

## The Complexity of Irony with its Types and Layers to Displaying the Vices of the Society in Jane Austen's *Emma*

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### Abstract

Irony is not a simple stylistic device used in literary work to enrich its meaning and themes. Irony is essential to both the writer's and the readers' cultural backgrounds. It is an important tool to understand inner identity and purpose in life. Consequently, many academic studies analyze its significant use and representation in different literary works. Jane Austen, on her part, is regarded as a master of using irony in her novels. Irony was her secret weapon to represent the suffering of women under the domination of the patriarchal society. Her novel, *Emma*, is not only a simple example of her use of irony, but it is her masterpiece, which is based entirely and fundamentally on irony. In *Emma*, the brilliant novelist has weaved her use of the various types of irony, namely, verbal, situational, structural, and dramatic, with an aesthetic value, turning its incidents and characters into memorable identities. The current study is devoted to examining the intermingling use of the various types of irony that reflect the unique literary talent of the novelist that skillfully matches her social critic role in fixing the vices of her patriarchal community.

**Key Words: Verbal Irony – Situational irony – Structural Irony – Dramatic irony – Jane Austen - Emma**

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## **1.0 Introducing the Study**

Jane Austen is considered one of the landmarks in the history of English Literature. Her objective realization of her community, her artistic observation of human behavior, and, above all, her distinctive use of irony have classified her as one of the pioneering female novelists not only in the nineteenth century but also throughout the history of Western literature (Lodge, 1991, P. 3). *Emma* is regarded the highest level of Austen's use of irony. The novelist has attacked her society and its absurd discrimination between men and women in almost all of her novels. However, *Emma's* attack is painted with a new color that can hardly be seen in other novels (Ibid 5). *Emma* is not a simple ironic criticism of the suffering of women in the patriarchal society. It is a universal scream against all absurd social and traditional norms, which we use to build high walls to imprison ourselves from knowing the real taste of life (Ibid 7). The novel contains many examples of the contradiction between what the character thinks and what she/he does. The wide gap between human thoughts and actions is the secret of the fantastic world of irony represented in the novel. According to Leroy W. Smith (1983), the female protagonist regards herself as responsible for matching various human beings into happily married couples (P: 8). Ironically, she could not understand her feelings towards Mr. Knightley, who can make a happy couple. If *Emma* cannot find her partner to form a happy married couple, how the reader can

trust her to manipulate the other characters to form their future marriages? However, the irony arises from the absolute confidence of Emma in her powers to find a suitable husband for her friend Harriet (Ibid, P: 13). The irony increases in Harriet's utter submissiveness to Emma's will despite her constant failure to find a suitable husband, not only for Harriet but for herself as well (Ibid, P: 15). Austen skillfully chooses several significant examples in which the extreme contradiction between the characters' feelings and thoughts on one part and their actions on the other part is ironically stressed. The generous person (Emma's father) who is so keen to invite people to his house, but he is too cheap to give them tasty food is one of those examples (Ibid, P: 55). The unmarried girl who could not find love in her world, attempts to convince the only one who truly loves her to propose to her close friend is simply another example (Ibid 57).

A third example is represented in the fragile woman whose friend drives her into endless awkward situations. However, she is too cute to beg her friend to stop interfering in her life (Ibid 58). The current study will address Austen's magnificent representation of irony with its four types in *Emma*. The researcher is not only concerned with the verbal and situational ironic examples of the novel that the reader can enjoy in other Austen's novels, but he also investigates the other types of irony, including structural and dramatic irony. The researcher also addresses the ironic representation of the novel's characters as

genuine fools. Each character in the novel makes a fool of himself/herself in continuous and regular situations, reflecting humanity's weaknesses and absurdity.

## **2.0 Austen as a Social Critic**

Irony is a unique technique commonly used in novels to evoke richness and value in the literary work. The use of Irony in *Emma* raises the novel to a high level in English Literature. Austen admits that her ironic touch in the novel is the secret that gives it its glamour (Lodge, 1991, P. 2). Without Irony, the story will be a simple narrative tale about the social conventions of marriage in eighteenth-century England. Nevertheless, apart from its aesthetic function, Austen uses Irony and other stylistic devices to fulfill her role as a social critic. She is considered one of the pioneering novelists who was completely aware of the vices of the patriarchal society during the eighteenth century.

