
UNIT 5 THE NARRATIVE OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to examine the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of the various devices used towards the successful portrayal of comedy and the development of irony. This will be discussed using some of the terms, concepts and methods of formalist and structuralist criticism

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Narrative, in its most basic sense, means the telling of a story or the recounting of events in a certain sequence. This working definition itself provides two of the most basic features of any narrative – the sequence of events means that the narrative is located in time, and the ‘telling’ of the story presupposes the presence of a teller. The story could be fictional, that is to say, ‘invented’, or it could be factual in the sense of dealing with events which have taken place in the ‘real’ world. (This division is by no means as unambiguous as it might appear, but even if it is taken as such, it is perfectly possible for the same narrative to combine the two modes, using both by turns). What is essential is that the narrative describes events, and not just things or persons. The two features mentioned above in turn open up several others, since the temporal aspect of narrative means that it has a beginning and an end and that the events are not presented randomly but in an order provided either by the structure of the text or by a plot within it, while the teller – within the narrative or outside it – offers one or more voices and points of view. By ‘plot’ is meant the order in which the events are presented by the narrative, as distinct from the order in which they take place in the story.

Different genres of writing within which a narrative is to be seen or read, all presuppose different kinds of interpretation: Each of these genres — whether epic, drama, fiction, poetry, or history — implies that certain expectations, ways of reading and interpretations are being indicated and agreed upon by the writer or the speaker and the reader or the listener. These differences could lie in a number of areas, including plot (whether the narrative highlights its presence or tries to hide it) reference to an external system of beliefs, the use of irony, and the treatment of time. One important narrative distinction is the one made by Plato in Book III of *The Republic*, between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ – the terms for these are respectively ‘diegesis’ (“description of actions by an authorial narrator”) and ‘mimesis’ (“representation of action through the imitated speech of characters”). Drama is pure mimesis, but the epic and the novel combines the two modes. Jane Austen tends toward a dominantly mimetic method, since her stories are unfolded in a series of

scenes, with a minimum of authorial description, and character is revealed through speech more than through authorial comment, though we are given inner knowledge about the character's minds.

The narratives of different kinds of fiction all use invented stories, but their treatment of plot varies widely. Realist fiction, like Austen's, hides plot in the way that historical narrative does, trying to present the events as if they really happened, and in just that sequence, instead of, like some other kinds of fiction, showing up its plot and the constructed nature of the sequence of events. Interestingly, both these effects are commonly achieved (though not of course simultaneously) by the same device — the inclusion of references to dates and times. The correspondence of these dates to 'real' time or events is an issue only in historical fiction.

To consider the treatment of time in narrative, take a look at the following model provided by David Higdon for the analysis of fictional time. According to this schema, time in a narrative could be 'process time' or time that exists to demonstrate a process such as the growth of a hero; 'barrier time' or time that is meaningful only with reference to a particular event, for example the time before and after the murder in a crime story; 'retrospective time' which draws meaning by comparison with past time, one example being the 'happily ever after' of the fairy tale; and polytemporal time which is a combination of all the others. Which of these do you see as used in the novel under consideration? I would see the use of 'barrier time' through the device of the letter Darcy writes Elizabeth, and 'process time', which is the usual time-pattern in the picaresque tradition, as present in demonstrating the growth of both the main characters, but particularly of the heroine. As far as the sequence of events is concerned, Jane Austen's narratives rarely deviate from chronological order. Retrospective accounts and delayed explanations are all incorporated into the time-span of the main action, often in the form of a letter or in dialogue, with no flashback or prolepsis — reality isn't subjective here. The main action of her novels never occupies more than a year, usually less, and illusion is achieved by scenic presentation of experience.

The last feature of narrative dealt with here as an area for the location of differences of genre is whether or not a particular narrative is capable of irony in its *form*, which is the way Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979) describes the reversal called 'peripeteia', or a deviation from the expected course of events, such as the death of Cordelia in *King Lear*. Kermode sees the resultant falsification of expectations and hopes as having the same place and effect in narrative that irony has in rhetoric. I do not see this really taking place in the text we are looking at, where the stress seems to be instead on the expected end working out. However, Elizabeth's reading of Darcy's letter could be seen as a moment of dramatic irony.

