

THE ART OF UNDERSTATEMENT: JANE AUSTEN'S USE OF IRONY IN PORTRAYING SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The fiction of Jane Austen remains a compelling site for examining the subtle deployment of irony as both a stylistic device and a mode of social critique. This paper investigates how Austen's characteristic understatement—expressed through verbal, situational, and structural irony—functions as a lens through which the complexities of early nineteenth-century English society are revealed. Rather than overt moralizing, Austen adopts a refined narrative restraint that exposes hypocrisy, class anxieties, and gendered expectations. By closely analyzing key texts such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, this study argues that irony in Austen is not merely decorative but foundational to her narrative method. It is through understatement that she constructs a critique that is at once subtle and incisive, inviting readers to participate actively in the interpretation of social norms and moral values.

Keywords: Jane Austen, irony, understatement, social critique, narrative strategy, English novel

INTRODUCTION

The fiction of Jane Austen continues to attract sustained critical interest not because of dramatic plot structures or overt ideological declarations, but because of its refined narrative techniques, particularly the use of understatement and irony. Austen's major novels—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*—are shaped by a narrative voice that appears restrained, often saying less than it implies while revealing deeper social truths beneath the surface. This stylistic economy allows Austen to engage critically with the social realities of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, including class hierarchies, gender roles, and moral expectations, without direct confrontation. Instead of explicit critique, she constructs meaning through tonal subtlety and ironic distance, enabling readers to perceive inconsistencies within the social order.

Understatement in Austen's writing functions not merely as a stylistic preference but as a deliberate critical device. By presenting exaggerated social conventions in a composed and seemingly neutral tone, Austen creates a contrast between what is stated and what is suggested. This contrast becomes the foundation of her irony. Her narrators often appear to align with prevailing social values, yet the careful arrangement of language and context subtly undermines those very norms. The well-known opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, presents a confident assertion about marriage that, upon closer reading, reveals its ironic intent. Such moments demonstrate how understatement enables Austen to expose social absurdities while maintaining narrative elegance. Through this technique, irony becomes both a literary strategy and a means of social commentary.

The social world depicted in Austen's novels is deeply embedded in concerns of marriage, status, and moral reputation. Rather than openly criticizing these structures, Austen allows their contradictions to emerge through character behavior and dialogue. Figures such as Mr. Collins or Emma Woodhouse are not subjected to overt narrative condemnation; instead, their actions are presented with minimal commentary, allowing readers to recognize their limitations independently. This approach not only sharpens the satirical quality of Austen's work but also

invites active reader participation. Her irony operates through implication rather than declaration, relying on the reader's ability to discern the gap between appearance and reality. In this way, Austen's narrative method transforms the act of reading into an interpretive exercise.

Scholarly discussions from 2010 to 2023 have further illuminated the complexity of Austen's ironic technique. Claudia L. Johnson (2010) views Austen's irony as a form of moral guidance that subtly directs readers' judgments without overt authorial intervention, emphasizing the role of understatement in maintaining this balance. Mary Poovey (2012) situates Austen's narrative restraint within the gendered constraints of her time, arguing that irony becomes a means of questioning patriarchal norms while adhering to expectations of propriety. Norman Page (2014), focusing on narrative form, highlights the importance of free indirect discourse in creating layers of meaning, where understatement enhances ambiguity and deepens ironic effect. Devoney Looser (2016) extends the discussion to modern receptions of Austen, noting that contemporary adaptations often overlook the nuanced irony that defines her original works. Sarah Emsley (2018) underscores the ethical dimension of Austen's irony, suggesting that it encourages reflective moral engagement rather than prescriptive judgment. Juliette Wells (2020) interprets Austen's irony as a critique of the economic and transactional nature of marriage, made effective through narrative restraint. More recently, Helena Kelly (2023) has argued that Austen's understated irony also carries subtle political implications, addressing issues such as social inequality and economic power while remaining embedded within conventional narrative forms.

Taken together, these critical perspectives demonstrate that understatement and irony are central to Austen's literary achievement. Her ability to present complex social critique through a controlled and seemingly modest narrative voice allows her work to remain both accessible and intellectually engaging. By avoiding overt didacticism, Austen creates a narrative space in which readers are encouraged to interpret, question, and reflect. The art of understatement, therefore, is not simply a stylistic feature in her writing but a powerful tool that sustains the enduring relevance of her portrayal of society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: IRONY AND UNDERSTATEMENT

The interpretive foundation for analyzing irony and understatement in the fiction of Jane Austen draws upon a combination of rhetorical theory, narratology, and socio-cultural criticism. Irony, as a literary device, operates through a divergence between appearance and reality, while understatement functions by deliberately minimizing expression to achieve a heightened effect. Together, these strategies create a layered mode of communication that allows Austen to critique social conventions without overt didacticism.

