THE CONCEPT OF IRONY IN JANE AUSTEN, WITH CONSTANT REFERENCE TO VIRGINIA WOOLF

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Thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (English Studies)

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5 August 2010
Signed Statement

This dissertation represents my own work and due acknowledgement is given whenever information is derived from other sources. No part of this dissertation has been or is being concurrently submitted for any other qualification at any other university.

Signed:……………………..
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude first and foremost to my supervisor, Dr. Jane Nardin. Her support and patience with respect to my neurotic temperament has been invaluable, and her feedback always constructive without being judgmental. I would like to thank also Dr. Susan Ang for prompting me to switch my major from life sciences to literature when I was an undergrad: this is a debt I cannot repay. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the importance of my department to this project: several friends in this department have provided colloquial feedback and emotional support regarding my work.

I am also indebted to my best friends Bryan Koh and Julia Tay. Bryan has provided me with endless plates of delicious food throughout the writing of this whole thesis, as well as always having a sympathetic ear for my problems. Julia has listened to (irrelevant or even esoteric) rambling about both Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf, and encouraged me when the writing got rough. I would have never been able to complete this project without their help. I would also like to express my thanks to the following friends: Natalia Kutsepova, Juliet O'Keefe, Kwek Hiong Chin and Tan Yeong Yong.

Special thanks, as usual, go to my indulgent parents, who supported me throughout the many ups and downs of this project. I really do appreciate the loving concern: I can only hope that the work justifies all the sacrifices of time and money that the both of you have made. I also owe a debt to Radiohead, Bach and Glenn
Gould for getting me through many nights of frustration and calming me down when I panicked. Lastly I would like to thank God for having given me the strength to complete this.
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# Abbreviations

The various abbreviations constantly used in this thesis are listed below. Full details of the works can be found in the list of works cited. Anything not listed in this table can be easily located in the list of works cited without the help of a table.

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Abstract

Although irony has often been discussed in Austen’s fiction, the understanding of irony in Austen has been surprisingly simplistic, with many critics arguing that her irony is stable. Firstly, this can be attributed to the lack of Austen criticism that takes into account theoretical discussions about irony. Secondly, this view is due to a lack of consideration for Austen’s aesthetics or a misreading of Austen that sees her aesthetics as supporting diadactism. This thesis aims to revisit the notion of irony in Jane Austen by including insights that have been gleaned from the theorizing of irony. In the process, it hopes to provide a meta-critical explanation to the conflict in the Austen canon, which involves most critics either as reacting against or supporting what they think are her views.

In order to get a sense of Austen’s irony, I have compared her aesthetics to those of Woolf in addition to looking at texts on the concept of irony. I argue that both Austen’s and Woolf’s use of irony cannot be divorced from their concerns with realism, which for them consists not of fiction that attempts to replicate external reality through minute description but rather their treatment of fiction as if it were reality. I show that free indirect discourse is a crucial feature in generating irony in Woolf’s and Austen’s texts, arguing that irony in both authors takes the form of an infinite dialectic. Using the examples of these two authors, I also show that irony is a method of generating both intellectual and emotional engagement in their fiction. I
hope not only to revision Austen’s aesthetics but also provide an insight into how the
tonings of irony and realism operate in the texts of both authors.
Preface

The impulse behind this thesis was simple. I had decided to work on Jane Austen as I had always admired her writing. While looking through much of the criticism on Austen’s work, particularly the writing on her irony, I noticed that most critics tended to see it simplistically: not unlike sarcasm, it was viewed as a tool for insulting characters whom Austen did not like. Then again, more recent criticism on Austen’s narrative strategies, I felt, did recognise the ambivalent attitude towards the characters in many of Austen’s texts. Was irony really so simplistic? And if it wasn’t, how would it play a part in Austen’s aesthetics? These were questions that haunted me and required not only research into the notion of irony but also research into Austen’s aesthetics. It seemed only natural to link the insights into Austen’s narrative strategies with the concept of irony.

At the same time, I happened, upon re-reading of Austen’s texts, to be reminded how Virginia Woolf’s own texts operated. As I read more about Virginia Woolf, I realised that her own aesthetics, as well as her reading of Austen’s texts, might come in helpful when trying to gain a new perspective on Austen’s aesthetics. Despite this, I will have to admit that this choice is, to a certain extent, eccentric and dependent upon my own tastes in literature. Any comparative study, I think, is to a certain degree arbitrary, and this comparison is no exception, regardless of whatever similarities lie in the aesthetics and techniques of the two writers. However, an eccentric study may be a productive one: one only has to consider Bloom’s
“Clinamen” in *The Anxiety of Influence*, which reads *Paradise Lost* as an allegory for the writing of poetry. The anachronistic study that I am proposing thus assumes that the modernist aesthetics of Woolf can build a new critical understanding of irony that contributes to a new conceptualization of Austen’s aesthetics.
Introduction

There is a critical gap in the study of Austen’s aesthetics, and it is highlighted by the critical response to her irony. Many critical accounts of her irony understand her irony as stable, that is, reliant on the undercutting of characters’ perspectives through the narrator’s constant perspective. Given that Austen’s narrator is effaced (through the heavy use of free indirect discourse), any account of irony as reliant upon the stability of narratorial views seems insufficient. While there have been some interesting studies (the most famous of which is Marvin Mudrick’s) done that try to understand the complex nature of Austen’s irony, many of these are more exploratory than conclusive: we are only beginning to realise that our critical understanding of irony in Austen needs updating.

Perhaps the reason for this is the fact that the issues of irony seem outdated in our current critical climate. Discussions of Austen’s irony were most popular in the first half of the 20th century. As with most trends in criticism, the numerous Austen studies on irony soon generated a critical backlash. To many critics, the studies on irony seemed to be too focused on the structure of the novel, which resulted in the neglect of its historical context: the central flaw of New Criticism. It is no wonder, then, that A. Walton Litz’s 1975 article, “Recollecting Jane Austen”, shows a sense of weariness when he talks about the discussion of irony in Austen: “In their
emphasis on irony and dramatic structure, in their aggressively anti-historical bias, the ‘subversive’ critics and the more austere technicians of New Criticism found a common ground… Novels are best viewed as autonomous worlds…” (675). Litz is aggrieved that the focus on irony which was so common in New Criticism seems to ignore the historical context (RJA 676). However, ignoring the ahistorical aspect of texts would destroy the radicality of such studies on irony: the provocation that texts are ahistorical highlights the notion that the meaning of texts need not necessarily depend on their historical context.¹ In fact, ahistoricality is the only reason why we can read any text at all. Our relation to any written text is always (to varying degrees) anachronistic, since it is impossible to relate to it at the exact time of writing. We are always trying to understand the texts we have with the current critical tools we have in hand: this includes any context of history that we attempt to settle the text in.²

This hypothesis is interesting if we consider that there was a renewed appreciation for Austen’s work in the early 1900s, particularly by the Bloomsbury group (Cady and Watt 241). The provocation of this idea is that Austen’s work decontextualises itself--her style is best understood when read anachronistically as it is best suited to an age outside itself--in particular the early 1900s. Therefore, this study intends to compare her aesthetics to those of Virginia Woolf because the aesthetics of Woolf are concerned with the role of art, the artist and ways of knowing

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¹ Of course, there are other numerous objections to New Criticism, but it is not within the scope of this study to deal with those. For more information, see Mark Jancovich’s The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism.

² I need hardly mention, of course, that the notion of history and the perception of past events are subject to the forces of history as well. The context is always-already contextualised.
the world, the effectiveness of art in portraying reality, and the role of the reader. These are issues that (as I will show) Austen was very concerned with in her writing. Thus, a comparative study might provide insights into how irony in Austen relates to issues like epistemology and the role of art in one’s life. The modern critic has tools for understanding irony that many of the critics in New Criticism did not use: namely, a corpus of theoretical writings that attempt to explicate the phenomenon of irony. This study thus attempts to revive the discussion of Austen’s irony by using irony theory to compare her irony to that of Woolf’s, arguing in the process that Austen’s irony resembles that of this prominent modernist.

In order to argue this, it is necessary to give an overview of the treatment of irony in the critical canon as well as a brief discussion of the nature of irony. While it is certainly true that much of criticism is dependent upon the views of the critic writing it, I would like to suggest that history of strong and varied responses to Austen’s work might be an indication of how her use of irony encourages such contentious, or even mutually exclusive readings of her texts. The next section on irony will discuss some of the criticism that has been written on irony. Then, I will demonstrate how the current critical understanding of irony, when read together with Austen’s texts, leads to disagreements about the Austen canon. In the course of the discussion, it will become clear that the texts themselves require a more incisive understanding of irony that builds upon the insights of some 21st century criticism. Both sections will argue for a revisioning of these notions which take into account the complexity of Austen’s aesthetics, building towards the last section, which argues for
a comparison of Austen’s aesthetics with those of Woolf so as to facilitate the
construction of an aesthetic framework that adequately explains and takes into
account her views on irony and aesthetics. This study therefore intends to investigate
possible ways of conceptualizing Austen’s irony in order to construct a critical
framework that revisions the two features in relation to the complexity of Austen’s
art.

The ??? of Irony

It is extremely uncomfortable for a critic to be dealing with the phenomenon
(if one can call it that) of irony. On the one hand, so much has been written on the
subject that one feels obliged to collect as many accounts of irony as possible. On the
other hand, there is an awareness that the collection of such accounts is an implicit
admission that the concept is difficult to pin down. The most distressing thing about
these accounts of irony is that they all seem to make sense on an intuitive level even
as they disagree with one another. In short, one can say about irony what Freud says
about wit:

[The] criteria and attributes of wit mentioned by these authors… seems to us, at
first glance, so very pertinent and so easily demonstrable by examples that we
cannot succumb to the danger of underestimating the value of such ideas. But they
are only disjointed fragments… In the end, they contribute no more to the
knowledge of wit than a number of anecdotes teach us of the true characteristics of
a personality whose biography interests us (605).

One can clearly see the irony in all of this, which is part of the problem: the
proliferation of accounts shows that no one has managed to account fully for wit.

This in turn generates more accounts that attempt to account for wit: if one wants to
be technical and put it in psychoanalytic terms, then one can say that there is a constant lack at the heart of the concept which accounts of irony attempt to screen.

But let us look again at the first part of my sentence: “one can clearly see the irony in all of this.” I know this is a clearly ironic phenomenon, but when it comes to explaining why, things become a little difficult. Samuel Johnson’s attempt at explaining irony does not clarify matters very much: “A mode of speech of which the meaning is contrary to the words” (Johnson, cited in Enright 5). A much more modern dictionary, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, has a much longer definition of irony with about the same amount of success:

A figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt. An instance of this; an ironical utterance or expression, *fig.* A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things. In etymological sense: Dissimulation, pretence; esp. in reference to the dissimulation of ignorance practised by Socrates as a means of confuting an adversary. *spec.* in *Theatr.* (freq. as dramatic or tragic irony), the incongruity created when the (tragic) significance of a character's speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned; the literary device so used, orig. in Greek tragedy; also *transf.* (database online).

It is even more confusing to find a paragraph by Freud which attempts to differentiate wit from irony when his summation of the writings on wit parallels the critical corpus of writing on irony: “The essence of irony consists in imparting the very opposite of what one intended to express, but it precludes the anticipated

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3 This definition of irony is simplistic, and does not take into account the many different types of irony. At risk of categorising, Johnson is talking only of a particular type of verbal irony: he does not take into account situational irony or dramatic irony. Of course, such classifications only lead us into some trouble, as I will show later.
contradiction by indicating… that the speaker himself means to convey the opposite of what he says” (725). It seems, then, that Freud is in agreement with Johnson, but the definitions of irony from the two writers are narrower than the senses elaborated in the Oxford English Dictionary. Of course, this is merely the tip of the iceberg: we have not even begun to look at the thousands of books that specifically concentrate on explicating the concept.

Of course, several critics who write on irony are aware of the problem, but continue bravely soldiering on anyway. D.C. Muecke opens his book The Compass of Irony by saying:

Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could… Yet if, upon examination, irony becomes less nebulous, as it does, it remains exclusively Protean. Its forms and functions are so diverse as to seem scarcely amenable to a single definition… (TCI 3).

He goes on to note that “irony, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder and is not a quality inherent in any remark, event or situation” (TCI 12). Since this apparently is the case, Muecke’s solution would be to catalogue as many definitions of irony as possible. He operates on two assumptions: firstly, that irony would become less amorphous upon closer examination and that secondly, one would be able to catalogue the number of forms that this “Protean” phenomenon takes. Doing this, of course, is like trying to enumerate all the possible shapes that water can take by attempting to take into account any thing that could act as a container for it. In short, it strikes one as somewhat futile and ironic because (as earlier mentioned) Muecke is
simply proving that irony might be “nebulous” after all.4 Incredibly, Muecke generates a long list not only in this book but continues the task in another book, titled (ironically?) *Irony and the Ironic*.

Muecke is, of course, not alone. In his article, “Approximately Irony,” Jonathan Tittler decides that he has to do a similar accounting of irony (to account for it): “If irony is not to be crushed under the weight of its own protean polymorphism, it must be set forth systemically” (32). And just like Muecke, Tittler insists on carrying on despite the futility of his task: “[Even] if totalization is impossible (because irony is the essence of unachieved totalization), we are at present so far from threatening that limit, surely much can be gained from a rigorous failure” (32).

Similar conclusions have prompted critics like Wayne Booth, Linda Hutcheon and D.J. Enright to try to record all the different forms (or at least, most of the different forms) of irony that are currently in use.

If forming a list of the different types of irony is not the most feasible approach towards understanding the phenomenon, then what is? Many other critics attempt instead to find out what the essence of irony is, that is, to find out what characterizes all things called “ironic.” The most famous of these studies is Søren Kierkegaard’s seminal book titled *The Concept of Irony*, written in 1841. Kierkegaard does not generate an exhaustive list of the different kinds of ironies that might arise in

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4 See, this is the problem. One knows it is ironic, but talking about why it is so is difficult, if not impossible. The irony here might be deemed “situational” – if one wants to classify – the critic is in the position of Oedipus (but does that mean that situational irony is akin to dramatic irony? The problems begin).
different kinds of texts and/or situations in life. Instead, Kierkegaard clearly finds this sort of cataloguing distasteful. Such exhaustive lists of how irony can be defined are, in fact, why he thinks his study is important: “As philosophy cannot be indifferent to the subsequent history of this concept, so neither can it content itself with the history of its origin, though it be ever so complete and interesting a history as such. Philosophy requires something more…” (TCOI 48). Instead of listing the various kinds of ironies that might exist, Kierkegaard tries to find out what characterizes irony by examining Socrates, whom he calls is the very first ironist in the world (TCOI 47).

The difference between the approaches stems from the fact that critics like Muecke view irony mainly as a rhetorical device and not anything connected to a method of reading or world-view. Muecke refuses to accept the idea of irony as epistemology mainly because the thought that everything could be ironic seems like a possibility that makes art dull: “Moreover, the non-ironic is not necessarily alazonic; that is to say, there are occasions in life and art, let us hope, when irony is not called for. What then are these occasions from which we would hope to exclude irony, if only to preserve some variety in life and art?” (IATI 4-5). It seems that Muecke believes that viewing everything with the potential to be ironic simply means that one would ignore the huge variety that art presents us with. Because of this, he wants to reduce a philosophical view of irony to merely a way of viewing irony (in other words, he would like to see it as yet another number on his list). I think, however, that Muecke thinks this because he unwittingly (and ironically, for someone making a list
of ironies) presupposes that the concept of irony is reductive: for Muecke, it seems that the notion of irony as a method of reading would mean that all texts would end up being understood in the same way. Even if irony is a method of reading, this in no way makes all texts similar to one another. There is the fact that even ironic readings of the same text differ from one another because they pick up on different aspects of the texts. Lastly, irony would operate in different ways for different texts.

Oddly enough, Muecke’s fear that the complexity of “irony” will cause the term to “follow into limbo the concept of ‘sublimity’” is the one of the few things in his text that gives us a key to understanding what “irony” may be. At this point, I would like to compare the problem of defining irony with Jean François Lyotard’s explication of the sublime:

The sublime… takes place… when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept. We have the Idea of the world… but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it… Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible… They can be said to be unpresentable (43).

One can try to describe the sublime, but its power comes from the realm of the unpresentable. It strikes me that irony might operate in the very same way. This would explain why irony, like the sublime, has become an overdetermined term: both terms attempt to describe a powerful affect of textuality which cannot be described fully in language precisely because it is, to some extent, beyond cognition.

Note Kierkegaard’s wonderful description of how ironic discourse operates in Socrates:
There is an engraving that portrays the grave of Napoleon. Two large trees overshadow the grave. There is nothing to be seen in the picture, and the immediate spectator will see no more. Between these two trees, however, is an empty space, and *as the eye traces out its contours*, Napoleon himself suddenly appears out of the nothingness… There is not a single syllable to give any hint of another interpretation, just as there is not a single brush stroke to suggest Napoleon. Yet it is this *empty space, this nothingness*, that conceals what is most important (*TCOI* 56-57, emphasis mine).

The notion that irony is precisely this nothingness that veils ideas is crucial to our understanding. Muecke’s complaint that “getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering mist” (as quoted earlier in *The Compass of Irony*) tells us more about irony than any of his lists. It explains why irony seems to be “infinitely elastic,” in Kierkegaard’s words (*TCOI* 63). One of the potencies of irony, Kierkegaard notes, “lies in formulating a theory of knowledge which annihilates itself” (*TCOI* 98). Thus, the more one theorises about irony, the more likely this theorizing is to go wrong because irony, like mist, cannot be pinned down. It oscillates endlessly between the two poles of a dialectic. The oscillatory movement itself is irony. Hence, differentiating irony into types only worsens the problem because the many definitions of irony provide an endless number of “poles” between which irony can jump. This is why the many types of irony seem to blend into one another while retaining a common something that is recognizable as irony. As Kierkegaard says, irony “is a nothingness which consumes everything and a something which one can never catch hold of, which both is and is not… it also succumbs to itself, since it constantly goes beyond itself while remaining in itself” (*TCOI* 161).
According to Kierkegaard, then, irony is a standpoint of one never taking a stand. It involves the ability to distance one’s self from the phenomenon that one investigates in order to try and reduce the phenomenon to a completely abstract concept, thus voiding all emotional attachment that one has to earthly things:

What characterizes irony most perfectly is the abstract criterion whereby it levels everything, whereby it masters every excessive emotion, and hence does not set the pathos of enthusiasm against the fear of death (TCOI 115).