5.2 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

David Lodge, in a reading of Jane Austen which draws upon formalist and structuralist criticism, shows how she incorporates elements of the **sentimental novel** and the **comedy of manners** into the method of realism. He goes on to explain the sentimental novel as the didactic, heroine-centered love story, of which Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) is the best example, as well as one of the most influential in initiating a number of sentimental epistolary novels, among them the first version of *Sense and Sensibility* called *Elinor and Marianne*. Lodge also sees Jane Austen's prose as crucial in the replacement of this epistolary technique by different and more flexible methods of representing the characters' thoughts and feelings. Structurally the love story consists of the delayed fulfillment of a desire. This delay doesn't just refer to the heroine's desire, but also the reader's desire to know whether she will get

the man she loves or not. The delay puts the heroine under stress and this generates the "sentiment" i.e. the feelings, anxieties, and moral choices that forms much of the sentimental novel. Lodge also points out that of all Jane Austen's works, *Pride and Prejudice* comes closest to the form of the classic love story, though the required delay is caused by the lovers' mistaken "first impressions", rather than by external obstacles to their marriage. Jane Austen does not use standard plot devices such as confessions, and the discoveries of long-lost children or parents, but all her novels have the basic structure of the didactic love story, with many variations, modifications, and inversions. She does use the theme of surrogate parents (the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park*) and, in the story of Lydia and Wickham, there even appears to be something resembling the conventional seduction plot.

Three of the principal sources of interest in narrative are suspense, mystery and irony. The first raises the question what will happen? Mystery raises the question Why did it happen? Irony is created when the reader knows the answers to the questions but the characters do not. All re-readings of novels thus tend to create an effect of irony. In *Pride and Prejudice* the suspense plot is provided by the story of Bingley and Jane. According to Lodge, it is difficult to combine comedy with the sentimental novel, and even when it is done in the manner of Fielding, Sterne and Smollett, the comedy tends to be more in the nature of "comic relief" from the main story, and usually takes a farcical form. Jane Austen's comedy on the other hand, is more theatrical and reminds us of Congreve, Moliere and even Shakespeare, because comedy in her novels is placed within the love story rather than outside it. I am not sure how far this is strictly true – characters like Mr. Collins seem to be among the chief sources of comedy in her fiction.

A feature that is peculiar to written fiction, and is one of the constituents of fictional realism, is a focalizing of the action through an individual viewpoint, the chosen viewpoint in *Pride and Prejudice* being Elizabeth's. Thus the reader is allowed to see Darcy only as she sees him, and is as surprised as she is by the gradual revelation of her misconception of him and thereby creating 'suspense' in the sense described above. Jane Austen is also among the first writers to use "free indirect speech" – reporting the thoughts of a character in language that approximates to their own 'idiolect'. One of the issues faced by writers of novels in the eighteenth century was as to whether or not their medium could appropriate ordinary speech, and in what ways. Jane Austen uses 'free indirect discourse' (a combination of reported speech and description) towards this end. This is a parodic technique as becomes clear from passages such as this one, describing Lydia's feelings for her husband:

"He was her dear Wickham on every occasion; no one was to be put in competition with him. He did everything best in the world; and she was sure he would kill more birds on the first of September, than any body else in the country."

(PP, 311)

This is one of the techniques of characterization used, since one of the effects of free indirect discourse is the illusion of depth to character. Sometimes only a few key words are used to indicate a particular character's crucial presence in a scene or conversation, and to ally it with the collective opinion, for example the novel's opening sentence shows up not just Mrs. Bennet's ideas about marriage, but society's at large: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (1)

This technique allows the novelist to give the reader greater access to the character's thoughts without entirely giving up control of the discourse to that character as in the epistolary novel. It also allows for variation between the character's and the narrator's values and lets us choose one character over the other – for instance Elizabeth over Jane and Elinor over Marianne. Though Elizabeth is the dominant

centre of interest in *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrative does often move away from her perspective.

