

<sup>3</sup>It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife<sup>2</sup>. (pg.1) The first sentence of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is perhaps the most famous opening of all English comedies concerning social manners. It encapsulates the ambitions of the empty-headed Mrs. Bennet, and her desire to find a good match for each of her five daughters from the middle-class young men of the family's acquaintance: <sup>3</sup>The business of her life was to get her daughters married, its solace was visiting and news.<sup>2</sup> (pg. 3) In this, she receives little help from her mild and indolent spouse, who regards her aspirations with a tolerant and witty cynicism. The main strand of this story concerns the prejudice of Elizabeth Bennet against the apparent arrogance of her future suitor, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and the blow to his pride in falling in love with her. Though a satisfactory outcome is eventually achieved, it is set against the social machinations of many other figures; the haughty Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the fatuous Mr. Collins; the younger Bennet daughter, Lydia; and her lover, Wickham, with whom she scandalously elopes. It is often pointed out that Austen's novels emphasize characterization and romanticism, but in *Pride and Prejudice* the emphasis is on the irony, values and realism of the characters as they develop throughout the story.

Jane Austen's irony is devastating in its exposure of foolishness and hypocrisy. Self-delusion or the attempt to fool other people are usually the object of her wit. There are various forms of exquisite irony in *Pride and Prejudice*, sometimes the characters are unconsciously ironic, as when Mrs. Bennet seriously asserts that she would never accept any entailed property, though Mr. Collins is willing to. Often Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth serve to directly express the author's ironic opinion. When Mary Bennet is the only daughter at home and does not have to be compared with her prettier sisters, the author notes that: <sup>3</sup>it was suspected by her father that she submitted to the change without much reluctance.<sup>2</sup> (pg.189) Mr. Bennet turns his wit on himself during the crisis with Wickham and Lydia: <sup>3</sup>let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough.<sup>2</sup> (pg. 230)

Elizabeth's irony is lighthearted when Jane asks when she began to love Mr. Darcy: <sup>3</sup>It has been coming on so gradually that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberly<sup>2</sup> (pg.163). She can be bitterly cutting however in her remark on Darcy's role in separating Bingley and Jane: <sup>3</sup>Mr. Darcy is uncommonly kind to Mr. Bingley, and takes a prodigious deal of care of him.<sup>2</sup> (pg. 202)

The author also independent of any character, uses<sup>1</sup> irony in the narrative parts for some of her sharpest judgments. The Meryton Community is glad that Lydia is marrying such a worthless man as Wickham: <sup>3</sup>... and the good nature wishes for her well doing, which had proceeded before from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but a little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such a husband, her misery was certain.<sup>2</sup> (pg. 270)

Austen uses irony to provoke gentle, whimsical laughter and to make veiled, bitter observations as well; in her hands' irony is an extremely effective device for moral evaluation: <sup>3</sup>She has Elizabeth say that she hopes she will never laugh at what is wise or good.<sup>2</sup> (pg.143)

The characters on *Pride and Prejudice* are full of moral, social and human values. Every character is measured against the intelligence and sensitivity which eighteenth-century people called good sense, and they stand and fall by common consent of the evaluation made by the author. The characters themselves, the sensible ones, accept this standard, and their relationships are determined by it, Mr. Bennet cannot be happy with his wife because he does not respect her: <sup>3</sup>Mr. Bennet saw his wife, he was thinking about how obstinate she was, how money made her so happy, and how hypocrite she was.<sup>2</sup> (Pg.90) For this reason he retreats the ridiculousness of his family into sarcasm and carelessness. Elizabeth also feels pained by her family's folly, and can not help realizing how harmful it is to Lydia's and her own romances:<sup>2</sup> I have bad news for you ... imprudent as a marriage between Mr. Wickham

and our poor Lydia would be, we are now anxious to be assured it has taken place in Scotland...<sup>2</sup> (pg. 262) Likewise when Charlotte Lucas marries the idiotic Mr. Collins for purely materialistic reasons, Elizabeth knows their friendship can never be the same; they will separate.

This stress on good sense brings characters together as well. Jane, Elizabeth, and the Gardiners are tied to each other by affection and an alert confidence in each other's judgment. They can rely on both the mind and the heart of the others'; this sensible and spirited attitude is what draws Darcy to Elizabeth in the first place. Since the quality of good sense is so important for the characters, we should know what it specifically is. The two characteristics already mentioned, intelligence and sensitivity, are obviously essential. A sense of responsibility also seems to be part of it. Mrs. and Mr. Bennet are not sensible when they fail to guide their family. This responsibility involves a consideration for the feelings of other people which silly characters as Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Lydia Bennet conspicuously lack.

What happens in *Pride and Prejudice* happens to nearly all of us, embarrassment at the foolishness of relatives, the unsteady feelings of falling in love, and the mortify of suddenly realizing a big mistake. The psychological realism of the novel is revealed in the quick recognition we have of how the characters feel, there is a very convincing view of how an intelligent, feeling person changes, the sensitiveness of how people do feel and act; as when Elizabeth and Darcy are angry at each other and how they completely change their minds with the passage of time. Jane Austen's major weakness as a writer is related to her greatest strength. Her novels are important because they demonstrate the crude vigorous power of society which is not just of her day, but exists today, although somewhat adapted, and still exerts a powerful influence over social life. The weapon that Jane Austen employs against its suffocating effects is that of irony which is all the more telling for its gentle mockery. At a time when women had no political or financial individuality, she shows how the powerless can influence and migrate the more soul-destroying aspects of female impotence. It must be remembered that Austen wrote solely from personal experience, and this authenticity makes her insights perennially valid.