

Jane Austen's Literary World : On Her *Irony*

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I

When we enjoy ourselves in the world of Jane Austen's works, it is not difficult to come across variety of her ironical expressions. They are found in various cases : in a conversational scene in the story, a certain situation along the plot of a novel, the theme itself of a novel, etc. Moreover, in speculating on her real life, we can pick up a lot of ironical cases in her letters.

To begin with, we would like to speculate on some examples of ironical expressions in conversational scenes. During the conversation between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in *Pride And Prejudice*, when he says, "There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome,"¹⁾ she answers as follows :

"And *your* defect is a propensity to hate every body."²⁾

This 'propensity to hate every body' is such a bitter irony as makes us feel her very aggressive feelings towards him rather than a humorous irony. Though this expression has often been cited as a good ironical example, can it be uttered in reality by a young woman towards a gentleman of high rank in society, apart from an imaginary scene that might be seen on the drama stage? It seems to us that this expression is too unrealistic to accept, and we might judge the author made Elizabeth utter too far severe words though we have to admit the writer intended to represent Elizabeth's hostile feelings against Mr. Darcy. These ironical words of hers are no doubt full of bitter antagonism which betrays her bellicose character : she wishes to squelch him with biting sarcasm.

Rev. Collins, who always pays his great appreciation and respect to Lady Catherine, his great patroness, is ironically criticized by Elizabeth :

". . . I am sure she [Lady Catherine] could not have bestowed her kindness on a more grateful object."³⁾

When we consider these words 'a more grateful object,' we surely feel that they are

both ironical and humorous, seen from the superficial aspect of them, but we cannot help but perceive, at the same time, her pouring bitter scorn behind them on the object, Rev. Collins. It seems to us that most ironical expressions towards people are in general likely to be critical of individual objects whom they are to be thrown at ; this is quite true of this scene : behind the quiet or mild words she hides her real feelings towards him : she scorns at him to an extraordinary extent.

We might maintain with great confidence that we can detect much more irony in *Pride And Prejudice* than in any other novel by Jane Austen. The following could be also regarded as another remarkable example of her irony in conversation : Mr. Bennet says to his wife :

“ . . . I had hoped that our sentiments coincided in every particular, . . . ”⁴⁾

Indeed these words of his give the readers a great enjoyment, but, if we stop here a moment to consider the latent meaning behind them, we can perceive a surprising and painful fact : at one side of the conversation these words are very sarcastic ones given to his ignorant wife, while at the other side they are also more ironical ones given to himself, because he recognizes himself too enough the very truth that he has long felt sorry for himself owing to his life partner's ignorance. We believe that irony in this case of his is a rare one which might be called double-constitutional irony ; the talker is giving an ironical laugh at himself as well as at the listener.

We could perceive another type of irony : the following could be regarded as a case of situational irony. In *Sense And Sensibility* we come to the situation in which Marianne, who is feeling sad because of her disappointed love towards Mr. Willoughby, tells her elder sister, without any notice of her elder sister's having been disappointed in love, that she cannot understand her agony of lost love⁵⁾. This case might be looked upon as a typically ironical one in the frame of a situation. This type of irony, we believe, has a good effect upon the readers' feelings during their passing the situation, especially upon the readers of mild character ; they never discover any hostile or malicious feelings in the talker's words and also behind them. In this respect this case is quite different from those cases of the conversational irony mentioned above.

We can also find a third type of irony in the plot of her novels. As a suitable example of irony of this kind, we could pick up the case found in the relation between Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley in *Emma*. She never recognizes the very existence of him in the true sense, though he has always been near her, and what is more, the most probable person that might understand all her situations in her life — her feelings, character, attitude, behavior, etc. ; in her womanly consciousness, ironically enough, she cannot recognize him as her own life partner until she has arrived at the very end of the story. Admitting such a case observed in the plot of *Emma* is a common one in novels in general, we will have to appreciate the author's techniques in planning the novel plot ; it is this unconsciousness of her that makes the readers much interested in

the story of *Emma*. However, here we may have one thing to point out : it is rare that we feel humorous when we happen to meet this type of irony.

We can pick up a similar type of irony in that we never feel humorous : irony in the theme of novels. In each theme of *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense And Sensibility*, we could find out irony of ideas against the tendency of sentimentalism, the literary spirit of the time of the latter half of the eighteenth century⁶⁾, and in that of *Pride And Prejudice* and *Emma*, we could discover irony against human beings' excessive self-reliance. And moreover, *Mansfield Park* might contain ironical aspects that outward appearance of human beings is filled with vanity and falsehood. In the last novel *Persuasion*, the quality of irony is more modest than in *Pride And Prejudice* and *Emma*, but we could even detect an ironical theme that human beings' insignificant pride or foolish vanity is trifled with by human beings' honest feelings.