Jane Austen doesn't in this text intrude upon the narrative in order to come down on the side of one character or the other, as she does in *Mansfield Park*, where she refers explicitly to "my Fanny". This works so that some events and speeches remain unsatisfactorily explained despite the fact of closure at the end. One example is Darcy's unexplained inclusion of Mr. Bennet in the letter to Elizabeth when he is citing her family's bad behaviour. We see plenty of instances from the behaviour of Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, Kitty and Mary, to prove the charge true of them, but no such evidence appears in the case of Mr. Bennet's. Many passages, including the dialogues between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* could be performed as written and have indeed been effectively dramatized on radio, television and film. Action in these novels is social interaction, and it takes place at balls, dinners, walks, parties, excursions, courtesy calls. Such events or gatherings as these lend themselves to mimetic presentation, with an emphasis on "manners" and conversation.

Fielding, in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, distinguishes between the comic and the tragic "The only source of the true ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation ... Now affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy...." [Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) London: Penguin, 1985, p.28]

Authorial distance is required for irony, and the overturning of expectations for comedy. One might ask here whether the ability to accept contradictions, inconclusiveness and ambiguity is required in comedy or does it lead instead to tolerance that makes satire impossible? Jane Austen never uses a first-person narrative voice, or a dramatized narrator. The ending of the novel is important in giving the *impression* of order and causality, (compare it with the similar ending of *Much Ado about Nothing* where all problems are swept away, at least temporarily, in a wedding dance). The question however remains – is the resolution of narrative an adequate closure of the problems it has presented?

5.5 THE USE OF WIT AND IRONY

Wit, as it was understood in the eighteenth century, fulfilled several purposes, but most importantly, a corrective purpose in the form of satire, though the Restoration drama of the early part of the century had used wit more as a representation of social mores than as a condemnation of them. A distinction can be made between the two kinds of laughter in Jane Austen's novels, depending on wit (which is verbal) or on humour arising from plot and situation. It is on this basis that literary categories such as 'the comedy of humours' or 'the comedy of manners' come to be formed. Wit for Jane Austen, as for her predecessor Congreve, is simultaneously a noun (quality of mind) and an adjective (quality of person). Congreve once defined wit as "at least the sign to good understanding" which shows one of the basic assumptions of English (upper class) society of the time ie, that manners are somehow indicative of morals. This can easily degenerate into a total identification of one with the other, and it is precisely this that Jane Austen satirizes.

Wit, and the witty use of language are understood as a means of attaining some sort of power by characters who would otherwise not have had it. Thus Elizabeth Bennet uses wit to hold her own against Darcy, who has the advantages of superior birth, family and wealth. Wit is also one of the ways Elizabeth manages to retain her self-possession and autonomy in the face of marriage to a social superior. Fear of losing these qualities in marriage (even in a marriage of love and companionship) is seen as a concern that the intelligent woman must face because of the dominant and authoritarian position offered the husband in the institution of marriage by both society and religion. Elizabeth, who also uses wit and irony to deal with the

embarrassments caused by her family, and with difficult situations like her conversation with Lady Catherine, can be seen to have this particular use of wit – as a form of self-defence – in common with earlier intelligent heroines who fear that marriage may end their self-possession – the two obvious examples are Beatrice in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, and Mirabell in Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Wit and irony as personal attributes therefore include the ability to use social and linguistic artifice for one's personal ends. But in Mr. Bennet's case irony also becomes escapism and a shrugging off of responsibility, for which he is clearly accountable. He shows detachment to the point of a complete lack of sympathy – Mr. Bennet is delighted when Jane is deserted by Bingley – "Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then. It is something to think of and gives her a sort of distinction among her companions." These words are not without some truth, or would not be in the case of a girl like Lydia, but come across as heartless when applied to Jane who really suffers. Irony is thus a gesture towards an illusory freedom. Does Elizabeth give up her characteristic mode of irony by falling in love with and marrying Darcy? Irony is recognized in this reading of the novel as an important feature of its structure. The sharpness of the irony increases or decreases in direct proportion to the distance which separates a particular character from this ideal, and one might argue that the distance doesn't disappear entirely even in the character of Elizabeth. Irony is thus present here in the form of a double awareness produced by the reader's simultaneous access to the point of view of the characters and that of the narrator.

