

An Elementary Analysis of Irony in *Pride and Prejudice*

Xinyi Chen^{1, a}

¹Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin, 300000, China

^aC1156918632@163.com

Abstract

Irony is one of the most common techniques of expression in literary creation. Based on the famous novel *Pride and Prejudice* written by Jane Austen, this article analyses the irony in the novel from three aspects: the theme, the characters and the plot using writing techniques of dramatic irony, mode irony and verbal irony. It enables readers to better understand the irony in this brilliant work.

Keywords

Pride and Prejudice; Irony; Analysis.

1. Introduction

Pride and Prejudice is one of the masterpieces written by Jane Austen. It takes all kinds of love entanglements between Darcy and Elizabeth which are attributed to their pride and prejudice as the clue to unfold the plot. Austen flexibly used the art of irony to depict the theme, main characters and plots in this novel, which has distinct artistic characteristics and later known as Jane Austen's art of irony. And that's one of the reasons why *Pride and Prejudice* has become a popular novel well known to the world.

2. The Embodiment of Irony Art

2.1. Irony in the Theme

From the very first sentence of the novel, we can learn how people at that time treated love and marriage, which also reflects the theme that Austen wanted to convey to readers. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." In British society at that time, women had a low social status and could hardly be economically independent. For a wealthy and single man, having a happy marriage seemed to be a proof to his worth and social status. As for women, most of them were also willing to marry a single and rich man. Here, the author seems to have set up a fixed standard of spouse selection and marriage pattern. She reveals that the essence of marriage in those days, that is, based on money and interests by using the artistic technique of irony.

2.2. Irony in the Characterization

Jane Austen described the characters in her novel through art of irony and depicts their distinct personalities. When talking about the social group, Austen showed in the novel that those who participated in the Longbourn Ball praised Mr. Darcy for his handsome appearance, gentleness and wealth. When the party was over, their attitudes towards Darcy changed dramatically. As far as they were concerned, Darcy was a man full of arrogance and unwilling to make friends with people of low social status like them. Mr. Darcy's critics and admirers, however, came from the same group. They praised people when given benefits, otherwise they devalued them. This kind of Philistine psychology is worth satirizing. As we can see from the novel, Mrs. Bennet is one of the main and typical characters. Her life goal had always been to marry her five daughters to men of high status and good fortune, regardless of whether they loved each other or not,

which fully reflects her money worship and vanity nature. In daily life, she was paranoid about every decision she had made and was very confident that she had always been right for the best of her daughters. Even when Mr. Bennet had made it clear that he was displeased with her, she still turned a blind eye and stuck to her own ideas. She also made a fool of herself while making efforts to get her daughters married. For instance, when she heard that Elizabeth had rejected Collins's proposal of marriage, she was so furious that she accused Elizabeth of failing to take advantage of opportunities, ignoring whether Elizabeth loved Collins or not. Hearing that Mr. Collins and Charlotte were engaged, she sneered at Charlotte for availing herself of the opportunity to get in. Moreover, when her youngest daughter, Lydia, ran off with Wickham, what worried her most was that she had not bought Lydia a wedding dress. Her ridiculous attitude toward marriage strongly reflected the ignorance and absurdity of the mainstream values at that time.

2.3. Irony in the Plots

Looking through the novel, it's not hard to find that the main components of the plot are conversations between characters during all the parties, balls, walks and card games. The author combined irony with the dialogues of the characters, thus forming the irony of the plot. Among those dialogues, the most representative one is the one that between Mr. Collins and Elizabeth when Collins proposed to Elizabeth. "Almost as soon as I entered the house, I chose you as the companion of my future life." Mr. Collins said, and he continued before Elizabeth could make any reply, "But before I am carried away by my feelings, I think I should state my reasons for marrying." Mr. Collins poured out his admiration to Elizabeth, regardless of her attitude towards him. Even though Elizabeth had clearly declined him, he still looked for reasons for himself and stubbornly believed that she would not refuse to marry a man with great fortune and high social status. However, we can see that the story turned out to be the opposite. Such dramatic arrangement of the plot fully shows the charm of the art of irony, which further enhances reader's interest in the novel.