Consequently, she uses her ironic tone to represent women's social and economic mistreatment during that period. Marriage for women during the Georgian era is considered the only hope to live a decent and elegant life (Brown, 1973: 157). Without marriage, a woman's fate is unknown. This is because women are not allowed to work by law. The only job opportunities for women are the simple jobs of babysitting and cleaning the houses. In other words, women can work either as a governess or as a maid. What makes the situation much worse is

that women are not allowed to inherit their father. The inheritance should go to the nearest male relative if no son is in the family (Hopkins, 1925: 403).

Consequently, if the woman missed her chances of marriage, she would face a dark future after her father's death. This unjust social system turned the process of marriage into some trade in which women became the goods. In contrast, the unmarried men with suitable fortune turned out to be the buyers (Paris, 1978: 9). The women, on their part, need to make the goods more attractive for the suitors, hoping that one of them will pick her by the end of the day. Austen uses her creative Irony to address such a situation with its humiliating and inhuman attitudes towards women. She invites her female readers to feel independent in their feelings and thoughts, aiming to find their rightful place in that world. The secret of Austen's Irony is based mainly on her literary skills in giving her readers a simple statement. Then, she contrasts that meaning in every other line in her novel (Harlod, 2010: 5). Maybe the best example is her opening sentence in her remarkable work, *Pride and Prejudice*, as she wrote: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife ." (Quoted in Harlod, 2010: 5) The first reading of this sentence meaning is direct and straightforward claiming that any man with enough money will be in need to find a wife and build his family. However, the rest of the novel indicates that women completely

and fundamentally played the role of finding a suitable husband while men were waiting motionlessly to be picked. In *Emma*, on the other hand, Austen reaches the highest level of Irony, distributed in every word and sentence of the text. However, it is essential to distinguish between Irony and comedy as two stylistic devices. The latter only produces fun and laughing, while the former has two different jobs, namely, drawing laughs and smiles on our faces and motivating our minds to think and contemplate (Marvin, 1974: 6). Irony flourishes from the contrast between the appearance and reality, between the character's image of himself/herself and his/her actual image in readers' mind, between what the character thinks and what he/she says or does (Ibid: 6). All these types of contradictions create an ironic atmosphere that not only refreshes the gloomy atmosphere of the topic with fun and exciting moments but also motivates the reader to think and even read the same statement several times.

### **3.0 Verbal Irony**

According to Alistair Duckworth, Jane Austen uses brilliant examples of verbal irony in *Emma*. That use increases the dilemma of the characters and their complicated journey of self-discovery (1971, P. 14). Being a novel of manner, the portrayal of the characters and their ironic comments become more important than the plot. The novelist uses her talent in verbal irony to establish an intimate link between her readers and her characters

(Ibid 12). For example, there are many incidents in the novel where the various characters represent different points of view about the same object. The irony arises from the readers' confusion between reality and appearance (Ibid 19). This turns a simple incident in the novel into a memorable moment. Remembering the verbal irony lasts more than the act of reading the novel. In the beginning chapters of the novel, Mr. Knightley, in a conversation with Mrs. Weston, uses verbal irony to describe Emma's lack of interest in reading as he says:

Emma has meant to read more since she was twelve years old. I have seen ... many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to [regularly] read through and [excellent] lists they were very well chosen, and very neatly arranged sometimes alphabetically, and by some other rule (37).

