

Irony and Feminism in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Satire and feminism are prominent in the novel, Jane Austen being famous for satire and feminism in many of her works. Satire is used to poke fun at the ridiculousness of characters. Irony, parody and sarcasm are rampant in the novel. Jane Austen uses feminism; she being a feminist herself, to show the inequality of the sexes in the 18th century, where man was the domineering factor. Women were mere pawns in the hands of men, bidding by the whims and fancies of their fathers and husbands. Women had little or no say in the matters of matrimony and were forced into marriage by their parents to secure a husband, no matter how bad he may or may not be. Security was the first and foremost thought on the parent's minds. It was not left to the girl to choose her husband. If a man proposed marriage, she had to accept and refusing a proposal was unheard of. Elizabeth Bennet breaks this tradition in the novel and chooses the man she desires for love and love alone. The 18th century was also known for its patriarchy, which is seen in the novel. The father not having a male heir is forced to bequeath his assets to the nearest living male relative, leaving his wife and daughters with nothing upon his death. Feminists do not agree with this tradition and fight against it. *Pride and Prejudice* is a domesticated novel, high lighting family life and the joys and tribulations of a family, set in the countryside of England and surrounded by nature. Domestication interwoven with romance is the theme with small add-ons to make the novel a more interesting one.

Keywords: satire, feminism, irony, parody, sarcasm, inequality, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Many of Jane Austen's novels deal with satire and feminism and the life in the early 18th century. Some critics say her work is controversial, others agree on her stand of trying to overcome the difficulties women faced in this period. That women have been treated as the "weaker sex" is common knowledge and women have always been put on the bottom rung of the career ladder, making way for the "stronger male sex". That this gender inequality has lasted for centuries shows that not much has been done to rectify this rather negative situation. In some countries, efforts have been made and are still being made today to rectify this but unfortunately without much success. Women are still passed over for promotions and face a glass ceiling, just because they are female and considered inferior. Writers, especially female writers have over the centuries been trying to make the public aware of the injustice that has been meted out to women^[1]. Just a small indent on a hard surface has been achieved. The world is still mainly male dominant.

Certain religious beliefs, clearly state that the woman (or wife) is the underdog in the family, bowing to the whims and fancies of her husband or to other male members in the family, be it the husband, father or brother. Marriage is certainly at the peak of this situation, the husband dominating the wife. Though it is not a 100% certainty in the case of marriage, male domination (some do take a stand and retaliate), the majority of marriages, certainly in some areas of the world are mainly male dominated. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen is centered around pride and how pride is used to create a barricade around the person, not allowing that person to communicate with the "lesser mortals" that surround them, using wealth as a shield to protect themselves from the wants of the less fortunate. To make themselves obscure, not wanting to be seen in the company of the less wealthy and if by chance were obliged to do so, kept

themselves in a clique, not wanting to socialize with others, apart from their own wealthy associates.

Prejudice is also seen to be used by the same people, who mock the poorer person or the less educated. However, Elizabeth uses her pride, when prejudiced against Darcy, realizing later to have been used wrongfully. Elizabeth's pride is instrumental in misjudging Darcy. Darcy on the other hand is prejudiced against Elizabeth due to her lower social standing. Both are equally guilty – Elizabeth of pride and Darcy of prejudice^[2].

Pride and Prejudice may be called a "Domestic novel", as it revolves around the Bennet household, then moving into Bingley's residence and further on to Darcy's mansion. The interpretation of an 18th century family life is well described as we enter the Bennet household, where the husband is busy in his own little world, not caring much for the activities around him, while making a remark or two now and then. His wife on the other hand is a bustling, busy-body woman, who loves gossip and is hell-bent on finding husbands for her five daughters. It mattered little to her of the future husband's appearance, but money was important and it was unheard of when Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins' proposal of marriage. The heavens fell in on Mrs. Bennet at this "tragic" event in her life^[3].

2. Irony in *Pride and Prejudice*

Irony is basically a contrast between reality and appearance. Jane Austen uses irony at different levels, uncovering the incongruity, even contradiction, under the surface of harmony, exposing her characters' misunderstanding of others as well as their own self-deception. *Pride and Prejudice* presents the contrast between intricacy and simplicity. Darcy and Elizabeth's intricacy is shown against Jane and Bingley's simplicity. Darcy and Elizabeth have depth, which involves them in the dangers of pride and prejudice. On the other hand,

Jane and Bingley is a simple couple, their simplicity turns into virtue. Both intricacy and simplicity have their own virtues, both equally desirable, but both have their own dangers. Simplicity and intricacy cannot be mixed. The irony of it is they are mutually exclusive and incompatible.

“It is universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of good fortune must be in want of a wife”^[4].

The beginning of the sentence suggests that a great “universal” truth is about to emerge in the novel. The second part deflates the reader, when it is found that it is concerned to a common social problem – marriage. The sentence itself means that people assume that a rich young man should be on the look-out for a suitable wife. It hides an ironic thought that in reality, things may be the other way round. It is likely that the women in the neighborhood of this young man are desirous of having such a husband and he may be the hunted, rather than being the hunter.

