

Jane Austen's Style of Humour

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Abstract : The vision of life presented by Austen in her novels is comic with a tinge of Neo-classical morality. However, the range of subject-matter and the scope of its treatment in her novels are very limited. Her comic art does not provide her with the freedom of going into the bottom of man's heart to explore and measure its depths. She never gets preoccupied with the inner consciousness of her characters. She keeps herself confined to the outer surface of the gentle lives and dwells upon those aspects, which come under the need of her comic art.

Keywords : 'Vision of life', 'classical morality', 'subject-matter', 'treatment', 'limited', 'comic art', etc.

Really, of all God's creatures, man is the only animal who laughs. To the mind of Aristotle, who has propounded the theory of incongruity in his 'Rhetoric', the comic is the result of a discord or contrast between the ugly and the beautiful. Hegel, on the other hand, sees the comic as the result of contradiction between an actual phenomenon and the aesthetic ideal. In the words of Hobbes—

"Men laugh at the infirmities of others by comparing them with their own abilities..... ." 1

Kant, another famous philosopher, finds the essence of the comic in the contradiction between the base and the elevated. In the view of A. Schopenhauer, the contradiction between the ridiculous and reasonable is the essence of the comic. He remarks—

"The cause of laughter in every case is simply..... this incongruity." 2

Hazlitt is a great champion of humour and laughter. He rightly observes—

"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps," 3

A writer uses various methods to create laughter in his works or art. It may be born of eccentricities, incongruities, absurdity of thoughts and behaviours, follies and foibles, sentimentalism, intentional understatement, topsy-turvy situations, puns, satires, wrong quotations; clichés, horse-play, buffonery, etc., which a writer uses in his works. The most important ingredient of the comic is, however, humour. To the mind of Carlyle, the essence of humour is sensibility; a warm, tender follow-feelings with all forms of existence. In this regards, S. Leacock observes—

"Humour, thus grew to turn on a contrast between the thing as it or ought to be and the thing smashed out of shape and as it not ought to be." 4

Jane Austen's world is quite different from the world we are living in today but the need of laughter in life has increased enormously. Humour in human life is as much

necessary today as it was in her times. The famous humorist, P.G. Wodehouse stressing its need, observes—

"To any bright young man with a gift for light writing who is thinking of giving up and joining an advertising agency I would say, 'Don't do it' boy. Keep the torch burning. The world may not know it, but it needs humour." 5

As a matter of fact, Austen's style is a true reflection of her comic vision of life and her Neo-classical moral values. It is believed that style is the ultimate reality of mind. In the words of F. L. Lucas—

"It is a means by which a human being gains contact with others; it is personality clothed in words, character embodied in speech." 6

The style of Jane Austen reveals an art that is endowed with the dignity of a classic. What she says about and how she says it — both are equally important. She always writes with hard labour, sincerity and complete devotion. Her use of language and her classical style are the result of her continuous effort and a gradual growth of her mastery over language, not a result of divine inspiration or good luck. In fact, her style reveals a very careful craftsman, a disciplined mind and unique comic genius. In her context, it is right to say that "style is the man". Her comic vision of life and her concern for Neo-classical values are the two main factors which determine and guide the prose style, she uses in her fictions. As a humorist, she presents a criticism of life in terms of comedy. The all-pervading presence of humour and irony present in her novels, makes them a source of perennial interest. It is the irradiating spark of humour that enlivens her so ordinary subject-matter and gives to her novels their enchanting charm. Her humour is quiet and delicate. There is always a proportion between her sense of ridicule to the follies by which she is often diverted. Her humour remains the humour of a cultivated, genial and refined observer rather than that of a reformer.

There is simplicity in Austen's language. Her use of anti-climax is brilliant in her novels. She says in 'Emma'—

“Goldsmith, tells us, that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but to die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill-fame.” 7

Here, Austen reconciles the 18th century concern for balancing phrase and the 18th century penchant for epigram. She, thus, provides the reader with necessary aesthetic distance to appreciate the satire connected with a serious subject like death. Miss Lascelles remarks—

“To us Jane Austen appears like one, who inherits a prosperous and well-ordered estate — the heritage of a prose style in which neither generalization nor abstraction need signify vagueness, because there was close enough agreement as to scope and significance of such terms.” 8

Austen stands out as one of the greatest humorists in the field of English fiction. Humour is the soul of her novels. Her humour is many-sided and quite allied to her moral vision. However, her humour is not born out of any malice or contempt. She simply smiles over the follies and foibles of her men and women. The laughter, that her humour provokes is the laughter of a sympathetic, tolerant, kind-hearted watcher of the society of the 18th century England not infected by the political upheavals, which took place in her times.