[Irony’s] relation to the Idea is negative, that is, the Idea is the limit of the dialectic. Constantly engaged in leading the phenomenon up to the Idea (the dialectical activity), the individual is thrust back, or rather, flees back into actuality. But actuality itself has no other validity than to be the constant occasion for wanting to go beyond actuality—except that this never occurs. Whereupon the individual draws these exertions (molimina) of subjectivity back into himself… Such is the standpoint of irony (TCOI 183)

That is, Kierkegaard analogizes the movement of irony to the dialectical movement in Hegel’s thought, except that irony has a negative end while Hegel’s dialectic has a positive end. While Hegel’s dialectic terminates in the Absolute, irony simply is a series of infinite negations, never reaching any stable position precisely because it undermines everything.

Because of this infinite negativity, Kierkegaard disapproved of irony, or at least irony as perceived as Socrates’ standpoint (which I have been elaborating on) and later as understood by the Romantics, Fichte and Friedrich Schlegel. He felt that irony confused the metaphysical actuality with the historical actuality because the metaphysical is atemporal: “Irony had sprung from the metaphysical problem concerning the relation of the Idea to actuality, but metaphysical actuality is beyond time, hence it was impossible for the actuality desired by irony to be given in time”
In other words, Kierkegaard notes that irony is always chasing after the idea, which is immutable and cannot be obtained, just like the reality outside Plato’s cave. However, since we live within time, any versions of the idea would be influenced by its historical (and cultural) context. Therefore, irony discards all positivity because “[it] knows that the phenomenon is not the essence” (Kierkegaard, TCOI 296).

Kierkegaard is therefore right in noting that irony is a moment that involves endless oscillations between the two poles of a dialectic: it is the moment in time when disjuncts between ideas are realised and performed (TCOI 295). Nevertheless, I am not sure that irony is empty or is nothingness simply because it is engaged in a futile chase after the idea. Rather, it seems that irony is an acute awareness of any sort of disjunction. If this is the case, and irony is the oscillating movement between these disjuncts, it does not necessarily mean that irony is necessarily directed towards a vanishing endpoint of the idea. The movement itself is not directed towards anything. Rather, it is a function of criticality: “the ironic orientation is essentially critical” (Kierkegaard, TCOI 293). Kierkegaard assumes that criticality must be directed towards obtaining the transcendental truth (as with Hegel), which is the reason why he does not approve of the infinity that the endless dialectic of irony represents.

This, however, is not necessarily true. Kierkegaard dislikes irony because he dislikes the cycle of endless negativity and desires that the individual, using irony, reach a positive conclusion:

Irony is like the negative way, not the truth but the way (TCOI 340).
Irony as a mastered moment exhibits itself in its truth precisely by the fact that it teaches us to actualise actuality… This cannot mean that it… [denies] there is, or at least there ought to be, in every human being a longing for a higher and more perfect. But this longing must not hollow out actuality; on the contrary, the content of life must become a true and meaningful moment in the higher actuality whose fullness the soul desires. Actuality in this way acquires its validity… (TCOI 340-341).

However, as Gary Handwerk notes, “it is actually Kierkegaard who remains locked into an individualist model of discourse… Irony must… be condemned because it falls short of attaining a fully unique and individual personality” (9). While Kierkegaard disapproves of irony because he sees its dialectic as futile, Handwerk argues through his reading of Schlegel that the constant movement between positions that constitutes irony “operates as an opening out to the other” (42). Because irony is a critical attitude, its constant undermining of its own position allows for new possibilities, ideas and concepts that are other than itself.

Schlegel pushes Socratic irony to its limits by proposing that the infinite negativity of Socratic irony is still bounded by one limit: the self. As Handwerk says, “this negating irony is an expression of the ironist’s realization that he, too, is caught up in the process of interpretation and can never attain a position outside itself or himself” (39). This realization, however, pushes the ironist to become open to possibilities outside of himself. Thus, irony is, for Schlegel, not only negative but

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5 Most studies, for example, Claire Colebrook’s *Irony*, view Romantic irony as something dependent on the transcendental ego. In this model, the dialectic of irony is united only in the artist’s imagination. There is, hence, a tendency to attribute a sort of omniscience to the artist: an infinite capability to create. Handwerk is aware of this, and works against this reading of the Romantic understanding of irony explicitly, as should be obvious from my explication of his writing.
positive, as to remain fixated on one unchanging Idea requires the ironic subject to reject anything concrete (where the concrete is other to the self fixated on the ideal):

“An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts. An idea is at once idea and fact” (33). Thus, it seems that Kierkegaard, perceptive as he was, did not give Schlegel full credit for his understanding of irony. This is understandable, as Kierkegaard, who was writing under Hegel’s shadow, was influenced by Hegel’s dislike of negativity. If one wants to consider irony in terms of ethics, then irony need not necessarily be entirely solipsistic. Somehow, Kierkegaard did not realize that if “[irony’s] actuality is sheer possibility,” then historical actuality (the “fact,” as Schlegel says) might merely be one of those possibilities (TCOI 296). Irony’s dialectic, therefore, does not move further and further away from actuality into the idea. Rather, its dialectic movement takes into account the possibility that any given actuality might be an idea, and vice versa.

It is perhaps notable that Schlegel, for all his perceptiveness, was recognized more for his literary contributions than philosophical ones (Allen, database online).

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6 Hegel might characterise irony as generating a “‘bad infinity,’ which names an accumulation without limits, one that adds on indefinitely to itself, but whose additions never alter the whole” (Levinson 67). For Hegel’s take on Socratic irony, see “Hegel’s Conception of Socrates” in The Concept of Irony (Kierkegaard, trans. Lee Capel, Indiana University Press, 241-256). It should be noted that Kierkegaard’s text is, itself an ironic work, and hence his support of Hegel was necessarily equivocal. While, like Hegel, he disapproved of the negativity in Socrates, he rebelled against Hegel (even then – this was his university thesis!) in insisting that Hegel misunderstood how Socrates treated the universal.
He was not merely a literary critic; he was, of course, a writer as well. I believe that this gives Schlegel a slight edge in his understanding of irony over Kierkegaard. If we examine where Kierkegaard went a little awry and where critics like Muecke went disastrously wrong, it stems from the problem that “irony is not a concept” (De Man, 163). As De Man further explains: “if irony were indeed a concept it should be possible to give a definition of irony” (164). While I have explicated, to the best of my ability, the philosophical workings of irony and hence, its dialectic structure and possibly its ethics, it is arguable that I have not, for better or worse, managed to define irony as a concept clearly. This is not necessarily disheartening, as I am in agreement with De Man that the reason why so many critics of irony fail to understand irony is precisely because they need to assert control over it: “There would be in irony something very threatening, against which interpreters of literature, who have a stake in the understandability of literature, would want to put themselves on their guard…” (167).

Irony necessarily threatens by very virtue of its operation institutional authority, which supports the notion that the critic has the necessary skills to understand a text “properly.” Irony could, of course, act to discredit a critic’s (or even a whole group of critics’s) particular reading of a text, which would be a nightmare for him: irony is responsible for the possibility that the critic could end up having his reading undermined. It is understandable, then, why critics like Muecke and Tittler

7 One could argue, so was Kierkegaard. But I think that the difference here is simply that Kierkegaard was writing fiction (if one can call Kierkegaard’s work that) for philosophy, and that Schlegel was writing philosophy for fiction.
would want to stabilize irony through making tons of lists. This furious list-making asserts their authority as critics: they can indeed, however tenaciously, grasp irony, and they will, somehow, against all odds, explicate it. It also explains, as De Man and Handwerk both say, why an astute critic like Wayne Booth would choose to ignore the Germanic tradition of looking at irony (De Man 167, Handwerk 7).

Similarly, Kierkegaard’s tight-lipped disapproval of the negativity of irony stems from a similar problem with authority in the realm of philosophy. In Derrida’s words, as concisely as possible:

[Up] to the event which I wish to mark out and define (structuralism), structure—or rather the structurality of structure… has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin… The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the story of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix… is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word… (SSP 352-353).

This emphasis on presence explains Kierkegaard’s devaluation of the negativity of irony: he determines Being as positive, hence irony, which he says is an incipient awareness of the self versus the other, is “the mere beginning of subjectivity” (Capel 35). Irony is thus useful because it sets the individual apart from the rest: this is, according to Kierkegaard, as positive as Socrates ever got. It seems that despite all his brilliance, Kierkegaard’s prejudice against absence and his emphasis on dialectical thought prevents him seeing the full implications of irony as possibility: the nothingness that constitutes irony can be construed as directly opposed to the ontological (and hence, philosophy as a discipline and Kierkegaard’s stake in the discipline as a philosopher). It is no wonder that Kierkegaard was so insistent upon
criticizing the negativity of Socrates and praising Goethe’s mastered irony. Unlike Socratic irony, mastered irony involves Goethe’s intent to impart messages to his readers as opposed to negating them. In Goethe, then, the dialectic would end by reaching a conclusion, thus ending the threat to the authority of philosophy.

This emphasis on presence veils the radicality of Kierkegaard’s text. Essentially, the bulk of Kierkegaard’s text implies that irony is paradox. Worryingly and annoyingly, it seems that one of the paradoxes of irony is that the dialectic and the paradoxical co-exist in it. Its flip-flopping between the two poles of dialectic implies that irony is the paradoxical relation between the two poles of dialectic. Irony unites the incompatible thesis and anti-thesis only by virtue of this relation between thesis and anti-thesis, which is necessarily temporal. Now Kierkegaard’s comment about irony being a moment gains a new resonance: in each ironic realization, one has to necessarily take a side of the dialectic to point out the incongruence realized in a text.\(^8\) The only way one can understand irony, therefore, is to speak of the conditions of possibility that create this border between the two poles of a dialectic; that is, to speak of irony itself.

Irony as border is a conceptual limit, the edge where two irreconcilable opposites meet. While much has been written on how irony operates, it seems that comparatively little has been written on the effect of irony. This strikes me (again) as ironic because the attack that irony launches against a monolithic world view/ a

\(^8\) This sounds rather abstract. For example, if one wants to read Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” as ironic, one has to take the stand that he either supports cannibalism or he does not. The only way one could say that he stands in the middle is to focus on the conditions that allow his text to be ironic.
system of power would first and foremost generate an emotional response: a sense of pain or helplessness. It is this that threatens critics and drives them to attempt to stabilize irony. However, their anxiety is usually only manifested in their texts in the introductory chapter (as in this first chapter…) as a recognition of how difficult it is to understand irony, and does not resurface in the rest of the text:

Despite the self-cautioning of both critics (Muecke and Booth), irony becomes dehumanized, not because their selections are inhuman, remote, or arcane, but because it emerges as a complicated game with strict rules… and a virtually infinite number of set techniques and procedures. This is the literary theorist’s métier, and we cannot say him nay… [We] too yearn for classification, for things in their proper place, we fear chaos…” (Enright 2).

Perhaps critics do not want to focus on their discomfort. As they speak of how irony works, they are safe within the realm of intellectual discourse, where the academic establishment (or philosophical/literary scene of their time) presupposes that they have the capacity to pin down the nebulous thing called “irony.” The critics retain a distance from irony, so that it becomes an object of investigation. A classic example of this happening is Jacques Lacan’s study of The Purloined Letter.9 Lacan puts himself in the position of Dupin by claiming the ability to explicate the movement of the letter in Poe’s text. Lacan states that after returning the letter to the Queen, Dupin is “in the spot marked by blindness,” where the Queen and the Minister formerly were (70). Dupin’s status as a genius who can uncover the truth behind mysteries is thus ironised by Lacan, who proposes thatDupin’s complacency about the stolen letter puts him in the minister’s position: he does not realize that it is the movement

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of the letter (the signifier) which determines a character’s position in the story. Unlike Lacan, he is unaware of “the symbolic chain which binds and orients [the characters]” (39). Here Lacan discredits Dupin’s idea of knowledge with his own idea of what knowledge is (hence creating the dialectic). However, since this dialectic is infinite, Lacan can be put into the Queen’s (and later the Minister’s and Dupin’s position). Derrida does this to Lacan through his essay *Le Facteur de la Verité*. Lacan’s position as omniscient psychoanalyst is ironised by Derrida’s essay, which claims that Lacan has completely ignored the narrator in his explication of Poe’s text: Lacan’s knowledge is therefore flawed as the Minister’s and Dupin’s were (429).

Generally, then, irony relies on the distance between the two poles of the dialectic: one ironises something by taking a position, observing another position from a distance and then criticizing that position to show that it is flawed/ wrong/ incomplete. This is perhaps what Kierkegaard was getting at by talking about Socrates as hovering above the world in a basket (*TCOI* 180). Socrates is distanced from the world so that he may examine it at his ease as literary critics have to distance themselves from irony to examine it. It seems to me, however, that this distance is a denial of the affective powers of irony. If the critics admit their emotional reaction to irony, then they risk becoming the object of irony: this personal stake in the concept of irony removes the distance that allows them to observe irony safely. Thus, as De Man notes, there are three main ways in which critics distance

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10 Of course before that there was the notion of investigation as proposed by the police-friend of the narrator and the notion of investigation as proposed by Dupin.
themselves from the subject of irony: firstly, to reduce irony to an aesthetic effect, secondly, to reduce irony to a dialectic of self (this thesis does this to a certain extent, as does De Man), and thirdly, to interpret and absorb irony within a dialectics of history, as Kierkegaard and Hegel do (De Man 169-170).

Linda Hutcheon’s book, *Ironic’s Edge*, however, actually devotes a chapter to the affect of irony. She believes that it is the affect of irony that characterizes it:

Unlike metaphor or metonymy, irony has an edge; unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy… irony is a “weighted” mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favour of the silent and unsaid… irony involves the attribution of an evaluative, even judgemental attitude, and this is where the emotive or affective dimension also enters – much to the dismay of most critical discourse and most critics… (37).

Hutcheon is astute in noting that the affective dimension of irony has not been much discussed. However, I do not think that it is fair of her to say that “[the] tendency in deconstructive criticism has been to take the edge off irony…” (37).11 As I have earlier noted, it seems that merely theorizing how irony works is taking its edge off. If irony did not have an edge, it is likely that none would even bother theorizing about it. In fact, it is possible that this discomfort with irony that causes us to want to observe it and theorize about it from a distance. Even Hutcheon’s noble attempt to talk about the affect of irony thus removes the edge from irony: any explication of irony necessarily removes its affect.

11 I am not sure that one could call Kierkegaard’s position “deconstructionist” (Hutcheon cites his study as one of the “deconstructionist” positions). It is, after all, a matter of terminology, as with so many things. Kierkegaard is commonly regarded as a proto-existentialist. Then there was what is now commonly known as the “structuralist controversy” in October 1966, at Johns Hopkins University, which many tend to see as the “invasion” of European structuralist/post-structuralist theory into American universities (theorists present then are familiar names to us: Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, among others).
What, then, generates the affect of irony? Hutcheon aligns her study against the New Critical use of the word “irony” because she believes that it “ignores the critical edge that irony’s ‘active cognition of disparity and incongruity has long been argued to produce” (38). She believes that the emotional affect of irony can be traced to an attitude which involves evaluation, which usually involves interpreting the intention of the ironist (37). She thus views her stance as incompatible with New Criticism’s sense of irony as well as deconstructive criticism’s sense of irony, which Hutcheon sees as “[setting] up an egalitarian, indeed, democratizing tension between emotions and even meanings” (38). This is a confusing and confused attitude. Although it might very well be true that the affect of irony involves an evaluation of some sort, tension between competing meanings or emotions does not mean that there is no evaluation going on: this explains why dilemmas are such painful things to deal with.

While it is true that irony (as exemplified by Kierkegaard’s example of Socrates in a hovering basket) might involve viewing one’s self as an object to be examined, thus dampening the pathos of a particular situation, it is also true that this ironic distance might very well be part of the emotional edge that Hutcheon is talking about. The “mastering of every excessive emotion” (quoted a few pages ago) that Kierkegaard has mentioned comes at the price of even more emotion. Oddly enough, Kierkegaard does not mention this in his book on irony but rather in his journals. The reason eludes one--just as irony does--so there is little point speculating why this is the case. What is certain is that Kierkegaard did feel the emotional effect of irony:
Irony is an abnormal growth; like the abnormally enlarged liver of the Strassburg goose it ends by killing the individual (Journals 55).

An individuality full of longings, hopes, wishes can never be ironical. Irony… lies in the very reverse, in having one’s pain just where others have their longings. Not to be able to possess the beloved is not irony. But to be able to possess her all too easily, so that she herself begs and prays to belong to one, and then not to be able to get to her: that is irony… Irony is a kind of hypersthenia, which may, as everyone knows, prove fatal (Journals 229-230).

Kierkegaard is feeling the pain of a dilemma: he can have the girl, but not the way he wants to have her, making it (by his definition) not being able to have her at all.  
There is an absolute feeling of helplessness: this is compounded by the fact that the ironic distance which allows him to understand the dilemma does not help to solve the dilemma at all; it only serves to make his own situation look more ridiculous. In fact, the feeling of pain can only be made possible if Kierkegaard is simultaneously within and without the ironic situation. The pain occurs precisely because he is emotionally attached to the girl. The pain of irony can only operate if this emotional attachment is present: it is caused by the paradox of being emotionally attached while critically detached from the situation.