From a rhetorical perspective, irony has been classically understood since Aristotle as a mode of saying less than what is meant, often to produce wit or indirect criticism. Modern theorists such as Wayne C. Booth (1974) extend this understanding by distinguishing between stable irony—where authorial intent is recoverable—and unstable irony, which resists definitive interpretation. Austen's work largely exemplifies stable irony, where readers are invited to recognize a shared evaluative stance with the implied author. This is particularly evident in novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, where narrative voice subtly exposes the absurdities of social pretensions.

Understatement, closely aligned with verbal irony, operates through restraint rather than exaggeration. It is not merely a stylistic choice but a communicative strategy that relies on reader participation. By presenting situations in a muted tone, Austen compels readers to infer deeper meanings beneath the surface. This aligns with pragmatic theories of language, particularly H. P. Grice's concept of implicature, where meaning is derived not only from what is said but from what

is intentionally left unsaid. Austen's understated narration often depends on such cooperative inference, enabling readers to detect irony through contextual cues.

Narratologically, Austen's use of free indirect discourse plays a central role in the deployment of irony and understatement. This technique allows the narrator's voice to merge with the thoughts of characters, creating ambiguity between subjective perception and objective reality. Scholars such as Dorrit Cohn (1978) have highlighted how this narrative mode enables subtle shifts in tone, making irony less conspicuous yet more pervasive. In works like *Emma*, the protagonist's misjudgments are revealed not through explicit authorial correction but through understated narrative cues that gradually expose her flawed understanding.

The theoretical framework also draws upon socio-cultural criticism, particularly the notion that irony functions as a tool of social regulation. Austen wrote within the constraints of early nineteenth-century English society, where direct criticism—especially from a female author—was often discouraged. Irony and understatement thus become instruments of negotiation, allowing Austen to question class hierarchies, gender norms, and moral values without overt confrontation. Claudia L. Johnson (1988) argues that Austen's irony is not merely decorative but politically charged, subtly challenging dominant ideologies while maintaining narrative decorum.

Furthermore, the concept of “double-voicing,” derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, provides another lens for understanding Austen's technique. Her narrative frequently contains multiple layers of meaning, where characters' statements may simultaneously reflect their own beliefs and invite ironic reinterpretation by the reader. This duality reinforces the function of understatement, as meaning emerges through tension rather than explicit declaration.

In combining these theoretical strands, irony and understatement can be understood as complementary mechanisms in Austen's narrative strategy. Irony creates the gap between perception and truth, while understatement controls the degree of exposure within that gap. Together, they produce a refined form of social critique that is both subtle and incisive. Rather than delivering moral judgments directly, Austen constructs a literary environment in which readers are encouraged to recognize incongruities and arrive at their own conclusions.

This framework underscores the significance of interpretive engagement in Austen's fiction. Irony and understatement are not passive stylistic ornaments; they are active processes that shape meaning through reader participation. By embedding critique within restraint, Austen achieves a distinctive narrative voice that remains both elegant and subversive, offering a nuanced portrayal of society that continues to invite critical reflection.

VERBAL IRONY AND NARRATIVE VOICE

Verbal irony and narrative voice form the backbone of Jane Austen's understated critique of social conventions. Rather than relying on overt satire or moralizing commentary, Austen crafts a narrative stance that subtly exposes the contradictions, pretensions, and limitations of the society she depicts. Her narrators often appear composed, rational, and even sympathetic, yet beneath this surface lies a finely tuned ironic sensibility that invites readers to question what is said, what is meant, and what is left unsaid.

Verbal irony in Austen's works frequently emerges through dialogue, where characters unwittingly reveal their own flaws. Figures such as Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* or Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* articulate statements that, on the surface, seem reasonable or polite but carry deeper implications of vanity, ignorance, or self-deception. Austen does not explicitly condemn these characters; instead, she allows their words to undermine themselves. This technique depends

on a discerning reader who can perceive the gap between intention and implication. The irony, therefore, is not imposed but discovered, reinforcing Austen's commitment to subtlety.

