



## JANE AUSTEN'S SKILL IN FOLLOWING A NEW TECHNIQUE – HANDLING GROUPS OF CHARACTERS IN COMPARISON WITH SHAKESPEARE: AN APPRAISAL

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### **An Abstract**

*This article projects the Austen's skill and techniques triumphs of Jane Austen's art is the immense vitality and variety of her characters. Her novels give the impression of universality, for she does satirise in relation to universal standards or values. All her characters thus become living, breathing realities, she does consider them impartially and shows them compounded both of faults and virtues like human beings. The narrative techniques adopted should be such as to help the writer to achieve his/her purpose. Jane Austen was very particular about the material she took up for artistic treatment in her novels.*

**Key Words: Narrative Technique, Humanity, Men and Women Relationship, Comic Vision, and Sentiment of Nature.**

Jane Austen's novels have rightly been called domestic novels. For one thing, "She never goes out of the parlour", and chooses to work, "with two or three families in a country village" as her raw material. Thus, in *Pride and Prejudice*, she deals mainly with the domestic life and aspiration of the Bennets, and to some extent with those of the Lucases. They are ordinary middle-class people with nothing extraordinary or exceptional about them visits are exchanged, dinners are given, and occasionally there is a ball. Ladies and gentlemen play cards or pass the time in idle gossip – simple recreations as are possible within the four walls of the house. Sometimes, these people do go out but it is simply to visit another family in the neighborhood. There is nothing that is remote from common everyday life.

One of the triumphs of Jane Austen's art is the immense vitality and variety of her characters. Indeed, in this respect, extravagant claims have been made for her. Macaulay, for example, considers her the equal of Shakespeare himself in her skill of character – portrayal. However, there is no denying the fact that her novels are a well – stored portrait gallery and the remark of Dryden, "Here is God's plenty", can very well be applied to her. There are other reasons also for the vitality of her characters. Her eye for the surface of personality is unerring. She can visualize the externals of personality as vividly as Dickens himself with a few brief sentences, she can bring out the habit, the dress, the appearance, the tricks of speech, in short, any oddity and idiosyncrasy of his creatures. But she does not stop at that. Her discriminating vision can penetrate to the organizing principles of a personality that lie beneath the surface. She can discern the motives and causes of conduct, the essentials of action. Her understanding of human nature is complete and she possesses full knowledge of the head and heart of her characters. She presents her figures so wonderfully that the same person strikes differently to different persons. To MR. Collins, Lady Catherine is a perfect specimen of humanity; to Elizabeth, she is a stupid woman of bad manners. The result is that her characters are living, breathing realities and not mere puppets or abstractions.



Jane Austen has her own interpretation of life to offer, and her matter, her design is always subordinated to this end. As Walter Allen puts it, “Jane Austen was a moralist – an 18<sup>th</sup> century moralist” (Saxena 45). The main emphasis in her works is on manners which she regards as morals in microcosm. The standards by which manners and morals are to be judged are both explicit and implicit in her novels. It is said that Jane Austen is the only English novelist who is also a true craftsman, a true artist. She is the only one of the great novelists of England who has solved the three major problems of her art. But another important reason for her enduring popularity is the universal significance of her novels. This universal significance is achieved in two ways. First, she creates living characters, she penetrates beneath the surface to the underlying principles of personality. She has a full understanding of human psychology and this enables her to draw intricate and complex natures. She lays bare not only the process of their minds but also those of the heart. All her characters thus become living, breathing realities, she does consider them impartially and shows them compounded both of faults and virtues like human beings. They have a universal significance they are not national types, but representatives of essential human nature. Secondly, her novels give the impression of universality, for she does satirise in relation to universal standards or values. Taste, sense and virtue, are the values dear to Jane Austen and these are the values. Taste, sense and virtue, are the values dear to Jane Austen and these are the values that have been dear to humanity in every age and country.

A successful novel should have a well knit structure. The narrative techniques adopted should be such as to help the writer to achieve his/her purpose. Jane Austen was very particular about the material she took up for artistic treatment in her novels. She took up for artistic treatment in her novels. She had a very strict sense of form and knew that the compact form of the novel depended mostly upon the nature of her theme. She is interested principally in the essentials of human relationships that interest her most and provide themes for her novels. Jane Austen deals with problem of love and marriage in all her novels and excludes everything else. We find her deeply concerned with the problem of proper adjustment between man and woman. The adjustment is achieved through the best kind of marriage.

