

The Art of Comic Irony as the Voice of Female Consciousness in Jane Austen's Novel *Pride and Prejudice*

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 19 Dec 2024

Revised: 02 Feb 2025

Accepted: 16 Feb 2025

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the art of comic irony in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* as the subject matter of female consciousness. Though the novelist's vision, in any novel, has to be presented artistically, Jane Austen, in *Pride and Prejudice*, uses the art of comic irony very naturally and effectively to awaken female consciousness. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the use of comic irony serves as a powerful tool for both social critique and character development. Through the skillful deployment of irony, Austen highlights the tensions between societal expectations and individual desires, creating humor while also deepening the novel's thematic exploration of marriage, class, and morality. In this research paper, the modernist free-indirect discourse will be used and considered as the theoretical framework though the concentration will be only on the use of the comic irony as an art to express the female consciousness in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Through an extensive reading of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen was perfect in using the art of comic irony since the novel offers an ideal combination of social critic and artist. Moreover, *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a comic novel and subtle tool for social reform, challenging readers to reconsider the norms and expectations of Austen's society and to recognize the value of individual integrity and personal choice.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Art of Comic Irony, and female consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* employs comic irony as a linguistic technique to satirize society because it draws attention to two of the main flaws in the novel's protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. This comic irony is being used by Austen to insist on female consciousness. The novel's title is a prime example of both satire and comic irony. Having a clear understanding of the novel's subject matter and the society of England at the time it was set is made much easier by this. "Pride" refers to Darcy's early arrogance and sense of superiority, whereas "prejudice" highlights Elizabeth's early partiality and bad judgment toward Darcy. Austen's use of these terms is ironic because, throughout the novel, both characters must confront and overcome these shortcomings in order to develop as people and have a satisfying relationship. The irony is that the title portrays these characteristics as major barriers to love rather than just personal shortcomings, implying that both characters' presumptions are absurd and incorrect and that is exactly what Austen aims to investigate.

In addition to the title, the opening sentence is an excellent illustration of comic irony through which female consciousness is also expressed. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." This sentence is ironic since it satirizes the conventional wisdom that affluent men are inherently in need of a wife. Here, Austen is making fun of the idea that marriage is a business deal determined more by financial stability and prestige than by true love or compatibility. The term "truth universally acknowledged" is employed in a sarcastic manner. Although the general public may believe that a wealthy man must be looking for a wife, the reality is more nuanced, and the first sentence challenges these conventional norms.

So right at the beginning, the opening sentence along with the novel's title set the tone of the novel's social irony. The title and the opening sentence together convey Austen's comic irony by emphasizing the personal habits and social conventions that the novel will eventually explore and analyze which at the same time reflects the artistic creativity of Jane Austen in awakening female consciousness. In addition to demonstrating Austen's keen wit and capacity to transform societal norms into sources of both amusement and wisdom, they set the stage for a story that will examine how pride and prejudice skew human relationships. This is what made the researcher, and many critics consider Jane Austen a social reformer, a creative artist, and a sensitive writer who took it upon herself the

task of reforming society by discussing social issues in a sarcastic artistic style and that lies through the art of comic irony which is considered as the voice of female consciousness.

Through comic irony which leads to female consciousness Austen in chapter 3 and 5 gives us a clear idea about Mr. Darcy's reflections on Elizabeth and Elizabeth's reflection on Darcy. Mr. Darcy declared that Elizabeth "... is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt"¹ him. The irony of first impressions is highlighted by his haughty and contemptuous attitude toward her beauty, which contrasts with the profound admiration he will eventually experience. Given that he will soon fall madly in love with Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy's initial assessment of her is ironic.

Regarding Elizabeth's reflection on Darcy, Elizabeth initially rejects him because he is arrogant, but as more about his personality is revealed, she comes to see that her preconceptions were incorrect, which results in a moment of irony and self-awareness.

"...and I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine."²

The ironic change in Elizabeth's perception of Darcy is reflected in her thoughts later in the novel.

Another example of comic irony is Mr. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth Bennet took place in chapter 19

"My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly, which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness... "Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry. Choose properly, choose wisely, choose modestly, but choose someone."³

Here, irony permeates Mr. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth. He portrays marriage as a social obligation, a duty, and a recommendation from his patroness rather than as a romantic or personal choice. The proposal is both ridiculous and amusing due to his lack of sincere affection and the excessive focus on outside influences (such as Lady Catherine's counsel).

