



THE MASK OF DECORUM AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY: IRONY AS A SUBVERSIVE TOOL IN FEMALE DISCOURSE IN JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54613/ku.v18iB.1698>

MAQOLA HAQIDA/O STAT'YE

Qabul qilindi: 18-may 2026-yil

Tasdiqlandi: 21-may 2026-yil

Jurnal soni: 18-B

Maqola raqami: 39

KALIT SO'ZLAR/КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

kinoya, ayollar diskursi, Jeyn Ostin, Andisha va g'urur, ijtimoiy iyerarxiya, feministik stilistika, gender, ramziy qarshilik

ANNOTATSIYA/АННОТАЦИЯ

Mazkur maqolada Jeyn Ostinning "Andisha va g'urur" romanida ayollar nutqida kinoyaning subversiv vosita sifatidagi funksiyasi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot Boothning ritorik kinoya nazariyasi, Mueckening ikki qatlamli ma'no konsepsiyasi hamda Millsning feministik stilistika yondashuviga asoslanadi. Asarda ayol qahramonlarning kinoyaviy nutqi orqali ijtimoiy iyerarxiya, patriarxal hokimiyat va odob-axloq me'yorlariga tanqidiy munosabat bildirilishi o'rganiladi. Elizabet Bennetning janob Kollinz, Ledi Ketrin de Berg va janob Darsi bilan muloqotlari misolida kinoya nafaqat badiiy usul, balki hokimiyat munosabatlarini qayta talqin qilish va ayol mustaqilligini ifodalash vositasi sifatida talqin qilinadi. Tahlillar natijasida kinoya ayollarga hukmron ijtimoiy qarashlarni ochiq qarama-qarshiliksiz tanqid qilish imkonini beruvchi ramziy qarshilik strategiyasi ekanligi aniqlanadi. Maqolada kinoyaning lingvopragmatik va diskursiv xususiyatlari ham tahlil qilinib, uning ayol qahramonlar tomonidan ijtimoiy cheklovlar sharoitida fikr bildirish, norozilikni ifodalash va o'z pozitsiyasini himoya qilish vositasi sifatida namoyon bo'lishi yoritiladi. Tadqiqot davomida kinoyaviy nutq birliklari ijtimoiy maqomlar o'rtasidagi ziddiyatlarni ochib beruvchi hamda gender stereotiplarini qayta baholashga xizmat qiluvchi muhim kommunikativ mexanizm sifatida talqin qilinadi. Shuningdek, Ostin romanida kinoyaning nafaqat individual xarakter yaratish, balki jamiyatdagi hukmron mafkuraviy qarashlarni tanqidiy aks ettirish vazifasini ham bajarishi asoslab beriladi. Muallifning badiiy mahorati kinoya orqali ayol ovozining intellektual salohiyati va mustaqil dunyoqarashini namoyon etishda yaqqol ko'zga tashlanadi.

ABOUT THE PAPER

Accepted: 18 May 2026

Approved: 21 May 2026

Volume: 18-B

Paper number: 39

KEYWORDS

irony, female discourse, Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, social hierarchy, feminist stylistics, gender, symbolic resistance

ANNOTATION

This article explores the role of irony as a subversive tool in female discourse in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Drawing upon Booth's theory of rhetorical irony, Muecke's concept of ironic duality, and Mills's feminist stylistic approach, the study examines how female characters employ irony to challenge social hierarchy, patriarchal authority, and restrictive conventions of decorum. Through textual analysis of Elizabeth Bennet's interactions with Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Mr. Darcy, the article demonstrates that irony functions not only as a literary device but also as a means of negotiating power and expressing intellectual independence. Austen's ironic discourse exposes contradictions within social institutions while simultaneously constructing a female voice capable of resisting ideological constraints. The findings reveal that irony serves as a subtle yet effective strategy of symbolic resistance that allows women to criticize dominant social structures without overt confrontation. The article also analyzes the linguopragmatic and discursive properties of irony, highlighting its manifestation by female characters as a means of expressing opinions, expressing discontent, and defending their positions in conditions of social restrictions. During the study, ironic speech units are interpreted as an important communicative mechanism that reveals conflicts between social statuses and serves to reassess gender stereotypes. It is also argued that irony in Austen's novel serves not only to create an individual character, but also to critically reflect the dominant ideological views in society. The author's artistic skill is clearly visible in the manifestation of the intellectual potential and independent worldview of the female voice through irony.