When we speculate on Jane Austen's letters, apart from her literary works, we can also find out a lot of ironical expressions in them. For instance, in one of the letters addressed to her elder sister, Cassandra, she writes about Fanny, one of her nieces, as follows :

. . . she [Fanny] finds that she has been buying a new cap without having a new pattern, which is true enough. . . . I consider it as a thing of course at her time of Life — one of the sweet taxes of Youth to chuse in a hurry & make bad bargains.⁷⁾

The last part of her words is a humorous and ironical expression about the young niece to whom she often turns her tender feelings. Though we cannot overlook the writer's slight ridicule towards her niece's silly behavior, we would imagine in addition that she just enjoys smart or witty kind of usage of words more than ridiculous feeling towards the object.

The following passage below is also an ironical example in which a Member of Parliament, Stephen Rumbold Lushington by name, who is a friend of Jane Austen's nephew Edward Austen's, is criticized very severely :

I am sure he is clever & a Man of Taste. He got a vol. of Milton last night & spoke of it with Warmth. — He is quite an M. P. — very smiling, with an exceeding good address, & readiness of Language. — I am rather in love with him. — I dare say he is ambitious & Insincere.⁸⁾

Her good opinion of him halfway turns into a sudden reversal in the last part, so that we could grasp her true opinion of him — a man who is anything but a man of good sense. It seems that Jane Austen is likely to play with the object of her observation by means of the witty usage of words and phrases.

When we continue to search for irony in her letters, we sometimes meet with examples which seem to contain a kind of sarcastic irony or cynicism that might give us an impression of displeasure. The following might be a good example true of this

comment :

They [the Lances] live in a handsome style and are rich, and she [Mrs. Lance] seemed to like to be rich, and we gave her to understand that we were far from being so ; she will soon feel therefore that we are not worth her acquaintance.⁹⁾

About Mrs. Lance, who is a new neighbor in Southampton, Jane Austen makes such cynical remarks as 'like to be rich' ; these words dare to be uttered by her, who we suppose has acknowledged enough the significance of wealth in the real world at the age of thirty-two. Beneath the seemingly witty expression we cannot but find an ironical paradox that the writer, who seems not to be so rich as the object, reveals to her elder sister Cassandra her honest feelings — her envy at Mrs. Lance's wealth : she wishes to avoid Mrs. Lance's society on account of Mrs. Lance's intense pride in wealth, while she might have to admit, we imagine, that she has something like a sort of sense of inferiority because of her less riches.

II

The objects in Jane Austen's irony, whether they appear in her works or in her letters, are people, things, incidents, the world, and so on ; ¹⁰⁾ and, above all, most of the objects are people ; she is likely to pay her more attentive eye to the people's attitude or behavior than to anything else. What kind of people are apt to be aimed at by her as the objects of her irony ?

Just among the characters in *Pride And Prejudice*, for example, we find Rev. Collins, whose words and deeds are too extraordinarily pompous and ceremonious ; and Mr. Darcy, who is misunderstood to be a horribly arrogant aristocrat ; and Mrs. Bennet, who appears as a considerably innocent and talkative woman, etc. And among those who are to be chosen as the objects in Jane Austen's letters, we can find a young girl called Fanny Knight, who is one of her nieces ; and Mr. Stephen Rumbold Lushington, a Member of Parliament who is destined to be criticized to be ambitious and insincere ; and also Mrs. Lance, one of her neighbors in Southampton, who takes too much pride in her wealth, and so forth.

Judging from the characteristics of these people, we acknowledge Jane Austen's irony tends to be one towards such people as have too far excessive aspects of their personal character. We would like to point out that she is inclined to dislike or sometimes abhor human beings' pompousness, arrogance, innocence or foolishness, pride distorted by vanity, and what not.¹¹⁾ In this respect we could claim that she has a unique measure of value judgment towards human beings, which seems to work automatically or intuitively in her inner mind just before she comes to utter ironical words. It is the very criterion to judge whether the objects are over the regulated mark or line of her own setting up or not. In her mind this criterion is laid orderly or in logical order : this unique way of her thinking contains a quality of rationality through

which she tries to discern each time whether the object ought to be regarded as ironical or not.

In addition when we speculate on her *Juvenilia*, we are obliged to admit that some factor of her way of thinking, no doubt, was generated in her youth. Though we have to take it into account that she was too young to recognize the significance of expressions of the severest kind, we could say she took on the character of considerably ironical or cynical quality when she was fourteen or fifteen years old.