In her response to Mr. Collins' proposal, Elizabeth is ironic in her rejection of Mr. Collins. She mockingly draws attention to how ridiculous his haughty, conceited demeanor is. She rejects him with greater venom because she knows he lacks genuineness and a personal connection. "You are too hasty, sir, and you are too far above me. I cannot marry a man I do not respect."⁴ This does reflect her female consciousness.

Pride and Prejudice can indeed be seen as a comic, ironic novel that serves as a means of social reform, particularly regarding the rigid class structures, gender roles, and marriage norms of early 19th-century English society. Jane Austen uses comedy and irony to entertain her readers and subtly challenge and critique the conventions of her time.

Thus, the art of comic irony has been convenient to Jane Austen, the novelist as a tool to express and awaken female consciousness in the then society of England. As in the case of the theme of love and marriage, so in the case of her art of comic irony, some of the critics mentioned in the Bibliography have dwelt at length on this comic art. They have explained it purely as an artistic device. The researcher's divergence is that he has tried to make it as an essential part of the subject-matter of female consciousness; he has explained as to how and why without its aid she could not possibly have come to delineate this consciousness. That way it becomes both form and content in the novel.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The art of comic irony is being used in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to express female consciousness in an excellent and perfect way. The modernist free-indirect discourse helps in studying Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and how the art of comic irony serves as a powerful tool to reflect the complexities of female consciousness in the context of social constraints and gender roles during the Regency era.

¹ Austen J. *Pride and Prejudice*: p.9; chapter 3.

² Ibid: p.17; chapter 5.

³ Ibid: p.97; chapter 19.

⁴ Ibid: p.98; chapter 19.

Research Questions

This research paper tries to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Jane Austen use comic irony to express the inner thoughts and consciousness of female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*?
2. In what ways does comic irony reveal the social and personal conflicts faced by female characters in the novel, particularly regarding marriage and societal expectations?
3. How does comic irony in Austen's novel create a nuanced portrayal of female consciousness, balancing both humor and critique of the patriarchal structures at play?

Limitation of the study

This research paper will discuss the art of comic irony as the voice of female consciousness in Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* by applying the modernist free-indirect discourse.

Literature Review

The first part of the literature review will start with what feminists used to write on Jane Austen. Steeves (1973) and Brown (1973) indicate a significant shift in the understanding of Jane Austen's literary contributions, moving beyond her former reputation for domestic comedy to highlight a nuanced social critique embedded in her irony and humor. Initially seen as lacking engagement with broader societal issues, Austen's writings now invite a reevaluation of her modest metaphor of "a little bit of ivory." Larsen (1987) mentioned that Margaret Kirkham posits that Austen's subtle truths, often overlooked by the unobservant, resonate with more insightful readers. Kirkham offers a feminist reinterpretation of Jane Austen. She comes to a different conclusion: "If we miss Austen's engagement with fiction and words as a distinctly feminist engagement, we find it difficult to give a coherent account of the development of her art." (xvii) Feminist critiques further complicate her legacy, examining how Austen addresses the gender dynamics of her era, with scholars like Butler (1975) arguing that her works intertwine contemporary issues yet retain reactionary elements complicating their classification as feminist. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) present a transformative perspective on Austen as a subversive figure whose heroines, despite seeming to conform, confront more profound systemic challenges. However, their analysis has faced critique for oversimplifying the relationship between themes of oppression and neglecting historical context. Judith Newton (1981) advances this discourse by exploring economic constraints on women, interpreting *Pride and Prejudice* as an assertion of Elizabeth Bennet's agency. Finally, Johnson (1988) emphasizes Austen's acute awareness of the interplay between private experiences and political realities, drawing on contemporary thought to illustrate how her protagonists challenge societal norms and confront the limitations placed upon them. He adds that the influence of Jane Austen's novels on women's lives, examining her views on personal happiness, female authority, and the role of politics in her works. He argues that Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma* validates the rights of female authority and stresses the benefits of female independence. Kaplan (1992) recognizes Austen as a keen observer of social institutions, particularly concerning marriage and gender roles. In another words, Kaplan (1992) portrays Austen as a critical commentator on society, emphasizing women's agency in a context that often constrains their choices while offering a complex examination of gender, class, and the marriage institution. In his analysis of Jane Austen's narrative approach, Jones (2017) highlights the ironic dynamics that prompt readers to correct the limited viewpoints presented by the author and her characters. This irony cultivates a 'double vision' regarding Austen's protagonists.