It seems, then, that there is a characteristically ironic dialectic in the theorizing of irony itself. One can oscillate between completely intellectualizing it, which would result in a sort of pain related to abjection, or end up trying to decipher its affect, in which case one would end up intellectualizing it.  

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12 He is, of course, referring to his relationship with Regine Olsen. For more on this see Kierkegaard: A Biography by Alastair Hannay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
13 It is not so wise, perhaps, to quote one’s self, much less one’s honours thesis, but in this case it seems appropriate, if not inevitable: “Kristeva notes that the abject, that which is always threatening
begins at, it seems that the result is the same: the would-be theorist ends up being 
bounced from one end to the other in the endless dialectic of irony. The comparison 
to the sublime, in fact, is not unapt. We have a very good idea of what it is, but we are 
unable to really present it nonetheless. This is partly due to the fact that irony, like 
Lyotard’s sublime or Derrida’s différance, is an effect of language’s ability to hint at 
that which is beyond itself but not represent it. Trying to use language to describe it, 
therefore, is a little like trying to see the back of one’s head.

Irony, like the sublime or différance, is best understood when its effects are 
felt. Thus it is impossible to talk about irony or have any sort of understanding of 
irony unless one gets that distinctive emotional edge. It is striking that these accounts 
of irony do not imply that the irony can be liberating despite the pain it occasions. 
The endless dialectic of irony also implies that the meaning of the text is not fixed: 
we become aware of our own ideological biases in our reading of texts as we realize 
the various other possibilities of meaning that the text could have. This liberating 
effect of irony is ignored, I believe, because the theorizing of irony in the abstract 
requires a pinning-down of meaning: this being the case, the positive side of meaning 
being unstable in a text is ignored. It seems, therefore, that the most appropriate way 
to understand irony is to deal with texts that are generally considered ironic. Hence, 
in my next section, I attempt to apply the little that I have said about irony in order to

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this imaginary border we have drawn round the self, appears to us as ‘radically separate, loathsome’ (Kristeva, AA 230, italics mine). The loathing that we experience is thus an emotional reaction towards the breakdown of the self/other boundary, and helps us to maintain our sense of self by making us reject the threatening material. ’ (Yang 9). Thus abjection is the process whereby we attempt to assert control over our emotions, necessary for our conception of ourselves as individual subjects.
understand how the phenomenon of irony has influenced the criticism on Jane Austen.

Irony in Austen

If one considers the extremes of Austen’s criticism, it is clear that there is something akin to an infinite dialectic going on in the canon. The two poles of the dialectic have been documented by Eve Sedgwick in her famous essay, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl”:

Austen criticism is notable mostly, not just for its timidity and banality, but for its unresting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson—for the vengefulness it vents on the heroines whom it purports to love, and whom, perhaps, it does... Even readings of Austen that are not so frankly repressive have tended to be structured by what Foucault calls ‘the repressive hypothesis’—especially so, indeed, to the degree that their project is avowedly antirepressive. And these antirepressive readings have their own way of re-creating the spectacle of the girl being taught a lesson. Call her, in this case, ‘Jane Austen.’ (450-451)

It seems highly plausible that such strong reactions are due to the use of irony in Austen’s work. Critics seem to take a stand either for or against Austen’s treatment of her heroines: criticism oscillates between these two poles in a movement which can only be characterized as ironic. This would explain the reactions of many critics who see Austen as either moral or morally repugnant. This is most evident from the criticism on *Mansfield Park*, which is one of the novels that this study will be focusing on. On the one hand, there are critics like Duffy, who feel that “*Mansfield Park* is Jane Austen’s most overtly didactic novel... the novel is one of the last works of conservative eighteenth-century social criticism...” (57-59). On the other hand, there are critics like Kingsley Amis, who believe the exact opposite: “Although
[Mansfield Park] never holds up the admirable as vicious, it continually and essentially holds up the vicious as admirable, an invasion rendered all the more insidious by being associated with such dash and skill, and all the more repugnant by the co-presence of a moralistic fervour which verges at times on the evangelical” (75).

However, studies on Austen’s irony have not understood irony as the creation of dialectical movements in Austen’s texts. Rather, critical perception of Austen’s irony has tended to see it as a tool for diadactism. Perhaps the pioneering study done on Austen’s aesthetics by Mary Lascelles in 1939, Jane Austen and Her Art, is an indication of the general attitude to the issue of irony in Austen’s works. In her book, Lascelles attempts to address the question of how the issue of irony fits into Austen’s aesthetics:

[Austen’s] choice of comedy is a less simple affair. What does she do with the world she knows in order to make of it a fit substance to compose the world of comedy?… Before looking into this problem it may be worthwhile to notice the ironical tone of her references to anything with which she does not mean to be concerned. (129).

Lascelles believes that Austen’s irony is used as a tool to direct the reader towards the issues that Austen was interested in. The disjunct between reader awareness and the awareness of characters serves to show the reader whether the character’s concerns are frivolous or they should be taken seriously. This view also naturally privileges the narrator’s views over the views of the characters.

This understanding of Austen’s irony has not undergone very much change. Studies as recent as William Duckworth’s 2003 essay, “Reading Emma: Comic Irony,
the Follies of Janeites, and Hermeneutic Mastery”, share this view of Austen’s irony. He notes that the “[responses] of readers to Austen’s ironic presentation of Mr. Woodhouse reveal how the intended reader laughs at Austen’s jests, while some critical misreaders of those ironies encounter a major barrier to appreciation of her comic characterizations” (database online). This implies, of course, that Austen expected her audience to have a grasp of irony, to be able to understand and enjoy “the incongruity created when the… significance of a character's speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned” (OED, database online).14 Duckworth’s essay suggests that the incongruity between the character’s knowledge of his self and the reader’s knowledge of the character arises from extra information provided by the narrator which the character has no access to:

Early in the novel the narrator observes that Mr. Woodhouse ‘was no longer teased by being wished joy of so sorrowful an event’ as Miss Taylor’s wedding (19). The intended reader, noting the criticism of Mr. Woodhouse, recognizes it to be ironic because the narrator’s commentary has shown the wedding to be a happy event, and seeks an alternative meaning (database online).

Michel Beth Dinkler explicates a similar view of Austen’s irony in her 2004 paper: “Ironic is a form of balanced speech and silence; the reader understands a deeper meaning behind language that a character does not grasp… Austen privileges her reader through irony, creating a richer and deeper reading experience” (database online). However, the assumption that the narrator’s information tells the reader how to perceive the characters implies that the narrator’s authority is far greater than that

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14 The irony here is dramatic, and it is linked to what is known as “stable irony”, as defined by Wayne Booth. It is a view of irony that presumes there is always a perspective that is reliable and which undercuts all other perspectives.
of other characters in the novel. The narrator is perceived to be the reliable source of information that the reader can trust, the sole character whose views and comments should be taken without irony.

The few studies which recognise the datedness of viewing Austen’s irony as being defined by a contrast between narratorial reliability and character unreliability face the problem of trying to place what function it has in its works, and how it ties into her aesthetics. As Eugene Goodheart notes of *Emma*: “Whatever irony is directed against the consequences of Emma’s fancy, is not an annihilating irony… [Emma’s aloofness makes] her the object of Jane Austen’s affection… Emma is the sometimes ruthless embodiment of Austen’s own imagination of what it means to be alive and endure in her own world” (602). Goodheart’s article aims to make sense of Austen’s treatment of Emma, and instead runs into a whole host of uncertainties and questions. At the end of his article he concludes:

> Without certainty I am inclined to see Emma as irredeemable as her autonomy—like her creator obsessed with the idea of marriage but not made for it. Could it be that there is a connection between celibacy and individual autonomy—in Emma’s case the freedom not only to live an independent life but to shape the lives of others, and in Austen’s case, to stand in imagination apart from the world she inhabits so that she can view it with irony—that is to say, resist its importunities to submit uncritically to its ways? I leave it to the reader to decide whether this is a rhetorical question or one that requires an answer (604).

More striking, perhaps, is Frances Ferguson’s study, which is highly insightful in terms of understanding Austen’s narrative strategies, but shows how an outmoded understanding of irony in Austen could render discussions of irony irrelevant. Ferguson claims that “the kinds of questions that Austen criticism once
registered in terms of irony or the unreliability of the narrator disappear from [Finch and Bowen’s] account, and rightly so, since it is difficult to speak of either irony or unreliability that cannot locate itself against an endorsed or at least a stated or reliable position” (162). This is predicated upon the assumption that a lot of Austen criticism makes: that irony in Austen is dependent upon the contrast between the narrator’s reliable opinions and the unreliable opinions of the characters. However, despite her dismissal of any discussion of irony, she actually later describes what can be called the ironising of character views without seeing it as having anything to do with irony:

When Emma and Knightley disagree about the wisdom of Emma's having strongly suggested to Harriet that she should reject Robert's proposal, it is Knightley rather than Emma who is described, by that composite voice that both is and is not Emma's alone, as “absolutely satisfied with” himself and “so entirely convinced that [his] opinions were right and [his] adversary's wrong.” Neither in his case nor in hers is it a fault to think that the opinions one holds are the right ones, because that is what it means to hold an opinion (171).

Here the narrator’s view blends into Knightley’s, but that does not stop irony from operating. What Ferguson is saying, in essence, that neither Knightley nor Emma seems to be fully supported by the text: the text infinitely oscillates between supporting Knightley and supporting Emma. More than this, she is implying that the narrator’s view gets ironised precisely because of its alignment with the voices of the characters. This removes any authority that the narrator’s voice has because the narrator’s voice is shown only to be as reliable as any other characters. The narratorial voice therefore, in stating its views, contributes to the dialectic that irony represents.
One only has to consider the implications of the mistake that Wayne Booth’s graduate student makes in order to examine how irony generates a dialectic in Austen:

Noticing something askew in one of his flights describing what Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet “stand for”, I asked him to say quite literally what kind of man he took Mr. Bennet to be. “Well, for one thing, he’s really quite stupid, in spite of his claims to cleverness, because he says toward the end that Wickham is his favourite son-in-law” (ROI 1).

Booth is incredulous that the “very sophisticated graduate student” managed to “miss Mr. Bennet’s ironic joke when [the student] was in fact working hard to find evidence that the author was always ironic” (ROI 1). He self-reflexively states that his reading of the student as wrong stems from a belief that he knows what Austen meant to say, and he asks himself how exactly he comes to this conclusion. He posits that Austen’s irony can be conceptualized as “a specific kind of literary fixity, a ‘stable irony’ that… [presents] us with a limited set of reading tasks” (ROI 3). He does admit that to conclusively disagree with the student, he has to assume the author (in this case, Austen) has a certain set of beliefs (ROI 11). If we insist upon understanding irony in this manner, then of course the dismissal of the notion of irony in studies like Ferguson’s (which recognize that Austen’s use of free indirect discourse makes it difficult to locate the narratorial voice and its views) makes sense.

Given Elizabeth’s views of her father, however, we realize that the irony might actually be at the expense of Mr. Bennet: Wickham is probably the son-in-law that will provide him with the most amusement. The novel does give us good cause to dislike Mr. Bennet and believe that he is “quite stupid despite his cleverness” as
Elizabeth’s view of him ironises his ironic stance. That is, through Elizabeth Bennet, it is suggested that Mr. Bennet’s attitude is unhealthy because the objectification of his supposedly inferior family members for his own amusement leads to him shirking responsibility for their behaviour. Then again, the “quickness” that Mr. Bennet (and the narrator) promote as attractive in Elizabeth can be responsible for Elizabeth’s possible unhappiness too, as the example of Lydia shows. As Handwerk says, “Booth’s normative irony… falls short of Kierkegaard’s recognition that irony, once engaged, tends to become infinite” (7). The equivocal treatment of each character’s values in Austen’s text therefore cannot be accounted for by a conception of normative or stable irony.

It seems that the current critical understanding of irony in Austen’s work does not only ignore the dialectics at work in her texts, but also ignores the emotive aspect of it. Thus, while discussions on irony are very emotional, they hardly reflect upon the possibility that the very object of the discussion (irony) is involved in generating the heated discussion. This study therefore proposes to understand Austen’s irony as dialectical: her texts continually shift between supporting either pole of a dialectic. It also argues that the blending of the narratorial voice with that of the characters makes it difficult for the reader to maintain an ironic distance from either the characters or the narrator. Irony in Austen is thus much more than an intellectual phenomenon: it serves to place the reader in the emotional position of the characters.

This use of irony places Austen in an anachronistic relation to writers of her own time. Austen’s irony, which takes the form of an infinite dialectic, bring to mind
modernist works. These narratives refuse authorial omniscience, and hence leave the reader always in “the position of the questing knower [who] must make sense of the text [by] drawing perhaps on personal experience, or perhaps on dissenting histories of the textual time periods” (Lilienfield 45). In this thesis, therefore, I will examine Austen’s irony by comparing her works to those of Virginia Woolf. I shall argue that the use of irony in Austen resembles that of Woolf in that free indirect discourse together with the use of third person narrative aligns reader consciousness with the protagonist. This makes it difficult for the reader to maintain an ironic distance between the characters and him/herself. The reader is thus emotionally affected by any irony directed against the protagonist by the third person narrator and vice versa. This can be seen as an enactment of the infinite dialectic of irony that was referred to in the previous section. This will not only provide a conceptual framework whereby Austen’s irony can be understood, but also explains the conflicted reactions to Austen’s texts.

In order to argue this, my next chapter will focus on Woolf’s aesthetics, showing that Woolf’s vision of realism was tied in to her hatred of diadactism. I will demonstrate that Woolf’s realism is linked to her hatred of diadactism because, for Woolf, a realistic text meant that the reader had to respond to the characters as if they were real people, with no trustworthy authorial guide telling them how to feel and think. Focusing on her reading of Austen, I will show how Woolf read Austen’s aesthetics as being similar to her own. Through a reading of Night and Day and To The Lighthouse, I will then show how irony in each text, which relies on the
reduction of distance between the reader and the text through free indirect discourse, takes the form of an infinite dialectic. The dialectic in the text ensures that no view is supported strongly by the text: the reader’s eventual reading of the text would depend on his/her own biases as his consciousness is pulled into the consciousness of different characters, giving the perspective of each character equal play.

In my last chapter, I will attempt to cast a new light on Austen’s aesthetics by showing the similarity in her views on writing and reading to Woolf’s. I will argue that like Woolf, Austen eschewed diadactism and felt that her characters should be treated like real people. In order to obtain these effects, free indirect discourse is also used to reduce reader distance from the text. However, in Austen, free indirect discourse is used mainly as a way to enter the consciousness of the protagonist. The blending of the protagonist’s voice with the narrator’s, together with evidence in the text that contradicts the views of either or both, ironise and destabilise the views of these two characters. Because of our identification with the protagonist and the narrator, we are ironised along with the narrator and protagonist. However, the ironised views are not completely disowned either. Thus, as in Woolf, we are left to support (or reject) these views depending on our own biases. I will demonstrate this using *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*. In addition to this, I also flesh out any interesting theoretical implications (if one can call the implications for such an argument “theoretical”) for irony and Austen’s aesthetics.
Woolf’s aesthetics: Art, the Artist, and Reality

“Irony” is not the first word that comes to mind when one thinks of Virginia Woolf. As Hermione Lee says in her discussion of Woolf’s essays, “Woolf was under discussion mainly as a modernist, with the emphasis falling on the 1919-1927 period, [sic] her manifestos on fiction, such as ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’, or ‘The Narrow Bridge of Art’, were used to elucidate what she was doing in her own novels” (VWE 94). This being the case, there has been much emphasis on Woolf’s lyrical style and epistemology.

Undoubtedly, this has much to do with her association with the Bloomsbury group and the critical understanding of her as a “modernist”. Woolf sits in her throne as some sort of visionary modernist queen, looking at the “luminous halo” of life “surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf, MF 160). It seems to me, however, that William Plomer is quite right in pointing out that Woolf “could be detached and see things in perspective; and she could enter into things, into other people’s lives, until she became a part of them” (112). Plomer is pointing out that Woolf’s ability to empathise with others is balanced by her ability to judge others from a critical distance. It seems that irony is the perfect tool to balance out Woolf’s critical orientation with her ability to empathise with others because it requires (paradoxically) emotional attachment operating together with emotional detachment. If the orientation of irony is essentially critical, as Kierkegaard has noted, then it is
likely that irony as a device is crucial to Woolf, because it facilitates the process of judging a text for a reader.

If, however, Woolf was an ironist, how exactly did this tie into her aesthetics? Moreover, how would an understanding of irony in Woolf contribute to an understanding of Austen’s irony? In this chapter, I attempt to answer both questions by investigating the place of irony in Woolf’s aesthetics as well as the relevance of Austen to her writing. Firstly, I will discuss Woolf’s hatred of diadactism in relation to her preoccupation with realism. I will argue that Woolf feels that diadactism is a feature of bad writing because it subordinates the presentation of life in the novel to a moral message, thus preventing the artist from objectively describing life. Next, I will briefly touch on Woolf’s reader-response criticism, showing that she believes the reader should react to the novel as s/he would react to a lived experience. This involved not just an intensely personal and emotive response from the reader but also critical judgment on the reader’s part. Aside from the responsibility of the reader to read with both feeling and intellect, Woolf’s beliefs resulted in her placing a strong emphasis on style as she believes that a good stylist could both capture reality and nudge the reader towards both an emotive and critical response. She is therefore paradoxically concerned with the aesthetics of texts even as she insists that writing should be treated as though it were reality. Lastly, I focus on Woolf’s critical writings on Austen to flesh out the importance of irony as infinite dialectic (as defined in the

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15 I do not think that writing can ever be completely objective, but Woolf seems to have believed this. I elaborate on this further in the thesis and in my other footnotes.
first chapter) to allowing texts to generate emotive responses that lead to critical ones. Lastly, I will focus on *Night and Day* and *To The Lighthouse* in order to elucidate how this notion of irony works in Woolf’s texts.