Equally significant is Austen's use of free indirect discourse, a narrative technique that blends the voice of the narrator with the inner thoughts of characters. This stylistic choice enables a layered form of irony, where the narrator appears to adopt the perspective of a character while simultaneously maintaining critical distance. For instance, in *Emma*, the narrative often mirrors Emma's confident but misguided judgments. Yet, through slight tonal shifts and contextual cues, Austen signals the limitations of Emma's understanding. The result is a dual-voiced narration that allows readers to perceive both the character's viewpoint and the underlying critique.

Austen's narrative voice is marked by restraint and precision. Unlike the overtly intrusive narrators of earlier eighteenth-century fiction, her narrators rarely offer direct moral judgments. Instead, they operate through implication, juxtaposition, and tonal nuance. This understated approach aligns with the broader aesthetic of her work, where meaning is often conveyed through what is implied rather than explicitly stated. The narrator's apparent neutrality becomes a vehicle for irony, as it encourages readers to engage actively with the text and draw their own conclusions.

Moreover, Austen's irony is closely tied to her representation of social norms, particularly those governing class, marriage, and propriety. Her narrative voice often echoes the language and assumptions of polite society, only to reveal their inconsistencies. For example, the emphasis on "good breeding" or "proper conduct" is frequently undercut by the behavior of those who claim to embody these ideals. Through verbal irony, Austen exposes the performative nature of social respectability, suggesting that adherence to convention often masks deeper moral shortcomings.

Another dimension of Austen's narrative irony lies in its ethical implications. By refraining from overt condemnation, she places responsibility on the reader to evaluate characters and situations. This indirect mode of critique fosters a more nuanced understanding of human behavior, recognizing that individuals are shaped by their social environment even as they contribute to its perpetuation. The narrative voice, therefore, becomes a space where sympathy and critique coexist, reflecting Austen's balanced perspective on human folly.

Importantly, Austen's use of understatement does not diminish the force of her critique; rather, it enhances it. The quiet, measured tone of her narrative voice contrasts sharply with the absurdities it reveals, creating a form of irony that is both subtle and incisive. This technique allows her to address serious social issues—such as gender inequality and economic dependence—without resorting to didacticism. Instead, the critique emerges organically from the interplay between narration and dialogue.

In sum, verbal irony and narrative voice are central to Austen's artistic method. Through carefully crafted dialogue and a nuanced narrative stance, she constructs a world in which meaning is layered and often indirect. Her understated irony not only entertains but also invites critical reflection, making her work enduringly relevant. By trusting her readers to perceive what lies beneath the surface, Austen transforms irony into a powerful tool for social observation and critique.

SITUATIONAL IRONY AND PLOT CONSTRUCTION

Situational irony plays a structural as well as thematic role in the fiction of Jane Austen, functioning not merely as a stylistic device but as a mechanism through which plot progression acquires depth and subtlety. Austen's narratives rarely rely on dramatic reversals in the conventional sense; instead, her irony emerges from the gradual unfolding of circumstances that quietly contradict characters' expectations, social assumptions, or self-perceptions. This restrained

deployment of irony aligns with her broader aesthetic of understatement, where the most significant shifts in meaning occur beneath the surface of ordinary social interactions.

In Austen's novels, situational irony is closely tied to the logic of social conduct. Characters often act within rigid frameworks of propriety, class consciousness, and moral certainty, only to find that these frameworks produce outcomes contrary to their intentions. This is particularly evident in the way marriages—central to Austen's plots—are negotiated. Rather than presenting marriage as a straightforward culmination of romantic desire, Austen constructs scenarios in which initial judgments are overturned through experience. The irony lies in the discrepancy between what characters believe to be rational choices and the eventual exposure of those beliefs as misguided. Plot, therefore, is not driven by external events but by the internal correction of perception.

Austen's method of plot construction relies heavily on delayed recognition. Characters misread situations, form premature conclusions, and act upon incomplete knowledge. These misinterpretations are not arbitrary; they are embedded within the social codes that govern behavior. For instance, politeness often masks true intentions, and social performance obscures genuine feeling. The resulting misunderstandings create a narrative tension that is resolved only when appearances are reconciled with reality. Situational irony thus becomes the engine of narrative development, as each revelation subtly reconfigures the reader's understanding of prior events.

Importantly, Austen avoids overt dramatic irony in favor of a more participatory form of irony, where readers gradually come to recognize the gap between expectation and outcome alongside the characters themselves. This shared process of discovery enhances the realism of her plots. The irony is not imposed from outside but arises organically from the interplay between character, context, and social convention. As a result, the narrative maintains a tone of composure even as it exposes the inconsistencies and limitations of its characters' judgments.