The second part of the literature review will state some recent studies on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in which there is a concentration on the use of irony to express female consciousness. Shu-Li (2001) insists that Irony is used by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* to express the theme, create characters, and organize plot and language, creating realistic comic work. Zhi (2004) states that Jane Austen's writing style, particularly in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, is characterized by irony, which is evident in figures, scenes, and even the whole novels. Hong-Ling (2006) explores that Austen uses dialogues and irony to raise women's subject awareness and speak highly of their rights in literature. Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* promotes women's subject awareness and literary skills, addressing traditional discrimination and prejudice while maintaining a timeless appeal. Yu-Xia (2007) explores that *Pride and Prejudice* indirectly expresses Jane Austen's feminist consciousness through comic devices, awakening feminist consciousness through the portrayal of comic characters. Xiang-Nan (2008) argues that Jane

Austen's feminist consciousness is explored and revealed through her view of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, revealing women's plight and status. Hanly (2009) explores that Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* uses irony to dramatize sibling rivalries, engaging the reader's unconscious satisfaction while protecting them from unpleasant effects, leading to psychic growth. Svahn, M (2013) states that Jane Austen's characters Mrs. Bennet in *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* are caricatures that reveal female social vulnerability, with the degree of irony varying between the two. Sun (2022) states that irony in *Pride and Prejudice* effectively depicts character images and highlights psychological activities and relationships among characters. Shabir, and others (2023) states that Jane Austen's novels portray intelligent, strong, and autonomous female characters who struggle for autonomy and feminine identity in society, challenging social norms and promoting feminine consciousness. Ritika (2023) states that in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma* women in 19th-century England prioritize marriage and social status, with women's priorities often ignored and their voices crushed by societal constraints and the recent study claims that as a result of that Austen's works awakens female consciousness in then society. Wenting (2010) explores that Austen was a great realist in the female literature history in England, and she was also a writer who took over from the past and set a new course for the futures, who lead the van of showing female consciousness. She wrote with her special female point of view, sharp observation and high intelligence, through a feminist voice, created several different female figures. He comes to a conclusion that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates her unique female perspective, sharp observation, and high intelligence, highlighting the importance of female consciousness in literature. Ting-Ting, H. (2011) states that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates her progressive thoughts and contribution to women literature by highlighting the awakening of new women's consciousness in love and marriage. Similarly, Tong Wei (2011) argues that in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen expresses her views on marriage and her feminine consciousness, highlighting the different attitudes among young women of the middle class and highlighting women's unfair conditions. Boarcăș, C. (2014) agrees with Ting and Wei and states that Austen in her novels reveal a feminine consciousness, highlighting the importance of women in her society and their ability to develop and assert their womanhood despite restrictions. Cui, X. (2020) insists that Jane Austen's works show the awakening of female consciousness in the 18th and 19th centuries, with various female characters pursuing true love and independent social status despite patriarchal authority.