Introduction. Irony is one of the most sophisticated forms of literary expression because it allows writers to communicate meanings that extend beyond literal statements. The effectiveness of irony lies in the discrepancy between what is explicitly said and what is implicitly meant. Booth (1974) argues that irony requires readers to reconstruct meanings hidden beneath the literal surface of discourse. Likewise, Muecke (1969) describes irony as a dual-layered communicative structure in which apparent meaning is undermined by an alternative implied meaning. Such a structure enables authors to criticize social realities indirectly while engaging readers in active interpretation.

The connection between irony and female discourse has become an important subject in feminist literary criticism. Scholars have noted that women frequently rely on indirect linguistic strategies in societies where direct opposition to authority is discouraged. According to Mills (1995), language reflects ideological and social power structures, and stylistic choices may reveal resistance to dominant cultural expectations. Within patriarchal environments, irony offers women a means of expressing criticism while maintaining outward conformity to social norms.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* presents a particularly valuable context for examining this relationship. Although the novel appears to focus on courtship and domestic life, it contains a persistent critique of social hierarchy, gender inequality, and class prejudice. Johnson (1988) argues that Austen's fiction subtly challenges accepted assumptions concerning women's roles and authority through irony and narrative

perspective. The novel's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, embodies this critical function through her wit, intelligence, and capacity for ironic observation.

This article investigates how irony operates as a subversive tool in female discourse in *Pride and Prejudice*. It seeks to demonstrate that ironic language enables female characters to question patriarchal authority, expose contradictions within social hierarchy, and assert intellectual autonomy. By analyzing key dialogues involving Elizabeth Bennet, the study explores the relationship between irony, gender, and power in Austen's narrative.

In Austen's fiction, irony functions not merely as a stylistic ornament but as a mode of perception and communication. Elizabeth Bennet frequently employs ironic remarks to evaluate the behavior of others and to expose social absurdities. Unlike characters who unquestioningly accept social conventions, Elizabeth maintains a critical distance from the values that govern her society. Her irony reflects intellectual independence and an ability to recognize contradictions between appearance and reality.

Literature review. The study of irony has occupied a central position in literary criticism, linguistics, and discourse analysis for several decades. One of the most influential contributions to irony studies is Wayne C. Booth's work *A Rhetoric of Irony*, in which irony is defined as a communicative strategy requiring readers to move beyond the literal meaning of an utterance in order to reconstruct the author's intended message. Booth argues that successful ironic communication depends on shared contextual knowledge between author and reader, allowing hidden meanings to be recognized beneath the surface structure of discourse [2, p.

10]. His theory is particularly relevant to Jane Austen's fiction, where much of the social criticism is embedded in subtle verbal exchanges rather than explicit authorial commentary. Booth further emphasizes that irony creates an active interpretive process, transforming readers into participants who must evaluate contradictions between literal statements and implied meanings [2, pp. 33–35].

An equally significant contribution comes from D. C. Muecke, whose *The Compass of Irony* provides a systematic classification of ironic forms and functions. Muecke views irony as a dual-layered phenomenon characterized by the coexistence of an overt meaning and a concealed evaluative perspective [5, p. 19]. According to his approach, irony often emerges from discrepancies between appearance and reality, expectation and outcome, or authority and truth. Such contradictions are highly visible in Austen's portrayal of social relationships, where characters frequently misinterpret themselves and others. Muecke's concept of ironic duality offers an effective framework for understanding how Austen exposes the weaknesses of social institutions while maintaining a tone of elegance and restraint [5, pp. 42–45].

The relationship between language, power, and gender has been extensively examined within feminist stylistics. Sara Mills argues that linguistic choices are deeply connected to ideological structures and social hierarchies. In *Feminist Stylistics*, she demonstrates that literary language can reproduce or challenge dominant cultural assumptions regarding gender roles [4, p. 3]. Mills emphasizes that women often employ indirect communicative strategies in contexts where direct opposition may be socially restricted [4, pp. 89–91]. Irony therefore becomes an important discursive resource through which female speakers can express criticism while preserving social acceptability. Her theoretical perspective is particularly valuable for analyzing Elizabeth Bennet's speech, as her ironic remarks allow her to question patriarchal authority without overtly violating the norms of feminine behavior.

Research on Jane Austen has consistently highlighted the central role of irony in her narrative technique. Claudia L. Johnson, in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*, challenges the traditional perception of Austen as a politically conservative writer. Johnson argues that Austen's novels contain subtle but persistent critiques of authority, class privilege, and gender inequality [3, p. 18]. According to Johnson, Austen frequently employs irony to undermine dominant ideological assumptions while avoiding direct political confrontation [3, pp. 24–26]. This interpretation is especially relevant to *Pride and Prejudice*, where social conventions are repeatedly questioned through the wit and intelligence of the protagonist. Johnson's work demonstrates that Austen's irony possesses not only aesthetic but also ideological significance, functioning as a means of exposing contradictions within the social order.