The understated nature of Austen's irony also allows her to critique social norms without overt didacticism. Situational irony reveals the instability of values such as wealth, status, and reputation by demonstrating how easily they can lead to error. Characters who place excessive faith in these markers often encounter outcomes that undermine their assumptions. Yet Austen refrains from explicit moral condemnation; instead, the irony itself performs the critical work. The reader is invited to perceive the discrepancy and draw conclusions, reinforcing the subtlety of her narrative voice.

Moreover, Austen's plot construction often hinges on reversals that are psychologically rather than dramatically significant. Transformations occur not through sudden events but through shifts in understanding. A character who initially appears sensible may prove prejudiced; another dismissed as insignificant may emerge as morally grounded. These reversals are ironic because they contradict initial impressions, yet they unfold so gradually that they seem inevitable in retrospect. Austen's control over pacing ensures that such developments feel both surprising and convincing. In this way, situational irony becomes inseparable from Austen's broader narrative strategy. It shapes the movement of the plot, guides character development, and underpins the thematic exploration of social life. By embedding irony within everyday situations rather than extraordinary, Austen achieves a form of realism that is both critical and empathetic. Her plots do not simply tell stories; they expose the fragile assumptions that structure social experience. Through understatement and carefully orchestrated irony, Austen transforms ordinary events into sites of quiet but profound revelation.

IRONY AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Irony in the fiction of Jane Austen operates not merely as a stylistic device but as a subtle yet incisive mode of social critique. Her narratives are grounded in the everyday rhythms of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English society, yet beneath their seemingly decorous surfaces lies a persistent interrogation of social norms, class anxieties, and moral pretensions. Austen's irony does not announce itself loudly; rather, it unfolds through understatement, allowing readers to perceive the disparity between what is said and what is meant. This quiet dissonance becomes a powerful tool for exposing the contradictions embedded within polite society.

Austen's ironic method often emerges through narrative voice. The narrator frequently adopts a tone that appears to align with conventional social attitudes, only to subtly undermine them. For instance, the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*—which asserts the “truth universally acknowledged” regarding wealthy bachelors—initially mimics accepted social wisdom. Yet, on closer reading, the statement reveals its own absurdity, exposing the transactional nature of marriage and the economic pressures shaping familial ambitions. Such irony does not overtly condemn social practices; instead, it invites readers to question their legitimacy.

Characterization is another domain where Austen's irony functions as critique. Figures such as Mr. Collins or Mrs. Bennet are not merely comic caricatures; they embody the excesses and limitations of a rigidly stratified society. Through exaggerated politeness, misplaced confidence, or obsessive concern with status, these characters reveal the performative nature of social behavior. Austen refrains from direct moralizing, allowing irony to illuminate the gap between self-perception and reality. Mr. Collins, for instance, perceives himself as a model of propriety and humility, yet his actions expose vanity and servility. The humor generated through such portrayals simultaneously entertains and critiques.

Importantly, Austen's irony extends to the structures that govern women's lives. Marriage, often presented as the central objective for female characters, is treated with a degree of skepticism. While Austen does not reject marriage outright, she interrogates its reduction to a purely economic or social contract. Through ironic juxtapositions—such as the contrast between Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic acceptance of Mr. Collins and Elizabeth Bennet's insistence on emotional compatibility—Austen highlights the constrained choices available to women. Irony, in this context, becomes a means of revealing the tension between individual desire and societal expectation.

Austen's use of free indirect discourse further refines her ironic technique. By blending the narrator's voice with the inner thoughts of characters, she creates a layered perspective that allows for subtle critique. Readers are often positioned to recognize the limitations or biases of a character's viewpoint even when the narrative momentarily inhabits it. This technique is particularly evident in the portrayal of characters who are unaware of their own follies. The resulting irony is not imposed externally but arises organically from within the narrative consciousness itself.

What distinguishes Austen's irony as social critique is its restraint. Unlike more overtly satirical writers, she avoids harsh denunciation. Her critique is embedded in tone, structure, and implication rather than explicit argument. This understatement enhances the durability of her observations, as it encourages active engagement from readers. The absence of direct judgment compels readers to draw their own conclusions, making the critique more persuasive and enduring.

In sum, irony in Austen's work functions as a lens through which the complexities of social life are examined. It exposes the inconsistencies between social ideals and lived realities, revealing

how conventions often mask deeper inequities and absurdities. Through understated narration, nuanced characterization, and innovative narrative techniques, Austen transforms irony into a sophisticated instrument of critique—one that continues to resonate with readers navigating the tensions between societal expectations and individual agency.