Wit also has a corrective purpose, where it is used to criticize, or at least to indicate (often the criticism is implicit in the indication) the problems in social behaviour. Satire bases itself upon this aspect of wit. The eighteenth century, repeatedly referred to as the 'golden age' of satire in English literature – the reason for which, according to Basil Willey, is the prevalence of the belief in 'Nature', and especially in 'Nature and Reason'. Descartes and Locke, two of the most influential thinkers of the time, held man's essential nature to be his rational soul. Following from this, the person who worships reason as closest to nature, reacts most strongly to the evidence of human unreason. The satirist (under which we might include Jane Austen) therefore measures the aberration from the ideal, in contrast to the comedian who is concerned only with aberrations from current social norms. The expression of wit was also influenced by the Augustan desire to define life as they saw it, in language that was elegant, another way of 'following nature'. Jane Austen can be seen as following Pope and Johnson in this respect.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, various political and economic changes and events took place. These led to gradual changes in the philosophy and thought of the time, and though Nature still remained the highest ideal to be followed, it now began to be dissociated from Reason. Greater attention was given to human instincts and emotions or as they were called, human sensibilities. Jane Austen thus contrasts 'sensibility' with 'sense' or reason, the former having a different connotation from that of the modern 'sensible'. Burke, writing at this time, sums up this changing view of nature when he says that politics should take into account "...human nature, of which human reason is but a part, and that by no means the greatest part."

The rise of a new literary genre, the novel, embodied this changed perception, and most of the popular sentimental fiction of this time depicted a heightened sensibility i.e. heightened morals and emotions, especially the former. Wit, at least as Jane Austen uses it, became both a means of subverting the cult of sensibility, and of offering a corrective, but her work also retains an awareness that laughter is not enough if unaccompanied by the 'good sense' which alone produces true wit.

Peter Conrad sees irony as both method and theme, form and content in the book, since it is used in the evasion of pain as well as in subversion. Irony is the way out for a character who cannot (or chooses not to) show open contempt for society, because it tacitly acknowledges that the survival of social niceties depends on a "contractual

them, a means of attack as well as of self-defense. An example of the latter being Elizabeth's reaction to Darcy's rejection of her at the ball. Conrad also distinguishes between irony and satire on the basis that satire diminishes the characters, and is meant to act as a corrective, while irony shows resignation on the part of the novelist (or the character) who longs for change but knows that it is not going to happen — Mr. Bennet's irony is of this kind. The difference between irony and satire would then appear to be one of the degree of savagery in the attack, and the degree of faith in the efficacy of the attack to bring about change. What do you make of such a differentiation? Do you think it helpful in the study of the text we are looking at?

5.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit examines *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of its narrative elements of plot, story and time, the narrative techniques used, its structure, and the use of wit and irony as both major themes and the method by which the themes are presented. This involves taking into account different kinds of comedy, as well as the ideas of comic fiction in Jane Austen's time. The use of language is extremely important, since wit and irony demand the ability to manipulate language to one's own ends — an ability that Elizabeth uses successfully, and Wickham uses harmfully.

5.7 GLOSSARY

Parodic hat which ridicules through mimicry

Polytemporal Involving the coexistence of, or a combination of, different kinds of time

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Is the narrative method used in *Pride and Prejudice* primarily mimetic or diegetic? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Find at least three instances from the text where one of the characters successfully uses wit in his or her self-defence.

5.9 SUGGESTED READING

- Higdon, David Leon *Time and English Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1977.
- Stokes, Myra *The Language of Jane Austen: A Study of Some Aspects of her Vocabulary*. London: Macmillan,, 1991.
- Brown, Julia Prewitt *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form*. Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Conrad, Peter "Introduction" to *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Everyman's Library, 1991