The place of irony in Woolf’s aesthetics can be understood better if we consider her hatred of diadactism. So much emphasis has been placed on Woolf’s essays on her own aesthetics that little attention has been paid to her hatred of diadactism. If, however, we focus on Woolf’s essays on other authors, especially her early essays, we find that she despised books that seemed to be preaching to her. As early as 1906, she was already reacting against didacticism. Of R.J. Farrer’s book, *The House of Shadows*, she writes:

> The drawback of the concentration which is the result of the scheme of the book is naturally that the characters are always seen under some kind of distortion, and that at intervals the idea behind comes too prominently and crudely to the foreground. The author harangues us on occasion as though he were speaking from the pulpit (*THOS* 94).

Woolf clearly resents this imposition upon the reader’s freedom to judge the characters in the novel. She believes that the artist’s duty is to portray life, to present this “varying,” “unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” with as little bias as possible (*MF* 160). Didacticism does not only attempt to fix the reader’s opinion, but also hinders the presentation of reality in art:

> So much of natural human nature, so many lights and shades, so much truth, in short, must be sacrificed altogether if you insist upon your crucifix and your crucified… [in] the end, it must be said regretfully, we feel small love for the injured woman, in spite of her sins, and her rescuer is little more than a tract which has been put somewhat crudely into a human case (Woolf, *MGC* 112).
Hence, Woolf praises *The Memoirs of Lady Ann Fanshawe* precisely because the writer narrates “without comment, almost without arrangement” (*LFM* 146). Thus Lady Fanshawe can “make statements plainly which some writers would in some way distort; and the reader has the pleasure of filling in the picture with fresh colours” (Woolf, *LFM* 146). Two things, then, can be deduced about Woolf’s aesthetics from her dislike of diadactism in literature. Firstly, as already mentioned, she believes that diadactism creates bad art because it distorts objective reality. In didactic works, we are forced to view reality through the lens of social convention and sometimes the personality of the author as well; thus we cannot access reality *per se*.¹⁶ Thus one of Woolf’s constant worries is whether she manages to present reality without the bias of her personality creeping in:

Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself? (*AWD* 56)

… I think writing must be formal. The art must be respected. This struck me reading some of my notes here, for if one lets the mind run loose it becomes egoistic; personal (*AWD* 67).

To Woolf, diadactism makes the fiction unrealistic: the nuances that make up reality are done away so that the writer can push his/her point across. Moreover, the all-too-personal views of the writer make it clear that this is merely a story constructed to get

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¹⁶ This is untrue, of course. No piece of writing ever entirely escapes the biases of its creator. However Woolf seems to believe, like T.S. Eliot, that art should be impersonal. For Woolf’s relation to T.S. Eliot’s aesthetics, see Mark Goldman’s “Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader” in *PMLA*. Goldman highlights many of the similarities in the aesthetics between the two writers. Another point of view with respect to Woolf’s aesthetics and many of her male modernist contemporaries is Megan Quigley’s “Modern Novels and Vagueness” in *Modernism/modernity*. Quigley stresses the differences as opposed to the similarities between Eliot and Woolf with reference to other modernist writers like Joyce and Henry James.
across a particular idea about life, thus emptying his portrayal of reality of its authenticity. She wants fiction to have “nothing that need not be there” (Woolf, Gaskell 341).

Woolf not only believed that art should present life, but also felt that one should react to literature in the same way that one reacts to life. This can be seen from the many essays she wrote on the experience of reading. Woolf had such strong faith that the novel could present the essence of life that she believed one’s reaction to reading should parallel one’s experience of living. She writes:

[It] is inevitable that the reader who is invited to live in novels as in life should go on feeling as he feels in life. Novel and life are laid side by side. We want happiness for the character we like, punishment for those we dislike. We have secret sympathies for those who seem to resemble us. (POF 81)

This view made Woolf quite scornful about the whole practice of what we now know as “literary criticism” because she believed that it took the feelings and individuality out of the experience of reading. She saw it as a formal, intellectual endeavour which required esoteric knowledge and training:

…[Now] there is a uniformity and a drill and a discretion unknown before [in the experience of reading], what do you think can be the reason?… In one word… education… [students] take service under their teachers instead of riding into battle alone… Such methods, of course, produce an erudite and eugenic offspring. But, one asks, turning over the honest, the admirable, the entirely sensible and unsentimental pages, where is love? Meaning… where is music, imagery, and a voice speaking from the heart? (AAB 222-223).

From this passage it can be deduced that Woolf viewed “literary criticism” as threatening the authenticity of the reading experience. The student of literature, she
felt, began reacting to books as objects to be analyzed. The student judged literature as literature, and did not relate to literature as s/he did to life. This impersonal relationship took away both the conceptual and experiential value of literature: “[Is] is not because the fallible human being is absent in most books of criticism that we learn so little from them?” (WP 117).

How, then, did Woolf think that novels should be approached? Certainly, an emotive and personal response was encouraged: “[There] are many schools of criticism… if we follow them all we shall only become confused. Better perhaps to read for one’s self, expose the mind bare to the poem, and transcribe in all its haste and imperfection whatever may be the result of the impact” (Woolf, Rossetti 212). Despite her endorsement of emotive reading, however, Woolf also believed that one should critically judge books by taking into account the relation of their form to content:

[Reading]… does not merely consist in sympathizing and understanding. It consists, too, in criticizing and judging…it does not help us greatly to read the views of another mind … it is after one has made up one’s own opinion that the opinions of others are the most illuminating… [By] asking questions and answering them, we find that we have decided that the book we have just read is this kind or that, has this degree of merit or that, takes its station at this point or that in the literature as a whole (LOR 272).

Any judgments of novels, whether stylistic or moral, had to be individual and hence (in Woolf’s view) original; she hated the parroting of popular opinion. This is quite in line with her view that one should react to novels as to life. After all, accounts of

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17 This is another instance of Woolf reacting against Eliot’s view of criticism. See footnote 1. Her view of criticism was much in line with the views of New Criticism; of course in fact one cannot read a book completely objectively or unemotionally.
people who have known her suggest that she was insatiably curious, ironic and emotive about life.

Woolf’s belief that art should present life and that one should react to art as one does to life led to a very particular set of aesthetic principles. The most obvious consequence of her belief in the power of writing to reduplicate the experiential and capture reality is the poetic quality of her novels. As earlier mentioned, her writing is thus famous for trying to evoke the senses in the same way that we use our senses to interact with the world around us. As Matthew Josephson notes: “Literature, to [Woolf], is a physical experience, which she re-creates… out of her cultured and sensuous memory” (85). This view accounts for much of the lyricism which Woolf is famous for.

While the sensuality of Woolf’s prose is indeed a central feature of her work, the notion of art presenting life to the reader also suggests that she believed that the representation of events and people in texts should simulate the experience of having been through an event or meeting someone. For Woolf, then, good fiction was fiction that firstly, evoked emotions while allowing space for the intellectual interrogation of these emotions. This belief led to her prizing texts that were stylistically excellent because of the range of things that a writer with good grasp of the technical aspects of writing could achieve. The most skilled artist, according to Woolf, managed to combine observational ability, philosophical insight and evocative ability into a flawless whole. This combination is only made possible through skill in writing:
It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction, to put us at a distance from the special life and to obliterate its features; while it is the gift of the novel to bring us into close touch with life. The two powers fight if they are brought into combination. The most complete novelist must be the novelist who can balance the two powers so that the one enhances the other (POF 83).

This view caused Woolf to view some writers as flawed. An example is Charlotte Brontë, who Woolf felt excelled at evoking emotion but failed to capture the multi-faceted reality of life or evoke any intellectual curiosity: “…We are forced to confront [Hardy’s characters] with destinies and questionings of the hugest import… Of this power, of this speculative curiosity, Charlotte Brontë has no trace… all her force… goes into the assertion, ‘I love’, ‘I hate’, ‘I suffer’” (JE & WH 167).

In order to create what Woolf calls “speculative curiosity,” a writer must first be able to accurately capture reality. This explains Woolf’s praise of Cervantes for having created “deep, atmospheric, living people casting shadows solid, tinted as in life” (AWD 27, emphasis mine). This emphasis on realism ties into Woolf’s hatred of diadactism, which, as earlier mentioned, she felt prevented characters in texts from being “solid,” “living” people because it removed a certain three-dimensionality from them. In life, there is no omniscient narrator to tell one how to judge a person or an extended commentary on whether a person’s behaviour is morally correct or not.18

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18 This, of course, depends on one’s religious views. It is certain that Woolf did not believe that there was an omniscient presence providing standards whereby others could be judged. This is evident from her response to T.S. Eliot’s conversion to Christianity: “[Eliot] has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church… A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is” (W.Letters 233). It is notable that Woolf associates diadactism with religion. The excerpt from the essay on Farrer, which I have quoted earlier, associates his diadactism with “speaking from the pulpit” (see p. 3).
One is left floundering in the sea of life to judge the other mortal millions as best as one can.

**Woolf on Austen**

If we keep this in mind, it is easy to understand that one of the reasons why Woolf holds Austen in such esteem is her ability to create life-like characters. It is notable that Woolf uses the word “perfection” to describe Austen’s writing (*TNOH* 567). Unlike Brontë, “the characters of a Jane Austen or of a Tolstoy have a million facets” (Woolf, *JE & WH* 167).

Here was an artist who portrayed characters as real as living people, who captured reality but did not try to convince readers of her views or extract morals out of her stories: “[Austen] wishes neither to reform nor to annihilate; she is silent; and that is terrific indeed” (Woolf, *JA2* 151). The lack of diadactism in Austen, for Woolf, allows the characters to be judged without a narrator’s incessant preaching. This silence opens the possibility for readers to react to the characters as they would to real people, judging and evaluating Austen’s characters as they would judge acquaintances or friends in their lives:

[Austen’s] characters are so rounded and substantial that they have the power to move out of the scenes in which she placed them into other moods and circumstances. Thus, if someone begins to talk about Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet voices from different parts of the room begin saying which they prefer and why, and how they differ, and how they might have acted if one had been at Box Hill and the other at Rosings, and where they live, and how their houses are disposed, as if they were living people (Woolf, *JA1* 14)

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19 At least, most of the time. As I note in my next chapter, Austen’s narrators do preach sometimes, and this annoys many of her critics, Woolf included.
Strikingly, Woolf’s description of the reaction to Austen’s characters seems to be a good explanation for Austen’s critical reception as described in my first chapter. Critics seem to either hate or love Austen, and the criticism on Austen, as I have mentioned, seems to oscillate between the two poles of approving or disapproving of her books. This can be linked to their emotive and personal response to Austen’s characters: often how one reacts to Austen is determined by how one would judge her characters as they would real people.\(^\text{20}\)

As a “pure artist,” in Woolf’s words, Austen would have been able to balance “the gift of style” against “the gift of the novel to bring us in close touch with life” \((\text{TNOF} \ 494; \ \text{POF} \ 83)\). How was this done? It seems that this balancing, if one wants to call it that, is achievable through the dialectical effect of irony which, I argue, is in turn inseparable from an insistence upon an aesthetic of realism. The operation of this irony, however, relies not on any sort of abstract conceptualization that we might engage in, as the many critics in my first chapter do. The dialectical effect of irony, I argue, operates because of what Hutcheon might call irony’s edge. As I have already argued, irony is the edge, where thesis and anti-thesis are paradoxically joined. To Woolf, the ambivalence that the infinite dialectic of irony generated was an important part in making characters realistic: as in life, one could never be completely sure about the hidden depths or flaws in a person. A sudden incident, a different shade cast

\(^{20}\) This is true of even of studies that contextualise her characters or attempt to understand them through the lens of theory. For instance, one can see Lydia Bennet as either selfish and silly or a rebel against the gender norms of her time. It really boils down to whether one reacts to her positively or not.
on a person’s character, might cause one’s perception of a person to change: indeed this is quite in line with the notion that “perhaps human nature was like that… different at different moments… a strange mixture” (Woolf, RASP 102).

At the heart of Austen’s artistry in making characters seem realistic was her ability to portray a scene from ordinary life without any overt passing of judgment. This was dependent, as Woolf says, on a perfect balance between critical judgment and emotion. Perhaps balance is not the right word; it seems that we are referring to the clash between emotion and critical judgment, which Woolf identifies in William Hazlitt: “To be a thinker and to express in the plainest and most accurate of terms ‘the reason for things,’ and to be a painter gloating over blues and crimsons… these were two different, perhaps incompatible ideals…” (Hazlitt 169). Characters gain contrast when they are placed next to one another; light is shed on their personalities as they interact with one another, and as the narrator keeps silent, we are left to judge them for good or for ill:

[By] means of perfectly natural question and answer; everyone is defined and, as they talk, they become not only more clearly seen, but each stroke of the dialogue brings them together or moves them apart, so that the group is no longer casual or interlocked. The talk is not mere talk; it has an emotional intensity which gives it more than brilliance (Woolf, POF 58-59)

The “ironic attitude” of Austen, as Woolf understands it, is indissociable from the “architectural quality” that is present in Pride and Prejudice which thrives on contrast to add nuance to character and force to its emotive affect: “[Things] are said, for all their naturalness, with a purpose; one emotion has been contrasted with another; one

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21 See p.14 of chapter 1, which argues that irony unites thesis and anti-thesis through temporality.
scene has been short, the next long…” (POF 60). The contrasts in each scene cast a certain light upon the characters at a particular point in the plot. In different scenes, however, the characters appear as different from themselves in other moments in time: they are contrasted with themselves.

It is by this principle of contrast that Austen is able to cast a certain light upon a character and then modulate the colour of this light, thus causing these characters to seem ambivalent. As Woolf herself implies, this is due to Austen’s shrewd understanding of the temporal nature of narrative. As I have mentioned, Kierkegaard says that irony is a moment, and it is at the moment when Austen casts light and shadows on her characters that irony begins to be set into motion. Woolf notes this of Austen’s characters using the example of her fools. Of them she says, “…they are no more consistently foolish than people in real life. It is only that they have a peculiar point of view… but there are a great many circumstances in which they do not behave foolishly at all” (JA1 13). Woolf is thus aware that many times, in Austen, the characters only look foolish because they are shown at their most foolish moments. Of course, as we build up the picture of their characters, we realize that they are often not as foolish as they appear.

It is true, for instance, that Miss Bates looks “so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing” throughout much of Emma (Austen 82). This is particularly true when we consider the scene in which Emma calls upon Mrs. and Miss Bates to distract Harriet from thinking about Mr. Elton. There, Miss Bates prattles on fondly about Miss Fairfax until she is out of breath, and is particularly delighted when
Emma gives Miss Fairfax a perfunctory compliment about her handwriting (Austen, *Emma* 148). Miss Bates is promptly “highly gratified” (Austen, *Emma* 148). At times like this her behaviour seems to be in line with Emma’s opinion, particularly when it has been made clear previously that Emma thinks that Miss Bates is silly and Miss Fairfax is unlikable.

As Woolf notes, however, Miss Bates appears extremely pitiable and not at all foolish at the picnic: “[We] are inclined to think that the most painful incident in any of the novels is when Miss Bates’s feelings are hurt at the picnic, and, turning to Mr. Knightley, she says, ‘I must have made myself very disagreeable or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend’” (*JA1* 13, emphasis mine). This is a moment when irony turns on Emma; here Emma is the fool. Miss Bates’s innocent remark shows that Emma can often be uncharitable and snobbish. This is an instance when the dialectic is put into operation: the validity of Emma’s opinions is put into question. Then again, it is not untrue that Miss Bates can be a bit silly. Indeed, if she were less silly, Emma would have looked less foolish at that moment. These evaluations can only be made because of emotive reactions to the text. That Woolf describes the moment as “painful” is telling: it is painful in large part because the text has painted Miss Bates to be very like Emma’s description of her. Emma’s cruelty is understandable, and that makes it all the more discomforting. The scene creates a moment where opinions of Miss Bates have to be contrasted with one’s feelings towards her. It is arguable that this is the affect of irony: here thesis (that Miss Bates is silly) and anti-thesis (that Miss Bates is not silly) are joined, and the balancing on
the edge between these polar opposites generates a similar painful emotional effect in that Emma’s attitude is completely understandable given Miss Bates’s previous behaviour, but yet completely unjustifiable given her relation to Miss Bates.

Such moments, to Woolf, make the characters fully rounded, more believable, more realistic and are part of the “peculiar intensity which she alone [Austen] can impart” (JA2 149). Austen, like all great artists, has her “whole scene, however solidly and pictorially built up… dominated by an emotion which has nothing to do with the eye” (Woolf, Pictures 244). This is evident not only through her carefully crafted scenes, but her ability to contrast one of these scenes with another. It seems, therefore, that when Woolf refers to Austen as “a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface,” this applies not just to the scene of Emma dancing with Charles Blake in The Watsons, but also her ability to prompt the reader to reconsider the character in the light of different scenes (JA2 149).

I would argue, therefore, that irony is intensely important in Woolf’s aesthetics because it is crucial in her emphasis on realism. It is a technique in writing which helps the novelist capture character, the thing that interests her most (Woolf, MBAMB 387). For the novelist who aims to write realistic novels while eschewing diadactism and excessive description of the physical, irony is one of the main tools in generating emotional and intellectual interest.  

22 It is a means whereby “the

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22 Woolf obviously aims to capture the inner world of the human mind and not the environment that humans live in: “The world is full of cripples [incomplete writers] at the moment, victims of the art of painting, who paint apples, roses… as well as words can paint them, which is, of course, not very well.
writer…[gets] into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy” (Woolf, CIF 431).

The “little scenes” that Austen paints so carefully are, as Woolf notes, “composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial” (JA2 149). It seems to me, though, that although Woolf is referring here to Austen’s dramatic power and not her irony, it is her irony that gives the scenes extra emotional significance, as in the aforementioned case of Miss Bates and Emma. After all, even though George Eliot is a great writer, Woolf finds her later novels unpalatable because she is didactic:

Those who fall foul of George Eliot do so, we incline to think, on account of her heroines; and with good reason; for there is no doubt they bring out the worst in her, lead her into difficult places, make her self-conscious, didactic, and occasionally vulgar… (George Eliot 176-177).