Jane Austen’s man and women are viewed primarily in relation to domestic life. Her mood in all the novels is uniformly cosmic. This uniformly comic vision also imparts a sense of unity to her theme she achieves a well-knit plot by eliminating everything that she considers superfluous to her purpose. She excludes all that is irrelevant to her theme. The story in *Pride and Prejudice* has a very methodical development. We have here the movement of two persons who are drawn apart from each other until they reach a climax of mutual understanding. Every chapter and incident in the story has relevance to the larger design of the novel.

Elizabeth Bennet’s misunderstanding is a result of Darcy’s rudeness towards her at the ball and all the characters strengthen the false impression she has developed of him – Wickham by his account of Darcy, Miss. Bringley by her insolent interference and Charlotte Lucas by causing her to mistake her prejudice for generous sentiment. More or less on the same pattern, Darcy’s hatred for Bennets grows while they draw apart. With Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth in which he offers an explanation of his behavior begins the phase of reconciliation between the two. At Pemberly Elizabeth and Darcy find themselves in more favourable circumstances and the story moves towards the happy ending in their union.



**Jane Austen is noted for her skill in her narrative management. She is very careful in arranging the events:**

“Miss Austen scarcely ever gets out of the humdrum of easy going respectable life. She can therefore well afford to be calm and neat in arranging every thread of narrative she has to weave. George Eliot undertakes to set forth the issues of a more tumultuous life to work out deeper problems and to play with torrents where Miss. Austen played with rill”. (P 203).

Sometimes Jane Austen poses as a historian in possession of all facts, interested only in presenting them as they have happened and interpreting them only as they themselves force evaluation from their very sum. That is to say, she sometimes seems a chronicler of the past. However, at times, she appears just a narrator of the present. After the delicious dialogue of the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, the author sums up the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet;

“Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been in sufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (*Pride and Prejudice* 3)

Here in very economical compass lies an accurate sketch of both characters, drawn by someone who has complete insight into them. The reader can at this point guess that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are being truly described, but the guess can be grounded on the conversation which they have just completed. She does not tell us of Mr. Bennet’s wanton responsibility nor of Mrs. Bennet’s malevolent selfishness. Sometimes Jane Austen intrudes directly. She casts aside all pretence. While apparently proceeding along the lines laid out by the requirements of neutral narration, she, often, - by a word, a phrase, or a personal note of qualification discloses a view which cannot represent that of any of her characters and which may not be her own too. In Derbyshire Elizabeth Bennet first awakens to the true nature of her sentiment for Darcy – but she is called way suddenly on account of the elopement of Lydia and Wickham. She hates to go. Then the author steps in:

“If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth’s change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its objects and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill – success might perhaps authorize her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment. Be that as it may, she saw him go with regret” (P 267).

Jane Austen is skillful in employing dialogues. Dialogue has immense value in the exhibition of passions, motives and feelings; of the reaction of the speakers to the events in which they are taking part; and of their influence upon one another. Wherever analytical method is used, dialogue is of service as a verifying supplement to it. William Henry Hudson rightly says,



In Jane Austen's works on the other hand the dramatic element predominates; her men and women for the most part portray themselves through dialogue, while she herself continually throws cross – lights upon them in the conversation of the different people by whom they are discussed. We shall naturally find that the largest place is given to direct analysis in novels which deal mainly with the inner life and with complexities of motive and passion” (P 147).

In the beginning of the novel, we find that the dialogue between the Bennets throws light on their intentions. They talk about the new tenant at Netherfield Park. They are very particular that one of their daughters should marry the young man who occupies Netherfield Park. They are very much interested in marital status. Mrs. Bennet says to her husband:

What is his name?  
Bingley  
Is he married or Single?  
Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure!  
A single man of large fortune;  
Four or five thousand a year  
What a fine thing for our girls! (P 1)