The body of the research paper

The art of comic irony has been convenient to Jane Austen, the novelist. Irony is an artistic device that deals with the juxtaposition of two mutually incompatible views of life. The basic feature of every irony is its awareness of the inherent contrast between reality and appearance and its attempt at an objective, dispassionate, and detached expression of that awareness in a language that makes the reader feel and understand very clearly the twin meanings of awareness and its expression. Jane Austen lived in a society that was remarkable for its inherent contrast; she disliked it and wanted to expose it. But her society was so closed that it would not permit a lady to do that; it would not allow her to come out in the open and denounce it by pointing out its abuses. That was her social limitation as an artist. However, her desire to do it was equally strong as an artist. The best way for her was to disguise her desire for irony, which gave her the freedom to criticise under the layer of meaning of a language whose crust of deceptive apparent structure allowed penetration only to those who were familiar with the artistic device of irony. This we may call deception or self-deception on the part of society and its individuals who feel better and comfortable with their closed eyes. Such people form the comic center of her irony. They are the subject of humor, for their deliberate closedness to reality about themselves creates humor. It is their folly, and their deliberate blindness to this folly is a source of mild, harmless laughter.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the art of comic irony is there in both form and content, and each is an image of the other. In content, it takes the form of contractual hypocrisy. This is assumed to be necessary for the survival of society. Hatred and scorn for others must be suppressed. Politeness and difference are always expected. This is the principle of functioning in the family. This contract is the only way to secure peace there. The individual is thus always the victim of this hypocrisy, but then, for peace, he has to bear it. Elizabeth has unworthy parents, but she cannot help it. She cannot openly express her contempt for social arrangements. For her, the only means is irony; for Austen, too, irony is the only means to expose the mind and heart of Elizabeth. Neither the character nor the author can come out openly against the established norms. However, they can express their scorn with a facade of irony. Thus, the irony, both in form and content, becomes incognito for Elizabeth and Austen. The reader has to recognize it. Elizabeth always hides her ideas and morals behind her ironic banter. She rebukes Wickham roundaboutly as she warns him that she is no longer deceived about Darcy. She is so poised and ambiguous in her language that

Wickham remains in doubt, but not so the reader. This is the diplomatic efficacy of irony – both avowing and disowning the most disreputable truths. This is done with a mocking imitation of detachment. It appears that the novelist longs for change, but she knows that it is not likely. She cannot make her character obey her. She is enraged by her own creatures. Naturally, she rhetorically arms herself against them but fails to make them succumb. Elizabeth must entertain Lady Catherine and Bingley, put up with Lydia and Wickham, managing in her in tensest irritation. This makes the difference between the satirist and the ironist clear. The satirist knows he can cure his victims, and the ironist knows he cannot. Thus, in him, there is a sense of resignation. The ironist, therefore, makes an oblique escape from his imprisonment by mocking his captors. But this mockery betrays him into collaboration with those captors.

Thus, irony, both in content and form, demands an effort from its reader, stressing his reason. Otherwise, its significance is missed, and the essence of her novels escapes him.

Her ironic form revolves around the ironic content of family. The affectionate onslaughts that Austen makes on the members of such a family are intelligible only if a sense of family loyalty and responsibility is assumed. A clear example is that of Mrs. Bennet. Elizabeth loathes her and yet loves her. Austen, too, does so. But she makes the antagonism public with her irony. But then her irony is not too loud – it is very subdued, and that has to be there for the sake of truthfulness both of Elizabeth and Austen. But here, they confide only in the reader. This ironic exposure is entrusted to art by removing it from the powerless fantasy of fiction.

In general there are two groups of feminist critics – old and new. Both made their own mistakes in assessing Austen as a feminist since they overlooked Austen's artistic method. It consists of the inseparability of content and form in Austen's novels. They do it by separating the form from the content in the novel and interpreting the content in isolation from the form. Naturally, the old feminists underestimate her, failing to appreciate her subdued feelings – her subdued feminine consciousness and ethos hidden behind the facade of her ironical form. The new feminists try to make her louder, which she does not want to be. Charlotte Bronte failed to appreciate her. She tried to read Austen as a romantic rebel writer, whereas Austen was the classical-critical kind. She failed to show the proper appreciation of Austen by understanding her irony of form and content, which makes Austen express her critique of the classic in understatements of irony. O. P. Sharma (1975) of the opinion that Austen might have devised a new method, deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not what people say but what they leave unsaid, not only what they are but what life is.

What is left "unsaid" suggests an authoritarian and subversive streak in Jane Austen. Austen needed to deflect or regulate her astringent contempt or hatred for others, and she did so through the use of irony. Thus, in her novels, there is a fine vein of feminine Criticism. In her, there is enough steely severity towards much of life, which she finds to be silly. For all this, she has used irony. She has used it to sharpen and expose all the incongruities between form and fact, all the delusions intrinsic to conventional art and conventional society. So, Austen is no longer charming, delicate, and reassuringly smug. She is strict, severe, and ironically subversive.

