

# The Research of Irony in Emma

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**Abstract:** This paper probes into the irony used in Emma by Jane Austen. The author takes a satirical aim at the state of marriage in 18th-century British society. The irony is characterized by double meanings, but the narration at one level expresses the semantics at another level, which is contrary to the expectation<sup>[1]</sup> The macro irony in Emma is mainly reflected in the description and characterization of characters and plot. For micro irony, there are verbal irony, dramatic irony, and situational irony.<sup>[2]</sup> And verbal irony includes assertive irony, commissive irony, and directive irony.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Keywords:** Jane Austen; Emma; Irony

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## Introduction

Emma focuses on the activities of the heroine's mate selection and focuses on the irony of the British social trend of taking marriage as a way for women to seek economic security and improve their economic status. This ugly fashion of valuing family status over women's feelings and rights. The main female characters in Emma all pursue equal exchange and communication with men's thoughts and feelings, and demand equal rights in social status, and insist on the freedom of independent observation, analysis, and selection of men. In Britain at the time, it was almost a defiance. Jane Austen with her female perspective and sensitive sagacity, uncompromising attitude, confident moral awareness, praised the truth, the good, and the beautiful romantically while criticizing the false, the ugly, and the evil.

## 1. Macro Irony in Emma

### 1.1 Ironic Narration

The novel opens with a satirical introduction of the perfect image of the heroine, Emma, who has successfully arranged a happy marriage for her governess. After her governess got married, she felt very lonely. Her behavior made her lose her companion and good friend. Then Emma made an acquaintance with Harriet Smith, which made her forget the sorrow of losing Miss Taylor. Then Emma set about making Harriet's marriage again. Firstly, she let Harriet reject farmer Mr. Martin and then made Harriet fall in love with Mr. Elton, but Elton proposed to Emma, which is a small climax of irony. Mr. Elton, who had vowed that he would die if Emma refused him, did not die, and four weeks later, he married a rich lady. At that moment, Mr. Churchill and Miss Fairfax returned home. Emma took a great interest in Mr. Churchill. Emma, who had no intention of getting married, took a great interest in Churchill and thought everyone would think they were a match made in heaven. The irony here is that Emma, determined not to get married, has arranged a marriage for herself. Not long after, everyone knew the secret that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax had an engagement. But what shocked Emma most was that Harriet fell in love with Mr. Knightley, which was the result of her daily instruction and blind encouragement. Because of that, Emma finally realized that she had been in love with Mr. Knightley, and the irony reached its climax. Fortunately, the novel has a happy ending. Emma married Knightley, and Harriet married Martin. Mr. Elton officiated at the two weddings. Here is the irony of Elton, because one was the noble lady he had vowed to marry, and the other was the illegitimate daughter who had wanted to marry him. These two women are much better than his current wife.

## 2. Micro Irony in Emma

### 2.1 Verbal Irony

#### 2.1.1 Assertive Irony

Mrs. Elton said to Mr. Weston: "If you knew how Selina feels with respect to sleeping at an inn, you would not wonder at Mrs. Churchill's making incredible exertions to avoid it. Selina said it is quite a horror to her. Does Mrs. Churchill do the same?" Mr. Weston said: "Depend upon it, Mrs. Churchill does everything that any other fine lady ever did." Mrs. Elton eagerly interposed with: "oh! Mr. Weston, do not mistake me. Selina is no fine lady, I assure you. Do not run away with such an idea." And then Mr. Weston said: "Is not she? Then she is no rule for Mrs. Churchill, who is as thorough a fine lady as anybody ever beheld."<sup>[4]</sup>

Assertive irony means that the speaker says is contrary to what he or she means, and the speaker expects listeners to understand his or her true intention by the context, tone of voice, and gestures.<sup>[5]</sup> Mrs. Elton wanted to boast her sister was a very noble lady so that her sister cannot live in an inn. The author satirized Mrs. Elton's foolishness because the only thing in her mind is flaunting. She always wanted to make herself better than everyone, but actually, she was not. The author used this skill to make this character funnier.