To Woolf, Eliot’s dramatic power is dampened by her self-consciousness, which steps forward to preach notions ostensibly philosophical in nature, often in the guise of her heroines, who sometimes speak with a voice too close to the omniscient narrator’s: “[Eliot’s] self-consciousness is always marked when her heroines say what she herself would have said” (George Eliot 176). To Woolf, this makes the author’s stance too obvious and our reactions to the characters become controlled and filtered. The “common meeting place” between writer and reader, in Eliot’s case, is thus not reached “easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one’s eyes shut” (CIF 431).

We can say for certain that a writer whose writing appeals mainly to the eye is a bad writer…” (Woolf, Pictures 243).
Woolf’s Irony: Night And Day and To The Lighthouse

If a discussion of irony in Virginia Woolf is to be of any relevance to Woolf scholars then it is imperative that an analysis of how this irony operates be undertaken. It is quite notable, I think, that the discussion of Woolf’s irony at Woolf’s centenary conference peters out somewhat when Iris Murdoch says: “Well, I think humour and comedy are very important in the novel, and it’s difficult to think of any great novel which lacks these, whether in the form of irony, or in the form of what one might call the deep comic…” (144). This is quite true, in the sense that irony is an extremely important concept that helps us understand writing (particularly what we think of as “literary writing”) but merely insisting that Woolf is ironic is not particularly helpful to scholarship.

How, then, does irony in Woolf operate? I would argue that Woolf’s irony relies on the use of free indirect discourse to emotionally manipulate the reader into being sympathetic to the views of various characters at different parts of the narrative, thus constantly varying the distance between the reader and her characters. Hence, irony in Virginia Woolf is not dependent on distance between the reader and her characters but rather the elimination of this distance. The emotional conflict caused by the contrasts created as the narrative slips out of one character’s consciousness into another’s is crucial to the operation of Woolf’s irony. Such emotional involvement calls into question our own judgment of a character. Woolf’s irony is in service of realism: we have to make difficult decisions on how to view each character and this parallels the difficulties that any person faces in trying to interact with
another face-to-face. Irony in Woolf is thus not a matter of intellect: that is, placing the reader in the same position as an omniscient narrator and having a bird’s eye view of all the faults and virtues of each character. Irony that uses this sort of critical distance is a very crude form of irony, and corresponds to the understanding of irony as stable (discussed in chapter one).

As Bakhtin says, authoritative discourse is “by its very nature incapable of being double-voiced” (DITN 43). It is possible to see irony as a didactic device which attempts to control the reader’s view of each character. In this case the writer tries his best to ensure that words do not “mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person” (Woolf, Craftsmanship 206). Woolf’s insistence upon the point that language does not signify one thing but multiple possibilities ties in with her use of free indirect discourse to create unstable irony. Free indirect discourse, which we can define (for our purposes) as “a specific style of speech and thought representation” which “weaves some of the words of a character into text attributed to the narrator”, “gives the reader a sense of being ‘inside’ the character’s mind” (Dry, 98; 102). This is quite insidious because we tend to be on our guard when the speech and thoughts of the characters are marked grammatically for us: our search for meaning in the text, as Booth says, is often dependent upon our sense of the author’s “second self” or implied author, an “official scribe, so to speak, for that narrative” (ROF 71).

Although this “second self” should be differentiated from the narrator, a narrator is often mistaken for the author’s “second self” because her position outside the story is analogous to the reader’s. The reader identifies with the narrator and thus trusts her
more as the reader is led to believe that the narrator’s “outside” stance with regards to the story makes her more objective. This assumption is reinforced by many novels that do have an omniscient narrator/implied author figure, for instance, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* or George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.

In Woolf, however, the attribution of a character’s thought to the narrator undercuts the reliability of both a character’s observations and the narrator’s. The boundaries between fiction and reality are broken down: the ascendancy of the narrator over the characters in his novels is lost precisely because the implied author becomes just another character. Our implicit trust in him is crucial to our emotional involvement; as the implied author is pulled into the narrative world, so the reader is pulled from outside the narrative to become an active participant in the text. In this way, Woolf is able to make the reader’s reaction to her characters approximate their reactions to people whom they meet in their lives. For example, upon learning of Katharine’s engagement, we are told:

> The world had him [Ralph Denham] at its mercy. He made no pattern out of the sights he saw. He felt himself now, as he had often fancied other people, adrift on the stream, and far removed from control of it, a man with no grasp upon circumstances any longer... For the substantial world, with its prospect of avenues leading on and on to the invisible distance, had slipped from him, since Katharine was engaged. Now all his life was visible, and the straight, meagre path had its

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23 In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth seems to be a bit confused with respect to the concepts of the “second self” and the narrator. For instance on page 71, he postulates that there is the “second self” of every author in every text, and goes on to point out that these “second selves” are different for different texts written for the same author. He says that “these differences are most evident when the second self is given an overt, speaking role in the story” (*ROF* 71). If the implied author is the inferred image of the artist and not the narrator, as he claims on the next few pages, then the implied author cannot have an “overt” voice in the narrative, since “our picture of him is built...only partly by the narrator’s explicit commentary” (*ROF* 73). It seems that the confusion is caused precisely because many narrators purport to be equal to the implied author.
ending soon enough. Katharine was engaged, and she had deceived him, too (ND 129).

Here the narrative slips into free indirect discourse. The thought that “the world had him at its mercy” belongs to Denham and is not a fact, although the manner in which Denham’s thought is presented seems to be a narratorial observation. Our consciousness is thus brought close to Denham’s, and we feel his emotional pain. It is possible to empathise with, too, the thought (also Denham’s) that “Katharine had deceived him”. This monologue of sorts ironises Katharine’s observation (also given in free indirect discourse) that Denham has an “angular and arid soul” (Woolf, ND 7).

Upon feeling Denham’s emotions and his romantic thoughts, particularly his idealisation of Katharine, Katharine’s observation seems uncharitable and mistaken. Our intellect, which has thus far absorbed the opinions of Katharine and the narrator, suffers a rude shock as we are brought to realise the flaws in their thoughts. Even the narrator’s impression that Denham has “a face built for swiftness and decision rather than for massive contemplation” seems suspect, especially after one realises that Denham often thinks about his own life (Woolf, ND 9).

The point of all this, of course, is that our consciousness is brought close to both the narrator’s and Katharine’s in the early descriptions of Denham. Our consciousness being close to the narrator’s and Katharine’s, we absorb these opinions of Denham as true, mistaking an emotive judgment for a detached, intellectual one. We are inclined to trust them, especially when descriptions of Denham are not semantically marked as belonging to Katharine, who, we are told, was “more critical
of the young man [Denham] than was fair” (Woolf, ND 8). Despite this opinion of the narrator’s, in the first chapter Denham comes across as quite in line with Katharine’s observations, if only because he is described in terms that conform to them. This can be easily proven by examining a few phrases used to describe Denham in the first chapter when Katharine shows him her grandfather’s things:

…Denham went on, glancing round him satirically… [Woolf, ND 10, emphasis mine]

Denham smiled, in a peculiarly provoking way [Woolf, ND 10, emphasis mine].

"You'll never know anything at first hand," he began, almost savagely [Woolf, ND 12, emphasis mine].

These descriptions are the implied author’s/narrator’s, but they are very much in line with Katharine’s impression of Denham. In fact, despite the narrator’s seeming discontent with Katharine’s judging Denham too critically, her opinion is fairly in line with Katharine’s. The passage where Denham bemoans his ill fate is one of the many proofs that he is a fairly sensitive and dreamy man. The narrator is not quite distinct from her characters, but where she is distinct her opinion is thus undercut.

The manipulation of our feelings again in the passages where we are brought close to Denham’s consciousness, however, undermines the view of him as harsh, thereby calling into question how we obtained the opinion in the first place, effectively deconstructing the boundary between emotion and thought. This tension between emotion and thought is the crux of irony. As mentioned in chapter 1, it is a phenomenon which cannot be fully intellectualised, nor fully explained through
emotion. It is both; impossible to describe completely but best performed in what we know best as “literary” writing.\textsuperscript{24}

The infinite dialectic of irony is further demonstrated in Denham’s behaviour with Mary Datchet as it destabilizes the notion of Denham as sensitive. His behaviour towards her, as well as her responses, seem to justify this description of himself as harsh and insensitive, or as Denham himself says when thinking about his behaviour to Mary, “dictatorial” (Woolf, \textit{ND} 105; 187):

"If that's [what Denham has done thus far in his life] your standard, you've nothing to be proud of," said Ralph grimly.

"Well, I must reflect with Emerson that it's being and not doing that matters," she continued.

"Emerson?" Ralph exclaimed, with derision. "You don't mean to say you read Emerson?"

"Perhaps it wasn't Emerson; but why shouldn't I read Emerson?" she asked, with a tinge of anxiety (Woolf, \textit{ND} 38).

The description here of Denham’s being “derisive” seems to be the narrator’s description (or perhaps it is Mary’s). The multiple occurrences of this sort of interaction being described undercuts the notion that the narrator is being completely biased, particularly since the women (especially Mary) react to Denham’s harshness with some apprehension. His behaviour to Mary mirrors his behaviour to Katharine in that he is changeful, forceful and abrupt. It seems that in any case, Katharine’s

\textsuperscript{24}This necessarily means that this thesis fails to a certain extent. Evidently this is part of the problem with working on irony: any attempt to master it usually results in it mastering you. Of course, this is no excuse to ignore the concept. As Beckett famously says, one has to try, even if one fails one has to try again and fail better. Failing better, unfortunately, might mean failing worse; irony is at work again. But one must try.
opinion, and in fact Mary’s opinion, which is that Denham, like Katharine, had “an
calculable force,” is not quite wrong either (Woolf, ND 147). When allowed into
Katharine’s and Mary’s thoughts, we can understand their reactions to Denham,
which in turn, when weighed against Denham’s own thoughts, undermine each other.
Thus Denham becomes ironised by Katharine’s thoughts, and Katharine’s thoughts
get ironised by Denham’s thoughts. This constitutes part of the infinite dialectic of
irony: Denham, like many people in real life, is altogether paradoxical and
contradictory. Our reactions to him will be mixed precisely because they depend on
how we want to finally judge him.25

Irony is thus a technique whereby characters are made more life-like. As our
consciousness is brought closer to each of the characters’ through free indirect
discourse, we empathise with them and find it more difficult to judge them critically.
Despite our closeness to a character, there are situations and the thoughts of other
characters which ironise the character we feel close to. Whether we eventually lean
towards one character or another really results from our own biases and feelings. It
seems, then, that Woolf succeeds in generating the personal, rather idiosyncratic,
feeling-based reaction that she wants in her novels. This is particularly notable in the
panel discussion of To The Lighthouse at Woolf’s centenary conference. Of Mr.
Ramsay, John Harvey says:

25 I might add that the same happens for many other characters in the novel: Katharine, Mrs Hilbery
and Mary Datchet. For instance, Mary feels that “people like Ralph and Mary had it all their own
way,” but Katharine’s struggle over the decision of whether to marry Rodney (in the following
chapter) ironises Mary’s (flat, class-based) view (Woolf, ND 86).
I think what enables it [an appraisal of the characters] to operate more strongly is the presence of irony. You get in that novel, I think especially with Mr. Ramsay, a variety of response, a variety of ironic inflections. It’s noticeable… Virginia Woolf will start off with a fairly hostile irony [concerning Mr. Ramsay]… yet the sentence will wind its way round and inside Ramsay’s ego, and see things somewhat in his perspective also, so that the irony takes a different tinge, more sympathetic, and is at times benign (126; 131).

Perhaps it is this “sympathetic” view of Mr. Ramsay that causes John Harvey to protest against Iris Murdoch’s and Juliet Dusinberre’s admiration of Mrs. Ramsay’s mothering skills. Dusinberre says, “I didn’t agree with Dr. Harvey about Mrs. Ramsay…as a woman reader I feel Mrs. Ramsay is a wonderful portrait of the mothering consciousness” (140). Iris Murdoch then repeats Dusinberre’s point about “Mrs. Ramsay as the ideal mother,” pointing out that Woolf could write better than most male writers of her time about women’s experiences because the sexes then did not have the freedom to know each other as well (141).

Harvey refuses to give up, though, and his last remark about Mrs. Ramsay is telling:

It’s not clear to me that Mrs. Ramsay is an ideal mother. That is to say, it’s not clear to me that the kind of concern she has for her children and for other people too is offered by the novel as an ideal concern. I would have thought that the novel takes pains to show that a lot of things she tries to force on people are mistakes, that the marriage she is shown forcing is a mistake, that her prescriptions for Lily Briscoe aren’t a help (142).

What is certain from the above exchange is that Harvey and Dusinberre both have good textual reasons for feeling the way they do. Their argument about Mrs. Ramsay being an ideal mother is actually prompted, I believe, by a personal reaction to the character of Mrs. Ramsay. Dusinberre likes Mrs. Ramsay and Harvey does not like
her. It is quite probable that the exchange on Woolf’s irony petered out because there is enough evidence in the novel to support either view. The view that is finally taken depends on the reader’s own biases and experiences in life.

If we examine the text of *To The Lighthouse*, it is possible to see how this tension between the two views of Mrs. Ramsay is generated. In this text, the narrator is a lot less distinct from the characters than the one in *Night and Day*, but our association of the narrator with the implied author results in our trusting the narration, even though the narrator’s voice blends seamlessly into those of the characters. The beginning of the novel shows Mrs. Ramsay’s attitude towards men in free indirect discourse: “Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valour… finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to or to find agreeable, something trustful, childlike, reverential…” (Woolf, *TL* 10). This protective sentiment of Mrs. Ramsay’s extends to her children and her neighbours:

“… as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature ‘I am guarding you – I am your support…”’ (Woolf, *TL* 20)

“With [Lily’s] little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting seriously… Smiling, for it was an admirable idea, that had flashed upon her this very second--William and Lily should marry--she took the heather-mixture stocking…” (Woolf, *TL* 21; 31).

As her child, James Ramsay picks up on Mrs. Ramsay’s view and supports her notion of herself as the emotional caretaker of the family: “Standing between her knees, very stiff, James felt all her strength flaring up to be drunk and quenched by the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again,
demanding sympathy” (Woolf, TL 43). James also thinks of Mr. Ramsay as “lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule on his wife… but also with some secret conceit in his own accuracy of judgment” (Woolf, TL 8). These descriptions of Mr. Ramsay are given in free indirect discourse, which makes us empathise with James with regards to Mr. Ramsay’s behaviour towards his wife.

However, we are made aware that Mrs. Ramsay’s protective behaviour is, as she notes when Mr. Carmichael snubs her later, partly due to vanity and pettiness: “It hurt her… the sense she had now when Mr. Carmichael shuffled past… that she was suspected; and that all this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity” (Woolf, TL 47). Lily Briscoe’s thoughts ironise Mrs. Ramsay’s portrait of herself as infinitely giving and generous by highlighting the more controlling, manipulative aspect of her nature:

[Mrs. Ramsay] was wilful; she was commanding… All this [experience of male behaviour] she would adroitly shape; even maliciously twist; and, moving over to the window, in pretence that she must go… half turn back, more intimately, but still always laughing, insist that she must, Minta must, they all must marry, since in the whole world whatever laurels might be tossed to her… there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman…an unmarried woman has missed the best of life (Woolf, TL 55-56).

Here free indirect discourse allows us to empathise with Lily’s doubts about Mrs. Ramsay’s behaviour. Mr. Ramsay’s thoughts, too, show that James may be too unsympathetic towards his father; “The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him… [She] flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies” (Woolf, TL
Mr. Ramsay’s assertion that Mrs. Ramsay sowed fruitless hope in the children makes one question whether her notion of caring for the children was actually harmful to them. This view is given in opposition to Mrs. Ramsay’s view that telling James lies about the bad weather would be harmful to him as it would “[dash] his spirits” (Woolf, TL 19).

What is taking place here is the dialectic of irony operating in much the same way as Night and Day. We are pulled this way and that, emotionally, and there is no final answer as to how a character can be summed up. Firstly, we absorb the description of Mrs. Ramsay as ideal mother (from James right at the beginning of the novel), but have this undercut by Lily and Mr. Ramsay. This ambivalence is sustained throughout the novel: for instance, when Mrs. Ramsay soothes both James and Cam to sleep by ingeniously wrapping her shawl around the skull, all the time feeling a little angry with herself for deceiving James, it is quite evident that she does truly care for her children as best she can (Woolf, TL 124-125). As Harvey notes, “[Woolf’s] so mobile that the reader is constantly engaged, as she is, in comparing and appraising” her different characters (131). The final question of whether Mrs. Ramsay is a wonderful mother or not really depends on the reader’s views of what makes a good mother.

I have thus argued that Woolf’s irony consists of using free indirect discourse to make readers empathise with different characters, and then using this

26 Of course, Mr. Ramsay is also treated with irony, as Harvey notes, but I am not going into it here for lack of space.
empathy with different characters to create ironic contrasts. I suggest that this method of creating ironic contrasts is essential to her aesthetics because it elicits an emotive and personalised response from the reader through characters that Woolf tried to render realistic. I have also suggested that this might be a fruitful way of looking at how Austen’s irony operates. It seems to me, however, that it would be prudent to outline a few differences in their aesthetics before moving on to discuss how irony operates in Austen.