3. The Use of Dramatic Irony, Mode Irony and Verbal Irony

3.1. Dramatic Irony

In short, dramatic irony refers to the situation that we, the audience, can learn something important that some of the characters on the stage don't. In other words, the effect of dramatic irony comes from the conflict between the characters' unconscious of the truth and the audience's understanding of the truth. Because of Darcy's arrogance and obsession of hierarchy, as well as believing in what Wickham said, Elizabeth hated Darcy very much at the beginning of the novel. However, as the story progresses, Mr. Darcy realized his arrogance and unfriendliness and tried to make some changes. In the end, the arrogant man still married the girl whom he has wrongfully looked down upon. This makes the ending of the story a dramatic turn from what the readers of the characters expected at the beginning, which is full of drama and irony.

3.2. Mode Irony

In the novel, Austen presents us with four different marriages, all of which seem to have happy endings at the end of the story. However, each of them has some ironic points. For Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, from the conflicts between them to their marriage, the huge change of their attitudes towards each other strongly satirized the strict sense of hierarchy and their inherent sense of superiority of the British upper-class. Meanwhile, it is also ironic the well-educated person would easily swallow fictitious stories on the basis of what others told them. As for Jane and Mr. Bingley, there is pure love between them. The two fell in love at the first sight at the Longbourn ball, then continuously attracting each other. However, as Mr. Darcy mistakenly

believed that Jane had no feelings for Bingley and persuaded him to go to London. As a result, Bingley gradually lost touch with Jane. Even though Darcy clarified his incorrect judgement of Jane and Bingley came to Longbourn to fix his relationship with Jane, it is easy to find that Bingley did not come to Jane in the flesh to ask for the truth in the first place. This is the reason why they have been apart for such a long time, causing Jane to experience pain and disappointment. It is not difficult to discover that the Collins and Charlotte's marriage was totally based upon money and benefits. Mr. Collins was a priest and entitled to inherit Mr. Bennet's estate. After being rejected by Elizabeth, he turned to Charlotte and wooed her immediately. As a descendant of the gentry bourgeoisie, even if Charlotte had received good education, she had neither social status nor strong economic power. At the age of twenty-seven, she regarded marrying Collins as "the only honorable way". This kind of marriage is also ironic and pathetic. The marriage of Wickham and Lydia is ridiculous. Had it not been for the generosity of Mr. Darcy, who paid a large sum of money to Wickham, the hypocritical snob would never have married Lydia. While everyone except Mrs. Bennet worried about whether Lydia would be happy in her marriage, Wickham happily brought Lydia to Longbourn to visit Mr. And Mrs. Bennet after receiving the money from Darcy. It ironically criticized Wickham and Lydia for their meanness and stupidity.

3.3. Verbal Irony

In the novel, Austen often used the dialogues between characters to show irony. For example, when dancing with Elizabeth in the Longbourn ball, Mr. Darcy always kept silent and was not willing to start any conversation with Elizabeth. However, according to the social etiquette of those days, it was impolite for people to hold his tongue while dancing. "Now you must say something, Mr. Darcy. You could remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples." Elizabeth took the opportunity to express her dissatisfaction with Darcy through this sarcastic remark. There is another example—when Miss. Bingley found that the man she loved seemed to have interest in another woman, she criticized Elizabeth as "one of those women who try to appear attractive to men by devaluing other women", intending to leave Darcy a bad impression on Elizabeth. Nevertheless, Mr. Darcy replied "It is true. There is meanness in all the tricks used by ladies to attract men." Superficially, he agreed with Miss. Bingley's opinion and evaluation of Elizabeth. But in fact, he satirized her for sneering behind the back of Elizabeth.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Jane Austen's successful use of irony in the theme, characters and plots fully shows the her writing intention and makes readers feel the unique charm of irony. Her ironical exposition of the four marriages highlights the marital problems in the society at that time, which makes the theme of the novel important and profound.

References

- [1] Austin (2013). Irony and Influence: A Presumptive Tale of Pride and Prejudice. Kirkus Reviews.
- [2] Zhao, Hong (2013). A relevance-theoretic approach to verbal irony: A case study of ironic utterances in Pride and Prejudice. *Journal of Pragmatics* Vol. 43, Iss. 1.
- [3] Xu Dan. Analysis of Irony Art in "Pride and Prejudice"[J]. *Journal of Kaifeng Institute of Education*, 2016, Vol. 36(5): 40-41.
- [4] Xu Yanli, Yin Guijian. Humor and irony in "Pride and Prejudice"[J]. *Journal of Heilongjiang Institute of Education*, 2011, (10):136-137.