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Satire in *Pride and Prejudice*: Challenging Society and the Sentimental Novel

In 18th-century England, the sentimental novel dominated literary culture. "'Sentimental' belongs to a group of words—including sentiment, sense, sensibility, sensitivity, and sympathy—which together form a crucial lexicon of both sentimental and Romantic literary culture" (Rowland). It was a genre defined by seminal works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* that emphasized heightened emotions and moral virtue, often with love and marriage as the rewards of virtue. English writer Jane Austen, born in 1775, grew up during the peak of the genre in the 1770s and 1780s. She read such works, and it is often argued that her own writing is a reaction against, or critique of, the sentimental novel. While Austen's second novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) heavily engages with the conventions of love and marriage, she imbues the story with irony and satirical humor, challenging the idealized, sympathetic image of romance and the societal pressures facing women, and men, in the Regency era. Through exaggerated characterizations, free indirect discourse, and ironic misjudgments, Austen exposes the flaws of sentimentalism and society, crafting a love story that values self growth and mutual respect.

Satire shall be defined as "a poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, especially as a form of social or political commentary" (Oxford English

Dictionary). Irony, as a component of satire and a rhetorical device, is heavily present in Austen's writing—and often utilized to further Austen's satirical ideas. Specifically in *Pride and Prejudice*, satire arises in Austen's ironic descriptions of characters, exposing the ridiculousness of social conventions in the Regency era. Julie Wylie emphasizes this practice in her 2000 essay "Dancing in Chains: Feminist Satire in *Pride and Prejudice*":

> Satire has long been considered the province of the male writer, and women, especially the older, outspoken ones, have been the target of the male satirist's venom. Aspiring female writers such as Jane Austen, hopeful of earning a place as an Augustan wit, knew their open criticism of the establishment would not lead to long or successful literary careers. Yet Austen wished to break from the restrictive confines of the sentimental novel, the literary form deemed sufficient to hold the imaginative and creative skills of a proper woman writer (Wylie).

Austen's satire is perhaps most visible in her characterizations of a few key characters, particularly Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins. Both characters are exaggerated to the point of caricature: Mrs. Bennet's obsession with securing husbands for her daughters embodies society's approach to marriage in the time period and Mr. Collins' sycophantic tendencies expose the social duty of marriage. However, behind these silly characterizations lies Austen's critique on society. Mrs. Bennet's single-minded fixation on marriage positions her as absurd, yet her concerns reflect an unfortunate societal pressure for women living under the rule of male primogeniture, in which the eldest son would inherit the family's estate. "The author's veiled feminist message is revealed only when the reader looks past the humor aimed at women and then asks why a character such as Mrs. Bennet acts as she does" (Wylie). Austen differentiates

herself from the mocking male satirists of her time by using Mrs. Bennet's character to educate and critique. She doesn't simply ridicule her actions or words—she offers the explanation for why Mrs. Bennet acts this way and outlines the trap of patriarchy she is stuck in: "The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (5). Austen's use of irony here is distinctly feminist, pushing readers to recognize that the injustice of this system renders Mrs. Bennet's behavior entirely rational.

Similarly, Mr. Collins shares Mrs. Bennet's concern for marriage as an economic necessity. He also represents another side of Austen's satire—the absurdity of marriage as a duty rather than a partnership of love. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth is comically calculated:

> 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 that 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 (Austen 80).

Collins' assertion that his first reason for marrying is because it is the right thing to do is already strikingly unromantic. It is worsened by the fact that he places his own happiness second, and ultimately completely ridiculed with his reveal that it is the recommendation of his venerated patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Collins serves as a direct critique of marriage as an obligation. This absurdity of the character lends itself to Austen's critique of marriage as a means of economic security and societal righteousness rather than a genuine union of emotional compatibility. This is emphasized in the language that Austen employs: Collins' dialogue is

marked by excessive formality and structure, creating comic dissonance between his words and the usually romantic view of proposals. The use of "first," "secondly," and "thirdly" highlight the calculated nature of his offer, making it appear as a formal argument. The phrase "which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier" which glorifies Lady Catherine's position, further relegates Elizabeth—and his own happiness—to an afterthought. The prominence of "I" highlights Collins' selfishness and his utter disregard for Elizabeth. There is hardly any use of "you" that compliments Elizabeth's qualities (without serving as a source of approval to Lady Catherine).

If Mrs. Bennet exemplifies the pressures placed on women, perhaps Collins also serves as a critique on the social conditions facing men who wanted to advance their status in this time, but he is less of a sympathetic character in the novel. The proposal scene's satirical nature is felt even more heavily when Collins assumes Elizabeth is simply playing coy with her refusal to marry. To this, he replies, "I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long" (Austen 82). Collins' ludicrous confidence in Elizabeth's acceptance is Austen's feminist irony at its sharpest. Readers of the novel, who have been privy to the narrator's and Elizabeth's voices, all understand that Elizabeth would never marry Mr. Collins, which imbues this moment with dramatic irony. Collins' assumption that Elizabeth's refusal is a sign of feminine modesty is immediately refuted in the reader's mind, making this moment inherently aligned with Austen's feminist mode of irony.

