

A Literary Stylistics Study on Verbal Humor in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract: *Literary stylistics is defined by its object and purpose of study, a school of literature that aims to elucidate the thematic significance and aesthetic value of literary issues. Literary stylistics, as a branch of stylistics, is a combination of linguistics and literary criticism. Literary criticism focuses on interpretation, while linguistics attaches importance to form. Literary stylistics pays attention to both interpretation and form, which is conducive to better language study. Jane Austen, comparable to Shakespeare, is one of the greatest novelists in the history of English literature. As a master of language, she wrote many books, *Pride and Prejudice* is one of her masterpieces. It has also been adapted into several TV series and films. Among them, English Rose Keira Knightley played Elizabeth is very impressive. For a long time, many critics and writers have studied this work, but there is relatively little research on its style, so this paper studies this film in terms of vocabulary, rhetoric, and syntax. In addition, this paper attempts to interpret the humorous expressions in *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of literary stylistics, to analyze the women's awakening consciousness implied by the humorous words, and to shed light on contemporary female values.*

Keywords: *Literary Stylistics, *Pride and Prejudice*, Verbal Humor, Women's Awakening*

1. Introduction

Just as Professor Wang Dechun (1987) said that literature is the art of language, so language is the essential element of literature. In addition, linguistics is deemed as a study of language. Therefore, literature and linguistics are inevitably intertwined in the course of development. However, in the past, literature critics merely focused on the literature effect in the works, overlooking the specific language rules. Similarly, linguistics only pay attention to language unit and language phenomenon. Nevertheless, because of the requirement of solving the deficiency of literature and linguistics study, we combined literature critics and linguistics. Then literature stylistics came out and has been boosting the development of language study. According to Professor Liu Shisheng (2003), linguistics focuses on the study of form, and its essential characteristic is description while literary criticism pays more attention to content research, and its greatest charm is interpretation. Literary stylistics is an interdisciplinary subject of linguistics and literary criticism. It attaches importance to both the description of linguistics and the interpretation of literary criticism. Moreover, according to Professor Shen Dan (2000), literary stylistics is defined as a subject that bridges linguistics and literary criticism, and focuses on how the author expresses and reinforces the thematic and artistic meaning through the choice of language (p.24).

Pride and Prejudice is a masterpiece of Jane Austen's love and marriage novels. The novel uses witty, humorous language and meticulous and profound brushwork to describe a manor marriage picture scroll. The plot twists and turns and the language is humorous and spicy, with unique ideas and insights. In addition, the novel has been made into TV series and movies. Of all the TV and film versions, the one starring Keira Knightley is the most shocking and impressive. Furthermore, there is plenty of British humor in the film, which is perhaps the quintessence of British literature and film. More importantly, there are varieties of humorous expressions in this famous film that indicate women's awakening, which is different from other literary works like *The Awakening*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Little Women*, and *Jane Eyre*.

Therefore, this paper aims to make a literary stylistics study on verbal humor in *Pride and Prejudice* and analyze the degree of women's awakening revealed by humorous language. The case study is categorized into three aspects including lexical analysis (vocabulary), semantic analysis (figures of speech: hyperbole, irony, contrast), and syntactic analysis (sentence length).

2. Literary Stylistic

2.1 Origin and Development of Literary Stylistics

Stylistics in western countries has been undertaken for more than two thousand years while literary stylistics is relatively late. Anglo-American literary stylistics originated and developed under the combined influence of developments in modern linguistics, Anglo-American practical criticism, French structuralism, the Russian Formalist School, and the Prague Linguistic Circle. Marked by the use of linguistic models in the interpretation of literary texts, this is a discipline mediating between literary criticism and linguistics of different levels and in various forms (Shen Dan, 2017, p2-3). In addition, L. Spitzer is regarded as the founder of literary stylistics. And in his opinion, stylistics is seen as a bridge between linguistics and the history of literature to study the mind of the author and the history of some national culture.

