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**Interpreting Austen's Irony: Compliant and Resistant
Readings of *Pride and Prejudice***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2003: 1).

This is one of the most popular first lines written in literature. Written by a woman in a time marked by profound gender inequalities, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) revolutionized the world of romance novels by giving visibility to female authors and depicting the hardships women suffered in the 19th century. Although the Bennet daughters had economic comforts as the daughters of a gentleman, they had to submit to societal pressures to find a husband at a very young age, primarily to be financially secure. Austen’s blend of romance, sarcasm, and comedy made this 19th century novel of manners one of the most skilful works in literary history.

The soul of Austen’s work, however, lies in her use of narrative irony. As Halsey (2013) notes, Austen’s narrative strategies and thematic choices trigger both resistant and compliant readings (212-213). While compliant readers are limited to reading the text with pleasure, resistant readers read against the text. This paper will examine how both types of reading function in *Pride and Prejudice*, what outcome they lead to, and how they relate to Austen’s ideology. In the first part of the TFG, I will examine Austen as an author and her relationship with her readers. I will then examine how verbal irony functions in *Pride and Prejudice* and analyses how this irony can be read from both a resistant and compliant perspective.

From a methodological perspective, this dissertation draws on reader-response theory and feminist criticism as leading literary foundations. These two types of criticism aim to examine and deconstruct how readers influence and give meaning to the text. In comparison, feminist criticism focuses on how the reading and analysis of a text is done with gender in mind; reader-response criticism focuses more on the interaction between reader and text in the construction of meaning, without necessarily considering the gender or ideals of the critic.

Despite their similarities, these two forms of criticism are not very often interchanged. Therefore, I will use both methods to better understand Austen's writing and readers' subsequent interpretations of her irony and the novel.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, irony, resistant reading, compliant reading, reader-response theory, feminist theory.

0. Introduction

The 18th century signified a turning point in women's literature and writing. From the middle of the century onwards, British women from higher and middle social classes began writing and massively publishing their works. Influenced by authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), female authors began treating topics such as their dissatisfaction with gender stereotypes, domesticity, and the patriarchal society in which they lived. This marked the beginning of early feminism and brought to light brilliant female authors such as Ann Radcliffe, Amelia Opie, and Jane Austen. The latter had ambitious plans from a very young age. Even though she could lose her prestige and social standing due to the era's barriers and prejudices against women writing, "from her childhood, her aim was to see her work in print." (Copeland and McMaster 13). With time and effort, she became one of the most famous female writers of all time, widely recognized for her marriage plots, her challenging proto-feminist ideology, and her masterful use of irony.

Due to the patriarchal social context, Austen hid her intentions and messages through irony in her novels, trusting that readers would decipher her criticisms. Through irony, Austen manages to give meaning to more than what is written and invites the reader to acknowledge this hidden meaning. *Pride and Prejudice* is an excellent novel to analyze Austen's use of irony and how readers interpret it because of its ambivalence. At first sight, this novel's overall trajectory seems to support patriarchal institutions and ideologies mainly because of the marriage plot. This can be seen, for example, when Charlotte Lucas has no other option than to marry Mr. Collins for financial security. Despite the apparent conservatism of this novel, I will argue that Austen's use of irony makes *Pride & Prejudice* a feminist text, since this irony is not only used to sharply criticize gender inequality and its consequences but also it invites the readers to recognize her critique of patriarchal society.