Here, Mr. Knightley clarifies that Emma's relationship with reading books is limited to making a list of good books that should be read. However, she never had the time to read them. The verbal irony in this statement arises from Mr. Knightley's praise of how magnificent those lists are. Praising the act of making lists indicates Emma's inability to oblige herself to read the books mentioned in the lists she has made since she was twelve. Another example is represented in a conversation between Miss Bates and Emma when the latter visited Jane Fairfax. Miss Bates told Emma that Jane was too ill to meet anyone, although

Emma had witnessed many neighbors visiting her on the same day, including Mrs. Elton, Mrs. Cole, and Mrs. Perry. The author summarized Emma's thoughts towards that situation in the following words: "Emma did not want to be classed with the Mrs. Eltons, the Mrs. Perrys, and the Mrs. Coles, who ... force themselves anywhere" (295). The contradiction between Emma's thoughts and the situation itself is the source of the verbal irony. It is evident that Jane did not want to meet Emma. However, Emma refuses to accept that fact and chooses another hypothetical claim unrelated to reality. This claim assumes that the other neighbours have visited Jane against her will while Emma is too classy to repeat their uncivilized action. The same example of irony is represented in Emma's inner thoughts regarding her feelings for Mr. Knightley. The author wrote:

A few minutes were sufficient for ... acquainted [her] with her own heart ... Once opening to suspicion, [A mind like hers] made rapid progress ... [She] admitted she acknowledged the whole truth. Why it was so much worse, that Harriet ... should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill (382)

In that quote, Austen links suspicion and the whole truth, making them two sequential steps inside Emma's mind. She would only let suspicion invade her mind for a few minutes if she wanted the whole truth. Logically, this process is impossible. Suspicions will only lead to more suspicions while facing reality, and



investigating the actual matter is the only path to reaching the whole truth. Again, the use of verbal irony is very significant in the text as it turns its moments into eternal memories, motivating both laughter and thinking on the part of the readers.

#### **4.0 Situational Irony**

In another study, Marvin Mudrick focuses on the situational irony in Austen's *Emma*. He argues that the verbal irony is so limited to the situation. Consequently, its use is useless in enriching the novel's other stylistic devices, including its themes, characters, and plot (1974, P. 14). It divides the novel into separate ironic situations. The use of situational irony, on its part, is beneficial for the novel as a complete unit. Moreover, its influence spreads throughout the work (Ibid: 16). There are many examples of situational irony revolving around Miss Woodhouse. The best example is her relationship with Mr. Knightley. From the novel's beginning, Emma is not entirely aware of her feelings towards Mr. Knightley, regarding him only as her best friend. However, when Harriet confessed her interest in him, Emma started recognizing the whole situation. Meeting Mr. Knightley to tell him the truth about Harriet's feelings, Mr. Knightley surprises her by confessing that he was in love with her from the beginning. He said:

I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence and never paid her any attention but, as your

friend: never cared whether she was dead or alive but as your friend. If she fancied otherwise, her wishes have misled her, and I am very sorry--but, Miss Smith, indeed!-- Oh! Miss Woodhouse! Who can think of Miss Smith when Miss Woodhouse is near? (24)

Here, the contrast between the beginning of the incident and its ending is the source of the irony that has granted the novel its happy ending. In another situation, Emma dismissed any relationship, despite Mr. Knightley's suspicions, between Frank Churchill and Miss Jane Fairfax. Ironically, they turned out to be secretly engaged by the end of the story, showing Emma's complete inability to understand the hidden feelings of other characters. Her enthusiasm towards matching Mr. Elton and Harriet includes the same type of irony. Emma intended to talk about the weather while alone with Mr. Elton in the same carriage. Ironically, her subject was cut out and replaced with Mr. Elton's passionate proposal. The author wrote:

She found her subject cut up--her hand seized--her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping--fearing--adoring--ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and [unequaled] love and unexampled passion could not fail of

having some effect, and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible (176).

In that quote, the contradiction between what Emma expected to be the topic of her conversation with Mr. Elton, the weather, and what already happened during the conversation is the source of situational irony.