This research study concentrates on Austen's female consciousness or ethos. The feminists have overlooked this aspect of her art. Among these feminist critics, we have two groups – one decidedly ambivalent towards Austen and another appreciative of her. The ambivalent group has pointed out Austen's shortcomings as a novelist from a feminist point of view. Marriage – the patriarchal pro-establishment institution – is being openly endorsed by her novels. A feminist cannot do it. Female bonding is not significant enough in her scheme of things. Female body and sex are at a discount in her novels. In politics, she is a conservative and nationalist, keeping her vision limited to Britain and never straying her attention to the French Revolution. In her novels, Austen is not at all romantic, with mad women wailing in dark attics. Her women are all elegant, playing complicit roles in bright ballrooms. The ambivalent critics highlight these points and abjure Austen as a feminist. Pro-Austen feminists have put evidence to reject these charges.

It looks like a war of words and ideas among Austen's critics. They seem to hover between extremes. The need of the hour is to have a balanced view of the creative writer in Austen – an artist who is interested in women in her way and within the bounds of her art. She is an artist replete with rich female ethos. Modern feminists may aggressively champion women's cause by proclaiming themselves to be "defenders" or "advocates" of women. But Austen is not with them; her artist does not give her the liberty of making any such proclamation. At best, she follows the long line of pro-women writers – her predecessors and contemporaries – like Mary Wollstonecraft.

Their distinction as feminists lies in the fact that they define and develop an outlook within which ideas develop, a theory in the original sense of the term, a conceptual vision takes shape. In the novels, her female consciousness is there in the shape of this vision, which takes the form of an artist's vision and not the form of an "advocate's" or "defender's" vision.

This is the artist's victory in Austen. If this artist had been subordinated, her novels would have been merely period pieces. They would have remained "comedies of manners." But she was such a mature artist that she rose above all these limitations. Her novels are not mere dead pictures of a past society. They are subtle and artistic expressions of Austen's passionate concern for human values, in which women hold a critical position. A good deal of the moral passion of the book *Pride and Prejudice* undoubtedly arises from Jane Austen's understanding of and feelings about the problems of women in her society.

What is this feminine consciousness or ethos? Social scientists have explored the minds of the most oppressed classes of society and found that they develop a consciousness or ethos of their own instead of being dehumanized and lost. That is to be seen in the form of their traditions and values, which they develop as compensation for their suppression. Their values and strengths appear elusive to the people. In her novels, Austen – the artist – has been very successful in creating this elusiveness. This leads us to her use of irony in her novels. To the readers, she appears to be eluding the problem of the woman, to be just supporting the conservative views of the patriarchal society where the woman is simply suppressed. But the truth is hidden behind the facade of irony. One had to pierce it to see the truth.

Social scientists suggest that female consciousness or ethos is more interested in continuity than revolution. Society in Austen's time lived at two levels simultaneously. Her novels present a corner of the world of convulsion, filled with wars, revolutions, the struggle for political liberty, repression, miserable poverty, and savage penal laws. There was another aspect, too: despite all this upheaval, the society – communities, and families – cohered and flourished. So, the political unrest was accompanied by domestic stasis and violence at one level and non-violence at another. The balance was thus maintained. And the novelists put more stress on peace than on war. It is not that Austen was not aware of the convulsion of her time. Her novels are not unconscious of the miseries of her day. Only she treats them with silent implication, which suggests the complete privileged isolation of the then-gentry and the illusion attached to this isolation. There is no direct description of flogging in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. There is a mere suggestion in the gossip brought home by Catherine and Lydia. The reader has to notice it to feel its effect. It sufficiently suggests the monotony, calmness, and acceptability of cruelty and how it unobtrusively enters the calm domestic life. But this life goes on. Here, we remember Forster's thesis of the continuity of civilization and culture under the constant threat of force. This idea of continuity also marks Austen's female consciousness. Marriage and family life maintain the stability and continuity of civilization, in which political and economic divisions, crises, and wars corrode. This is a woman's creativity in preserving and restoring what history tears apart. Corrosion is uniform and repetitive; thus, for Austen, this is not a subject for her novels. Vitality and Organization are unique, problematic, and infinitely discoverable. These appeal to Austen's female consciousness. Hence, they form the subject of her novels. This explains the close relationship between novel and women. From its inception, women have made up the major audience and often the major subject of the novel. Jane Austen, too, followed this tradition. Thus, a woman has put herself at the center of her artistic consciousness. This is what makes the female consciousness of Austen.