Among her juvenile works, one of the most cynical descriptions could be found in her *The History of England* : she dares to call Queen Elizabeth I “that disgrace to humanity, that pest of society.”¹²⁾ Moreover she adds under the title of this work that this was written “By a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian.”¹³⁾ When we consider this work was composed from her own unique viewpoint, we are extremely startled at the girl writer's uncommon severity. We could glance at one of bitterly ironical aspects of young Jane Austen's inner mind. This trend of severity was possibly given constant refinement, with her own growth, in the sense that it might turn to excellent eye of observation on human beings. In her adult literary works & real letters, the phases of her ironical expressions grow to be adult ones ; in uttering irony she learns to put such decent sort of diction to real use as seems to be much more ironical than any other abusive one. (A tallented person knows to be modest ?) Her unseen character of severe harshness, we believe, comes to give her irony a great depth in humor and bitterness.

We know well enough that irony in general will be originally generated just by bright people from something like ridicule or contempt towards the objects, especially towards those who are characteristic of being too curious or too excessive in their words and behavior. In Jane Austen's novels & letters such persons as mentioned above appear and make us enjoy to a very great extent. We might agree on the idea that her irony is incomparably excellent and has very humorous aspects in itself. But we would like to point out simultaneously that there is something hidden beneath her occasional utterance of irony, which might impress on us an aspect of Jane Austen's inhuman coolness — a slight of spitefulness or a kind of transcendent ridicule towards the people she makes a great observation on. And we have a fact to add here: the fact that the nature of her irony is never of an anti-social character though it may take on a quality of a kind of transcendentalism.

Even if we tried to turn our critical eyes to Jane Austen's irony, we would be bound to admit the firm truth that her irony is essential to her literary works and letters. It is needless to say that the readers could enjoy without fail her variety of irony to the fullest measure if only they could keep their eyes away from the aspect of her character — seemingly mild severity.

We could imagine on the other hand she possibly enjoyed herself, playing with the techniques of combination of humor and irony in composing her works & letters. We might suppose she took a great delight in the very description of the people who were

doomed to be criticized.

It could be admitted in safety that she indeed had a keen eye of observation on human beings, and we have to appreciate her finesse of irony, humorous or severe, in her writings : she was a true lover of irony.

Notes :

- 1) *Pride And Prejudice*, p. 58 ; The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, ed. R. W. Chapman, London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1976
- 2) *ibid.*
- 3) *ibid.*, p. 178
- 4) *ibid.*, p. 29
- 5) *Sense And Sensibility*, p. 185 ; The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, ed. R. W. Chapman, London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1974
- 6) Ian Watt gives us the following reference in his *THE RISE OF THE NOVEL* :
 With only a few exceptions the fiction of the last half of the eighteenth century, though occasionally of some interest as evidence of the life of the time or of various fugitive literary tendencies such as sentimentalism or Gothic terror, had little intrinsic merit ; and much of it reveals only too plainly the pressures towards literary degradation which were exerted by the booksellers and circulating library operators in their efforts to meet the reading public's uncritical demand for easy vicarious indulgence in sentiment and romance.
THE RISE OF THE NOVEL, p. 290, London : Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1957
- 7) *Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 330, Letter to Cassandra Austen, Thursday 23 September, 1813, *Jane Austen's Letter to her sister Cassandra and others*, col. and ed. R. W. Chapman, second edition (reprinted), London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1979 <first edition (1932)>
- 8) *ibid.*, p. 353, Letter to Cassandra Austen, Thursday 14 October, 1813
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 175, Letter to Cassandra Austen, Wednesday 7 January, 1807
- 10) James Edward Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen's nephew, wrote in his *Memoir of Jane Austen* as follows :
 Her unusually quick sense of the ridiculous led her to play with all the common-places of everyday life, whether as regarded persons or things ; ...
Memoir of Jane Austen, p. 92, second edition (reprinted), London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1951 <first edition, Oxford : The Clarendon Press (1926)>
- 11) Sylvia Townsend Warner described the objects of Jane Austen's irony as the following in his *Jane Austen* :
 . . . ; its subjects are some variety or other of pretentiousness : pretentiousness of sentiment, of refinement, of pomposity.
Jane Austen, p. 10 : Bibliographical Series of Supplements to 'British Book News' on Writers and Their Work, No. 17, London : Longmans, Green & Co., (revised) 1957
- 12) *Minor Works*, p. 144, *Juvenilia, The History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles the 1st* ; The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, ed. R. W. Chapman, London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1975
- 13) *ibid.*, p. 138