My research revolves around the reader's interpretation of irony in *Pride and Prejudice* and its relationship to the author's ideology. To understand how readers interpret Austen's irony, I am using the terms "compliant" and "resistant" reading, which Katie Halsey mentions in her book *Jane Austen and Her Readers*. Although these terms seem contradictory, they complement each other in *Pride and Prejudice*. On the one hand, compliant readers accept the text presented uncritically and read with it instead of against it. On the other hand, compliant readers question the literal meaning of a text critically, reading both what is being said and what is left unsaid. To address my research question, I propose to analyze *Pride and Prejudice* by combining this theory of "compliant" and "resistant" reading with feminist theory. I will also use pragmatics, Grice's conversational maxim of quality, and echoic irony to explain how irony functions in this novel. Firstly, pragmatics is the linguistic discipline that will add light on how language is used depending on the context and the meaning it tries to convey. Secondly, Grice's quality maxim will explore the relationship of irony with the truthfulness that an utterance has to possess to be conversationally effective. Finally, echoic irony will be used to analyze how the speaker's intention in *Pride and Prejudice* is "to convey [their] own attitude, or reaction to [a] thought" (Wilson & Sperber 129).

I aim to illustrate how in order to understand Austen's feminist critique contained within her use of irony, both compliant and resistant readings of the novel are required. The first part of my TFG explains how Austen conceals an intention in her novel from which the reader derives meaning. The second part addresses how readers consciously or unconsciously identify, analyze and draw conclusions from verbal irony, accompanied by passages from *Pride and Prejudice* in which characters use irony to illustrate this process.

1. Author, reader, and the creation of meaning

The act of reading not only refers to the comprehension and processing of language in its form, but also involves the manifestation and creation of meaning through cognitive individual analysis and comprehension (Carter). During the reading process, the reader creates an individual interpretation of the text, which, according to Saussure, depends on the reader's experience with language and the social aspects of language. This process of language system and social connotations is thus the trigger for the creation of meaning in texts.

Nevertheless, the author of the text can use stylistic devices such as irony to lead the reader to certain interpretations of the text. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, irony can alter compliant readings of the text and create resistant readings. For example, take the first sentence in the novel: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen 1). If the reader reads this sentence literally, they will realise that it is ironic because the statement is far from "a truth universally acknowledged" and the author is aware of this. Once the reader has come to this conclusion, they have no choice but to think about the potential meanings surrounding the text.

Pragmatically speaking, "making meaning is a dynamic process involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance" (Thomas 22). Although pragmatics is based on speech, I argue that these pragmatic theories can also be applied to the interpretation of written texts. Instead of speaker and listener, a dichotomy of author and reader can be made. It is certain that readers and writers are dependent on each other in the process of meaning-making. On the one hand, a text does not hold meaning until it is read, and the reader creates an interpretation that may comply with or resist the ideas and ideologies that the text conveys. On the other hand, Austen provides the reader with the means to create meaning, and she relies on those means to do so.

1.1. The reader

To explain the importance of the reader, I will illustrate it by using reader-response criticism. This type of criticism focuses on the reader's experience and construction of meaning in a literary work. This theory assumes that different readers may interpret a text differently depending on their values, context, and type of reader. Accordingly, the text comes alive through the reader and their interpretative capacity: "The reader is the artist who reduces the potentiality of a written text to the actuality of a literary work" (Keegan 83). It must be noted that reader-response criticism is known for focusing on the reader rather than the author. Nonetheless, I believe that reader-response criticism gives importance to both the reader's interpretation and the author's purpose. Nonetheless, the latter has to be deciphered by the former, which assigns the reader the leading role.

For this part of the project, it is worth mentioning Wolfgang Iser, a major critic of reader-response criticism who is known for introducing the concept of the implicit reader. An implicit reader has the ability and knowledge to understand the complexities of a text. Thus, Iser defended that when writers publish a book, they hope the implicit reader will understand the irony and metaphors presented in their text. In contrast, the actual reader may have trouble understanding and enjoying the text, which complicates his reading experience and meaning-making process. Although one might think that these two types of readers are opposites, they coexist in every person, and depending on the circumstances, one or both types arise during the reading process.

This phenomenon also occurs in compliant and resistant readers. These terms may seem antagonistic, but they are necessary and complementary during the act of reading. On the one hand, compliant readers do not think critically about the meaning of the text, but simply read along. On the other hand, resistant readers discern the hidden meaning of the text and what the author is concealing. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader may comply with the patriarchal

ideologies contained in the narrative, yet readers may become resistant when the narrator or characters use irony to challenge other characters' conservative cultural views. For example, when Elizabeth Bennet states, "I am perfectly convinced that Mr. Darcy has no fault" (Austen 32), the reader is invited to read against the literal meaning and conclude that Elizabeth means the opposite.