Only from this dialogue, the story starts developing. It shows that Jane Austen attaches much importance to marriage. Archbishop. Richard Whatley writes, “Jane Austen conducted her dialogue with regard to character hardly exceeded even by Shakespeare himself” (Watt 40). The dialogue between Darcy and Elizabeth helps to understand their inner motives. At Netherfield Elizabeth dislikes Darcy. Darcy stares at her but she does not respond. When she refuses to dance with him and says, “despise me if you dare”, he replies in an unmistakable accent “Indeed do not stare”. In this dialogue, we find how adamant Elizabeth is. Though Darcy is proud at first, he comes down to accept what Elizabeth says. The attitude of Darcy is such that their reconciliation at the end is quite convincing. In a conversation at Netherfield Church, Elizabeth makes her well-known remark:

‘I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do direct me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can – But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without.... My good opinion once lost is lost for ever” (P 54).

It is a chilling comment which she acknowledges to be a defect but not a laughable one. Her speech shows how far she has gone due to prejudice. Once she was longing to get his love. Now she is going far away from him, when he approaches her.

Elizabeth's dialogue with Lady Catherine de Bourgh throws light on Elizabeth's character. It also kindles her feelings towards Darcy. Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Elizabeth are conversing:

“And will you promise me, never to enter into  
Such an agreement?  
I will make no promise of the kind  
Miss. Bennet, I am shocked and astonished,



I expected to find a more reasonable young woman” (P 345)

This dialogue also shows Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s intention of discouraging Elizabeth from entering into engagement with Darcy. Jane Austen is compared to Shakespeare in many ways. George Henry Lewes calls her a prose Shakespeare:

May we suggest to all novelist that Miss. Austen incomparable as an artist is the most dangerous of models. She makes her people speak and act as they speak and act in everyday life and she is the only artist who has done this with success and pleasant effect” (Lewis 140)

It is often observed that Shakespeare’s first few scenes strike a keynote and provide the audience/readers with a clear cut picture of the main characters of the play. Similarly Jane Austen lays emphasis on her main theme of love and marriage in the very opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice*:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (P 1)

This novel is noted for its element of humour too. The conversation between Bennets reveals Jane Austen’s humour. Jane Austen can use humour as opposed to wit for satiric purposes, an unusual talent. Jane Austen comments on Mrs. Bennet,

“She was a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper. When she was disconnected, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (P 3).

We can also find the element of irony in this novel *Pride and Prejudice*. W. A. Craik says;

“Jane Austen characteristically finds ways of subordinating her part as narrator; irony is not merely an attitude, it is a method of presentation organization, analysis and judgement. Her skill in irony is at its greatest here....Irony is appropriate in *Pride and Prejudice* because the characters the characters are all deficient in some way, even though intelligent characters may express Jane Austen’s judgement for her” (P 64).

Jane Austen has followed a new technique of handling groups of characters. There are almost twice as many characters in this novel *Pride and Prejudice* as in *Sense and Sensibility*. In the second of this novel *Pride and Prejudice*, we meet almost all the characters. Her art of characterization is superb. She does everything in clear outline and perspective. Referring to her study of characters LegouisGazamian observes thus:

“And this gift is explained by the immediate intuition she brings to her study of character, an intuition so natural and supple that it appears absolutely simple. Her clear sighted eyes read through the inner minds of those who live around her...only by a slight tremour in her style...are made aware of the tension, the nervous vigour, the effect put forth by her thought to comprehend and surmount the unseen obstacles that bar its progress, Everything dissolves into sight” (P 2).



### **Jane Austen can be placed on par with Shakespeare:**

“Shakespeare has had neither equal nor second. But among the writers who...have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud. She has given us a multitude of characters, all in a certain sense, common place, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings” (Wright 6)

The technique of an artist cannot be appreciated for its novelist or cleverness alone. It has to be of service to his theme. A novelist’s technique has to facilitate his or her portrayal of characters and situations. Going by this criterion, one may conclude that in *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrative and the dialogue of Jane Austen serve her artistic purpose well and that her men and women have been convincingly becomes clear when this novel is critically examined.

To Conclude, Jane Austen has employed so many techniques to make the novel interesting. Her narrative skill is superb. She is very careful in arranging the events. Dramatic element predominates in her novels. Her men and women portray themselves through dialogues. The conversations of others keep the hero and heroine informed and even enlightened. Jane Austen has also followed a new technique – handling groups of characters. She is compared to Shakespeare for her multitude of characters.

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