Additional perspectives on Austen's irony can be found in the scholarship of Marvin Mudrick. In *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, Mudrick argues that irony serves a dual purpose in Austen's fiction: it protects characters from social pressures while simultaneously enabling deeper insight into human behavior [6, p. 73]. He suggests that Elizabeth Bennet's ironic perspective allows her to maintain intellectual independence within a society governed by rigid expectations [6, pp. 80–82]. Mudrick's interpretation supports the view that irony functions as a mechanism of self-expression and resistance rather than merely a stylistic feature.

Feminist literary criticism has also contributed significantly to understanding Austen's representation of female agency. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argue that nineteenth-century women writers often developed indirect strategies for expressing dissatisfaction with patriarchal structures [7, p. 56]. Although Austen's methods differ from the more overt critiques found in later women's literature, her use of irony similarly enables female characters to negotiate social constraints and assert intellectual authority [7, pp. 72–74]. Their work provides a broader historical context for interpreting irony as a gendered form of discourse.

Contemporary discourse studies further support the connection between irony and power relations. Norman Fairclough emphasizes that discourse is not merely a means of communication but also a site where social power is produced and contested [8, p. 38]. From a critical discourse perspective, ironic language can challenge dominant ideologies by revealing inconsistencies within accepted social norms [8, pp. 94–96]. Applying this approach to *Pride and Prejudice* highlights how Elizabeth Bennet's discourse contests assumptions regarding class hierarchy, gender expectations, and inherited privilege.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship on Austen's irony and feminist discourse, relatively few studies have examined irony specifically as a subversive communicative strategy within female discourse. Existing research tends to focus either on narrative irony or on general representations of gender. Therefore, a closer examination of Elizabeth

Bennet's ironic interactions with male and aristocratic authority figures provides an opportunity to integrate theories of irony, feminist stylistics, and discourse analysis. Such an approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how language functions as a means of symbolic resistance and how Austen constructs a female voice capable of challenging social hierarchy while remaining within the boundaries of acceptable decorum.

Methodology. This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine irony as a subversive tool in female discourse in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The research is based on close reading and interpretive analysis of selected dialogues involving Elizabeth Bennet, particularly her interactions with Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Mr. Darcy. These episodes were chosen because they illustrate the relationship between irony, gender, and social power.

The theoretical framework combines Booth's theory of rhetorical irony, Muecke's concept of ironic duality, and Mills's feminist stylistic approach. Booth's model is used to identify the distinction between literal and implied meanings, while Muecke's framework facilitates the analysis of contradictions between appearance and reality. Mills's feminist stylistics provides tools for examining how linguistic choices reflect and challenge gendered power relations.

The analysis focuses on identifying ironic expressions, their communicative functions, and their role in negotiating authority within social interactions. Through a discourse-oriented interpretation of textual evidence, the study explores how irony enables female characters to express criticism, resist social constraints, and construct intellectual autonomy within the patriarchal environment depicted in the novel.

Results. Booth (1974) emphasizes that irony requires readers to identify meanings that are intentionally concealed beneath literal language. Elizabeth's discourse consistently invites such interpretation. Her statements often appear polite on the surface, yet they simultaneously communicate skepticism toward accepted norms. Through this strategy, she expresses dissent without violating expectations of feminine decorum.

Mills (1995) suggests that women's linguistic practices may function as forms of resistance within unequal social systems. Elizabeth's irony illustrates this principle. Rather than openly confronting authority figures, she uses wit and indirect criticism to challenge assumptions concerning gender, class, and social status. Her discourse demonstrates that language itself can become a means of negotiating power.

One of the clearest examples of subversive female discourse appears in Elizabeth's interactions with Mr. Collins. As a clergyman and heir to the Bennet estate, Mr. Collins represents institutional and patriarchal authority. His proposal of marriage reflects conventional expectations that women should prioritize economic security over personal preference.

Elizabeth's response undermines these assumptions through irony and verbal intelligence. She refuses to accept the notion that marriage is merely a practical arrangement and rejects Mr. Collins's confidence that any woman would naturally welcome his proposal. Her ironic responses expose the absurdity of his self-importance and challenge the belief that female consent can be assumed.