1.2. Author versus speakers

As Woolf mentions in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), "Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote" (Woolf 53). This quote suggests that with Austen, nothing is clearly stated, including the text's ideology. Due to Austen's use of various and contradictory ideologies and voices in *Pride and Prejudice*, it can be said that there is no clear ideology in the text. By doing this, Austen challenges the reader to critically evaluate the several ideologies found in the text and their importance. This notion can be confusing since a great deal of people who have read or heard of *Pride and Prejudice* may think the text holds a feminist ideology. Nonetheless, as Morini says: "many voices are striving for dominance in the novels, and it is challenging to acknowledge which voice is sanctioned by the narrator/author/structure, whether the author is fully backing her narrator, or even whether the narrator is one or many" (Morini 342).

Austen chose to employ a third-person omniscient narrator in *Pride and Prejudice*. This type of narrator has access to all the character's inner thoughts and feelings. However, the novel is mainly told from Elizabeth's point of view. This type of focalized narration gives Austen the "chameleonic" ability to ventriloquize all sorts of characters, to speak in anybody's voice without giving clear indications as to his/her endorsement of their points of view, or even as to whose voice it is that he/she is imitating" (Morini 345). It is the reader who has to go through all those ideologies until they figure out Austen's purpose, which goes along with her ideology.

1.2.1. Austen as an author

Austen has been regarded worldwide as one of the precursors of feminism. It is commonly believed that she subtly transmits her proto-feminist ideas through irony in her books. Like many other women writers in the 18th century, Austen uses writing to rebel against the patriarchal view about the female's incapacity of rational thinking and deconstructs the ideal lady's behaviour through a feminist narrative authority, Elizabeth Bennet. Moreover, she regarded females as the central part of the novel.

Furthermore, Mary Wollstonecraft's influence on her has been widely discussed in the field of literary feminism. Wollstonecraft's most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), has been regarded as the first feminist manifesto. It has been argued that Wollstonecraft's early feminist ideals set a base for the creation of Austen's female characters. This female author's writing was based on a feminist view of the social conditions of women in the 18th century. She defended the equality of sexes and the reform of female education. The following excerpt from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* accurately represents both Austen's and Wollstonecraft's ideology as well as some of the main themes of *Pride and Prejudice*:

“I attribute [the gender inequalities] to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers ... the civilised women of this present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.” (Wollstonecraft 9)

Some ideas that Wollstonecraft defends can be seen in *Pride and Prejudice*. As Ascarelli (2004) says, Austen portrays her ideology on *Pride and Prejudice* and “manage[s] to infuse her books with a Wollstonecraft-like feminist critique that is less politically charged but just as potent” (1). She not only does this through irony, but she positions Elizabeth Bennet as the

main transitional character of this idea. This can be seen for example when Elisabeth rejects Mr. Collins's proposal, and she asserts: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female, intending to plague you, but as a rational creature, speaking the truth from her heart" (Austen 62). Through her ironic personality, this main character expresses her dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by society and demonstrates that women are capable of reasoning, critical thinking, and independence. Hence, it could be said that this novel is a script of Jane Austen's critical and personal thoughts. She portrays through irony the harm of arranged marriage, the unequal relationship between the sexes and the socially imposed gender norms.

