

Irony is a humorous  
or mildly sarcastic  
use of words essay



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Irony is a humorous or mildly sarcastic use of words to mean the opposite of what is said. Irony can be used in a satirical, humorous or sarcastic manner. It can be used to indirectly put a message across to someone as a joke. In Austen's books the characters sometimes valued irony because that is how they earn their success and to some it just made their life worse. However the characters are not fully aware of the irony used. This in itself is another aspect of irony. So, the question is why does Jane Austen use irony so much? "To Jane Austen irony does not mean, as it means to many, a moral detachment", (Encarta online encyclopaedia).

To her it was all about humour and fun. I have discovered that she uses irony in most of her works. Her mother "had a great sense of humour" (Brodie's notes 1990: 7) and it was probably genetically passed on to Jane. The convention within which she lived and wrote demanded a certain code of conduct, and this influenced her writing a great deal. Her way of showing what she thought of this way of living is by being ironic without being cruel, satirical without being complacent. In most of her books I have noticed that quite a lot of the characters are snobbish and their lifestyle is very different. For instance, women had to know how to sing and dance. Perhaps Jane Austen found that very amusing the fact that they were all acting in a 'stereotypical way' and decided to mock them, as she does use her irony in a very humorous way.

Although I would like to add that at that time, it did not seem stereotypical to them, but we feel it as stereotypical now. I also learnt that Jane Austen was a very straightforward person. She always said what she thought and felt, "Jane was always free with what she thought", (Encarta online <https://assignbuster.com/irony-is-a-humorous-or-mildly-sarcastic-use-of-words-essay/>)

encyclopaedia). To add comedy to her books she used irony to get her message through. She indirectly put forward what she wanted to say in a clear-cut way. There are so many reasons why she uses irony. “ Jane Austen is a great ironist as well as a major satirist”, (Encarta encyclopaedia). This suggests that she was a good humorist.

She likes the reader to recognize his or her own perspicacity, in understanding the character and the situation, whilst the characters themselves may be oblivious or merely suspicious. She likes to get the reader thinking, because her irony takes numerous forms and invariably involves the contrast between what is said and what is meant. Her irony is only secondarily a matter of tone. Primarily it is a method of understanding. It perceives the world through an alertness of its denials and incongruities. It is adherent with the generosity of spirit; it is on the side of ‘ life’. Jane Austen’s malicious irony is only used upon some of the characters in her novels but upon the reader as well. Another entity is that Jane Austen always portrays herself in her characters.

She was witty and sarcastic and she has imposed that on to her heroines as well. For instance in her novel of Emma, the heroine Emma is a spitting image of her. I would say that she resembles Jane Austen because of the way she is so satirical and infinite. This shows that she is aware of her irony and admires it. Jane Austen’s art of fiction involves irony, humour and realism or naturalism and ethics. The ironist and the moralist are often found to be together. The purpose of irony’s incompatible contrasts may be to produce the savage resentment that can tear out the follies and silliness of the age.

Yet the essence of moralistic writing is that the reader should know where he or she stands.

The essence of ironical writing is that the writer is not quite saying what he or she means and may be indeed implying the total opposite! It makes it far more intangible. Ironic language often has a surface meaning and a different deeper meaning. For instance the first line of *Pride and Prejudice* when it says “ It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in need of a wife”, (pg 51). The surface meaning is that every man wants a wife. The deeper and ironic meaning is that in this novel majority of the single wealthy men do not want wives, and even the married men (Mr. Bennet) are unhappy with the wives they have. This is just like everyday life; people have a surface person and another person deep inside. I feel that irony enables us to remain distant from some characters and to criticize them more easily, but paradoxically also enables us to draw closer to others.

I will now give a little background to each of the novels. The first is ‘ *Persuasion*’. ‘ *Persuasion*’ was Austen’s final completed novel and was written between 1815 and 1816, and published incompletely revised immediately after her death with ‘ *Northanger Abbey*’. As so often in Austen’s novels, ‘ *Persuasion*’ concerns the social issues of her time and particularly the matter of class. The story begins with the letting of Sir Walter Elliot’s seat, Kellynch Hall, to his annoyance as a man of self-elaborating and showy tendencies. *Persuasion* is the tale of the romance between his pretty and friendly younger daughter Anne who meets the novel’s hero, Captain Wentworth and in spite of social barriers and the rival Musgrove sisters – <https://assignbuster.com/irony-is-a-humorous-or-mildly-sarcastic-use-of-words-essay/>

Louisa and Henrietta – pursues his affection having once turned him down as a spouse. Accidents and various engagements ensue leading to what the reader hopes will be another finale of poetic justice and requited love. The next novel is ‘Emma’.

Jane Austen began writing Emma in 1814, though it was not published until 1816, and then it was anonymous (as were all of her novels initially due to the prejudices of her times). Emma Woodhouse, the eponymous heroine (of sorts) is endowed with wealth, good looks, prestige and is, moreover, well aware of how clever she is. Anne Taylor, who had been extremely close to both Emma and her father, marries Mr Weston. In the absence of this confidante, Emma looks for a new friend and becomes acquainted with the 17-year old, illegitimate girl Harriet. Emma tries to aid Harriet with a series of catastrophic schemes to prove the girl to be of worthy parentage and deserving of a good man. However, in doing so, she prevents Harriet from marrying Robert Martin who despite being an eligible young farmer is deemed by young Woodhouse to be ‘beneath’ Harriet. She tries to bring together the orphan and Mr Elton, a young vicar who in fact despises Harriet. Such tinkering much annoys Emma’s brother-in-law Mr Knightley.

He can see Emma’s faults in a way in which the girl herself cannot. Emma is the story of the self-styled protagonist’s gradual realisation of her own lack of self-knowledge. Along the way there is much in the way of heartbreak, romance and detailed, subtle character portraiture. It is widely considered to be Austen’s finest work and the one, which most fulfils her ambition to present the lives of a small community of “ three or four families in a country village” realistically and excitingly. It is often very amusing and is a <https://assignbuster.com/irony-is-a-humorous-or-mildly-sarcastic-use-of-words-essay/>

wonderful depiction of the workings of a well-meaning but ill-directed mind wishing to act selflessly.