It is natural that Austen's world was the world of the then-gentry, and "Austen's novels are set in the social context of the gentry, to which Jane Austen herself belonged. Some of her heroines have no fortune (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*); others, on the other hand, are very well off (*Emma*), but the social class remains the same."⁵ It was this world that produced the first major woman author in English. When she got an opportunity as a creative writer, she focused on the importance of women in the family and society as well as on the yet unspoken values of her sex. For Austen, novel is not a means to prove the claims and opinions of men. It has a broader frame. It tells about the energies of culture and spirit. Men assert themselves through violence and instability. Women – in marriage and family – work for non-violence, stability, and culture and spirit. And that is why, in her novels, Austen makes women speak and also makes herself talk through them.⁶ Her feminine consciousness thus taps this

⁵ Georgian society in Jane Austen's novels. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

⁶ The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen: pp22-23.

unacknowledged energy of culture, spirit, and women. Till the feminist energy took shape and form of a movement, it was channelized through the tradition of women passing it from mothers to daughters. Austen's feminism, in her novels, is not the form of a movement; it is there in the form of this tradition; the daughter learns from the mother and then treads on her own course. Elizabeth has her own aversion for her parents; she cannot express it and does not revolt against it, but she has the liberty of leaving them and making her own path different from theirs. Although her women lead restricted lives, her novels are not about restriction, nor even about expression, but about the relationship between the two, about how women find ways to develop and assert their womanhood despite the restrictions placed on them. There are women like Charlotte Lucas who settle for anything. But the heroine is different. She tries to mold the world as much as the world molds her.

Her feminine consciousness was a part of her broad moral consciousness, which could not deny or neglect the existence of social existence based on human interdependence, cooperation, and adaptation. Removing her pride and prejudice, Elizabeth takes recourse to this consciousness and achieves happiness in her life, as well as guarantees the happiness of others. Her feminine consciousness thus becomes a part of the greater social consciousness developed by her – as well as by her creator – for the sake of collective survival and individual security and fulfillment. And that is where Austen differs from the staunch feminists. Whereas they stand only for the individual woman and reject outright the collective society and family, Austen stands for both, for in her feminine consciousness, the good of the two is inevitably aligned. So, the question of the rejection of society – of family and marriage – is not the prerequisite for the assertion of individuality. Indeed, the individual looks askance at this society, but he is never in a mood to reject it outright. For its presence is a guarantee of his release. In Austen, cooperation is not humiliation and submission. Rather, the uncooperative self is often the debased self.

There is another aspect of this female consciousness. Elizabeth keeps this connection at the intellectual rather than the biological level. Blood is rejected by the intellect, for only the intellect empowers the heroine to look at and judge the previous generation critically. Only intellect helps the character, and the author creates a facade of irony, which helps in the evaluation of parents and others with total detachment. The blood makes one move towards submission – sometimes even abject. The intellect tends towards detachment, irony, and freedom. Naturally, Austen does not show any interest in the motherhood of the young generation. It is not by sheer chance that she omits this motherhood from her novels. Motherhood involves biological function based on blood and affection. In her novel, a woman with such a motherhood is a failure; Mrs. Bennet is a failure. Lydia is the outcome of such motherhood. Elizabeth is aware of this failure on the part of her parents. She is very loud on that point. She also adopts a mother's attitude toward Lydia – but her motherhood is based on her intellect, allowing her to have an objective and detached – and hence a correct – evaluation of Lydia's character, life, and situation. The irony is that the real mother fails to understand it at all – for she is the biological mother, and Elizabeth, who we may call a surrogate mother, has a correct perspective, for she is intellectual.

This female consciousness attached to a woman's intellect is a prism through which she sees not only the older generation but also herself and her individuality. A study of the older generation allows her to evaluate herself and discover her identity. Not only this, but she also extends her vision from the older generation and herself to the man before her. She finds out his identity, too, moves toward him, and makes him move towards herself so the two can fuse in marriage and a happy family life. They can move together to revitalize their past generation and tradition and move ahead to guide the next generation. Such is the extension of the female consciousness of the heroine.