1.2.2. The Speakers in *Pride and Prejudice*

According to literary pragmatic theory, the speaker is the narrator. Austen uses a third person omniscient narrator to describe the feelings and thoughts of her characters. She also has the power to shape the reader's perceptions of the characters in the way she describes them. This can clearly be seen when Austen's narrator describes 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 insufficient 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. (Austen 3)

Because of these descriptions, the reader is able to make assumptions about the type of personalities these characters have. However, characters also become opinionated speakers in *Pride and Prejudice* since the novel includes dialogue and free indirect discourse apart from the third-person omniscient narration. Take as an illustration this quote from when Mr. Bennet contradicts his wife and asserts that if Elisabeth marries Mr. Collins, he will not approve: "From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again

unless you marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do” (Austen 63). Although Mr. Bennet’s statement about becoming a stranger to Elisabeth is ironic, the reader can notice that Mr. Bennet considers Mr. Collins an unacceptable match for his daughter. Through this comment, Austen invites us to think about the absurdity of arranged marriage and its high chances of failure if parents do not know how to identify a suitable husband for their daughters.

Thomas (1995) argues that the meaning of an ironic utterance consists of the utterance meaning and the force. The former is the literal meaning of the utterance, while the latter is “the speaker’s communicative intention” (Thomas, 1995: 18). This force, most of the time, and in the case of “Austen Author”, carries criticism in it. In order to explain this part of my paper, I will be using Morini’s concept of “Austen Author” and “Austen Narrator” as two different entities (339). The descriptions of Austen Narrator when she does not use irony elicit a compliant reading of the text since the reader does not have to read against the text to understand its meaning. Nonetheless, when Austen’s Narrator or other characters use irony, the reader must read against the text and decipher the meaning hidden in the ironic utterance. Hence, compliant and resistant readings are not static processes. The reader unconsciously intertwines both types of reading depending on the force or lack of force of the text.

On the other hand, free indirect discourse, mostly from Elizabeth’s point of view, and dialogue from all the characters are narrative strategies that state the different ideologies of the characters. However, as Moses (2003) argues, Austen Author, Narrator and Elizabeth Bennet have a special connection and a shared string of thought. Austen Author blurs the line between Austen’s Narrator voice and the main character’s voice. For example, Austen Narrator and Elizabeth share the same view of Mr. Darcy at the beginning of the novel:

Elizabeth: “Mr. Darcy is all politeness,” said Elizabeth, smiling” (Austen 14)

Austen Narrator: “He [Darcy] was at the same time haughty, reserved, and fastidious, and his manners, though well-bred, were not inviting. In that respect his friend had greatly the advantage.” (Austen 9)

Moses (2003) argues: “By blurring the distinction between Elizabeth’s voice and that of the omniscient narrator, she controls the reader’s point of view” (155). This can be seen in the example aforementioned, the reader is compliant when reading Austen’s Narrator point of view but it turns into resistant reading when reading Elizabeth’s ironic comment since they have to acknowledge the force behind the utterance. The outcome is the same, the reader will understand Elizabeth’s ironic comment is aligned with Austen’s narrator description of Mr. Darcy.

The distinction between Austen Author and Narrator is necessary since Austen Author includes several ideologies in the text. Although Austen Narrator, as omniscient, has access to all the character’s feelings and thoughts, she mainly aligns with Elizabeth’s. It must not be overlooked that Austen Author includes other characters with more patriarchal ideologies. These characters, such as Mr. Collins, and Mr. Darcy, enrich the text and aim to represent the 19th Century’s contextual situation. Regardless, Austen Author and Narrator have shaped these characters on purpose to be contradicted by Elizabeth Bennet, the predominant voice. The effect that this has on the reader is to align with the predominant voice and comply with Elizabeth’s view while they resist the text, trying to unmask the meaning of the force of her irony.

2. Irony

Irony and its purpose are not always easy to interpret. It is a very fluid concept and has been studied in very diverse areas; for example, irony has been used to refer to narrative techniques, to figures of speech, to situations and to actions such as Socratic irony to define the fact of faking ignorance. The classical concept of irony is defined as “a situation in which

something intended to have a particular result has the opposite or a very different result” (“Irony | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary”). This definition portrays Grice’s view on irony. This philosopher is known for his contributions to language and communication, mainly because of his Conversational Maxims. He believed that to achieve meaningful communication, people had to use four maxims: Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner. Irony violates the maxim of quality since this maxim consists of the speaker telling the truth.