Other situational irony examples in the novel involve more than one character. For example, the situational irony of Emma's unconscious love for Mr. Knightley ends with their marriage at the novel's end. Ironically, in the novel's second half, Emma thinks Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley and unquestioningly helps to put them together to admit their love to each other. As for herself, she thought she would never fall in love, while she unconsciously was in love with Mr. Knightley from the novel's beginning. She told Harriet: "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. [Were] I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! But I [have never] been in love; it is not my way or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall" (P: 178). Emma is certain that she should be excluded from women's sex for not having their natural desire to get married contradicts her extreme enthusiasm about matching any two couples to get married. In other words, she affirmed in that quote that she theoretically was against the only activity she did throughout the novel. Besides, she was already in love without knowing her true feelings. Nevertheless, this did not stop her from predicting the

hidden love feelings of the other characters. Through those various examples of situational irony, the author has successfully linked the various parts of her literary work with coherence and harmony, giving the text further literary richness and solidarity.

### **5.0 Structural Irony**

As for the structural irony, there is a slight difference between it and the situational irony. The latter denotes the irony in one situation whose outcomes differ and contrast with the expected ones. In structural irony, the author repeats one pattern throughout the novel (Marvin and Christensen, 1974: 142). In *Emma*, for example, Austen uses a recurrent pattern throughout the novel. The pattern consists of an idea in Emma's mind regarding a misjudgment of a particular person or a situation. This misjudgment makes the reader suspicious of Emma's future behavior and actions. However, those suspicions are genuinely supported by Emma's self-realizing her first mistake of judgment. Then, the whole pattern starts to repeat itself. This structural irony increases the intimacy between the readers and the heroine. Additionally, it stresses the unity of the plot, which can be divided into separate stages of misjudging, being shocked by the result, and finally realizing the initial mistake (Ibid: 145). The problem is that Emma's enthusiasm and self-confidence in her several mistaken judgments never decrease. This is illustrated in Emma's

attempt to evaluate her emotion towards Frank Churchill. Austen wrote:

She continues to [entertain the idea] that there is no doubt of her love for him. However, Emma predicts whether her feelings are actually love or esteem. Emma might love Frank because she is constantly thinking of him and likes to receive letters from him (260).

In the previous lines, Emma admits in her inner dialogue that she has no feelings towards Frank. Nevertheless, she insists on following her actions with him until she is shocked by the apparent truth that she had neglected from the beginning. She did not love Frank. What made the whole situation much worse was that Frank did not love her either. This situation is a repeated pattern to what happened at the novel's beginning when Emma insists that Mr. Elton did love Harriet. Her blind enthusiasm led her to push the couple towards each other, causing them nothing but unhappiness. As a result of Emma's blind enthusiasm, Harriet rejects Robert Martin's proposal, though she is really in love with him, while Mr. Elton turns out to be in love with Emma, not Harriet. In another example, Emma decided to draw a portrait of Harriet as a plan to shorten the gap between her and Mr. Elton. However, the portrait does not reflect the actual Harriet's figure. Instead, it reflected the unconscious image inside Emma's mind. Mr. Knightley attempted to correct that fault by telling Emma, "You have made her too tall" (40). Even Mrs. Weston noticed

Emma's exaggeration of Harriet's beauty in the portrait as she said, "The expression of the eye is most correct, but Miss Smith has not those eyebrows and eyelashes. It is the fault of her face that she has them not" (40). Such exaggeration raises the irony of the situation in which Emma repeatedly made the same mistake. She insisted on the existence of the feeling between Mr. Elton and Harriet. Consequently, she attempted to motivate Mr. Elton to like the portrait more than the actual figure of Harriet. Of course, all those strategies on Emma's part led her to a disaster when Mr. Elton confessed his passionate love for her in the carriage scene.

### **6.0 Dramatic Irony**

The dramatic irony represents a new type of contradiction between the readers' awareness and that of the characters (Smith, 1983: 11)). In other words, the dramatic irony arises in a situation where the readers have grasped and understood completely the truth while the character themselves are still in their illusion. Several examples in Austen's *Emma* could suit that definition. For instance, since the beginning of the novel, Emma has declared that she would never fall in love or get married to anyone. However, she started to consider her love relationship with Frank Churchill, exposing superficial similarities between them, aiming at proving to others that they were suitable for each other. She even stated that both cared about their family; Frank cared about his ill aunt, while Emma cared about her aged father. Apart from the irrelevance of that similarity to love and marriage, Frank,

unlike Emma, was waiting for his aunt's death to declare his engagement to Miss Jane Fairfax. Ironically, during several attempts to state such superficial similarities between her and Franck, Emma firmly declared her lack of interest in falling in love or getting married. In another example, Emma decides never to interfere again in others' business after her tragic failure in matchmaking between Harriet and Mr. Elton, which ends with Mr. Elton's confession of love to her, not Harriet. She became aware of her inability to know the inner feelings of the others.