2.2 Definition of Literary Stylistics

According to Professor Liu Shisheng (2003), linguistics focuses on the study of form, and its essential characteristic is description while literary criticism pays more attention to content research, and its greatest charm is interpretation. Literary stylistics is an interdisciplinary subject of linguistics and literary criticism. It attaches importance to both the description of linguistics and the interpretation of literary criticism. However, it is not as elusive as the interpretation of literary criticism, unlike the description of linguistics pursuing being objective, advocating science. According to the current information, the research scope of literary stylistics can be roughly divided into three aspects: Chinese stylistics, Western stylistics, and Western stylistics in the foreign language circle of China.

Moreover, in this paper, literary stylistics is defined as a subject that bridges linguistics and literary criticism, and focuses on how the author expresses and reinforces the thematic and artistic meaning through the choice of language (ShenDan, 2000, p24). Literary stylistics has dual directions. The task of literary stylistics rests on two aspects. The first aspect is to provide literary critics with a set of methods and procedures so that they can study literary works and explain literary phenomena in a more scientific and rational way. Another task is to interpret literary works and help readers comprehend and enjoy the stylistic meaning and value through description and analysis of the language chosen by the author (Zhao Xiufeng, 2005, p78).

Furthermore, literary stylistics is a discipline mediating between literary criticism and linguistics. The purpose of a stylistician is to explicate how the writer's verbal manipulation produces or contributes to the total meaning of the work, based on a linguistic knowledge of the workings of language. With the aim of supporting or promoting literary interpretation, literary stylisticians operate along the lines of traditional common-sense based interpretation of literary significance, focusing on linguistic choices which are thematically or artistically motivated. This intermediary discipline differs from the traditional approaches to literary style, for it is characterized by linguistic observations and insights, and by analytic and systematic knowledge of linguistic norms (Carter ed. 1982, p 4-7).

3. Jane Austen's Humor in *Pride and Prejudice*

3.1 Definition of Humor

According to Oxford Advanced English - Chinese Dictionary (ninth edition), humor is 1) [uncountable] the quality in sth. That makes it funny or amusing; the ability to laugh at things that are amusing; 2) [countable, uncountable] (formal) the state of your feelings or mind at a particular time; 3) [countable] (old use) one of the four liquids that were thought in the past to be in a person's body and to influence health and character. For this study, the first definition is adopted, and the humor to be discussed in *Pride and Prejudice* will be used in a broad sense to embrace whatever language that amuses. Special attention will be paid to vocabulary, irony, hyperbole, and various other witty devices. Moreover, according to the different forms of expression, humor can be divided into these types: humorous music, humorous pictures, humorous action, and humorous language. Humorous language refers to the use of language means to reflect a sense of humor. Based on language, it uses language as a medium to express the author's thoughts in light and witty tones according to special contexts, such as sarcasm, puns, exaggeration, etc., so as to achieve far-reaching artistic effects. In addition, humorous language involves a lot of content, such as social concepts, religious beliefs, cultural customs, etc.

English culture includes values, displays, and prejudices, and humorous language can reflect all of these contents. Therefore, if you don't understand English humor, you can't master English. Furthermore, there are many types of humorous language, including pure verbal communication, mixed verbal and non-verbal communication, cultural reference and use of stereotypes, and multilingual communication.

In addition, British humor is a general term used to describe the comedic language or actions of the United Kingdom and its former colonies. Sometimes, however, this kind of humor can seem strange and incomprehensible to non-Commonwealth people. For example, some people are not familiar with some British slang and some people are well-known in the UK but unknown in the world. Many British TV programs showing British humor have become very popular in the world. It becomes a good way to show British culture. Strong themes of irony and self-deprecation run through British humor. The emotional component of humor is often hidden below the surface, making it sometimes difficult for people from other cultures to feel it. British humor deals with all subjects and almost no subject is taboo. For instance, in the famous British TV series *Sherlock*, there is a lot of dialogue that shows British humor and makes people laugh. Sherlock Holmes said to Watson that you have lowered the IQ of the whole street, which indicates the humor and charm of Sherlock Holmes and also shows what is British humor from a lexical level. Moreover, there are many British humors in figures of speech. For example, why is England the wettest country? Because the queen has reigned there for years! This example uses a pun to show British humor because 'reign' and 'rain' have exactly similar pronunciations.