#### 2.1.2 Directive Irony

The state of mind expressed by the speaker is a hope or a wish, that is, the speaker is trying to get the listener to do something, but the listener judges that the speaker cannot ask him or her to do it according to the context or common sense, and the listener wants to judge the speaker's real intention according to the relevance principle.<sup>[5]</sup> At this time, the speech is ironic.

Martin asked Harriet to marry him, but she couldn't make up her mind. Emma said "I lay it down as a general rule, Harriet, that

if a woman doubts as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him. I thought it my duty as a friend to say thus much to you. But do not imagine that I want to influence you."<sup>[6]</sup> Emma's wish was that Harriet should refuse Martin, but she said she would not interfere in the matter. Harriet was convinced that Emma had not interfered with her thoughts, but she had been guessing at Emma's thoughts. The irony here is Emma's behavior of controlling Harriet's thoughts and the character of Harriet who has no independent mind. This writing technique makes the characters fuller and makes the characters character more distinct.

### **2.1.3 Commissive Irony**

Commissive speech is when the speaker asks himself or herself to assume some kind of obligation or responsibility. The premise is that the speaker hopes and believes that he can fulfill the promise.<sup>[5]</sup> If the speaker does not want or believe that he or she is capable of fulfilling the promise he or she has made, then the statement is ironic. Once Mr. Elton made violent love to Emma and he vowed that he was ready to die if she refused him. Elton did not believe that he would die if he was refused by Emma, but he made the promise anyway. The irony is strong here, making this character more arrogant and reckless.

### **2.2 Dramatic Irony**

This is a fact known only to the reader that Elton visited Hartfield for exchanging any vacant evening of his blank solitude for the elegancies and society of Mr. Woodhouse's drawing-room, and the smiles of Emma Woodhouse. One day, Emma wanted to have a likeness of Harriet. She said "I could almost venture if Harriet would sit to me. It would be such a delight to have her picture." Let me entreat you," cried Elton; "Miss Woodhouse, to exercise so charming a talent in favor of your friend. I know what your drawings are. I do not doubt your success. Pray, pray to attempt it."<sup>[6]</sup> Emma said this portrayal needed a frame. Therefore, Elton immediately went to London to make a frame for the picture and even skipped his favorite game of whist-club. All the things Elton has done were for Emma, but Emma still confirmed those were for Harriet. A few days later, Elton wrote a proposal charade to Emma, but Emma thought it was actually for Harriet. When Harriet had a throat problem, Elton begged Emma not to visit Harriet because he was afraid that Emma would catch it too. He even commissioned Mrs. Weston to join him in persuading Emma. It was clear to readers that Elton was in love with Emma, and the author's imprint was clear. However, Emma did not find the fact, she still insisted that Elton was in love with Harriet. Neither did Elton, he didn't know why Emma pushed Harriet to him. The author used dramatic irony to highlight the absurdity and shortcomings of the characters. And the dramatic irony in this part expands the plot and deepens the theme of the work, and plays an important role.