A good way to begin is to look at E.M. Forster’s criticism of Woolf: “Life eternal [Woolf] could seldom give; she could seldom so portray a character that it was remembered afterwards on its own account, as Emma [Austen’s Emma] is remembered, for instance, or Dorothea Casaubon…” (120). Woolf’s irony was always at work in her novels, but perhaps her control of it was not as fine as she would have preferred, especially in her earlier novels. In *Night and Day* this is particularly obvious (as can be seen from my explication of it); it seems like there is an attempt to change the voices of her characters in order to make them distinct from one another, although this is not entirely successful. Woolf’s characters have different opinions, but it does not seem that they have different voices. Thus she fails in her attempt to be polyphonic in the same way as Austen. Woolf’s irony in *To The Lighthouse* seems to me more successful, but this occurs at the cost of characterization: although the voice of the narrator lacks an “I” (in every part of the novel except for ‘Time Passes’), unlike *Night and Day*, it is still a distinct personality that does not allow the different voices of the characters to come forth. Their thoughts
are voiced, but not their idiolects. For instance, the narrator’s poetic voice in ‘Time Passes’ resembles Lily Briscoe’s and Mrs. Ramsay’s voices. This is evident if we compare the following quotations taken from Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and the narrator respectively:

For the great plateful of blue water was before [Mrs. Ramsay]; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see. Fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men (Woolf, TL 17).

Lily Briscoe watched [Mrs. Ramsay] drifting into that strange no-man’s land where to follow people is impossible and yet their going such a chill on those who watch them that they always try at least to follow them with their eyes as one follows a fading ship until the sails have sunk beneath the horizon (Woolf, TL 92).

Now, day after day, light turned, like a flower reflected in water, its clear image on the wall opposite. Only the shadows of trees, flourishing in the wind, made obeisance on the wall, and for a moment darkened the pool in which light reflected itself… (Woolf, TL 141).

Woolf’s work therefore sometimes merges the narrator’s voice and the characters’ voices. Bakhtin talks of the effect of this: “The distance between [the narrator] and the other person’s [a character’s] voice is lost; stylisation becomes style; the narrator is transformed into a mere compositional convention” (DID 198). While it is certain that irony in Woolf is effective, I would argue that the uniformity of the writing style causes her to lose a certain degree of self-reflexivity that Austen’s texts

27 Woolf never attempted to be Austen-like again after the failed Night and Day, and her narrators, for most part, blended somewhat unobtrusively (but also distinctly by virtue of its constancy) into the stream-of-consciousness of various characters.
insist upon: the narrator’s descriptive abilities are hardly questioned. In Austen’s
definitions, the distinct narrator/implied author is put into question, and her own style
comes under scrutiny. It is possible to say that “the author’s thought no longer
oppressively dominates the other’s thought, discourse loses its composure and
confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced” (Bakhtin, *DID
198)*. In my final chapter, I go on to examine Austen’s letters, criticism and novels
using the insights gleaned from Woolf, arguing that even when the narrator/implied
author seems didactic, there is an ironic dialectic at work in her voice. Since the
narrator in Austen’s works aggressively asserts her authorship, this puts more than
her voice into question: it puts the whole plot of the novel into question as well.

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28 See Val Gough’s essay, “Virginia Woolf and Mysticism” (1996), which attempts to talk about how
Woolf ironises mysticism, particularly in *To The Lighthouse*. He argues that irony in Woolf is a matter
of whether the reader is ironic or not, even as Woolf encourages an ironic attitude. I tend to think this
is both logically incoherent and missing the point, as that would make Woolf’s novels not different
from any other texts. Anything can be read ironically if one is an ironic reader. I think however, that
there is a structural difference between texts that can be read ironically and texts that consciously
encourage irony. Nevertheless one can extend his thesis to argue that Woolf’s voice might be closer to
Mrs. Ramsay’s than any other character in the novel, and from there, that ironisation of Mrs. Ramsay’s
often poetic descriptions of things might mean an ironisation of the style the whole novel is written…
This however, takes a lot of work and is a little strained.

29 Scandalously, Bakhtin seems to equate the narrator with the author.
Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen?

The phenomenon of Jane Austen is a very curious one. Firstly, there is a paucity of information about her aesthetics. Unlike Virginia Woolf, who wrote extensively on art in general, particularly books, Jane Austen was never an essayist. This, coupled with the fact that Cassandra Austen thought it prudent to burn whatever letters of Jane Austen’s could have inspired controversy, has led to a sort of vacuum in our characterization of her as artist. Austen’s own family aimed for a portrayal of her as benign, conservative, polite and every inch a lady. Caroline Austen writes: “[Jane Austen’s neighbours] sometimes served for her amusement, but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip—She never turned them into ridicule—She was as far as possible from being either censorious or satirical…” (Caroline Austen, 47). This mirrors J.E. Austen-Leigh’s defensive and rather uncomfortable response in his Memoir about his aunt’s propensity to ridicule others: “[Austen’s] unusually quick sense of the ridiculous led her to play with all the common-places of everyday life…but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip. She was as far as possible from being censorious or satirical” (Austen-Leigh 97). This view of Jane Austen is a popular one: today the legacy of the Janeites, as they are known, is reflected in the endless production of boring romance novels.

Austen’s critics, however, have a very different view. Her skill as a writer meant that fellow writers and critics could not accept the view of “gentle Jane.” The
thing that seemed most obvious is her skill in crafting narrative. As Leslie Stephen said, “To deny Miss Austen’s marvelous literary skill would be simply to convict oneself of the grossest stupidity” (418). The question, however, is how one perceives her use of this skill. As I have mentioned in chapter 1, many critics see it as a tool for diadactism, particularly where discussions of her irony are concerned. It seems to me that these characterizations of Austen the artist are the legacy of the unfortunate vacuum she has left behind. The view that she is didactic undoubtedly stems from a characterization of Jane Austen as a conservative lady, who held certain values and wanted to promote them through her work. This is definitely related to the portrayal of her by her family members as well as much nineteenth-century criticism of her, which, outside of a few notable critics like Lewes, Simpson and Kavanagh, generally portrayed her as an upper-class lady who painted delicate little pictures of her way of life. The view of her as cold and aloof undoubtedly stems from the assumption that irony is dependent upon a critical distance of the ironist from his subject, and that the ironist is ultimately there to judge, weigh and measure his subjects with his unsympathetic eye.

A quick look at Barbara Collins’s essay on Mansfield Park shows how diadactism is linked to the nineteenth-century characterization of Austen. Collins links what she calls “the Olympian omniscience” and “the intrusion of the sermonizing” in the novel to “typically righteous Victorianism” (30). She emphasizes that Austen was, in the last years of her life, an early Victorian. But what Collins does not acknowledge is the background of such a view: Austen’s own Victorian nieces
and nephews painting her (inevitably) in their own image. Collins’s Austen approves of the “starched manners” of Edmund and Fanny: she is very much the prim aunt who refused to make fun of her neighbours. Perhaps the most famous study on Austen’s irony, Mudrick’s *Ironic as Defense and Discovery*, loudly voices all the common assumptions about irony in stating its thesis: “Distance--from her subject and from the reader--was Jane Austen’s first condition for writing… To events, literary or actual, she allowed herself no public response except the socially conventional or the ironic; for neither of these endangered her reserve…” (1).

In my last chapter, I showed that Woolf is highly supportive of Austen as an artist because she feels that much of Austen’s writing is in line with her aesthetics. Woolf, too, felt that the portrayal of Austen as a person hindered an understanding of her aesthetics and tried to get at a different sense of what Austen the artist must have been like:

[The] reputation of Jane Austen has been accumulating on top of us like these same quilts and blankets. The voices of the elderly and distinguished, of the clergy and squirearchy, have droned in unison praising and petting, capping quotations, telling little anecdotes, raking up little facts… So they pile up the quilts and counterpanes until the comfort becomes oppressive. Something must be done about it (*JAP* 331-332).

Woolf’s reading of Austen’s aesthetics stemmed mostly from her readings of Austen’s novels which implied a skilful artist with a deep capacity for feeling. It is telling, to me, that Woolf’s attempt to clear the air involved a reading of Austen’s juvenilia, specifically *Love and Freindship* [sic]. It seems to me that the examination of materials written by Austen might yield a fresh sense of her aesthetics (even as one
adds to the cacophony). Therefore, I will examine mainly Austen’s letters and juvenilia in order to show that the little we can glean of her aesthetics neither supports the perception of Austen as didactic nor supports the perception of her as an artist who believed in keeping her distance from the subjects of her art.

Using her letters, I argue that Austen’s aesthetics are startlingly similar to those of Virginia Woolf. I show that it is likely that there is a Woolfsian paradox in her aesthetics: that is, she, too, seems to react to fiction as she does to real life, but at the same time she is extremely concerned with literary form. The former is evident through the way she talks about several fictional characters in her letters, and the latter is evident from the comments that she makes on novels that she reads. Through my readings of Austen’s juvenilia and letters, I will also show that she disliked diadactism. Much of Austen’s earlier fiction is burlesque, and I agree with several other critics that this was a reaction against the unrealistic portrayal of people and situations. However, as in Woolf, I believe that Austen’s emphasis on realism cannot be separated from a dislike of diadactism.

It seems to me, then, that with the similarities of Austen’s aesthetics to Woolf’s, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that the end result of Austen’s aesthetics might be an employment of irony that works in a manner similar to irony in Woolf. Although Austen, like Woolf, hardly mentions irony, it is undeniable that it is a crucial tool that she utilizes in her writing. Despite the scarcity of information that we have of Austen’s views on fiction, I think that a firm sense of her aesthetics can be formed. I will argue that her aims of making fiction personal and non-didactic result
in a use of irony that is very much in line with Woolf’s: that is, in Austen’s fiction, irony operates as infinite dialectic that facilitates the emotive and cerebral responses that are in line with her emphasis on realism and her dislike of didactic fiction. This is evident from the evolution of irony in her early fiction as a simple concept of reversal and contradiction to a more complex concept in her later fiction. In order to cement my argument with regards to Austen’s aesthetics, I will first use Northanger Abbey to show how irony, as infinite dialectic, is used as a tool in service of a realism that resembles Woolf’s: to create ambivalence towards the characters such that one would have the same difficulty judging them as real people. As in Woolf, the operation of irony in Austen uses free indirect discourse together with third person narration to vary the reader distance through the novel. In Northanger Abbey, the narrator’s more apparent untrustworthiness, however, makes it easier for us to detect the irony than in Mansfield Park. Finally, I move on to Mansfield Park, arguing that Mansfield Park, uses a very similar kind of irony. I show that the irony in Mansfield Park is more subtle because the narrator is more subtle about her controlling hand. The technique developed in Northanger Abbey is perfected and any superiority which the narrator or the reader holds over the characters is destroyed.

Jane Austen’s Aesthetics

A quick comparison of Austen’s juvenilia with her letters brings out an apparent contradiction, a tension between her critical attitude towards fiction and her involved, emotional reaction to it. The burlesque nature of her juvenilia shows a young writer with a great amount of talent, familiar with narrative technique and the
various clichés that pervade much of the popular fiction of her time. As Margaret Anne Doody says in the introduction to *Catherine and Other Writings*, “By the time [Austen] writes the earliest works of *Volume the First*… she is entirely aware of thematic patterns and plot structures, or paradigms that could only be familiar to a reader of a multitude of books…” (xv).

On the other hand, the letters do show a side of Austen that is not exhibited either in her juvenilia or mature writings: that she was involved in whatever she had read in a very personal way. The stuff of fiction mingled with her reality and she sometimes wrote about the latter by comparing it with the former. This is evident from the way she describes her day-to-day activities to Cassandra, with references to Fanny Burney’s works:

Tomorrow I shall be just like Camilla in Mr. Dubster’s summer-house, for my Lionel will have taken away the lady by which I came here, or at least by which I intended to get away, and here I must stay till his return. My situation, however, is somewhat preferable to hers, for I am very happy here… (*A.Letters* 6)

The Jane Austen that emerges from this little excerpt is hardly the critic who has a firm grip on the various follies of her contemporaries. The excerpt shows that whatever her notions about fiction, Jane Austen, like any avid and passionate reader, was not above making whimsical comparisons between her life and the life of a much-loved character in a book.

This attitude is most evident, however, not when Austen speaks of her life or the fiction of others, but when she speaks about her own writings:

[Miss Benn]… really does seem to admire Elizabeth. I must confess I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate
those who do not like her at least, I do not know (A.Leters 201, emphasis Austen’s).

Henry & I went to the Exhibition in Spring Gardens… I was very well pleased—particularly (pray tell Fanny) with a small portrait of Mrs. Bingley…. I went in hopes of seeing one of her Sister, but there was no Mrs. Darcy;--perhaps however, I may find her in the Great Exhibition which we shall go to, if we have time;--I have no chance of her in the collection of Sir Joshua Reynold’s Paintings… Mrs. Bingley is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features & sweetness; there was never a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her. I dare say Mrs. D. will be in Yellow (A.Leters 212).

There is no balanced consideration of Elizabeth Bennet’s strengths and weaknesses, or some lengthy analysis of her characterization. Rather, Austen delightedly speaks of her character as though she were a living person and evidently expects her readers to react to Elizabeth Bennet as though she were. Certainly Austen was speaking partly in jest with regards to the readers who might not have liked Elizabeth Bennet; this however, seems to be an insistence upon a personal reaction to fiction that consisted of taking into account one’s own idiosyncratic likes and dislikes in judging characters, much as one’s personality unfortunately determines one’s reaction to another person in reality. By blatantly insisting on her bias towards Elizabeth and not discussing her fictionality, Austen seems to be implying that fiction should not be read as though one can maintain a critical distance from the characters, and that one should react to the characters in much the same way as one reacts to other people in one’s reality.

The second quotation is even more telling. Again, Austen is amusingly imaginative. She goes to an art exhibition, views paintings of women and imagines
them to be portraits of her own characters. As an author, she knows she has invented the characters, and yet supposes them to have preferences that she does not know: in this case, colours. Austen’s creations are living beings to her, so alive that she would take portraits of other people to be likenesses of her characters. This demonstrates a seeming disregard for the boundary between fiction and reality and shows her propensity to treat her characters like living beings. This tendency is supported by Austen-Leigh’s famous quote from his aunt about Emma: “She was very fond of Emma, but did not reckon on her being a general favourite; for, when commencing that work, she said, ‘I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.’” (125). Austen views her characters as real people and expected others to like or dislike them much as they would react to real people.

However, it would be foolish to assume that Austen was naïve about treating fiction as though it was reality. One only has to examine *Love and Freindship* [sic] to uncover Austen’s wariness of treating works of fiction as models for reality. Here is a paragraph from *Love and Freindship* [sic] which is similar to the meditations on novels in *Northanger Abbey*:

‘My Father, seduced by the false glare of Fortune and the Deluding Pomp of Title, insisted on my giving my hand to Lady Dorothea. No never exclaimed I. Lady Dorothea is lovely and Engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but Know Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes…” We all admired the noble Manliness of his reply. He continued. ‘Sir Edward was surprised… “Where, Edward, in the name of wonder” (said he) “did you pick up this unmeaning Gibberish? You have been studying Novels I suspect”’ (Austen, *LF* 79).30

30 Laura gives the youth’s name as Lindsey, but she addresses him as “Edward”. Probably Lindsey is his last name – Austen’s narrative does not make it entirely clear.
Here, Austen is delineating the problem of treating novels as models of reality. In this early text, irony is present in the form of a character’s unwitting speech much as in Browning’s dramatic monologues: Lindsay, the young man who makes the ridiculous speech, shows himself to be foolish because he is rebelling against his father merely for the sake of doing so. In constructing this scene Austen is demonstrating her awareness of the artificiality in many novels: young men may indeed like the women whom their fathers recommend as spouses, except that in novels it is often not the case. To behave like a novel’s protagonist simply because he is portrayed in a positive way, then, might have ridiculous results.

The irony here, at risk of classifying and going down the slippery slope of people like Muecke, is what is commonly known as dramatic. The effect stems from the reader’s awareness of Lindsay’s stupidity and superficiality, traits of his own which he is completely oblivious about but which are evident in his speech. This, however, puts the reader in a position of superiority. The irony is stable: the reader is the knowing one, the critical observer, and the characters unaware of their own foolishness. This type of irony is common in much of Austen’s earlier writings, as demonstrated in this quotation from “Jack and Alice”:

The perfect form, the beautifull [sic] face, and elegant manners of Lucy so won on the affections of Alice that when they parted… she assured her that except her Father, Brother, Uncles, Aunts, Cousins and other relations, Lady Williams, Charles Adams and a few dozen more of particular friends [sic], she loved her better than almost any other person in the world (Austen, JAA 21).

As Cynthia Griffin notes in her perceptive essay on Austen’s early works, in these pieces, “[a] reader is made to feel superior both because he recognizes the
exaggerations as such and derives pleasure from them and because he sees the comic potentialities of other ‘serious’ novels when the authors and less perceptive readers of these novels do not” (152). This sort of stable irony, however, makes her earlier works similar to didactic novels in that both promote a fixed set of values, even though this promotion in Austen’s burlesque works operate by negation. In these works, we are made aware of the dangers of mistaking sensibility for morality among other things. The characters are held up as examples of what not to be like, but there is little examination of their motives or even the reasons behind why sentimental novels are structured as they are. There is an implicit assertion that such novels are unrealistic, such characters hypocritical and the more sensible characters (for instance, Sir Edward in the above-quoted excerpt of Love and Freindship [sic]) morally correct.

It seems to me, however, that Austen abandoned the epistolary form of her earlier works precisely because of this reason. Although she does not voice her dislike of diadactism as overtly as Woolf, an examination of the implications of her letters shows her discomfort with what she felt was the unnaturalness of books, connected with the idea that forcing a simplistic interpretation onto the reader via (didactic) characterization and plot was both unskillful and unrealistic. Her letters show a concern with form and style as opposed to content. Austen wanted her texts to contain contrasting ideas, to have no one dominant voice. She certainly was not very concerned with getting a particular message or idea across. This is perhaps most evident when she writes to Cassandra Austen about Sir Brydges Egerton’s Arthur.
Fitz-Albini: “We have got ‘Fitz-Albini’… My father is disappointed – I am not, for I expected nothing better. Never did any book carry more internal evidence of its author. Every sentiment is completely Egerton’s. There is very little story, and what there is told in a strange, unconnected way” (A.Letters 22). Austen disapproves of the book because she believes that Egerton’s opinion dominates the novel. There is no play of ideas, only a single voice, and characterization and plot handled in a didactic manner. The following comment on the form of the story, I believe, shows how didacticism hinders artistry. Austen seems to be implying that Egerton is so occupied with filling the book with his opinions that the story ends up badly told. This dislike of didacticism is further demonstrated by the oft-quoted portion of her letter with regards to Pride and Prejudice. Here Austen proudly claims: “I do not write for such dull Elves/ As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves” (A.Letters 202). She expects her readers to do work: it is unlikely that a writer who held such a view would craft works which dictated to the reader what to think.