THE ROLE OF UNDERSTATEMENT IN CHARACTERIZATION

In the fiction of Jane Austen, understatement operates as a subtle yet powerful instrument of characterization. Rather than presenting characters through overt moral judgments or exaggerated emotional displays, Austen prefers a restrained narrative mode in which meaning is often implied rather than declared. This technique allows readers to participate actively in interpreting characters, drawing conclusions from what is left unsaid as much as from what is articulated. Understatement, therefore, becomes a defining feature of Austen’s narrative voice and a crucial mechanism through which her characters acquire depth, ambiguity, and realism.

Austen’s understated style frequently manifests through free indirect discourse, where the narrator’s voice merges seamlessly with the consciousness of the character. This blending often results in statements that appear neutral on the surface but carry ironic undertones. For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet’s wit is revealed not through elaborate descriptions but through concise, measured responses that subtly expose both her intelligence and her limitations. When she remarks upon Mr. Darcy’s pride, the language remains controlled, yet the underlying critique is unmistakable. The restraint in expression allows Austen to highlight Elizabeth’s perceptiveness while simultaneously hinting at her own susceptibility to misjudgment.

Similarly, understatement plays a key role in shaping the character of Mr. Darcy. His transformation is not dramatized through grand declarations but is instead conveyed through small, deliberate actions and modest expressions of feeling. His letter to Elizabeth, for example, is composed in a tone that avoids excessive emotional display, yet it reveals significant shifts in his self-awareness and moral growth. The lack of overt sentiment intensifies the sincerity of his character, suggesting that genuine change is often quiet rather than theatrical.

In *Emma*, Austen employs understatement to expose the protagonist’s flawed self-perception. Emma Woodhouse is introduced as “handsome, clever, and rich,” a description that appears straightforward but subtly foreshadows her complacency and lack of self-awareness. Austen refrains from directly criticizing Emma; instead, she allows Emma’s own words and actions to reveal her errors. Through understated narration, readers perceive the gap between Emma’s self-image and reality, which becomes the central tension of her characterization. The irony lies not in explicit condemnation but in the quiet exposure of inconsistency.

Understatement is equally effective in portraying secondary characters. Figures such as Mr. Bennet or Miss Bates are rendered memorable through minimal yet precise details. Mr. Bennet’s detached humor, often expressed in brief, understated remarks, underscores both his intelligence and his irresponsibility. Miss Bates, on the other hand, is characterized through her excessive speech, which contrasts sharply with the narrator’s restrained tone. This juxtaposition heightens the comedic effect while also eliciting sympathy, demonstrating Austen’s ability to balance irony with empathy.

Moreover, Austen’s use of understatement reflects broader social dynamics. In the rigidly structured society she depicts, open expression of emotion is often constrained by decorum and convention. Characters must navigate social expectations that discourage directness, making understatement a natural mode of communication. Austen captures this reality by allowing her characters to speak in measured tones, where true intentions are frequently masked by politeness.

As a result, characterization emerges through implication, requiring readers to discern meaning beneath the surface.

Importantly, understatement also serves as a moral filter. Characters who rely on exaggerated language or overt displays are often portrayed as insincere or lacking depth. In contrast, those who communicate with restraint tend to embody authenticity and moral integrity. This distinction reinforces Austen's broader critique of superficiality within her social milieu.

In sum, understatement in Austen's fiction is not merely a stylistic preference but a deliberate narrative strategy that enriches characterization. By privileging subtlety over explicitness, Austen invites readers to engage more deeply with her characters, uncovering layers of meaning through careful observation. The result is a nuanced portrayal of human behavior, where irony and restraint work together to illuminate both individual personality and social complexity.

CONCLUSION

Jane Austen's art lies in her ability to say less while meaning more. Through understatement, she transforms irony into a powerful tool for portraying society. Her narratives do not rely on dramatic gestures or explicit critique; instead, they invite readers to perceive the complexities of social life through nuanced observation.

The enduring appeal of Austen's work can be attributed, in part, to this restraint. Her irony remains accessible yet layered, offering insights that continue to resonate. In an age where literary expression often leans toward excess, Austen's measured approach serves as a reminder of the power of subtlety.

Ultimately, the art of understatement in Austen's fiction is not merely a stylistic choice but a philosophical stance. It reflects a belief in the reader's capacity to discern meaning and in the value of indirect expression. Through irony, she constructs a portrait of society that is both critical and compassionate, revealing the intricacies of human behavior with remarkable precision.

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