The significance of this exchange lies in its reversal of power relations. Although Mr. Collins occupies a socially privileged position, Elizabeth's ironic discourse deprives him of intellectual authority. By refusing to conform to expectations, she asserts individual judgment and demonstrates that women are capable of independent decision-making.

Austen's critique of social hierarchy becomes particularly evident in Elizabeth's encounters with Lady Catherine de Bourgh. As a member of the aristocracy, Lady Catherine expects unquestioned obedience from those of lower social rank. Her authority derives from inherited status rather than personal merit.

Elizabeth's responses challenge this hierarchical worldview. While maintaining formal politeness, she refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Lady Catherine's attempts to control her personal choices. Through carefully constructed irony, Elizabeth exposes the arbitrary nature of social privilege and rejects the assumption that rank determines moral or intellectual superiority.

Muecke (1969) argues that irony frequently emerges from contradictions between appearance and reality. Lady Catherine's confidence in her own superiority contrasts sharply with the narrow-mindedness revealed through her behavior. Elizabeth's ironic discourse highlights this contradiction, encouraging readers to question the values upon which social hierarchy is based.

The relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy provides another important example of irony as a subversive tool. Initially, Darcy's social status and pride position him above Elizabeth within the established hierarchy. However, Elizabeth's ironic wit prevents their relationship from becoming one of domination and submission.

Throughout their conversations, irony functions as a means of establishing intellectual equality. Elizabeth challenges Darcy's assumptions and refuses to be intimidated by his social position. Her ironic observations reveal confidence in her own judgment and resist the expectation that women should defer to male authority.

As the narrative progresses, Darcy gradually recognizes the value of Elizabeth's perspective. This transformation suggests that genuine respect must be based on mutual understanding rather than inherited privilege. Austen thus uses irony to critique traditional power structures while promoting a model of relationships founded on equality and individual merit.

The examples discussed above demonstrate that irony operates as a form of symbolic resistance within female discourse. Elizabeth Bennet does not engage in direct rebellion against social institutions; instead, she questions their legitimacy through language. Her irony exposes inconsistencies within patriarchal and hierarchical systems while allowing her to remain within the boundaries of acceptable social behavior.

Johnson (1988) notes that Austen's critique is often embedded within ordinary conversations rather than explicit political statements. This subtlety contributes to the effectiveness of irony. By encouraging readers to recognize contradictions independently, Austen transforms irony into a powerful instrument of social criticism.

Consequently, female discourse in *Pride and Prejudice* should be understood not merely as dialogue between characters but as a site where cultural values are contested and reinterpreted. Irony enables women to articulate alternative perspectives and challenge structures of authority that seek to limit their autonomy.

The analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates that irony functions as a central discursive strategy through which female characters, particularly Elizabeth Bennet, negotiate power relations and challenge established social hierarchies. The findings reveal that irony is consistently used in situations where direct opposition to authority is socially restricted, allowing female speech to remain within the boundaries of decorum while still expressing critique.

One of the key results of the study shows that Elizabeth Bennet's ironic responses to Mr. Collins expose the absurdity of patriarchal assumptions regarding marriage, economic security, and female consent. Her indirect verbal strategies undermine Mr. Collins's perceived intellectual and social authority, revealing a reversal of power dynamics in interpersonal communication. This suggests that irony operates as a tool for destabilizing institutional authority at the micro-level of dialogue.

Similarly, the analysis of Elizabeth's interactions with Lady Catherine de Bourgh indicates that irony is used to challenge aristocratic ideology and inherited privilege. Although Elizabeth maintains formal politeness, her discourse reveals resistance to hierarchical domination. This confirms that irony allows the speaker to question social rank without engaging in open confrontation, thereby preserving social acceptability while subverting authority.

In the case of Elizabeth's relationship with Mr. Darcy, the findings demonstrate that irony initially functions as a mechanism of intellectual defense and social resistance. Over time, however, it also becomes a medium of mutual recognition and transformation, contributing to the development of equality between characters. This indicates that irony in Austen's narrative is not only oppositional but also dialogic, facilitating shifts in perception and understanding.

Overall, the results confirm that irony in *Pride and Prejudice* operates on multiple levels: linguistic, social, and ideological. It enables female characters to articulate criticism of gender inequality and class prejudice, while simultaneously maintaining conformity to expected norms of behavior. The study concludes that irony serves as a subtle but effective form of symbolic resistance, allowing women to construct intellectual autonomy within a restrictive patriarchal framework.