On a more internal scale, the novel's irony emerges heavily through Elizabeth Bennet's perspective. Unlike sentimental heroines like *Pamela's* Pamela Andrews, Elizabeth is characterized by her quick wit and intelligence. As a sign of this, her relationship with Mr. Darcy develops mostly through their witty banter instead of immediate, idealized affection. Austen develops the interactions between these two with great care, crafting dialogue as captivating as a

screenwriter's or playwright's. Their exchanges are ripe with subtext, verbal sparring, and revelatory moments that give the impression of a sharp, well-paced film script. In fact, *Pride and Prejudice*'s enduring success as a novel and in its adaptations largely lends itself to Austen's timeless wit and command of dialogue—her method of establishing human dynamics, tension, and social critique through layered conversations. Elizabeth and Darcy's verbal battles are a space where Austen can dismantle romantic idealism. At the Netherfield Ball, Elizabeth tells Darcy, "...I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds.—We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room…" (Austen 69). Despite her sarcastic intonation, Elizabeth's speech here recognizes that her and Darcy are cut from the same cloth, acknowledging their shared qualities of observance, independence, and pride. It is this independence and wit that allows Elizabeth to challenge Darcy on her own and take her romantic fate into her own hands.

In contrast, Pamela embodies modesty and a more passive endurance, encapsulated best by the quote: "I fell down on my knees, and said, For Heaven's sake, your honour, pity a poor creature, that knows nothing of her duty, but how to cherish her virtue and good name: I have nothing else to trust to: and, though poor and friendless here, yet I have always been taught to value honesty above my life" (Richardson). Unlike Elizabeth, who bravely challenges social norms through her observations and wit, Pamela relies on emotional appeals and physical expressions of her distress, through tears and kneeling to protect herself from Mr. B's—her master's—rakish advances. Notably, she characterizes herself as poor and pitiful. For Pamela, it is chiefly her virtue that compels Mr. B to finally reform himself and offer her a sincere proposal of marriage. Her goodness and piety lead to her ultimate reward: marriage. Elizabeth is a shift away from the passive virtue of the sentimental novel to the ironic, self-aware figure who asserts

agency through intellect rather than suffering. In this way, Austen redefines the novelistic heroine: a woman who isn't waiting to be rescued or rewarded for her virtue, but as an active participant in her own fate who can assert rather than submit.

Elizabeth is a protagonist who places great faith in her abilities of perception. Her perspective is explored through Austen's innovative use of free indirect discourse, a technique that allows readers to experience a character's inner thoughts while still guided by a narrator's perspective. As a result, readers are exposed to Elizabeth's flawed biases, which shape her misjudgments of Darcy and Wickham but also her exaggerated views of other characters. It should be noted that the ridiculousness of Mrs. Bennet and Collins largely stems from Elizabeth's perspective. While she views them negatively, Austen's irony encourages readers to reckon with the social realities driving their behavior—both characters' attitudes are born from a will to survive and are technically acting pragmatically to secure their futures. By exposing these flaws in Elizabeth's thinking, Austen is able to subtly and intricately critique the sociopolitical state of the Regency era. For example, "The direct statement about her mother in Chapter 1 ("a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper") as well as the quiet irony with which her father is regarded express her views of her parents: she feels contempt for her mother and love for her father, but she has a clear recognition of his failings" (Paulson 295). Elizabeth's characteristic wit makes her an engaging protagonist, but it often leads readers to overstate her judgments.

Although readers are largely on Elizabeth's side, Austen gives her plenty of room for failure. In her essay "Austen's Voices," Jenny Davidson observes, "The peculiar thing about Austen's technique is that though our sympathies are all with Elizabeth against Miss Bingley, Miss Bingley is in fact correct…in almost all of what she says, as Elizabeth will later come to

understand. Whether because of a satirical impulse or an angry one, Elizabeth often finds herself in the position of overstating her own case" (240). For another example, when lamenting Charlotte's "humiliating" marriage to Mr. Collins, Elizabeth's voice is also quite exaggerated. "The hyperbole of the language here…draws attention to the fact of the judgment's being considerably too harsh" (Davidson 242). Through these moments, Austen portrays Elizabeth as a flawed but intelligent heroine, contrasting the traditional ideal of a heroine who is immediately able to discern true love. Rather than presenting romance as a reward for virtue, Austen satirizes sentimental tropes by stressing that love is not simply a matter of fate and sentiment. Instead, Elizabeth's arduous romantic journey is paved with layers of irony, reconstructing love as a process of self-discovery and inner growth, thus subverting the ideals of female love and marriage in a rigid social era.