Austen is amused and delighted by human follies. She rarely poses a moral and hardly believes in black humour. Man's absurdities are always in her focus—not the high-minded and exceptional absurdities of tragedy or the grim ones of Swifteen satire but those common, frequent and more laughable ones of society, its codes of manners. Though her comedy is charged with moral purpose, the foibles and absurdities of human behaviour are viewed with amused detachment. Her humour is not boisterous like that of Dickens, nor it is tinged with pathos, which characterizes Dickens's humour.

Austen's novels are replete with numerous humorous expressions. They are endowed with verbal humour. In the novel 'Northanger Abbey', she remarks on Catherine Morland—

“She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. What a strange unaccountable character!” 9

At another place in the same novel she observes—

“But in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and

neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist.” 10

What Elizabeth in Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice' says to Darcy while dancing with him is equally full of humour. When he asks her if she talks by rule, she says—

“Sometimes one must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together, and yet for the advantage of some conversation ought to be arranged as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.” 11

In the novel 'Mansfield Park', Edmund advises Fanny to accept Henry Crawford and what he says in justification of the choice is tinged with humour though it is not explicit. To quote—

“He is lively, you are serious, but so much the better; easily dejected and to fancy difficulties greater than they are. His cheerfulness will counteract this. He sees difficulties nowhere and his pleasantness and gaiety will be a constant support to you.” 12

In the novel 'Sense and Sensibility', Austen introduces Elinor and Marianne at the end of the first chapter. She says about Elinor—

“She had an excellent heart—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.” 13

In the novel 'Emma', Mr. Woodhouse, the father of Emma makes a comment on the portrait of Harriet drawn by Emma to secure Mr. Elton's interest. His comment is packed with humour. To quote—

“It is very pretty. So prettily done ! Just as your drawings always are, my dear. I do not know anybody who draws as well as you do. The only thing I do not thoroughly like is that she seems to be sitting out of doors, with only a little shawl over her shoulders and it makes one think she must catch cold.” 14

Equally humorous is the description of Anne Elliot in 'Persuasion' when Austen explains her attitude as a result of her experience—

“How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been—how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust providence ! She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning.” 15

Besides verbal humour, Austen's novels are full of situational humour. She is a comic writer. Therefore, comic situations are frequent in her novels. In 'Emma', Mr.

Woodhouse wants her son-in-law to live with him and his daughter when Mr. Knightly's marriage is fixed with Emma, who finally discovers that she has been in love with him all along he does not want to leave his own native place. It is another matter that Mr. Knightly finally succumbs to the pre-condition of Mr. Woodhouse and unwillingly accepts to stay with him and his daughter, Emma.

In 'Pride and Prejudice', Elizabeth's mother wants her to accept the marriage proposal of Mr. Collins but her father is against this marriage. He tells Elizabeth that he will be angry with her if she accepts her mother's advice but her mother will be angry if she accepts his advice. In 'Northanger Abbey', there is a plan of Catherine going out with John Thrope but Mrs. Allen is against it. She thinks that young men and women may drive about the country in open carriages but going to inns and public places together is not right. The whole discussion takes place after they together visit so-called inns and public places. Catherine wants to know why she did not tell her before not to do so. Mrs Allen replies that young people will be young people and they should not be thwarted. Thus, the whole situation is made quite humorous creating a good deal of laughter. In 'Sense and Sensibility', where one character is expected another arrives and this happens three times in the novel. At Barton, Marianne expects Willoughby and we see Edward, in London, she expects him again and Colonel Brandon calls, and at Cleveland, Elinor runs to meet her mother and finds Willoughby. All these events create humour and laughter in abundance. Austen's novels may be serious in intention but they are lively and humorous in tone.

The treatment of characters by Jane Austen also shows her comic vision and sense of humour. She likes to laugh and is fond of making others laugh, too. Many of her characters like Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Miss Bates, Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Elton are highly entertaining figures of comedy. She laughs at their follies, vanities and foolishness but she never hates them. Even the apparently wise, the self-righteous and virtuous also are given comic treatment by her. In 'Northanger Abbey', we are made to laugh at the silly fears and the imaginings of the heroine, Catherine Morland. The novel has become very interesting because of the way the sentimental heroine has been parodied and treated. Even the character of Emma has been conceived and executed in the comic vein. she prides herself on her wisdom and tries to shape the destiny of others without being aware of her own heart in the process of match-making. she is presented as a victim of her own illusion. However, she blunders, she commits in the process, mortifies her and makes her learn the lesson of life. However, Jane Austen never inflicts pain on her heroines, who are often laughed at for their pride or prejudice or romantic whims and fancies. We enjoy even the

foolish Mrs. Bennet and the talkative Mr. Elton as we enjoy other characters. When the so-called wise people are paid in their own coins we simply laugh at; we never take sadistic pleasure in their defects.

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