Jane Austen writes about Mrs. Bennet, “The business of her life was to get her daughters married, its solace was visiting and news.” The ironic implication is that she is not likely to show much discrimination about the young men they choose as their husbands, which is proved later by her exaltation in Lydia’s marriage to Wickham. Another example of this type of irony is Mr. Bennet’s description of Wickham. “He is as fine a fellow as ever I saw. He simpers and smirks and makes love to all of us. I am prodigiously proud of him. I defy ever Sir William Lucas himself to produce a more valuable son-in-law.” The ‘valuable son-in-law’ referred by him was none other than Mr. Collins, Lydia’s husband. Most events in *Pride and Prejudice* have been given an ironic twist, such as when Mr. Darcy remarks about Elizabeth – “she is not so handsome enough to tempt me”, when he sees her at the Ball for the first time. The irony of the situation is that Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth later in the story.

Another example of irony is when the militia departure from Meryton is expected to put an end to Lydia’s flirtations; however it brings about her elopement. Elizabeth thought that her prospects of marriage to Darcy were slim due to Lydia’s misconduct; the irony of the situation is that it brings them together. The irony of character is seen when Elizabeth prides herself on her perception, and disclaims Jane’s blindness to the realities, is herself blinded by her prejudice for Darcy. The Bingley sisters hate the Bennet family for their vulgarity, especially Mrs. Bennet, but they themselves are vulgar. Irony in dialogue is indicated when Mrs. Reynolds, Darcy’s housekeeper says, “I do not know when my master will marry; I do not know who is good enough for him.” Her words innocently praise Darcy, but to Elizabeth, she remembers Darcy’s words upon their first meeting, “She is not handsome enough to tempt me.” Mrs. Reynolds was not aware of Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s connection when she made that remark^[5].

Mr. Bennet says to Elizabeth, when Bingley departs from Netherfield, “So Lezzy, your sister is crossed in love, I find! I congratulate her. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little, now and then. When is your turn to come? Let Wickham be your man, he is a pleasant fellow and would jilt you considerably.” In these words ‘pleasant fellow’ is hidden a dramatic irony at the expense of Mr. Bennet as the ‘pleasant’ Mr. Wickham is destined to make life miserable for Mr. Bennet when he elopes with Lydia.

Grandiloquence, the type of talk that is pompous and bombastic, and fully of nice-sounding words, that in the end

mean nothing; is used in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* in an ironic form. At times a single word can add ironic dimensions to the whole speech. Mr. Collins and Mary’s speeches are full of this irony. For example, Caroline Bingley writes to Jane: “If you are not so compassionate as to dine today with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives.

Mr. Collins says to Elizabeth, “In truth, I must acknowledge that, with all the disadvantages of this humble parsonage, I should not think anyone abiding in it as ‘objects of compassion’, while they are ‘sharers of our intimacy’, at Rosings.” The heaviness used here ironically reflects upon the shallowness of the sentiment being expressed. Irony is also used to express comedy in the novel. Mrs. Bennet’s vulgarity drives away any suitors for her daughters, but only temporarily. Lydia’s thoughtlessness threatens irreparable disgrace, but ultimately her marriage with Wickham does take place. Also the villainous characters, Wickham and Lady Catherine De Bourgh are responsible for uniting Elizabeth and Darcy^[6].

3. Feminism

“Feminism refers to any ideology that seeks total equality in rights of women and people who self-identify as women, usually through improving the status of females. This also includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment.”

Whether Jane Austen herself was a feminist has been widely discussed over the years in the literary world. Austen is critical of the gender injustices present in the 18th century English society. She focuses on the social norms prevailing during that time, which was a patriarchal society, ruled over by men, whether it is the father, husband, or brother. She dramatizes the heroines (Elizabeth) struggle to acquire for herself a place within the social and conservative institution of marriage.

Charlotte Lucas marries for the sake of having a roof over her head and not for love. The entailment of the Bennet estate is an extreme hardship for the Bennet family and is quite obviously unjust. This leaves Mr. Bennet’s daughters in a poor financial situation and forces them to marry and marry well. Jane Austen clearly believes that women are equal to men, in intelligence and capability. Elizabeth refuses to marry Darcy at first, just for the sake of achieving a good financial standing. Her belief is that marriage is based on love and respect for the man. Women of that era had to resort to marriage in order to advance socially or even to just survive.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of good fortune must be in want of a wife.” The opening line in the novel is related to this idea. This is obvious as Mrs. Bennet constantly is in search for men to marry off her daughters. This quote indicates Austen’s belief that women in her society were dependent on marriage and women were always on the lookout for their “prey”, the wealthy bachelors. Elizabeth is not shown in this light in the novel, but is able to stand her ground against Darcy, at times outshining him a few times, she coming out triumphant, whenever there is a spat between them.

When Elizabeth meets Lady Catherine de Bourgh, (in Elizabeth’s house), it is Lady Catherine who attacks Elizabeth over the romantic issue with Darcy. Elizabeth however is able to retaliate and shows Lady Catherine that she will not be cowed down to. Elizabeth says, “He (Darcy) is a gentleman, we are

equal.” Elizabeth clearly does not think that she is in any way “inferior” to Darcy or his aunt.