Although Austen satirizes many conventions of the sentimental novel, she does not reject virtuous and genuine love. Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage is not written with any irony. Unlike Mr. Collins' and Charlotte Lucas' economical marriage and Lydia's lust-driven elopement to George Wickham, Elizabeth and Darcy's union is built on mutual respect and personal growth. In this sense, Austen does not completely negate the sentimental novel, instead transforms and refines it, retaining its deep emotional qualities but suggesting realism over idealism. In his novel *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, Richard Paulson suggests that Austen often provides one ideal marriage in her novels as a contrast to all the other flawed unions:

> Austen seems to believe in an ideal marriage. At this point the wife-husband relation has become analogous to the various fool-knave relations of satire. It remains in the background in the false relationships of the Bennets and in almost all of the established marriages in Austen's novels, with always one ideal

marriage by which to judge the rest—in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Gardiners (Paulson 303).

With the presentation of the Gardiners as a model couple—rational and competent—Austen seems to emphasize a more realistic vision of romance, one that is maintained by respect and sound judgment. This positive image of the Gardiners is something quite unique to Austen's work. "...the subtle effect of semi-satirical judgment associated with Austen's free indirect style, the striking choice to put incorrect or unfounded judgments into the mouth of the novel's most attractive character while allowing better-founded ones to less attractive characters (Miss Bingley, Charlotte Lucas, Lady Catherine) is not found in the writing of [Henry] Fielding or Richardson" (Davidson 243). This technique differentiates Austen from sentimental conventions, in which beauty and virtue were often aligned. Austen distinguishes herself by dispersing wisdom across a variety of characters in the novel, whom otherwise seem unremarkable in comparison to Elizabeth. This creates the sense that love in its best form is a balance of emotion and rationality.

Nevertheless, Austen is not the first to satirize the sentimental novel. Henry Fielding, known alongside Samuel Richardson as one of the founders of the English novel, also engaged in the satirizing of the sentimental novel. She was also not the first female satirist—Frances Burney had been satirizing social conventions in 18th-century England since her first novel *Evelina* in 1778. Though, Austen's style and transformative contributions to the novel should not be understated. In his book *The Historical Austen*, William Galperin explains, "Although there were other writers, notably Frances Burney, on whose works Austen undoubtedly modeled her third-person narratives, the realistic practice that she is widely believed to have perfected, with

its particular deployment of free indirect style, is less an advancement upon an earlier type of omniscient narration—specifically Fielding's—than a practice that consists equally with aspects of the epistolary mode in which as many as a third of Austen's major fictions may have been conceived" (21). Austen's blend of Fielding's omniscient style with the subjectivity of the epistolary form allows for an immersive reading experience, revealing more of her characters' thoughts and feelings. This innovation of free indirect discourse strengthens Austen's satire, allowing for the subtle critiquing of societal contradictions and individuals while maintaining a certain narrative distance. Austen may have used satire as an urging for self-reflection from those within society. Paulson, quoting from D.W. Harding's essay *Regulated Hatred*, suggests that Austen's satire highlights how social conventions sustain flawed individuals:

> Austen's 'regulated hatred,' and its satiric implication is 'that the ruling standards of our social group leave a perfectly comfortable niche for detestable people and give them sufficient sanction to persist,' and so they are 'society's embarrassing unconscious comment on itself'" (304).

By commenting on how society traps itself and allows for problematic behavior, Austen emphasizes the gap between decorum and character. This is seen in characters like Lady Catherine, whose extreme wealth has given her a superiority complex, allowing her to exert undue influence. Her entitlement is completely based on the generational status she inherits. On the other hand, Wickham's superior decorum is merely a facade for his morally flawed character, helping him hide his true self-serving personality. Then again, there is a societal and financial reason why he must compensate with his manners. Through her satire as a whole, Austen critiques how society values appearances and

wealth over integrity and true character, and how these conventions can be manipulated by the players within the society.

Ultimately, as Wylie puts it, Austen uses "the power of comedy to educate." Through comic characterizations of secondary characters like Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins, Austen exposes the follies inherent in the system of the Regency era, daring readers to look beyond their absurdities and acknowledge the hard truths that engendered their behaviors—often through a feminist lens. Moreover, the irony inherent in Elizabeth's own misjudgments deconstructs the sentimental or idealized version of love into one that comes out of self-discovery and personal growth. Austen's clever use of satire helps *Pride and Prejudice* stand as both a critique and repurposing of the sentimental novel, offering a more nuanced and natural depiction of human relationships, emphasizing rationale and compatibility over pure sentiment. Rather than dismissing the notion of love, Austen reconstructs it to fit in her ideal framework—rational, adaptable, and rooted in mutual understanding. To Austen, the best marriages and purest loves are not always the most beautiful, but they are compassionate and equal, reflecting a belief and hope that the societal vision of love can progress.

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the
Harvard College Honor Code in this assignment
and in all of my written assignments for this course.
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