3.2 Verbal Humor in Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen is considered one of the supreme artists of the novel. Her reputation may find its best manifestation in T. B. Macaulay's assertion that 'Shakespeare has had neither equal or second, but among the writers who, ... have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud' (Brain ed. 1987, p 20). J. H. Lewes followed up this stunning claim, announcing that Jane Austen is 'a prose Shakespeare' (Idem, p20). Another insight is Goldwin Smith's reflection on Jane Austen and Shakespeare: Both are creative; both are purely artistic; both have the marvelous power of endowing the products of their imagination with life, as it were, apart from their own. Each holds up a clear and undistorting mirror—Shakespeare to the moral universe, Jane Austen to the little world in which she lived.

Pride and Prejudice is a masterpiece of Jane Austen's love and marriage novels. The novel uses witty, humorous language and meticulous and profound brushwork to describe a manor marriage picture scroll. The plot twists and turns and the language is humorous and spicy, with unique ideas and insights. Focusing on family and love life, it makes the readers deeply ponder the reality of human nature and society in the irony, exaggeration, and seemingly perverse and inappropriate language.

In addition, the novel has been made into TV series and movies. Of all the TV and film versions, the one starring Keira Knightley is the most shocking and impressive. She performed Elizabeth's character and temperament, vividly and successfully. *Pride and Prejudice* is a romantic film based on Jane Austen's novel of the same name and was released by Focus Features in the United Kingdom on September 16, 2005. The film maximally retains the essence of the original, inheriting the classic while cleverly integrating many modern elements, beautiful and enduring, which is a rare adaptation.

In this film, there are varieties of British verbal humor expressed through some special vocabularies, sentences, and figures of speech including hyperbole irony, etc.

3.3 Women's Awakening in Verbal Humor

Different from other literary works, like *The Awakening*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Little Women*, and *Jane Eyre*, Jane Austen uses humorous language to reflect the awakening of women. The dialogues between the main characters reflect the different personalities of Elizabeth, Charlotte, Mrs. Bennet, and Lady Catherine, and their attitudes towards marriage and class. And most of the dialogue is done humorously, making the audience laugh and think at the same time. Through analyzing these humorous dialogues, we can understand different characters' personalities, views on marriage, outlook on life, and values, and further analyze the degree of women's awakening.

Jane Austen lived from the late 18th century to the early 19th century in England. At that time, women's sense of independence and equality had not fully awakened, especially in rural towns far away

from the hustle and bustle. Most people believed that the most important cause in a woman's life was to marry a good husband, which was also reflected in Jane Austen's works. However, Jane Austen never married, and writing was her only career. Living in a society dominated by male and patriarchal power, her works all started from the perspective of women, with strong feminist color, and her heroines were wise and rational, no less than men. Therefore, in a sense, from the perspective of Jane Austen's works and her personal life, she brought challenges to the traditional female role positioning at that time. From today's perspective, she can be said to be the enlightenment of women's awakening.

4. Case Analysis

Although literary stylistics relies on the experience of interpretation, instinct, and insight, it objects to the sole reliance on instinct and argues for the necessity of close reading, claiming that only by adopting modern linguistic theories and approaches can we fully comprehend the function of language and describe the language feature exactly and systematically. This is one of the basic differences between literary stylistics and new criticism (Shen Dan, 1994, p.7).