Nonetheless, irony has been widely researched since Grice proposed his concept of figurative language and has been discovered to be much more complex and flexible. In reader-response theory, irony has been described as a tool the reader uses “to make judgments and decisions about the relative value stated or intended meanings, drawing the reader into its vision of truth, so when the reader finally understands [they] become a member of the community that shares that vision” (Green 304). Hence, it can be acknowledged that Austen shares a very close relationship with her readers. Austen invites her readers to practice critical thinking through her writing. Nonetheless, during this process, she guides the readers in every step of the meaning-making process.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, irony is very dense and never lacking for more than one paragraph. The reader is driven into the author’s truth, presented mainly in Elizabeth’s and the text’s narrator’s irony. Considering that in the early 19th century, oppositional views towards women’s domestic role were controversial, hiding her ideology through irony was Austen’s way of challenging readers to discover by themselves the meaning behind the text. For this research, I will focus on verbal irony and the reader’s interpretation of it. Moreover, I have chosen to use Wilson & Sperber’s (2012) concept of irony as an echo to analyse Austen’s use of verbal irony. This concept gives a more accurate and pragmatically focused view of this narrative strategy, which allows us to understand the speaker’s intention and relate it to the reader’s understanding and interpretation of the ironic utterance.

2.1. Verbal irony as echo

Grice's traditional definition of irony as the speaker uttering the opposite of the utterance's literal meaning was seen as too basic for irony's complexity. Nonetheless, Wilson & Sperber (2012) developed a theory named echoic irony, which defends that irony's main purpose is not to communicate the opposite of the uttered sentence, but to communicate the speaker's attitude towards the victim of the criticism (e.g., rejection, mocking, dissatisfaction). Nonetheless, these two researchers acknowledged that "an ironical utterance typically implies that the speaker believes the opposite of what was said, but this is neither the meaning nor the point of the utterance." (Wilson & Sperber 125). For example, if it starts snowing outside and someone says, "It must be hot outside," Wilson and Sperber (2012) will interpret that the speaker means the opposite and ironically expresses dissatisfaction with the cold weather.

Within echoic irony, Austen Author mainly uses verbal irony to portray her ideas. The reader must figure out the meaning of the ironic utterances to make sense of the narrative. This process may change the reader's perspective since *Pride and Prejudice* is both a novel of manners about a romance and, simultaneously, seems to be a powerful critical feminist piece of literature about the 19th-century patriarchal situation. Hence, when interpreting this type of irony, the reader fluctuates between compliant and resistant reading. When irony is not echoed or does not violate the maximum of Quality, the reader performs a compliant reading, while with the ironic utterances echoed that flaunt the maxim of Quality, the reader performs a resistant reading of the text. Nonetheless, the outcome is always the same, a resistant perspective from the readers towards the novel since the compliance of the plot is only to be read against.

To exemplify the various arguments exposed in this paper, I will proceed to analyze some passages of *Pride and Prejudice* that contain verbal irony. This will show how compliant and resistant readings are carried out in *Pride and Prejudice* when readers are faced with verbally ironic utterances and how both types of readings complement each other. Consequently, this will portray how the reader deciphers the meaning of these ironic utterances and how this can be related to Austen's proto-feminist ideology.

2. 2. Analysing verbal irony in *Pride and Prejudice*

Verbal irony is the most prevalent type of irony in Austen's novels. Nonetheless, there is a specific reason for me to have chosen this type of irony to explain its mechanisms for the readers. Ruth Filik et al. (2017) explain in their article *The Emotional Impact of Verbal Irony: Eye-tracking evidence for a two-stage process* the reader's processing of verbal irony. They demonstrate that readers unconsciously carry out a resistant reading of the text when they encounter irony:

(...) readers initially respond to the negative aspects of ironic criticism, which may result from the sharp contrast between the superficial positive message (i.e., what may have been expected or desirable in the situation) and the intended negative message (i.e., the reality). (...) Subsequently, upon reaching the end of the target sentence, readers have had more time to consider the speaker's motivation for using ironic language. (...) by the time the reader encounters the described emotional response, they have already successfully interpreted the prior comment as being intended literally, or ironically (Filik et al., 198-200).