Emma loved Mr. Knightley, but she was not aware of this truth. Readers are more aware of the problem than she is. First of all, Emma disagreed with Knightley because they had different views from Martin. Knightley was very angry with Emma because he thought it was Emma who made Harriet refuse Martin. While they were quarreling, Emma showed cheerfulness and indifference; but she was very distressed. She felt no remorse for what she had done, and still thought she was better than him at judging women's rights and their subtleties. She had, however, customary respect for his general judgment, so the situation was very unpleasant to her. Secondly, Emma always thought Knightley was a perfect person. She said, "Mr. Knightley's air is so remarkably good, you might not see one in a hundred with gentleman so plainly written as in Mr. Knightley."<sup>[6]</sup> Thirdly, Emma said something unkind to Miss. Bates. Knightley felt angry with Emma, he said "How can you be so cruel when you're in your right mind to a woman of that disposition, of that age, of that position? Emma, I didn't expect that to happen."<sup>[6]</sup> Emma felt regret and she never had been so depressed. Emma wanted to apologize to Miss Bates, so she went to Mrs. Bates' home and worked done that thing. So far, Mr. Knightley forgave Emma, she believed nothing would make her happier than to have his forgiveness. Finally, when Mrs. Weston said Mr. Knightley might like Miss. Fairfax, Emma was almost crazed. Emma knew Knightley appreciated Miss. Fairfax and she also knew that Miss. Fairfax was an intelligent lady. but she said: "I cannot at all consent to Mr. Knightley's marrying, I cannot adopt it now. And Fairfax, too, of all women! Mr. Knightley does not want to marry. I am sure he was not the least idea of it. Do not put it into his head. He has no occasion to marry, either to fill up his time or his heart!"<sup>[6]</sup> Moreover, Emma did not want Mr. Knightley to marry, and even she would not allow him to marry, and she hated him to marry Jane Fairfax. Accordingly, we could tell Emma liked Knightley, but she didn't see it herself.

Through dramatic irony, the author describes characters who produce reasonable speculations and judgments based on the superficial phenomenon. But we know the story doesn't work that way. Dramatic irony is created one scene after another, making it easy for readers to integrate into the novel and look funnily at the characters. Readers seem to participate in the novel, involuntarily into the role of the spirit, personally involved in the plot development of the work. While reading, we even want to tap the character and tell him or her what is going on. With the development of the story, readers maintain a close psychological connection with the protagonist, while encountering funny or absurd plot changes, readers cannot help laughing because of resonance and feeling embarrassed by the awkward plot.

### **2.3 Situational Irony**

Emma has always been determined not to marry and believed that no marriage would change her mind. However, when Frank arrived at Highbury, Emma took a keen interest in him. Whatever Emma was doing, her first thought was Frank. We found out Emma had a crush on Frank. But when Frank returned home, she found her passion for him had gone. She didn't love him. Ironically, Emma, who had always claimed she would never get married, took an interest in Frank.

Emma believed that Harriet's status was enhanced by making friends with her. Therefore, when Martin proposed to Harriet, Emma expressed her opposition. Afterward, Harriet was in love with Knightley. Harriet did not think that she and Knightley would be possible, but Emma said "There were more wonderful things that had happened; that there had been matches of greater disparity."<sup>[6]</sup> Emma expressed her appreciation for the unequal status of marriage. But when Emma knew that Harriet loved Knightley, her thoughts changed. Emma thought Harriet was inferior both of mind and situation; she began to regret preventing Harriet from marrying the unexceptionable farmer who would have made Harriet happy and respectable in the line of life to which she ought to belong. How ironic! Emma originally thought that Harriet's position has been raised after becoming her friend, and higher than Martin's. But when

Emma learned that Harriet was in love with Knightley, she thought that Harriet's position was very humble and that Harriet should be married to Martin.

The plot of the novel is like a riddle under the application of situational irony, and the readers try to solve it under the guidance of the author. In this sense, Emma is like a mysterious detective novel. The author carefully hushed up some crucial clues until it was necessary to reveal the truth. There is always a vague sense of foreboding throughout the reading, and the reader can't help laughing when the "truth" is revealed. Certain situational irony can be traced back to the factors that lead to the inevitable, right between the lines. This feeling reinforces the comic effect of reading. The author seems to say to readers: you and I know how absurd Emma's ideas are.

### 3. Conclusion

Through the use of irony in this work, Jane Austen aims to express her dissatisfaction with the idea of people's marriage in British society at that time. This is a perfect work of genius. The style of the work is without affectation. It is precisely the use of verbal irony, dramatic irony, and situational irony that makes the ordinary stories tickle readers' hearts properly and make readers enjoy the spiritual level. The artistic charm of the work is greatly enhanced.

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