To put it specifically Professor Liu Shisheng (2002) sets forth a checklist for stylistic analysis in fiction, which covers the following aspects (1) Lexical mode (usage of words) (2) Grammatical Structure (3) Context structure (arrangement of sentences and paragraphs) (4) Foregrounded features, including rhetoric (5) Mode of style deviance (6) Discourse mode (7) Narrative point of view (8) Expression mode of discourse (9) Expression mode of idea (10) Style of author (11) Style of works In this paper, due to the limited time, only some aspects at the lexical, semantic level, and syntactic levels will be explored. The following part will be devoted to an analysis of the specific linguistic devices in the film, *Pride and Prejudice*.

4.1 Lexical Analysis (Vocabulary)

Words are closely related to style, which is often defined by those who study English style as "the right word in the right place." (Wang, 1987) Writers usually consider how to use appropriate words to express the subject idea. And vocabulary is the most basic unit of language, and writers usually choose different words to express their views. The film *Pride and Prejudice* has a lot to pay attention to on the lexical level.

Example 1: You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves.

Analysis: At the beginning of the film, through the dialogue between Mr. Bennett and his wife, we can see Mr. Bennett's sense of humor and Mrs. Bennett's traditional view of marriage. Mrs. Bennet wanted her daughters to befriend the new rich Mr. Bingley, but she was annoyed at her husband's teasing of his daughter. The word "nerve" vividly shows the British sense of humor. This humorous dialogue also implies Mrs. Bennett's rigid view of marriage, believing that her daughters will be happy if they marry a rich man, but in fact, there are many factors affecting marital happiness. It can be seen that Mrs. Bennett is still influenced by the traditional idea that women need to be attached to men, without the consciousness of women's awakening.

4.2 Semantic Analysis (Figures of Speech)

In literary works, the use of rhetorical devices is very common, and the use of a variety of rhetorical devices can significantly enhance the effect of speech and sentences. Jane Austen is a master of language and she uses rhetorical techniques freely and flexibly. She may use all kinds of figures of speech, but in this paper, I will focus on three of them: hyperbole, irony, and contrast.

4.2.1 Hyperbole

Leech believes that the deviation of deep structure is a semantic deviation, which is the language effect related to the abnormal cognitive meaning of a language unit. Hyperbole is one of them and it means the exaggerated use of spiritual feeling to express meaning, which can often achieve the purpose of emphasis and produce the effect of emotional irony or humor.

Example 2: I would not dance with him for all of the Derbyshire. Let alone the miserable half.

Analysis: At the ball, the conversation between Elizabeth and her sister reveals Elizabeth's attitude towards Mr. Darcy, as well as her views on marriage. In Elizabeth's opinion, Mr. Darcy was insolent and did not want to dance with him, still less to please him than the other sisters. Elizabeth has her

ideas and opinions, and she has her criteria for love, not just based on material wealth. All these show that Elizabeth is a woman with knowledge and her ideas, who dares to break through the shackles of traditional marriage concepts and has an awakening of female consciousness. These two sentences use exaggerated rhetorical devices to show Elizabeth's independence, neither servile nor overbearing character vividly. The humorous dialogue shows Elizabeth's awakening of self-consciousness and clear understanding of love and marriage. In addition, her ardent pursuit of marriage based on equality and respect demonstrates her awakening of independent femininity.

Example 3: I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better; for, as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party.

Analysis: When Mrs. Bennett insisted that Mr. Bennett visit Mr. Bentley, Mr. Bennett didn't think it was necessary. Here, Mr. Bennett exaggerates Mrs. Bennett's beauty. In fact, all five daughters are younger and more beautiful than Mrs. Bennett. Mr. Bennett made his statement all the more ridiculous by deliberately distorting the truth and using it to draw an inference that sounded impossible. The dialogue between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Bennett shows Mr. Bennett's humor and wit and also reflects Mrs. Bennett's eagerness to find a rich family for her daughter to marry. She is still deeply bound by traditional marriage and class concepts and has no intention to wake up, which makes people think that she is stupid and ridiculous.