As this quotation suggests, readers can identify the speaker's sharpness and attitude through ironic comments. This identification is possible because of the apparent gap between the literal meaning of the utterance and its symbolic meaning. Filik also mentions that apart from noticing this opposition that Grice defends, the readers also have time to consider the attitude speakers aim to convey by using irony, just as Willson and Sperber suggest. Depicting irony in a text is a process that is most of the time done unconsciously. Yet, with Austen, the reader is asked not only to identify irony but to comprehend it critically.

2.2.1. Example 1: I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women.

The passage that I aim to analyze first belongs to chapter eight of *Pride and Prejudice*. Here, Miss Bingley and Mr. Darcy define what an “accomplished woman” is for them. Afterwards, Elizabeth Bennet responds sarcastically to their opinions to criticize them. Through irony, Elizabeth expresses her disagreement with the situation and the pressure women had to put up with, but she voices it indirectly.

“Oh! certainly,” cried his faithful assistant, “no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.”
“All this she must possess,” added Darcy, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”
“I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.” (Austen 21, my italics)

Here, Elizabeth ridicules Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley’s high expectations. She relies on Mr. Darcy to recognize the absurdity of this opinion by stating that she thinks that he has never met a woman with those qualities. When voicing this ironic utterance, Elizabeth follows Grice’s maxim of Quality since she is being truthful and telling the truth as it is. Here, the readers can comply with the opinion echoed. Although ironic, the meaning of this utterance is meant to be understood literally since it does not violate the maxim of Quality. Through this utterance, Austen criticizes the class system, and the number of pressures and high expectations women were subjected to be worthy of marriage.

2.2.2. Example 2: I advise you by all means to refuse him.

This second passage belongs to chapter twenty-one of *Pride and Prejudice*. In this chapter, Elizabeth convinces Jane not to doubt Bingley’s feelings towards her. Elizabeth realizes that Caroline wants to prevent Jane from marrying her brother Bingley. Caroline has

always considered the Bennets inferior, apart from thinking that if Bingley marries Darcy's sister, she will have an opportunity with Darcy. In this passage, Elizabeth tells Jane through irony that she should not care about others' comments and trust in the mutual love Bingley and her share. Jane understands the irony and agrees with Elizabeth.

“You must decide for yourself,” said Elizabeth; “and if, upon mature deliberation, you find that the misery of disobliging his two sisters is more than equivalent to the happiness of being his wife, *I advise you by all means to refuse him.*”

“How can you talk so?” said Jane, faintly smiling. “You must know that though I should be exceedingly grieved at their disapprobation, I could not hesitate.” (Austen 68, my italics)

In contrast to the previous example, Elizabeth does flaunt the maxim of Quality since she utters a false opinion so that it has the opposite effect on the reader and the hearer, in this case, Jane. This is a suitable example to explain Filik's theory on deciphering irony. It must not be overlooked that readers can easily interpret the implicit meaning of the echoed thought because, apart from having the context, they know Jane's desire to marry Mr. Bingley. Hence, the readers understand Elisabeth's purpose for employing irony and will unconsciously identify the flaunting of Grice's maxim. When they encounter Jane's response, they will corroborate that Elisabeth's echoed thought is ironic since Jane also understands the intended meaning of the comment. In this passage, Austen criticizes the harm that the rigidness of social classes and the pressure of searching for marriage can provoke. With her pretentiousness and arrogance, Caroline tries to sabotage Jane's happiness and Elisabeth's future with Darcy.

2.2.3. Example 3: I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long.

This passage belongs to chapter nineteen of *Pride and Prejudice*. After having asked to have a private meeting with Elisabeth, Mr. Collins explains to Elisabeth his motivations for marrying her. It becomes clear that he wants to marry for the pressures of not being married.