Charlotte Lucas says, “I only ask for a comfortable home and considering Mr. Collins’ character, connections and situations in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering a marriage state.”

An important point in the novel is when Elizabeth emerges as a true feminist when Georgiana Darcy describes Elizabeth as “sporty”. “Sporty” describes a sports person, with masculine qualities. A picture of a strong personality is portrayed by this one word, which describes Elizabeth, though being a woman, is able to look after her own interests.

“That gender differences is a foundation of structural inequality between men and women, by which women suffer systematic justice, and that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of a biological necessity, but it is produced by the cultural constructions of gender differences [2].

Morris Pam adds that these various assumptions are just excuses to make women feel subordinated, and these different feminine characteristics vary from country to country, due to different cultures. Feminism in the historical context is discussed by Young Arlene, regarding pre-emancipated women and their lack of freedom in a male dominated society. “In all cases, her identity and her fate are defined and controlled by men – by fathers, husbands and seducers [4].

This statement from Young Arlene is reflected in Jane Austen’s novel, where rich men tame and domesticate the nature around their estates, in the same way they tame and domesticate the women around them. Arlene Young compares women with parrots in a cage – “If we come to think that the nursery and kitchen are the natural spheres of a woman, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot, because they have never seen one anywhere else [4].

Elizabeth Bennet wants to explore her emotions and her potential without the dominance of men, and attempts to do this. “Women were seldom seen outside the cage of conventional domesticity, and were not readily accepted in roles that seemed challenging to traditional assumptions about feminine identity [4].

Feminism in Austen’s novels is all about women finding a way to survive in society, despite the disadvantages they face. “Even in her teens, Jane Austen was preoccupied with the hardships faced by women reduced to a state of absolute dependence on relations who often prove to be unkind and unfeeling. Her interest in the plight of impoverished women and the harsh realities of the Georgian marriage market never left her. She once advised her niece Fanny, “Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony” [5].

Looser Devoney discusses Jane Austen’s novels and what they protest about. “They protest, however mutedly against the social, legal and economic injustice of male primogeniture, restriction of women’s property rights and female economic dependence [6].

4. Female satire

Three writers, namely Jane Austen (1775 – 1817), Ivy Compton – Bennet (1884 – 1969) and Muriel Spark (1918 – 2006) have

been included in criticisms of satire as a genre, and have been placed alongside their male counterparts on the art of satire as it is practiced by men.

Jane Austen uses her novel to try to educate her society on the difficulties faced by women, both before and after marriage, using irony and wit. However, male writers using satire consider themselves superior.

Defining, controlling, dishing out the ‘critical medicine’, to the society which they critique, female satirists wield their caustic pen from a distance that is on the fringe rather than a ‘privileged height’ [7].

In one of her letters, Jane Austen says “...the little bit (two inches wide) on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labor [6].

Jane Austen uses her novel *Pride and Prejudice* to show that it is not only a love story; not just another romantic novel on the shelf, but she uses her irony and satiric caricatures to focus on marriage, family connections and the most important, patriarchal society and exposes the inequalities of women and tries to improve the situation within the patriarchal system.

5. Conclusion

Jane Austen’s “*Pride and Prejudice*” is innovative in the company of a happy ending while it conducts consciousness on significant difficulties such as a girl’s standing as well as publican preconception which consistently occurs, is unavoidable as well as may affect the destiny of two affectionate hearts. Jane Austen looks to inform the primer that representatives of central as well as senior class may confront a lot of preconceptions as these two classes are extremely dissimilar however at that moment it’s not class that prepares a man cheerfully married besides his capability to face the pleasure as well as preconception in manner of love the “right” person. Jane Austen also illustrates a comic with diverse scope of point of view on love as well as marriage in before 19th century. The men have large scope of options, while teenage women should survive restraint in most of the female presence; expect frequent chances to face entitled teenage men. The females are simply exchanged in eyes of males, with are frequently renounced to their destiny with this presents their part as little more than piece of belongings in this comforting community. Dramatic irony is one of the important characters of pleasure as well as preconception. The dissimilarity within aspect as well as fact is highlighted at each level. Wickham mentions to become pure with artistic, however bring out to be wicked. Darcy is apparently rude, besides is in actual fully a great gentleman. Caroline Bingley tries to preconception Darcy across Elizabeth however more she tries to injure her, prepares Darcy more charmed in the direction of Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennet’s try at catching entitled bachelors consistent disappoint as well as she just successive in operating them aside. Difficulty for Darcy as well as Elizabeth is presumed when Lydia elopes in the company of Wickham; but outcome is the dissimilar. Lady Catherine must to prohibit this marriage, however suddenly she prepares it simple for Elizabeth as well as Darcy. Darcy guides Bingley versus marrying a Bennet girl, besides arrive finally marrying one him. Elizabeth informs Collins that she is not that kind of girl who will decline 1st suggestion as well as receive the 2nd; however this is precisely what she does. There is reasonable satire at recital stage, packing most of the each page of novel.

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