Example 4: Of music! Then I pray speak aloud. It is of all subjects my delight. I must have my share in the conversation, if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England, I suppose, who have more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient.

Analysis: Exaggeration is comical when it turns into boasting, and when the bragger is obviously far removed from what he is boasting about, as Lady Catherine was. This grandiose remark portrays Lady Catherine's pompous and self-important character to the best of its ability, and as it is difficult for the reader to think so highly of Lady Catherine, the comic effect of the exaggeration is highlighted. At the same time, these sentences also reflect Lady Catherine's view of music as a measure of women's talent, rather than reading books. It also reflects that Lady Catherine is bound by the inherent concept of education and class, and does not attach importance to reading to enrich her brain. Therefore, Lady Catherine and Elizabeth's views on female education are in sharp contrast. Elizabeth loves learning from the bottom of her heart and longs for knowledge. In the face of people's stupid judgment, she also showed great disgust, and she showed her good sense of learning and a strong sense of humor in the dialogue with others. Elizabeth expressed more than once: "In addition to mastering music, singing, painting, women should also have some real talent, read more books, and be more intelligent." She regards women's learning ability as the noble character of women, which collides with the negative view of women's intelligence at that time and highlights her awareness of female development. She always believes that women should improve themselves and enhance their abilities through study. Reading is also an important factor in making women more attractive and charming.

4.2.2 Irony

Irony is also a kind of distortion to achieve the purpose of emphasis, it is to achieve the effect of irony or humor through the orthographic or ironic orthographic. The use of irony is one of the traditions of British literature and film, including many famous works. The irony used by Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, is directed not at the evil forces but at the common people with one shortcoming or another, so the overall effect is humorous.

Example 5: Oh, believe me, no one would suspect your manners to be rehearsed.

Analysis: The funny characters add a lot to the humor of the whole film. Take Mr. Collins, for example. Mr. Collins is a poser, an egotistical man who grovels before money and power. It was ironic to be a poser at the Bennett house but to be a sycophant at Lady Catherine's. Dinner at the Bennets' house showed every sign of superiority. Elizabeth disliked him so much that she made a mockery of him. Furthermore, When Elizabeth rejected his proposal, the self-important Collins assumed that women would always reject the first proposal. Collins' formal proposal left the audience in stitches. Mr. Collins's absurdity and foolishness contrast sharply with Elizabeth's wit and humor. It also reflects Elizabeth's character, her view of marriage, and her view of class. Elizabeth is independent, pursues freedom and equality, does not admire power, lively and brave. She longs for a marriage based on mutual respect, freedom, and equality, rather than the pursuit of wealth and attachment to men. Moreover, she is clear-headed and independent and does not fall in love with a person for wealth and

status.

4.2.3 Contrast

The contrastive technique is a common expression technique in literary creation. Contrast is to have obvious differences, contradictions, and opposition, have different characteristics of the two sides arranged together, contrast and comparison of expression techniques. The contrast technique is to put the opposite meaning or things, or two aspects of things together for comparison so that readers can distinguish between good and bad, distinguish between right and wrong. The contrastive technique in writing is to place both sides of the contradiction in things, phenomena, and processes under certain conditions so that they can be concentrated in complete artistic unity and form a complementary comparison and echo relationship. The use of this technique is conducive to fully displaying the contradictions of things, highlighting the essential characteristics of the things being expressed, and strengthening the artistic effect and appeal of the article. In the film, *Pride and Prejudice*, there are varieties of contrasts, and due to the limit of time, I will analyze some of them which are relatively typical.

Example 6: Elizabeth: Charlotte! Charlotte: My dear Lizzie. I've come here to tell you the news. Mr. Collins and I are...engaged. Elizabeth: Engaged? Charlotte: Yes. Elizabeth: To be married? Charlotte: What other kind of engaged is there?

