
Irony In Pride And Prejudice

Jane Austen's witty way of incorporating her personal humour within her works makes her stand out in comparison to other authors publishing their own novels at the time. Theresa Weisensee describes her writings as 'strongly marked by an ironic tone, a subtle humour and highly ambivalent statements.' This irony she presents to her readers is one of the most prominent features throughout her novels and it is very particularly evident in *Pride and Prejudice*.

While this novel at first could be seen as a simple, entertaining and somewhat comical depiction of the social conventions of England at the time of Austen, it's actually indirectly critical and treats particular political, economical and sociological circumstances- all mainly through the aforementioned use of irony. Austen opens her novel with the statement. 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife'. This is not only an exceptional example of verbal irony, making this one of Austen's widely known quotes from her works, but also sets the tone for the remainder of the text. Despite this truth being 'universally acknowledged', it is subjective as even if the women do see themselves as potential wives in the eyes of any well-off man, there's a high chance that the men don't regard them in the same manner. This contradiction is what makes it ironic and it is further emphasised in the lines following it, how without being aware a man is immediately 'considered as the rightful property' of the daughters of the families in the neighbourhood he moves into as is in the case of Mr. Bingley.

In Tony Tanner's book on Austen, he writes about this opening sentence and says that:

[...] there are constant reminders of the shiftings of what people take to be 'truth'; for what is 'universally acknowledged' can change not only from society to society but from person to person, and indeed within the same person over a period of time.

This is seen throughout the novel in the ways and methods characters such as Elizabeth first form and later on change their views and opinions on the other characters. While her first impression of Darcy was that he was 'the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world', and becomes obstinate on thinking otherwise, she hears that Wickham was a 'universally liked' person and takes a liking to him immediately. This could be seen as a reference to the opening line as alike to it, such a broad and generalising statement could prove to be false in the end which in fact it was when she learns about his true colours through Darcy's letter.

However, it isn't just Elizabeth who takes on a negative first impression. The reply Mr. Darcy gives to Mr. Bingley after he suggests that Jane introduces Elizabeth to him is that 'She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me'. He refuses to dance with her, especially since he had 'no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men'. Therefore, he feels it to be beneath him to ask her himself especially since he has an especially high ranking. This plants a seed that would later sprout into a fine example of situational irony as although Darcy had not considered Elizabeth adequate enough to dance with him, he however saw her suitable enough to ask her hand in marriage. Not only that, he does so after persuading Mr. Bingley to not marry Jane due to her family's status. Colonel

Fitzwilliam states that Mr. Darcy even 'congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage' yet all of this is contradicted when he ends up proposing himself to another daughter from the same family.

Regarding Darcy not dancing with Elizabeth the first time he had the opportunity, he is eventually swayed by Sir William to do so in the sixth chapter is a fine example of situational irony. When Sir William initially asks Darcy to partake in the dances, the latter strongly refuses it and states that 'Every savage can dance. Although Sir Lucas states that dancing was 'one of the first refinements of polished society, Mr. Darcy argues that even none aristocratic people knew some semblance of dance, eliminating any notion of it being a delight only the upper-class could enjoy. The irony comes in however when Sir William presents Elizabeth to him and he 'requested to be allowed the honour of her hand' as not only does Darcy act in opposition to his earlier statement, but the change in his attitude is also very sudden as it happened just a short while after he initially declared his intention to not dance.

Although one can say that Darcy and Elizabeth are the main characters and that a lot of the irony is centred around situations involving them together, it also extends to relations extending to others. As readers, we first get a good first impression of Mr. Wickham and even Elizabeth herself is interested in him. In fact, her father tells her to 'Let Wickham be your man. He is a pleasant fellow, and would jilt you creditably'. Here, Mr. Bennet describes Mr. Wickham as a pleasant man- despite following up his compliment with sardonic humour, saying that he'll abandon Elizabeth. He continues to mention how officers such Mr. Wickham 'disappoint all the young ladies in the country. These words lead to two instances of irony involving Lydia, the youngest of the Bennet sisters who had grown infatuated with the officer. The departure of the militia from Meryton was supposed 'to bring an end to Lydia's flirtations', leaving her in fact disappointed. However, this brings about the expected separation between her and Mr. Wickham, but their combined elopement making this an ironic situation. This elopement brings about dramatic irony as it also creates a crisis within the Bennet family and a hit to Mr. Bennet's complacency. In reality, Mr. Wickham wasn't the good man others and he himself made him out to be and that in fact, as Colonel Forster believes, Mr. Wickham is actually 'imprudent and extravagant.

Before Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy actually do get engaged, we see the character of Lady Catherine who tries to prevent this from happening. On an unannounced visit to the Bennet household, she asks Elizabeth 'will you promise me, never to enter into such an engagement?' She tries to persuade her into letting go of any thoughts in relation to marrying Mr. Darcy. She does so as she wants him to marry her daughter instead yet the opposite happens as these attempts 'only make Darcy realize that Elizabeth will marry him'. Her interference between the two characters brings up elements of irony. There is dramatic irony related to her earlier statement in which she says that a 'scandalous falsehood' is spreading about Elizabeth already being engaged to Mr. Darcy. This is considered ironic as Elizabeth could have actually already been engaged to him if she didn't reject him the first time he proposed. However, 'unluckily for her ladyship, its effect had been exactly contrariwise' as Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth did, in fact, get engaged, after all, making this episode above all an exceptional case of situational irony. After Elizabeth accepts Mr. Darcy's second marriage proposal, she also adds in an ironic comment about Lady Catherine and how she 'has been of infinite use, which ought to make her happy, for she loves to be of use'.

One cannot fully comprehend the presence of irony in *Pride and Prejudice* until they finish their

first reading of the novel and go back to the start and reread the first sentence. With the knowledge of what the book entails, one can fully perceive the irony present in that infamous line and the subsequent usage of irony throughout the remainder of the novel that might have been overlooked the first time. Only through this can one fully see how Austen is a 'critical observer of humanity' and how she makes use of irony to express 'moral and social justice, who enlarges the reader's understanding of experience through making him realize how limited is that of her fictional characters'.