

Irony in Emma

Irony arises from a contrast, a contrast between appearance and reality, between what a character thinks himself to be and what he really is, between what he believes and what the reader knows to be actually 'the case', between what a character says and what he really means to convey, between what a character thinks what he will do or achieve and what he really in the long run does or achieves, and so on. Irony may produce a comic effect or a tragic effect, depending upon the circumstances of the case. Thus we find abundant examples of irony in both the comic and the tragic plays of Shakespeare. This means that the use of irony by an author may amuse the reader or may sadden him all the more.

Jane Austen is a comic writer, and, therefore her use of irony in her novels adds to the comic effect at which she aims. In other words, in the novels of Jane Austen we have comic irony and indeed, she gives us plenty of it. It may also be pointed out that irony may exist in a situation or in a piece of dialogue or in a remark or in a belief which a character has or expresses, and so on. Further irony may be conscious on the part of a character, or it may be unconscious. On the part of the author, however, irony is always conscious.

The use of irony is all-pervasive in Emma. The very opening chapter furnishes a couple of examples of irony.

For instance, there is irony in Emma's claim that she has made the match between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Says she: "I made the match, you know, four years ago; and to have it take place, and be proved in the right, when so many people said Mr. Weston would never marry again, may comfort me for any thing." This claim is categorically rejected by Mr. Knightley. Thus there is a contrast between what Emma says and what actually is the case. This contrast amuses us. Similarly, when Emma goes on to say that she will now find a wife for Mr. Elton, this statement also becomes ironical in the light of subsequent events. Therefore this statement by Emma is also an example of the use of comic irony, although the irony behind this statement is discovered by us when we have gone through a few more chapters of the novel.

The whole account of Emma's plans and endeavours regarding the contemplated Harriet - Elton match is pervaded by comic irony. The irony here lies in the amusing contrast between what Emma believes she can do and what really happens. She is confident that she will be able to bring about a matrimonial alliance between her protegee Harriet and the Highbury vicar, Mr. Elton. All her thoughts and efforts are directed to this end. She even succeeds in driving out from Harriet's mind all thoughts of a possible marriage to Mr. Robert Martin, and in persuading her to reject, Mr. Martin's proposal. At this time she believes Mr. Elton to be really a very pleasing young man whose whole behaviour is interpreted by her as showing his deep interest in Harriet. When Mr. Elton offers to carry Harriet's portrait to London in order to have it framed, Emma says to Harriet that Mr. Elton must be showing the picture to his mother and sisters in order to acquaint them with the girl he has selected as his would be wife. There is obvious irony in these words spoken by Emma to Harriet, though this irony comes to light only later on.

and we can appreciate it better on a second reading of the novel. Similarly, there is irony in Emma's guess that Harriet's father must be a gentleman and a gentleman of fortune, and that Mr. Martin must therefore be regarded as being inferior to Harriet in social status. The irony of this guess also comes to light later in the novel when it is discovered that Harriet's father is only a tradesman. When Emma solves the charade brought by Mr. Elton to Harriet, there is irony in her applying the solution, namely "Courtship", to Harriet. There is again in this case, a contrast between the real significance of the charade and Emma's application of it to Harriet. The irony becomes more marked when, on this occasion, Emma goes so far as to say to Harriet: "I am very happy. I congratulate you, my dear Harriet, with all my heart." The irony in this whole account becomes even more striking when, on the occasion of a visit to a poor family, Emma creates several opportunities for Mr. Elton to get some time alone with Harriet for a private conversation of an amorous kind and when Mr. Elton fails to make use of those opportunities. It is, indeed a stunning climax for Emma, but it is a most amusing situation for the reader who finds that all Emma's efforts have come to nothing because Mr. Elton has all along been in love not with Harriet but with Emma herself. All this irony is of course, directed against Emma who had so much confidence in her own judgement. In other words, Emma is the victim of this irony, and the author makes us laugh heartily at Emma's discomfiture although there is a tinge of sympathy mingled with our mirth, and although poor Harriet excites a lot of our sympathy.

There is a very striking example of irony in the situation in which Emma discovers that Harriet

is in love with Mr. Knightley. After the failure of Emma's plan about getting Harriet married to Mr. Elton, Emma had been planning Harriet's marriage to Frank, and Emma had been under the impression that Harriet and Frank were becoming attached to each other. Harriet says that she was never in love with Frank. And then comes the revelation that Harriet had been in love with Mr. Knightley ever since he had asked her to dance with him. Thus the irony here arises from the contrast between what Emma has been thinking and planning and what actually turns out to be the case.

At last, there are some minor examples of irony also. Early in the story, Mrs. Weston thinks of bringing about a match between Emma and Frank, but this plan comes to nothing because Frank gets engaged to Jane. Thus, on one hand, Mrs. Weston was contemplating Emma's marriage to Frank and on the other hand Emma has been contemplating Frank's marriage to Harriet. Both these schemes come to nothing. Then there is irony in the manner in which Frank is introduced in the story with such fanfare and such pleasurable anticipations on the part of various characters. Eventually he is found to be a cunning and unscrupulous man. The contrast between our own anticipations and the actual character of Frank amuses us. This contrast could have proved tragic if Frank had turned out to be a greater villain than he shows himself to be. As it is, we have only comic irony in the delineation of Frank's character.