Analysis: After Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins' proposal, Mr. Collins turns around and asks Charlotte to marry him. Charlotte says yes and tells Elizabeth, which is a comedic scene. In addition, this scene is a very typical contrast, reflecting Elizabeth and Charlotte's completely different views on marriage. Charlotte was only after material marriage, and though she did not love Mr. Collins at all, she agreed to marry him. Elizabeth wanted a marriage based on equality and mutual respect, based on love. It also reflects the degree of the awakening of Charlotte and Elizabeth. Like most women at that time, Charlotte only pursued materialistic marriage and became the appendage of men without female awakening consciousness. However, what Elizabeth wanted was freedom and equality in marriage, mutual respect, and an awakening of women's consciousness, which still has enlightenment for today's women in choosing a spouse.

4.3 Syntactic Analysis (Sentence Length)

Different sentence patterns are used in literature, some long and some short. Long sentences and short sentences each have their function. The effect of short sentences: (1) emphasize the effect and highlight the expression of emotion. (2) sentence style is lively, concise, with a strong sense of rhythm, consistent with the style of the original text. (3) the sentence pattern is neat, the rhythm is clear, the rhyme is harmonious, the music is beautiful, and the reading is catchy. (4) combination of long and short sentences, lively sentence patterns, patchwork, with a sense of rhythm. (5) the language image, has a very graphic sense, and strong expression. The film *Pride and Prejudice* also uses a lot of short sentences to show humor.

Example 7: My goodness, did you see her hem? Six inches deep in mud. She looked positively mediaeval.

Analysis: These words were spoken to Mr. Darcy by Mr. Bingley's sister. After Elizabeth's sister Jane fell ill, Elizabeth went to Bingley's house in the rain to see her and got muddy. There was a humorous irony in what Mr. Bingley's sister said. This reflects the traditional view of women of Mr. Bingley's sister, who thinks that women should behave properly and be ladylike and looks down on Elizabeth's rude behavior. But in Elizabeth's opinion, women should not only behave well and dress well but also be independent and read more books. This shows that Mr. Bingley's sister is still bound by the traditional feminine view and does not wake up.

5. Conclusion

Since the appearance of literary stylistics, it has been booming in the language field. Literary stylistics is the bridge between literature critics and stylistics. In addition, literary stylistics has dual directions. According to Professor Zhao Xiufeng (2005), the task of literary stylistics rests on two aspects. The first aspect is to provide literary critics with a set of methods and procedures so that they can study literary works and explain literary phenomena in a more scientific and rational way. Another task is to interpret literary works and help readers comprehend and enjoy the stylistic meaning and

value through description and analysis of the language chosen by the author (p.78).

Jane Austen is considered 'a prose Shakespeare', which indicates her huge reputation of her. The lines in the film show that Jane Austen is a wordsmith. In this film, there are varieties of British verbal humor expressed through some special vocabularies, sentences, and figures of speech including hyperbole, irony, contrast, etc. In addition, varieties of humor expressions show one of the themes of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is women's awakening. Through analyzing these humorous dialogues, we can understand different characters' personalities, views on marriage, outlook on life, and values, and further analyze the degree of women's awakening. Therefore, in a sense, from the perspective of Jane Austen's works and her personal life, she brought challenges to the traditional female role positioning at that time. From today's perspective, she can be said to be the enlightenment of women's awakening.

However, due to the limitation of time and the author's incompetence, this paper may lack theoretical depth and its research process may be not so strong. Therefore, this paper needs improvement in the following aspects. Firstly, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* also has many aspects worth studying in literary stylistics, which cannot be analyzed in detail in this paper due to the limited knowledge and time of the author. Secondly, the author needs to read and write more to improve her academic writing, so that she can better express her thoughts in English. The author of the paper hopes her study in the field would be thought-provoking and draw the attention of some scholars.

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