

## **Irony and Humour in Jane Austen's *Persuasion***

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Human absurdities are exposed using irony which is a weapon of ridicule. Irony arises from the contrast - contrast between the surface meaning of a statement and the real or the intended meaning of it. It may also be a contrast between what a person says and what he does, that is, between pretence and reality. Humour has comic irony as its principal source. Including *Persuasion*, irony is all pervasive in the novels of Jane Austen and indeed, irony was her forte. Delicate, ruthless irony is the very essence of her style.

Jane Austen was a born storyteller. Faithful observation, personal detachment and a fine sense of ironic comedy are among Jane Austen's chief characteristics as a writer. Folly, she ridicules wherever she finds it, sin, she excuses wherever she can and does not pretend to be a social reformer. She had complete mastery as an artist over her material. Austen was a realist and she drew her materials from actual life as she sees it. If they are considered from the point of view of story or characters or setting, realism can be found as the keynote of her novels. There is nothing fantastic, fanciful or far-fetched in her works thus she being a practitioner of the domestic novel or the novel of manners.

Jane Austen's favourite weapon was irony. As a humourist, irony was her *forte*. Though her vision was satirical, she held a comedian's view towards life. She treated her characters with mild and subdued kind of humour. *Persuasion* has two kinds of characters. The author gives a sympathetic depiction of one kind of characters and ironic description of another kind. The ironical delineation includes those of Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mrs. Musgrove, Mary and to a lesser degree the Musgrove sisters and Captain Benwick.

The ironical sketch of Sir Walter Elliot is much of amusement to the readers. He attributes great respect to himself because he acknowledges the combination of him having good looks with the blessing of a baronetcy. He thinks of his appearance more than a woman. He amuses the readers with his repeated disappointing efforts for a second marriage and he manages with a claim that he has not re-married for the sake of his dear daughter. Equally amusing is the fact that he thinks of himself to be youthful while everybody else in the family and in his circle of acquaintance as having grown old.

Irony is found when Sir Walter is reluctant to offer his mansion to a tenant though he, already in debt, has already agreed to let it out. Here humour and irony emanates from a contrast between the pretension and reality. Having his tenant in mind he says: "I am very little disposed to grant a tenant of Kellynch-hall any extraordinary favour, be he a sailor or a soldier". (Chapter 3)

The snobbery of Sir Walter is equally amusing. When Mr. Wentworth is referred to as a gentleman by Mr. Shepherd, Sir Walter says: "You misled me by the term 'gentleman'. I thought you were speaking of some man of property. Mr. Wentworth was nobody, I remember"(Chapter 3). With the same snobbery he disapproved of the match between Anne and Fredrick Wentworth. Jane Austen gives an ironical summing up of Sir Walter in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter. When Sir Walter learns that Captain Wentworth has twenty five thousand pounds and is well-placed in his profession, he no longer objects to Anne's marriage to Captain Wentworth. The Captain "was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish spendthrift baronet, who had not any principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had place him ..." (Chapter 24). Having observed minutely more of Captain Wentworth, "he was very much struck by his personal claims, and felt that

his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against her (Anne's) superiority of rank." (Chapter 24). In short, the absurdities of Sir Walter have been exposed through ironical statements in the course of the novel, and he is made to look ridiculous.

Next in line is Elizabeth, Sir Water's daughter. Elizabeth, a handsome girl with a dominating temperament, is as snobbish as her father. With irony, Jane Austen describes her proposals for economy. She either plans to cut off some unnecessary charities or refrains from refurnishing the drawing room. She thinks and feels herself ill-used and unfortunate. Moreover, she is not willing to give up the comforts to which she is used to and does not want to lose her prestige and dignity. Elizabeth is looked upon ridiculous when her relations with Mr. Eliot and Mrs. Clay are portrayed. She longs to get married to the heir-presumptive, Mr. Elliot. She has once been frustrated but when he tries to make up, with the Elliot family, Elizabeth's hopes revive. As far as Mrs. Clay is concerned, Elizabeth is not prepared to admit that this woman has any idea or designs to marry Sir Walter. The confidence she has over Mrs. Clay becomes to know that Mrs. Clay has run away to London to live as Mr. Elliot's mistress.