Thus, Austen's female consciousness is regenerative. It is a continuous process moving from the old to the young. That explains why it was so easy for Austen to adopt the form of irony, which is also regenerative in its own way. Here again, we are at the meeting point of her novel's content and form through irony. That is the excellence of Austen – the creative writer. Through marriage and family, the heroines go in for perpetual reorganization through change, renewing by forever producing new combinations of experience. In Austen, the family is a continuum. Elizabeth learns lessons from the past, changes her present, and moves forward to address further changes in future generations. Before the feminine consciousness of Austen, the feminist movement seemed too narrow since it did not seem to have such a vision of time. The novel's end does not mean the end of this consciousness. Elizabeth

and Darcy may have got married. But that is not the end of the novel. There is the hint that they have to bring up Georgiana. The continuity is never to be broken. So, her novels have an open-ended structure.

This concept of continuum in female consciousness once again asserts the concept of interdependence. The idea of independence belongs to the male consciousness. And that is at the center of the tragedies of Shakespeare. Male dominance belongs to the tragic world. Austen cannot have it because her novels belong to the world of comedy, where male dominance is rejected. Naturally, she views limitations on women's lives ironically but not negatively. If there had been no such limitations and oppressions, there would have been no need for comic irony. Elizabeth, the heroine, takes them not as such but as difficulties to be removed and surmounted so that interdependence and continuum could work successfully to benefit all in the past, present, and future. In this process, no compromise of integrity is involved. The speaker is always in a position of tacit superiority but cut off from his hearers.

This integrity is never challenged because there are no autonomous identities in the novel. This identity is always cooperative. The comic irony suggests that the negative in one's life suggests the growth of the positive in another. Hence, the two must coexist. Austen sums up Mrs. Bennet's life with this negative statement: "The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news."⁷ It suggests not only the negative aspect of her life but also the positive fact that Elizabeth's "business" and "solace" will be finer than her mother's. This is the beauty of Austen's extended feminine consciousness as expressed in her art of comic irony.

Thus, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen has achieved the unity of content and form, of thought – her concern for women – and narrative. She achieves it through the method of comic irony. She has learned to say what she has to say through her books, above all, through the medium of her characters' consciousness, and she has formed a style fit for her purpose. It is a style fit for her critical attitude. To her, the first necessity was to keep reasonably on good terms with the associates of her everyday life, with its order and decent civilization. And yet she was always aware of their weakness and crudeness and the need for her to resist them and their values. How could these two contrary ideas be reconciled? The novels showed her the way.

She intended to save the correct and positive values without antagonizing those with negative values. This she could do with caricature or comic irony that lulled these people to take the assault on them as 'good-natured' and not at all disruptive. They are presented as exaggerated figures of fun but whom she hates and detests. Mrs. Bennet gives the impression of herself being a funny character, but Austen shows her to be detestable. It is tough to say where caricature leaves off and the claim to serious portraits begin. Mr. Collins is comical in his visit to the Bennets and in his proposal to Elizabeth. But it is also true that he fits into the real world and is acceptable to other characters. He, along with Mrs. Bennet, creates miserable conditions for Elizabeth when she refuses him. Consequently, the proposal scene is not only a comic fantasy but also, for Elizabeth, a taste of the fantastic nightmare in which economic and social institutions have such power over the values of personal relationships that the comic monster is nearly able to get her. Thus, her comic or ironic style reinforces the novel's theme, content, and characters. Therefore, this style serves the double purpose of creating the novel's form and reinforcing the theme. Thus, the caricature is dovetailed into the social setting. Charlotte might have accepted him as her husband. But Elizabeth cannot reconcile herself to this fact; she resents it. Austen, too, gives a definite hint of her resentment. Such comical creatures become an unconscious comment on the society of which they are part. Such a society makes Charlotte indifferent to personal relationships and prefers cruder advantages in the broader social world. Elizabeth understands Charlotte's attitude as well as that of society. But she also understands her inability to break with such a friend and such a society. This is Austen's inability, too. She may hate, but she cannot break with the cause of her hatred. This is the artist's dilemma with a firm feminine consciousness – the consciousness about the absurdity of the society that cares so little about its women.