Nevertheless, Emma could not commit herself to such a decision. She continued her hopeless attempts to match Harriet with another suitable person, Mr. Knightly. The situation becomes more dramatic when Harriet tells Emma that she (Harriet) has fallen in love with her rescuer. Emma thought that she meant Franck, who had already rescued her from a violent gypsy. However, Harriet was referring to Mr. Knightley, who rescued her from her public humiliation during the Crown Inn Ball. The dramatic irony reaches a new level when Harriet exposes the truth to Emma, who has recognized her feelings for Mr. Knightley.

The conflict inside Emma reached its maximum level when she told John Knightley about Harriet's feelings, hoping for a miracle. That miracle is represented through Mr. Knightley's confession of love to her, which made her the happiest woman in the world, though she was still claiming that she is not the type that might fall in love and get married. A third example of

dramatic irony occurs when Emma draws a portrait of Harriet. Any observer of the portrait, including her friend, Mr. Knightley, Her Father, Mr. Woodhouse, and Her governess, Mrs. Weston, could easily recognize the gap between what is drawn and the real figure of Harriet. For Emma, the easy part is to fix the picture. Instead, she decided to fix Harriet, the human being, to diminish the gap between her and the portrait. She thought

She would notice [Harriet], [improve] her, ... [detach] her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners. It would be an exciting and ... very kind undertaking, highly becoming her situation in life, her leisure, and her powers.

(20)

In this quote, the author stresses Emma's blind enthusiasm, which makes her treat Harriet as a clay doll that can be modified and upgraded to a new level. In the final line, she describes her manipulation of Harriet as being kind. The readers here become aware of Emma's snobbery and arrogance. She used Harriet as a means of entertainment to fill her free time. The verb "improve" stresses her illusion, especially when she convinces Harriet to reject Robert Martin's marriage proposal. The irony increases when the novel ends with Harriet and Martin getting married. This indicates that all the improvements made by Emma were an illusion.



## **7.0 Layers of Irony**

Shinobu Minma, in a detailed study of the use of irony in Austen's *Emma*, suggests a new perspective in analyzing the novel. She argues that each ironic example in the novel cannot be classified into a verbal, situational, structural, or even a dramatic type of irony (2001, P. 13). This simple classification reduces the literary value of Austen's irony. She argues that each example consists of several layers of meaning. Each layer exemplifies a particular type of irony (P. 16). According to Minma, the verbal dialogue between the characters representing their different ideologies and cultures represents the first layer of irony. Then, there are the unspoken signs during the dialogue that may contradict the character's speech (P. 21). Of course, the novelist comments on the character's facial expressions and nonverbal gestures that indicate to the reader the hidden message that the character could not say in the dialogue. In the third layer, the contradiction is between the character's inner thoughts, represented to the readers through the novelists' objective voice and the character's words (Ibid 26). The fourth layer represents the character's complicated feelings that may contradict not only his verbal words or nonverbal gestures but also his rational thoughts. Those four layers constitute the complicated irony of real life in which we unconsciously make fun of ourselves in various examples and situations. This means that the readers can find the four types of irony, namely the verbal, the situational, the

structural, and the dramatic, in one example. This is clearly represented when Emma revised and reevaluated her feelings towards Frank Churchill. The author wrote:

She continues to [entertain the idea] that there is no doubt of her love for him. However, Emma predicts whether her feelings are actually love or esteem. Emma might love Frank because she is constantly thinking of him and likes to receive letters from him (264).