Discussion. The findings of this study indicate that irony in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* operates as a complex discursive mechanism that simultaneously reflects, negotiates, and destabilizes the social order of early nineteenth-century England. Rather than functioning merely as a rhetorical ornament, irony emerges as a strategic form of communication through which female characters articulate resistance within the constraints of patriarchal ideology and rigid class hierarchy.

From a feminist stylistic perspective, Elizabeth Bennet's ironic discourse can be interpreted as a linguistic strategy shaped by gendered expectations of politeness and restraint. As Mills (1995) suggests, women in patriarchal societies often cannot afford direct confrontation without risking social exclusion or moral judgment. In this context, irony becomes a socially permissible form of critique that allows Elizabeth to express disagreement while maintaining the appearance of conformity. This dual function of irony—compliance on the surface and resistance at a deeper

level—demonstrates how linguistic choices are deeply embedded in power relations.

The interaction between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Collins clearly illustrates how irony destabilizes institutional authority at the interpersonal level. Mr. Collins represents not only individual arrogance but also the broader ideological structure of patriarchy, where male authority is legitimized through religion, law, and inheritance. Elizabeth's ironic replies expose the gap between Mr. Collins's self-perception and his actual intellectual limitations. In this sense, irony functions as a corrective discourse that reveals the instability of assumed authority and questions the legitimacy of socially constructed superiority.

Similarly, Elizabeth's exchanges with Lady Catherine de Bourgh highlight the ideological dimension of irony in relation to class hierarchy. Lady Catherine embodies aristocratic entitlement and the belief that social rank automatically confers moral and intellectual superiority. Elizabeth's refusal to internalize this hierarchy, expressed through carefully controlled ironic politeness, signals a rejection of class-based determinism. Importantly, this resistance is not expressed through rebellion or overt defiance but through linguistic subtlety, which allows Elizabeth to maintain agency without violating social norms. This reinforces Booth's (1974) argument that irony requires interpretive participation, as meaning is not explicitly stated but must be inferred through contextual contradiction.

The relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy further extends the discussion of irony from resistance to transformation. Initially, irony serves as a defensive mechanism through which Elizabeth resists Darcy's pride and social dominance. However, as the narrative progresses, irony becomes a shared communicative space that enables mutual recognition and intellectual equality. This evolution suggests that irony in Austen's novel is not static; rather, it functions dynamically within interpersonal relationships, facilitating shifts in perception and social understanding.

From a broader ideological perspective, the study demonstrates that irony in *Pride and Prejudice* contributes to the critique of Enlightenment-era social values, particularly those related to gender, class, and marriage. Austen's use of irony exposes contradictions within a society that simultaneously values rationality and maintains rigid hierarchical structures. Women, positioned at the intersection of these contradictions, utilize irony as a means of negotiating identity and asserting intellectual presence within restrictive cultural frameworks.

Moreover, Muecke's (1969) concept of ironic duality is particularly relevant in explaining how Austen constructs meaning through contradiction. The tension between surface politeness and underlying critique creates a layered discourse in which meaning is never fixed but constantly negotiated. This instability of meaning reflects the instability of the social structures being represented, suggesting that language itself becomes a site of ideological struggle.

Overall, the discussion confirms that irony in Austen's narrative operates at multiple interconnected levels: as a linguistic device, a gendered communicative strategy, and an ideological tool of critique. It allows female characters to inhabit a paradoxical position in which they appear socially compliant while simultaneously undermining the very structures they outwardly respect. This paradox is central to understanding how female agency is constructed in *Pride and Prejudice*, and it highlights the importance of indirect discourse strategies in literary representations of gendered power relations.

Conclusion. The analysis demonstrates that irony plays a crucial role in the construction of female discourse in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Through ironic language, female characters challenge social hierarchy, question patriarchal authority, and assert intellectual independence without openly violating conventions of decorum. Elizabeth Bennet's interactions with Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Mr. Darcy illustrate how irony functions as a subtle yet effective means of resistance.

The theoretical perspectives of Booth, Muecke, Mills, and Johnson reveal that irony operates on multiple levels simultaneously. It creates a distinction between literal and intended meaning, exposes contradictions within social structures, and provides women with opportunities to negotiate power relations. Austen's use of irony therefore extends beyond aesthetic purposes and acquires broader ideological significance.

Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates that language can serve as an instrument of empowerment. Through wit, critical distance, and ironic observation, Austen's heroine challenges dominant assumptions regarding gender and class while preserving her individuality. Irony emerges as a powerful discursive strategy through which female voices gain authority and contest restrictive social norms, confirming its enduring relevance in discussions of literature, gender, and power.

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