Elizabeth, the heroine, manages this art of comic irony very successfully. She has more "quickness of observation."⁸ She admits that she prides herself on her discernment. Elizabeth's calm sense consistently takes the form of an ironic detachment commonly attributed to Jane Austen herself. Like Austen, Elizabeth is often unwilling to commit herself directly to the truth, and she, too, is capable of withdrawing into the relativism of a variety of points of view.

⁷ . Austen J. *Pride and Prejudice*: p.5; chapter 1.

⁸ . *Ibid.* p.12; chapter 4.

Likewise, Elizabeth's lively mind comes into play best when she can put aesthetic distance enough between herself and her subject so as to regard it with ironic detachment; she says – "' Follies and nonsense ... do divert me ... and I laugh at them whenever I can.' " ⁹

In the novel, it looks like the self-imposed blindness on the part of Elizabeth. Naturally, she becomes the center of her creator's irony as much as other characters are the center of her irony. Elizabeth needs more confidence in her powers of judgment, which is not entirely free from error. She needs to accept others' views more easily, and from the beginning, she misunderstands the characters of Darcy and Wickham, which automatically leads to the underestimation of the former and a wrong estimate of the latter. Very proud of her shrewdness in understanding others, Elizabeth develops prejudices against other characters in the novel. The irony lies in the fact that she willfully continues to live in the world of her own creation until she gets a jolt, almost shocking to her, in the form of the lengthy and informative letter from Darcy, who takes many pains to explain himself patiently to her misguided self-lest his worthy character should be portrayed in dark colors.

This character has to be brought to her proper senses; she has to be brought down to the level of the ground. Through her irony, Jane Austen succeeds in doing that. At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth takes on just a little of Jane's mild, uncritical, and passive acceptance of the world. She seems to enjoy disliking less. When Lydia's new husband comes to Longbourn and parries her attempts to catch him in his lies, her pointed irony dies away into a kind of smile we have hardly identified with Elizabeth before now.

There is no pursuing her dissatisfaction with the world now, no enjoyment of dislike. Later, she even refrains from being witty at Darcy's expense, for he has not yet learned to be laughed at. There is no laughing here at the world's foibles; she is mellowing a little. The more she sees the world, the more she seems pretty satisfied with it, an attitude her sister Jane will understand. If Elizabeth was wrong about Wickham, she was, after all, wrong too about Darcy. She has come to see that there is good in the world where she doubted it – which is what Jane has been too quickly believing all along.

The most important thing done in the novel is that all disagreeing characters have been brought together in the same family. They began with disagreement and ended up living happily together on common ground in Derbyshire. In the family, all differences are reconciled. The family that is created in the course of *Pride and Prejudice* repels again and again the critical assaults made on it by the various characters. Darcy would have liked to marry Elizabeth, but not like her mother. Mr. Bennet would have liked to exclude a daughter and son-in-law from Longbourn. Lady Catherine would have liked Pemberley to remain unpolluted by Bennets. Mr. Collins would have liked his cousin Lydia to be driven out of the family forever.

But sentiments like these are futile. Jane Austen's irony is too strong. It has brought together the characters in a relationship that rises above absolute and final judgments on relative merits. It has bound the characters together in a family relationship. Both are not equally beautiful, but each needs the other. Questions of good and evil are finally irrelevant. The Jane in the family will always need the Elizabeth to mediate between her and the world as it is. However, we must recognize that Elizabeth will always need Jane as well. After Elizabeth reads Darcy's letter, she regrets that there is no Jane to comfort her and says she has not been so weak and vain. So, it is also with Bingley and Darcy. Bingley relies on his friend's judgment and can only marry once Darcy gives his permission. And Darcy himself cannot marry until he is ready to give it. Thus, to some extent, there will be a pooling of the resources of sense and sensibility in the neighborhood of Pemberley. Wickham has earned a grudging place in the family. The conventional ending in this novel is not just two weddings but three. Jane Austen's irony has elevated her above such a judgment. Jane Austen's art of comic irony as the voice of female consciousness has elevated her above in the case of contrasting her with her contemporaries and put her at the same time in the rank of social reformer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is thankful to the Deanship of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at University of Bisha for supporting this work through the Fast-Track Research Support Program.

⁹ . Ibid.p.45; chapter 11.

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