The contradiction between "there is no doubt of her love" and "Emma might love Frank" is an example of verbal irony. After stating her love as an unquestionable truth, she used the modal "might" to indicate its weak probability. However, as Minma recommends, if the readers dive into the lines, they can easily find another type of irony, namely the situational one. The whole situation is entirely ironic. Emma's re-evaluation of her feelings towards Frank is absurd not only because Frank was not in love with her as he was secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax but simply because she was not in love with him either.

Nevertheless, situational irony is not the only type recovered under verbal irony. These few lines stressed the structural irony of the text. Here, Emma repeats the same vicious cycle she kept doing from the novel's beginning. She got mindlessly enthusiastic about a particular idea until the

circumstance proved her wrongness; she felt ashamed of herself and decided not to interrupt others' hidden feelings. Only a few pages later, Emma started a new journey with a new cycle. The whole situation can also be taken as an example of the dramatic irony. Emma, since the beginning of the text, made it crystal clear that she was not the type of woman occupied with the idea of falling in love and getting married. Ironically, what Emma only does in her life is making strategies to match between herself and Frank Churchill as the perfect couple in the entire novel. Ironically, the novel ends with Frank being engaged to another woman, while Emma recognizes her compassion towards John Knightley and eventually marries him. Such an example shows the literary cleverness of Jane Austen and her marvelous use of irony with its various types as an essential role in judging her society, reflecting its vices and negative aspects. She also uses her unique ironic examples to convey her message to readers who are fascinated by those memorable living examples.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

The current study thoroughly examines the exceptional use of irony in Jane Austen's *Emma*. The traditional classification of Austen's irony into verbal and situational cannot reveal a comprehensive vision of the outstanding technique of irony in this novel. Apart from Austen's other literary works, *Emma* is a living example of the ironic tragedy of human beings whose inability to

match their actions and inner thoughts with their external actions and words causes them to have a double voice, one inside and another outside. In this novel, the writer has introduced several layers of irony in which the readers witness various kinds of contradiction between the characters' various points of view regarding the same person or incident, the same character's words and his/her nonverbal gestures, the character's speeches, and inner thoughts, and finally the character's inner thoughts and deep emotions. All these types of irony collaborate to stress Jane Austen's role as a social critic who cares about her society, aiming to fix its vices and inhuman approaches, especially towards women.

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## ملخص

السخرية ليست مجرد أداة أسلوبية بسيطة تستخدم في العمل الأدبي لإثراء معانيه وموضوعاته. ولكنها جزء أساسي من الخلفية الثقافية المشتركة بين الكاتب وقراءه. إنها أداة أساسية لفهم الهوية الداخلية للذات والغرض من الحياة. ونتيجة لذلك، فقد تم تخصيص العديد من الدراسات الأكاديمية لتحليل أهمية استخدامه فن السخرية وكيفية تمثيله في الأعمال الأدبية المختلفة. وتعتبر جين أوستن رائدة في هذا الشأن، ففن السخرية هي سلاحها السري لتمثيل معاناة المرأة في ظل سيطرة المجتمع الذكوري، وتعد روايتها إيما ليست مجرد مثال بسيط على استخدامها لفن السخرية، ولكنها تحفنتها الفنية التي تم بناء ونسج خيوطها بشكل كامل وجوهري على السخرية. فقد استخدمت الروائية العبقرية لأنواع السخرية المختلفة في مختلف أجزاء الرواية ما بين السخرية اللفظية وسخرية المواقف والسخرية البنيوية والسخرية الدرامية، وهو الأمر الذي جعل من العمل الفني ذو قيمة جمالية منقطعة النظير، بل وتحولت أحداثه وشخصياته إلى هويات خالدة لا يمكن ازالتها من ذاكرة القراء. وقد خُصصت الدراسة الحالية لفحص وتحليل الاستخدام المتداخل لأنواع السخرية المختلفة بالعمل الفني موضحة الموهبة الأدبية الفريدة لدى جين أوستن والتي تأتي في توازن مثالي مع دورها في النقد المجتمعي لإصلاح رذائل مجتمعها الذكوري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السخرية اللفظية - سخرية المواقف - السخرية البنائية - السخرية الدرامية - جين أوستن - إيما