Mary, sister of Elizabeth, is portrayed with plenty of irony. Like her sister, she thinks that social connections are very, very important in one's life. As far as her nature is concerned, Mary is dissatisfied with life and she keeps on grumbling and complaining. Mary exaggerates her ailments and the least indisposition gives her a feeling that she is sinking. All the above nature of hers is ironically portrayed. She thinks herself as an unlucky person. She keeps complaining that she is always the last of her family to be taken notice of. Mary keeps complaining that her husband always ignores her and also feels that her children are unmanageable. If her husband is away for a long stretch of more than six hours, she feels hurt. A speck of irony is seen in her attitude towards her parents-in-law. Mrs. Musgrove pampers Mary's children by giving them a lot of trash and sweet things that they are sure to come back sick and irritated for the day. When Louisa, Mary's sister-in-law, meets with an accident, Mary protests that she must stay to nurse her. The obvious irony is that she is anxious to stay with her husband rather than her wish to nurse Louisa. Mary's selfishness in leaving her sick child with Anne to attend a party at the Great House with her husband is also

ridiculed by Austen. She provides more humour even than her father. Mary, indeed, has to be recognised as one of the principal comic characters created by Jane Austen in *Persuasion*.

Mary's mother-in-law, Mrs. Musgrove, is treated ironically by Jane Austen. This is obvious in Mrs. Musgrove's grief over her dead son, Richard, for whom she never cared when he was alive. The irony arises from a contrast between 'pretence' and 'reality'. Her grief is not a genuine experience but a sentimental pose. As Mrs. Musgrove's son Richard was a troublesome, hopeless, stupid and unmanageable person, nobody in the family had felt grieved when the news of his death came two years ago. But, all of a sudden, Mrs. Musgrove speaks about the dead man in a manner which is intended to win sympathy arouses mirth in the mind of the readers. Another ironical remark is that, Mrs. Musgrove while giving Mrs. Croft the history of her eldest daughter's engagement she speaks in a "perfectly audible" voice "while it pretended to be a whisper" (Chapter 2). In the climax, the accident at Lyme is a scene of shock, anxiety and family disaster. But even here elements of comedy are unmistakable. Hysterical Mary renders her husband Charles incapable of any action. It is understood that Charles, "hung over Louisa with sobs of grief, and could only turn his eyes from one sister, to see the other in a state as insensible, or to witness the hysterical agitations of his wife, calling on him for help which he could not give" (Chapter 12).

Jane Austen's themes are ironic and here it is intended to mean the juxtaposition of two mutually incompatible views of life through which the readers derive passive enjoyment. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies amused Jane Austen. Whatever impression a person wishes to give of himself is unacceptable to Jane Austen that she points with an attitude of irony the truth that lie's beneath the surface. Pretentiousness, absurdity and dishonesty are exposed by her. Straight, honest character like Mrs. Smith is like a rare snapshot who does not have a double image. Mrs. Smith can be taken at her face value with all her virtues sans pretensions and incongruities.

The technique of ironic statement frees Jane Austen from the necessity of making involved commentaries on her characters. Another technique is to put a speech into a character's mouth which is not intended by the speaker as irony but becomes ironic in effect and the readers are left to notice the implications. Her comic view of life often raises a smile

– an appreciative smile, a broad smile, sometimes a bitter smile. At times she is harshly critical of some faults and attitudes. There is a tendency to think that irony and humour must co – exist. An ironist without humour is almost inconceivable.

What one is, and what one thinks, are brought out by Austen by highlighting the incongruity in man. What is there between expectation and fulfillment, pretense and she brings out actuality. One of the contradictions in human experience is the ironic perception. Thus, Jane Austen mirrors the life she knew. Her interest is in human motive; in the reactions of individuals to each other and she could deal with people with absolute accuracy by never stepping beyond the limits of her personal knowledge.

### Works Cited

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