However, Elisabeth is aware that if she marries him, she will become a mere object in the relationship.

“I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long.”

“Upon my word, *sir*,” cried Elizabeth, “your hope is a *rather* extraordinary one after my declaration. (Austen 76, my italics).

From the context, the reader knows Elizabeth will reject him not only because of his pride but also because she is in love with Mr. Darcy. Because of Elizabeth’s response and the context, the reader is led into a resistant interpretation of the text. Elisabeth does not flaunt the Quality maxim since she recognizes being surprised by his instance. As Wilson and Sperber have suggested, the speaker communicates her attitude towards the criticized person. The irony, therefore, relies on Elisabeth using politeness markers to parody Mr. Collins’s impoliteness. Through this situation, Austen points out the limited options for women to marry, not based on love but on social rank and money. Austen criticizes marriage for being the only way for women to obtain wealth and social status. Although Elizabeth married for love, most women in the 19th century, such as Charlotte, were forced to marry for financial security.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

Along this dissertation, I have shown that reader-response theory works competently with feminist theory, although these two types of criticism are rarely intertwined. Moreover, reader-response criticism is known for giving more precedence to the reader than the author in creating meaning. Nonetheless, I believe that Austen and her readers are equally important and have a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, because of Austen’s irony and hints, the readers are able to interpret and understand the purpose of *Pride and Prejudice*, that being, criticizing 19th-century gender inequality. On the other hand, thanks to the readers, Austen has been able

to share her proto-feminist ideas with the world, becoming one of the most influential British novelists of all time.

A close analysis of both primary and secondary sources has enabled me to confirm my thesis and assert that compliant and resistant readings are necessary and complementary in *Pride and Prejudice*. Nonetheless, I have realized that both types of readings are carried out depending on if they violate or not Grice's maxim of Quality, apart from the novel's context and the speaker who echoes the thought. Moreover, I have acknowledged that Austen was not forced to hide her proto-feminist ideology through irony in her novels because of the patriarchal society she lived in. Other women writers, such as Wollstonecraft, openly portrayed their ideology in their writing. Nevertheless, Austen chose not to as a way of encouraging the reader to develop their critical thinking capacities. Finally, although Austen's Author relies heavily on Elizabeth Bennet and her perspective to portray her point of view, I have shown that she also uses the narrator to back up Elizabeth's ironic comments and criticize characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their undesirable personalities. Finally, it has been confirmed that Austen includes several ideologies in the text to give the reader a more comprehensive view of the era's situation. Nonetheless, it can be noticed that the protagonist and narrator have the function of criticizing through irony the retrograde and patriarchal beliefs uttered by characters such as Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins.

Further Research

In this TFG, I have introduced the concept of irony and concentrated only on verbal irony. Nonetheless, Austen uses other types of irony in her novels, such as dramatic or situational irony, which would be worth researching since these types of irony also help guide the reader towards the correct interpretation of the text. This broadening of the research would offer a different view from that on verbal irony and add a broader understanding of Austen's

use of irony. Moreover, it would be interesting to see how compliant and resistant readings are carried out in her other novels. Since Austen's novels were based on social behaviour and manners in the 19th century, it would be curious to see if her irony would be depicted in the same way as in *Pride and Prejudice* and the reader's consequent interpretation of it.

On a different note, I believe that helpful research could emerge from using reader-response theory and feminist criticism together, not only on Jane Austen but on women's writing in a broad sense, especially in the 19th century, when women began to be more outspoken about the era's inequalities. In addition, I hope that this paper sheds light on the trust Austen put on her readers to interpret the hidden messages in her novels. Although many influential scholars have researched Austen and her novels, most focus on the proto-feminism in her texts, the analysis of the characters, or those who influenced her thinking. Nonetheless, other aspects are worth studying, such as the different ideologies in the text and how these coexist with each other, the most silenced characters in her novels, and other narrative strategies not mentioned in this research, such as the epistolary technique.

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