More than this, Austen’s comments on Pride and Prejudice show that she is first and foremost a stylist, more concerned with form than any particular moral message:

The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;-- it wants shade;-- it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte [sic] – or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile (A.Letters 203).
Here, Austen mocks the preaching of didactic novels by calling it “solemn specious nonsense.” The quotation also makes it clear that Austen felt uncomfortable with the lack of contrast in the work. This discomfort can be linked to her dislike of Egerton’s work: in both cases she felt like there was a certain uniformity (if not of thought then of style). In her juvenilia, it is possible to see her experimenting with forms that would allow the reader greater freedom of thought. In “Lesley Castle,” she makes an attempt to allow for various perspectives to be aired in the correspondence of the different characters. Miss Margaret Lesley, for instance, finds Lady Lesley “an insignificant dwarf,” while Lady Lesley herself thinks the Lesley sisters are “Scotch Giants” who would “frighten [one] out of [one’s] wits” (Austen, LC 120-121). Here the opinions of each character ironise the other’s. This attempt to present varied perspectives to the reader is, perhaps, not entirely successful because the epistolary form already makes the reader aware of the distance between the characters and himself. The superiority of the reader to the characters, then, is not entirely effaced: he is still judging from a distance.

Perhaps “The Female Philosopher” is a key piece of Austen’s juvenilia where the development of her aesthetics is concerned. Austen attaches a little notice dedicated to her niece in the manner common to the books on female conduct at that time: “…I think it is my particular Duty to prevent your feeling as much as possible the want of my personal instructions, by addressing to You on paper my Opinions and Admonitions on the conduct of Young Women, which you will find expressed in the following pages” (FP 165). The letter that follows, written by the character
Arabella Smythe, is simply a description of everyday life, namely, Mr. Millar’s visit to the Smythe family and Arabella’s subsequent thoughts and feelings on the other characters involved in that visit. There are no ostensible guides on how to behave. I think from this it is pretty clear how Austen’s dislike of didactic works and emphasis on realism coincide. Austen seems to be reacting against works like Mary Brunton’s *Self-Control*, which contain a dramatic and didactic storyline with a narrator constantly preaching about the moral value of each incident in the novel.31 These sentimental novels often create implausible stories and/or characters in order to hammer home some point related to how one should behave or think.

“The Female Philosopher” is striking because the main text (Arabella’s letter) does not specify what lessons, if any, should be extracted. Part of the joke here, I believe, stems from the fact that there is possibly no moral to extract, and Austen is mocking the novels which claim to teach others how to behave by asking the reader to extract a moral out of a text that has no moral implications. Austen’s dislike of diadactism can be seen from this mockery of texts which dictate how one should behave: in Arabella’s letter she shows how far removed from reality these didactic texts are by principle of contrast. However, I think that there is another side to the joke, which is that any meaning from this text has to be forcibly extracted (as opposed to having a didactic narrator or plot dictate morals to the reader). Novels

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31 Austen makes fun of Brunton’s “unnaturalness” repeatedly. See the letters 11-12 October 1813 and 24 November 1813. It would be more helpful, in the latter letter, if Austen had specified exactly what Mr. – [Cassandra Austen has cut out the name] thought of *Mansfield Park* that prompted her to say she would imitate *Self-Control* to please him. Sadly, Austen specifies in that letter that she has chosen not to include this opinion on her list. For the list, see B.C. Southam’s *The Critical Heritage*. 

which are realistic and not contrived, which portray day to day life, do not, by virtue of their subject matter or even the structure of their plots, have any apparent moral for the reader. A “natural” novel would therefore not be didactic.

It seems to me then, that Austen wanted her readers to participate actively in the novels and find meaning in them, and this ties in with her need for novels to be realistic and not didactic. This participation has to be not merely intellectual but also emotional (feeling for the characters). Austen’s emotive reaction to literature as explicated earlier was very much what she desired for her readers. She wanted her readers to view her characters as people and not merely linguistic constructs. This can be seen from her expectations of the reader’s emotional engagement with Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. Given that she wanted the reader’s active intellectual engagement in the novels along with the reaction to characters as though they were real people, it is no wonder that Austen finally adopted the form that we are so familiar with in her mature novels.\(^\text{32}\) The narrators in her fiction, insisting upon their own authority as creators of the fiction, give their opinions of the characters. The reader is inclined to trust these narrators because of the authority that has been traditionally invested in third person narrators; however the narrator’s voice sometimes blends with the protagonist’s through free indirect discourse, making it difficult to discern what the narrator’s thoughts are. Furthermore, other devices like

\(^{32}\) I am not suggesting that Austen was completely conscious of the complexities in the text. Whether she was or not, we will never know: there simply is not enough evidence to tell, and many of the terms we use to discuss texts nowadays were not available to critics at that time. But what seems certain, to me, is that Austen wanted people to think critically about her texts as well as relate emotively to them, and in trying to achieve these ends and resolve the tension in her aesthetics, she ended up with what we know as the mature form of her writing.
the plot, dialogue or thoughts of other characters (this through free indirect discourse) undermine the narrator’s/protagonist’s opinion. The contradictions within the text leave the reader emotionally torn because he begins to realize that the plot of the novel or ideas that each character has does not cohere with the narrator’s opinion. This removes the reader’s superiority over the characters because his emotional involvement would hinder his ability to judge in a detached critical manner. His identification with the thoughts of the characters, as well as his identification with the narrator as a figure outside the main storyline, who is all knowing and trustworthy, is disrupted. The narrator’s authority over the characters is also disrupted. Irony becomes a textual tool whereby readers themselves are put into the position of Austen’s characters, all of whom have their own belief systems. The bias of the reader is shown as he reads the novels, depending on whom he feels sympathetic to: we have had to play an active part in constructing any meaning we find.

Austen’s style, then, is remarkably modern. From the glimpses that we have had of her aesthetics, I do think that there is very good basis to view her irony as operating in a manner similar to modern authors. Woolf definitely had basis in suggesting that Austen, had she lived, “would have been the forerunner of Henry James and Proust” (JA2 155). It occurs to me, however, that Woolf is wrong in suggesting that Austen had not fully modernized her style. Austen is the forerunner of Henry James and Proust, or even (if one wants to be audacious) a possible contemporary as far as her writing style is concerned. After all, the effect of irony in Austen’s texts, which is to cause the reader to be pulled this way and that through
identification with different characters, finally having to settle and judge them, is an achievement remarkably similar to what Henry James was aiming for in *The Turn of The Screw*. James says that he took pains in trying to structure the text such that his own values would be “positively all blanks,” so that the reader would “think the evil” as opposed to finding it overtly stated in the text (17). If there was to be a moral in Austen’s text, the reader would have to think the morality in the text, or rather, his judgment of her characters would show his moral values just as the judgment of the governess in James’s text shows one’s moral values. Of course, the manner in which this effect is achieved is very different. In my next section on *Northanger Abbey*, I explore in more detail the relation of irony to the methods by which the reader is emotionally attached to each character, as well as the narrator’s role.

*Northanger Abbey*

If we are to examine the role of irony in Austen’s aesthetics, it seems to me that there is no better novel to start with than *Northanger Abbey*. We know that this was one of her earlier works. It is likely that *Northanger Abbey* was composed perhaps one or two years after *First Impressions* and simultaneously with *Sense and Sensibility*, finished in its final form before the final versions of the other two novels in 1803 (Litz, *Chronology* 188). It is closer to the juvenilia in terms of its playful tone, but is unlike the juvenilia because of its nuanced examination of texts and social

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33 Hence the critical debate about whether the governess was repressed (the psychoanalytic argument) or whether she really did see ghosts rages on. If one views children as innately sexual, something Freud argues, then I think the former is more likely. If one however sees this sexuality as a harmful thing, the latter view is more likely.
convention. It can be viewed as a bridge between her juvenilia and mature work and is thus crucial if we want to gain any insight on how irony operates in Austen’s novels.

The thing that separates Northanger Abbey from the rest of Austen’s novels, outside of its unique place in the chronology of composition, is that it is the only novel of Austen’s that directly focuses on the various techniques used in writing of novels. The irony here works differently from Woolf’s, I think, in that the narrator is an obtrusive presence, and a character in her own right who is insistent upon her authorship of the text. In some parts of the narrative, however, free indirect discourse operates to bring our consciousness close to the protagonist’s, merging the narrator’s voice with Catherine’s. This merging of voices ensures that the narrator’s perspective becomes unreliable, or subject to ironisation. When we come to the text with the assumption that the third person author/narrator is reliable, and that it is a point of identification for us, as an “outsider” to the fictional world, we empathize with the narrator. This identification, however, makes us the objects of irony when evidence in the text ironises Catherine’s views, as we share her thoughts. This ironisation of Catherine also sensitizes us to the idea that the narrator is unreliable (since their voices are sometimes indistinguishable), even in cases where her voice is distinct from Catherine’s. The ironisation of the narrator and Catherine alerts us to a further manipulation behind the already-manipulative narrator, the implied author who has arranged for the narrator to be ironised.

34 As I have explained in chapter two.
This makes us suspicious of the narrator’s authority, which she exerts by being very self-reflexive about her manipulation of the text. After all, we have realized that the “outside figure” may not be outside the story at all. Looking at the narrator with more critical eyes, we can see what I would call the narrator’s bias, for lack of a better term. She does not like Gothic novels and wants to prove that they are unrealistic, and does this by manipulating Catherine into recognizing the unreality of Gothic novels. The narrator’s manipulation of the text alerts us to the fact that the whole novel is a work of fiction, created to serve particular purposes, in this case to “educate” Catherine into realizing that Gothic novels are unrealistic. However, we realize too, that the implied author has an agenda too: perhaps in ironising the narrator she is using the text to support Gothic novels.

We cannot, however, rely on the implied author for the last word because of the ironisation of the narrator. If this is true, there is really no stable ground to judge the characters on, as the parallel between the implied author and the narrator means that the implied author’s manipulation of the text is also criticized (through Isabella). Having been made suspicious of all traditional sources of authority, we realize that in fact there is a leveling impulse in the text that negates not only the authority of the narrator, but that of the implied author, “Jane Austen.” The boundaries between reality and fiction break down, and we are forced to judge the characters as we judge real people: subject to our own biases, without a controlling consciousness to tell us what to do. Whether we read the text as for or against Gothic novels, then, exposes our biases as readers.
The basic structure of the novel is a Bildungsroman, a story in which the main character, Catherine, learns the difference between the fictional world of Gothic novels and everyday reality. This idea is enforced through free indirect discourse that tells us Catherine’s thoughts as she muses on how she has been wrong in assuming herself to be a Gothic heroine. Because most of Catherine’s thoughts are told in free indirect discourse, we empathize with Catherine’s fears as Catherine forms a Gothic narrative about the Tilney family: she imagines that a locked cabinet carries a horrid secret, that General Tilney has imprisoned Mrs. Tilney, who “yet lived, shut up for causes unknown [receiving] from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of coarse food” (Austen, *NA* 138). We feel her shame when she discovers that the locked cabinet contains only laundry bills and was actually unlocked; we are told, in free indirect discourse, “Such was the collection of papers… which had filled her with expectation and alarm, and robbed her of half her night’s rest! She felt humbled to dust… Nothing could now be clearer than the absurdity of her recent fancies” (Austen, *NA* 126).

After Catherine has been disabused of her fantasies by Henry, we feel her bitterness and regret regarding the whole incident, also told through free indirect discourse:

Henry’s address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled… She saw that the infatuation had been created, the mischief settled long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged (Austen, *NA* 146).
Here it is really impossible to tell whether these are Catherine’s thoughts or the narrator’s opinions of Catherine’s misadventure, since the narrator’s voice merges with Catherine’s. What is certain is that there is evidence in the text that contradicts Catherine’s/the narrator’s harsh opinions of her errors about Tilney family and even Gothic novels in general.

As Johnson and Mckillop have noted, the text does follow a Gothic narrative in terms of its plot structure:

After all, there is no fixed rule that things should never happen as they do in novels. Eleanor Tilney has already proved herself a true friend… Henry at least appears as a lover in good earnest (Mckillop 148).

The network of gothic analogues that fall into our purview… leads us to conclude that the unassuming Catherine is indeed a gothic heroine… The alarms of romance and the anxieties of modern life are thus, like so many other apparent opposites in the novel, virtually one and the same (Johnson, xxii, emphasis hers).

From this, we become sensitized to the fact that Catherine’s initial opinion of her fantasies (and by implication the effaced narrator’s) might not be so trustworthy. How can we account for this? Quite simply, the person who is constructing the narrative has made it that way. There is a sense that the implied author, “Jane Austen,” has arranged the narrative so as to ironise Catherine’s conclusions and in turn, the narrator’s. Our suspicion of Catherine also ironises Henry’s views of England, as she idolizes him (“It [was] at any time a much simpler operation to Catherine to doubt her own judgment than Henry’s”) and takes on his belief that such tales of horror and cruelty cannot “be perpetuated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing…” (Austen, NA
Despite having her characters criticize Gothic novels as unrealistic, the implied author has sneakily supported Gothic novels by using their structure and validating several of their clichés.

Our suspicion of Catherine’s/the narrator’s opinions lead us to doubt the narratorial voice when it is distinct. What becomes clear, then, is that the narrator is a manipulative authorial persona who is biased towards her characters. Her constant ironisation of the conventions of Gothic novels show that she clearly disapproves of their conventions, and by commenting on Catherine’s deviation from the established narrative of Gothic novels she makes us realize that she is manipulating Catherine to get across a lesson about Gothic novels: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine… But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero her way” (Austen, *NA* 5;8, emphasis mine). A large part of the humour stems from the narrator trying her best to make Catherine into a typical heroine despite her apparent unsuitability: in doing this she provides an alternate, “everyday reality.” Upon the entrance of Henry

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35 There is no space to discuss this here, but there are a lot more ironies generated as the different voices in the novel contrast with one another: the narrator’s voice (where she is distinct from Catherine), ironises Henry’s views on women as misogynistic. Henry boasts to Catherine about his reading as he says he has entered Oxford (Austen, *NA* 78). The narrator picks up on this and mocks his egotism: “[There] is a portion of [men] too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire anything more in a woman than ignorance” (Austen, *NA* 81). Although Henry has been to Oxford, Catherine is the better reader. Upon reflection, after her initial horrified reaction as described in the previous paragraph, Catherine learns more of General Tilney’s character “to feel that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty” (Austen, *NA* 183). The superiority of Henry’s mind and his knowledge is mocked and destroyed.
 Tilney into the Lower Rooms, the narrator says that “fortune was more favourable to our heroine” (Austen, *NA* 14). It can scarcely been ignored that a few pages before, the narrator has insisted upon giving Catherine a hero by hook or by crook. The narrator’s manipulation itself, however, is ironised by the character of Isabella.

Isabella is similar to the narrator in that she attempts to trap Catherine in a Gothic fiction very much like the narrator’s. It can be said that Isabella and the narrator are competing to use Catherine as a character, the only difference being that the narrator got to her first. Isabella poses as Catherine’s best friend and tries to get Catherine to marry her brother (Austen, *NA* 104). The narrator has posed Eleanor Tilney as Catherine’s best friend and has got Catherine to marry Henry Tilney. Catherine suffers as much at the narrator’s hands as Isabella’s, firstly, by having the narrator’s chosen hero feed her with Gothic ideas, and then by having the narrator provide Gothic scenes for her to inhabit:

The night was stormy; the wind had been rising at intervals… it blew and rained violently. Catherine… listened to the tempest with sensations of awe; and, when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time she was really in an Abbey (Austen, *NA* 121, emphasis mine).

If the narrator has tailored the whole narrative to her purposes as Isabella has tried to manipulate Catherine for her purposes, how trustworthy, then, is she? Again, who is responsible for this parallel if not the implied author? But the parallel also implies that the implied author is not to be trusted. In fact, doubt of the implied author leads to a recognition of what I call the implied author’s bias, which, surprisingly, has not been noted very much in criticism: the bias lies in the fact that the narration mostly
focuses on telling Catherine’s thoughts (and where free indirect discourse is used, it almost exclusively blends with Catherine’s voice) while the views of other characters are told mainly through dialogue (this is the case with Isabella, Miss Tilney and Henry Tilney). We realize Isabella is a flat character, a parody of a Gothic heroine, simply because the implied author has not fleshed out her thoughts and feelings. Our empathy with Catherine and the narrator, on the other hand, generates sympathy for their actions and thoughts even when they are mistaken. Does the implied author want us to dislike Gothic novels by having a narrator and various characters realize that they are unrealistic? Or, since she ironises the narrator, is she trying to imply instead that Gothic novels are realistic? What could be the meaning behind the use of the character Isabella to ironise the implied author herself? What is the point in sensitizing us to the fact that Isabella is a flat character? Does she, in fact, want us to be sympathetic to Isabella as we are to the narrator and Catherine despite their faults?

