

⇒ There is a pervasive irony in Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice'. Give instances of irony in the Plot and Characterisation of the novel.

Do you agree with the view that Jane Austen is a master of irony? Illustrate your answer from "Pride and Prejudice".

"Jane Austen's fiction is steeped in irony both in language and situation." Discuss.

What do you understand by irony? Illustrate Jane Austen's use of it "Pride and Prejudice".

Jane Austen's novels are really full of ironic situation. Collins proposes to Elizabeth when her heart is too fully of Wickham. Darcy proposes to her exactly at the moment when she hates him most. Elizabeth thought that her prospects of marriage to Darcy were completely blasted by the infamy of Lydia's conduct, but the affair actually brings them together. Lady Catherine, attempting to prevent their marriage, only succeeds in hastening it. The fact is that there are incongruities and contradictions inherent in the human nature itself, and Jane Austen, quite amused herself, portrays them vividly for the amusement and moral education of her readers.

The very first sentence of Pride and Prejudice offers a beautiful example of verbal irony. Verbal irony consists in a peculiar use of language in such a way that the meaning really intended is quite opposite to the surface meaning. Verbal irony is the result of the ironic tone of Jane Austen's narrative. The sentence states, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." The meaning intended

P.T.O →



in this sentence and gradually revealed by the action is just the opposite of the surface meaning. The fact is that quite a number of women would like to trap a single man in possession of a good fortune for a husband. In order to relish the irony of these words we have only to remind ourselves that it is the pompous ass Mr. Collins who is the son-in-law of Sir William Lucas. This type of ironic tone is maintained throughout the novel.

Irony in Jane Austen's novels is always a means to rich comedy. She enjoys depicting the incongruities of character but she does not allow them to taint the atmosphere of gaiety and mirth that fills the pages of her novels. Anne Elliot's marriage with Captain Wentworth does materialise in the end. Emma's self-awakening comes just in time to rescue her from a great catastrophe. It is interesting to note that in *Pride and Prejudice* it is the villainous characters — Wickham and Lady Catherine — who are responsible for uniting Elizabeth and Darcy.

Like all other novels of Jane Austen, the theme of *Pride and Prejudice* also easily lends itself to an ironic interpretation. At the ironic level, *Pride and Prejudice* presents the contrast between 'Intimacy' and 'Simplicity' as those terms apply to 'personality'. Darcy and Elizabeth's intimacy is set against Jane and Bingley's simplicity. The first two have depth, but their depth involves them in the dangers of *Pride and Prejudice*. The latter two are quite simple, and their simplicity turns out

P.T.O →



to be a virtue. But which one is more attractive and even preferable - the intricacy of the first two or the simplicity of the latter? Both intricacy and simplicity have their virtues; both are equally desirable; on the other hand, both of them have their dangers too, perhaps one would like to be both intricate and simple at the same time, but the irony is that they are mutually exclusive and incompatible.

Most of the events and situations in *Pride and Prejudice* have been given an ironic twist. Mr. Darcy remarks about Elizabeth that "she is not handsome enough to tempt me" and soon after gets captivated by her enormous eyes. Taking into consideration the imprudence of a marriage alliance with the Bennet family, he removes Bingley from Netherfield but makes the same alliance himself. Collins proposes to Elizabeth when her heart is too full of Wickham. Darcy proposes to her exactly at the moment when she hates him most. Elizabeth quit emphatically tell Mr. Collins that she is not the type of girl who will reject the first proposal of marriage and accept the second, but this is exactly what she does. The departure of the militia from Meryton was expected to put an end to Lydia's flirtations; it brings about her elopement. Miss Caroline Bingley leaves no opportunity of casting aspersions on Elizabeth and her family but she succeeds only in betraying her own illbreeding and alienating Mr. Darcy. Lady Catherine's intervention to check the marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy helps to

P.T.O. →



expedite it. Example of this type of irony are innumerable and can be picked from anywhere in the novel.

Irony of character is even more prominent than irony of situation. Isn't it ironical the Elizabeth, who prides herself on her perception and disdains Jane's blindness to the realities, is herself quite blinded by her prejudices. Darcy always thought he was such a gentleman, but his proposal to Elizabeth is quite ungentlemanly. Wickham is graceful to look at, polished and refined in his manners, but at heart, he is an unredeemed villain. The Bingley sisters hate the Bennets for their vulgarity, but are themselves vulgar. The fact is that there are incongruities and contradictions inherent in human nature itself, and Jane Austen, quite amused herself, portrays them for the amusement and edification of his readers.

Jane Austen's irony is not tinged with any bitterness, nor does it reflect her cynicism. It is amusing but it is not just verbal wit for local entertainment. It provokes some deep thinking over some significant issues of human life. Hence irony in her hands is neither indifferent nor irresponsible. Jane Austen is objective in her observation and depiction of the reality of life, but not in her evaluation of the moral values governing this reality.