One cannot tell. What is certain is that the authority of the implied author and the narrator is destroyed. The implied author and narrator have no more authority than the other characters in the novel. One is no more reliable than the other. We become aware that how we want to interpret the texts depends on our biases. We are put into the position of one of Austen’s characters who face trials in interpreting the world around them. We have to treat the characters as real people despite our knowledge of their fictionality: all views being equal, we cannot subordinate a character’s view to “the purpose of the narrator” or “the purpose of the implied author” on the basis that they are more reliable because they seem non-fictional. Our
view of whether the novel is pro-Gothic or anti-Gothic eventually depends on whether we decide that the sum total of evidence in the novel is for or against the Gothic, and this again depends on innumerable things unsaid about the critic: his political stances, his allegiances to various schools of criticism, etc. I have already cited Johnson and Mckillop as reading the text as pro-Gothic. However, the view of many critics, Griffin included, see the novel as claiming that “the real world is the non-fictional world; the ability to perceive reality is equated with ability to perceive fiction” (155). Thus, the text generates the infinite dialectic of irony. Thesis and anti-thesis are united as equals, this paradox and unmixable mix held together only by the form of fiction which can evoke both thesis and anti-thesis at the same time.

Mansfield Park

*Mansfield Park* is perhaps the most contentious of Austen’s novels. There has been much furor over Austen’s supposed support of its central character, Fanny Price, whom many critics hate. Virginia Woolf expects “Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price [to] bore us frankly… due to the fact that [Austen] is content to take it for granted that such characters and conduct are good without trying to see them in a fresh light for herself” (JAI 12). She considers this Austen’s only limitation: the times where Austen (in her view) refuses to be silent, and “[commits] herself to saying seriously that such things and such people are good…” (JAI 13). Somerset Maugham says that

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36 Marilyn Butler is also of this view that Catherine “abandons her error and humbly submits to objective reality” (70).
Fanny and Edmund “are intolerable prigs and all [his] sympathies go out to the unscrupulous, sprightly, and charming Henry and Mary Crawford” (462).

Once the reactions have occurred, however, the tendency is to ask why. David Lodge suggests that the “subtle and untiring employment of this vocabulary [of judgment], the exact fitting of value terms to events [in the novel]… have a rhetorical effect which we cannot long resist” (105). Through this vocabulary, Lodge argues, “we pick up the habit of evaluation” and become schooled into “[feeling] all along that Fanny was right” (105-106). Here, I think Lodge is beginning to get to the heart of the problem. Our determination of who makes these judgments about Fanny affects our perception of their reliability. The general instinct has been to attribute them to Jane Austen, writer. Thus Lodge says that our approval of Fanny must be unequivocal or “we should suspect Jane Austen of losing confidence in her moral scheme” (105). The attribution of the narrator’s voice to Jane Austen is why Lodge, Maugham and Woolf, among others, feel that Mansfield Park is didactic and prosing: like Mudrick, they see the world of the novel as “a world which the author intrudes into… and which she has engaged herself to affirm” (Mudrick 180). William Nelles’s recent study on narration in Austen’s novels sheds light on why so many critics have thought that Mansfield Park is didactic. He notes that “while the narrator of Mansfield Park does admit to being a writer, she adopts the familiar realistic pose that she can direct the presentation of a story, but not alter the fabula itself,” thus “approaching the rhetoric of omniscience” that we are so familiar with in many other novels (121). Northanger Abbey, he notes, “demands parody of the contemporary
delight in claims of narratorial omnipotence; but none of Austen’s other novels claim such a capacity” (122). In other words, *Northanger Abbey* is more forthright about parodying narrators: this is evident at the end of the novel when the narrator talks about “the tell-tale compression of pages… hastening together to perfect felicity” (Austen, *NA* 185). *Mansfield Park*, however, is not as consistently ironic about its narration.

If we examine Austen’s own responses to the novel, however, it is difficult to find evidence of this preachy attitude. In her letter to John Murray, she insists that *Mansfield Park* holds its own against what is most commonly regarded as her masterpiece, *Emma*: “The Authoress of *Emma* has no reason I think to complain of her treatment in [the Quarterly Review] – except in the total omission of *Mansfield Park*. – I cannot but be sorry that so clever a Man as the Reviewer of *Emma*, should consider it as unworthy of being noticed” (Austen, *A.Letters* 313). Perhaps *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* seem the two Austen novels most opposed to each other: the former is all brilliant wordplay, with a heroine who is as sprightly as Elizabeth Bennet, the latter is full of narratorial intrusions, short discourses on morality and a sickly, passive heroine. Even more surprisingly, perhaps, we can deduce from Austen’s letters that she intended Henry Crawford to be likable, which in turn suggests that Austen may have intended for the Crawford siblings to appear as attractive characters: “Henry [Austen] is going on with *Mansfield Park*; he admires H. Crawford—I mean properly—as a clever, pleasant Man” (*A.Letters* 257). Yet again in her letters she writes to Fanny Knight: “…pictures of perfection as you know make
me sick & wicked…” (A.Letters 335). If Anne Elliot “is almost too good for [Jane Austen],” then how can Fanny Price (infinitely more moral than Anne, if we trust the narrator) not make Jane Austen “sick & wicked” (Austen, A.Letters 335)?

How can one square the notion of Austen intentionally portraying the Crawfords as likable with the tedious moralizing of the narrator, who spends a good deal of time pointing out their faults? It seems that this tension between the likable Crawfords and the unlikable Fanny can only be resolved if we are open to the idea that the irony in Mansfield Park perhaps works similarly to the irony in Northanger Abbey despite the different form of the novels. If we compare the two texts, there are several differences in structure that might account for this. Firstly, the implied author’s bias is stronger in Northanger Abbey than Mansfield Park with regards to their protagonists: in the former we are privy almost exclusively to Catherine’s thoughts, but in the latter we are exposed more to the thoughts of other characters (through free indirect discourse), even though there still is a bias towards telling Fanny’s thoughts. Secondly, the narrator in Mansfield Park is a lot less self-reflexive about the form of the novel than the narrator in Northanger Abbey. Thirdly, the narrator in Mansfield Park (where she can be distinguished from the characters) supports Fanny’s opinions more than the narrator in Northanger Abbey supports Catherine’s.

The net effect of these differences means that irony in Mansfield Park is more subtle than irony in Northanger Abbey. I argue that as in Northanger Abbey, free indirect discourse blends the narrator’s voice with the heroine’s (thus, the vocabulary
of judgment that Lodge mentions might be part of Fanny’s vocabulary, slanting us towards her point of view). However, in this case, free indirect discourse allows us access to the thoughts of other characters as well. This opening of the consciousnesses of other characters, together with their voices in dialogue, operates to give us a much stronger sense of their personalities. We are able to empathize with other characters in addition to empathizing with Fanny, and this throws Fanny’s opinions into doubt. In addition to this, textual evidence often contradicts Fanny’s opinion, further ironising her. Again, because the narrator’s voice and Fanny’s are sometimes indistinguishable, the narrator is often ironised along with Fanny, and this causes us to doubt her voice even when it is distinct. Unlike the narrator of *Northanger Abbey*, however, the narrator of *Mansfield Park* does not purport to have control over the story, and I think this has caused all the difference in the attitude of the critics with regard to the two novels. Without the narrator as author figure showing her overt manipulation of the text, one is a lot less conscious of any manipulation of the text going on either at the level of the narrator or the implied author. Habit takes over and we are more inclined to view the narrator as a typical omniscient narrator who extracts morals from a “real” story that she has chosen to narrate to us.

Perhaps one of the notable things about Fanny Price is that her character, when we examine it, shows huge flaws, but the narrator refuses to point them out. From the beginning of the novel, as Joyce Jenkins says, “she sits, making negative
moral judgments about the actions of others, while doing nothing herself” (346). Only just after getting to know Miss Crawford, Fanny is already judging:

[Fanny] was a little surprised that [Edmund] could spend so many hours with Miss Crawford, and not see more of the sort of fault he had already observed… Edmund was fond of speaking to her of Miss Crawford, but he seemed to think it enough that the admiral had since been spared; and she scrupled to point out her own remarks to him, lest it should appear like ill-nature (Austen, MP 56, emphasis mine).

This passage comes right after another passage in free indirect discourse telling us Miss Crawford’s thoughts: “[Without Edmund] being a man of the world or an elder brother, without any of the arts of flattery or the gaieties of small talk, he began to be agreeable to her… There was a charm, perhaps, in his sincerity, his steadiness, his integrity… She did not think very much about it, however; he pleased her for the present…” (Austen, MP 56). In the first passage, the vocabulary of judgment that Lodge noted is already at work on poor Mary Crawford. Her tendency to speak her mind, which leads her to freely criticize her uncle, is judged as “indecorous” and “very ungrateful” by Fanny (Austen, MP 54). Fanny therefore sees Mary Crawford’s open nature as “a sort of fault”. The contrast between the two passages, however, shows Fanny to a disadvantage. Firstly, though Mary Crawford is materialistic, she is not heartless: she begins to care for Edmund despite his (comparatively) unpalatable social status. As for Fanny herself, her refusal to tell Edmund what she thinks could come across as scheming, depending on how one looks at it. Mary Crawford speaks her mind without trying to put on a front that would be attractive to Edmund; Fanny on the other hand is always doing her best to put herself in a good light. Later on in
the novel, when Edmund worries that Miss Crawford might find winter at Mansfield
dull, Fanny again holds back her comments: “Fanny could have said a great deal, but
it was safer to say nothing, and leave untouched all Miss Crawford’s resources, her
accomplishments, her spirits, her friends, lest it should betray her into any
observations seemingly unhandsome” (Austen, *MP* 166). For someone whom Edward
describes as “firm as a rock in her own principles,” Fanny’s refusal to speak out reeks
of irony: it is precisely because she tailors her responses only to Edmund’s responses
(constantly reaffirming his opinions) that Edmund thinks she is a paragon of virtue
(Austen, *MP* 290).

The narratorial voice, then, is ambivalent precisely because it blends into the
consciousness of the main characters; for instance, the narrator’s voice blends into
Edmund’s here: “Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged
Fanny’s mental superiority” (Austen, *MP* 388). But from the narrative, we know that
this is not the case; Fanny has different values, but she is not necessarily mentally
superior to Mary Crawford.\(^\text{37}\) Edmund’s view of Fanny as faultless is thus ironised,
just as Fanny ironised his view of Mary Crawford. The narratorial voice, therefore,
which claims Fanny as “hers” and furthermore describes the marriage of Fanny and
Edward Bertram as one based on “true love,” throws into question the very notion of
love that it describes (given that Fanny, by the narrator’s own account, would have
been disposed towards fancying Henry Crawford) (Austen, *MP* 380; 389; 385). This

\(^{37}\) Mary Crawford is right about clergymen being indolent – the example of Mr. Grant proves her right
(Austen, *MP* 40). She recognises Edmund’s kindness and Fanny’s kindness too, even her brother’s
vanity.
is especially true if we consider the value of constancy promoted by Anne Elliott in 
*Persuasion*.

As Jenkins notes, a careful examination of Fanny yields three major flaws in her character: passivity, selfishness and a dour priggishness (355). Evidence in the novel shows this to be so: we know she is unfair to the Crawfords and terribly self-centred. The evidence in the novel, through ironising Fanny’s thoughts in free indirect discourse, throws into doubt the narrator’s voice when it can be distinguished. When the narrator’s voice is distinct from Fanny’s, she attempts to mitigate Fanny’s faults: “She could just find selfishness enough to wonder whether Edmund had written to Miss Crawford before this summons came, but no sentiment dwelt long with her, that was not purely affectionate and disinterestedly anxious” (Austen, *MP* 352). Fanny does not spend much time indulging sentiments that are disinterested--she only spends most of the novel worrying about Edmund’s relationship with Mary Crawford and dwelling on the latter’s flaws. The narrator, though adopting the pose of omniscience, is clearly mistaken. Her bias towards Fanny is ironised and highlighted. Similarly, the narrator is ironised through her own narration when she tries to wrap up the novel: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort…” (Austen, *MP* 380). The narrator means Fanny’s comfort, for almost everyone else suffers, as Claudia Johnson notes (Johnson, cited in Jenkins 351). It is arguable that Crawford (like Isabella) is a figure that ironises the narrator’s controlling hand too. Like the narrator he sets up
traps for Maria Bertram and then punishes her when she falls into them. Fanny’s personality, on the other hand, is also praised and rewarded by Crawford. Since Crawford gets himself into a pretty pickle by the end of the novel, it might be wise to not to take the narrator’s words without any reservations.

In fact, there is little in the novel that actually supports Fanny’s views. We have already seen how she is selfish and manipulative – then she doubts the capacity of both Henry Crawford and his sister for feeling:

There was every thing in the world against their being serious, but [Crawford’s] words and manner… how could she have excited serious attachment in a man who had seen so many… how could it be supposed that his sister, with all her high and worldly notions of matrimony, would be forwarding anything of a serious nature in such a quarter? Nothing could be more unnatural in either (Austen, MP 252).

If Fanny is so often wrong, it is no wonder that most people have taken a strong dislike to the character. Evidence in the novel often turns the irony on Fanny’s views. The implied author seems to have arranged it such that we take Fanny’s views (and the narrator’s) with a pinch of salt.

It seems that the novel inclines us to be sympathetic to Fanny not so much through the narrator’s views or Fanny’s own merits but rather the oppressed situation that she is in. It is true that Fanny is priggish and judgmental, but it is also true that she is simply repeating the violence that has been inflicted on her by Mrs. Norris. A misstep from her strict moral code could lead to a drastic change in Fanny’s circumstances in life. Her habit of keeping silent is partly due to her lack of empowerment in the family: little value is placed upon her opinions. Fanny is a neurotic, and being neurotic always implies a degree of narcissism (a very Lacanian
worry about how the self appears in the eye of the other). Her opinions are often wrong not because her powers of observation are flawed, but because she is too harsh in judging people, having been judged too harshly herself: concerning the Crawfords, for instance, she is right in noting that they are worldly and materialistic, but she presumes that these attributes preclude a capacity for genuine feeling. We must be slanted towards Fanny’s views in order to understand how the oppression at Mansfield has caused her irreparable emotional injury. If we are too harsh on Fanny, we simply reduplicate not only her faults but also the oppression of the whole Bertram family environment.

As readers, therefore, we vacillate between empathizing with Fanny and with the other characters. We are made to endorse her opinions through free indirect discourse or the narrator’s opinions. The amount of evidence in the novel, however, that ironises both Fanny and the narrator causes us to see that they do make mistakes in judgment. For us to entirely dismiss Fanny’s opinions, however, would make us the subject of irony: we simply re-enact the violence that Mrs. Norris has subjected Fanny to. Fanny is often correct, as I have said, but only to a certain extent. Our empathy with other characters, together with our understanding of Fanny’s situation in the novel, is not enough to allow us to say any one character has an opinion that is wholly correct. Much of it depends on our own stances: for instance, how we judge Crawford’s feelings and behaviour towards Fanny much depends on our own views regarding sexuality and relationships. The question is the degree to which we feel sympathetic towards Crawford because of his genuine feelings for Fanny and the
degree to which we disapprove of his treatment of Maria. In *Mansfield Park*, it seems, textuality takes a backseat to a personalized response to the characters. It is true that the authority of the narrator is destroyed, as with *Northanger Abbey*, but *Mansfield Park* seems less concerned with the principles of its own construction than with enacting a sort of realism for its readers: having them perform the difficult task of judging characters as they would react to people in real life.

**Conclusion**

I hope I have managed to provide a new conceptualization of Austen’s aesthetics that takes into account and explains some of the stylistic features of her work, in particular her use of irony. The comparison with Woolf shows that if Austen’s irony is to be understood, it has to be understood in service of realism. This in turn opens a new understanding of Austen’s realism which might be equally interesting to explore: the performative aspect of her realism. No longer can we regard Austen as the harmless spinster who faithfully replicates whatever she sees around her “[on] the little Bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory…” (Austen, *A.Letters* 323). Her realism is not merely mimetic: it is also performative. We are pulled into the world on that little bit of ivory and are forced to fend for ourselves the best we can.

I hope, too, to have explained a certain tendency in Austen’s critical canon. The polarization of the views on her work, I think, can be attributed to the way her irony evokes very personal responses from her critics. It undercuts the notion of the critic as a detached and impartial observer who can explicate the text objectively. Although irony is essentially a critical orientation, it is not, as Kierkegaard implies, a
phenomenon that relies on critical distance. Quite the opposite: the false assumption that Austen’s irony is stable often results in such an understanding of irony. The elimination of distance between the reader and the characters in a novel, as I have shown in Woolf and Austen, is what in fact generates any sort of ironic distance in the texts. The reader here is an active participant in the ironic movement: he is subject to irony in the same way as one of the characters in the novel. As the reader gets pulled from one pole of the dialectic to another, he realises his movement between the two poles, and only from this realisation can he stand apart from the movement to decide what he likes and dislikes in a text. Thinking of irony in Austen’s texts undeceives us of the notion that we, as readers, can ever be only intellectual about a text: feeling is always involved in the thinking process, however we might like to deny that. This being the case, Austen’s text performs irony on the reader: the reader is no longer able to maintain a position of superiority to the characters.

The dilemma that faces the readers can be compared to the problems that the characters in the text face. Thus, it brings into question the authority of the critic who would claim to be able to explicate the text from a distance. In fact, I would like to suggest that the more trendy, “critical” questions regarding a text (politics, history, etc) are only answered through the “unsophisticated” intuitive and emotional reaction of a reader to a text’s characters and plot. For instance, we can only discover Austen’s view on the education of women in her novels by examining her treatment of characters in her novels. But I think that critics tend to forget that our examination of her novel is ultimately ours: to an extent dependent upon our own emotional
reaction to the novel, which is in turn determined by things like our political views.

We would like to maintain the illusion that we can objectively discuss the content of a text. However, in this view, as Terry Eagleton says, “what gets left out is the literariness of the work” (3, emphasis his). We ignore (or pretend to ignore) the affect of a work of literature in favour of excavating its content, but this affect is the very thing that distinguishes a work of fiction from other sorts of texts. I hope that in my explication of irony in Austen I have placed emphasis on the mechanisms in the text that make reading Austen a special and exciting experience. The pain of a dilemma, which the reader is forced to face, is at the same time a liberating phenomenon because the reader is freed to make his own decisions. Irony thus re-enacts existential angst: it can truly be said that we live again through the experience of reading a great book.
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