Humor in *Pride and Prejudice*

The Role of Humor in Austen’s Novel of Development

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“Oh! certainly,” cried his faithful assistant, “no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half–desired.” (Austen 35)

This detailed, exaggerated description of societal (and one might say superficial) expectations of the ‘ideal’ woman during the eighteenth century is a perfect example of Jane Austen’s use of humor and irony in her probably best known novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Renowned for the use of those modes in describing her characters’ faults and follies and society in general, Austen has been both associated with a new humorous authorial category of the eighteenth century, that of “the wit”, and with what was seen as the typically female genre of the novel (Raskin 527-528, 539; Greenblatt 27). Her novels have been, among other perspectives, discussed by critics in light of feminism (e.g. Castellanos; Fraiman; Kirkham; McDonnell) and genre theory, especially the Bildungsroman (Ellis; Moretti; McDonnell). Building on scholarship which views Austen’s novels as female Bildungsroman¹ – that is, which explore the development of female characters within the constraints of patriarchal society (Ellis; McDonnell) – this

¹ Some critics argue that the development of women during Austen’s time was restricted in such a manner as to preclude the possibility of the existence of a female Bildungsroman, the Bildungsroman usually demanding some sort of development of the protagonist often achieved through education and travels – possibilities not open to women in a patriarchal society of the time (e.g. Pratt).
thesis examines the significance of Austen’s use of humor in considering *Pride and Prejudice* as a Bildungsroman. The thesis argues that, just as in the citation above, humor is essential to the developmental and socio-critical thrust of Austen’s novel. The argument draws on humor theory to examine the role of humor, both on the level of the protagonist’s development and on the level of narration, and aims to show that the use of humor in this Bildungsroman plays an integral part in the representation of a controversial feminist societal critique.

The Bildungsroman and Humor

As a genre the Bildungsroman, at times called the novel of development, novel of formation or education, lacks a clear definition (Maier 317). Although Franco Moretti, for example, discusses the classical Bildungsroman and its features in his seminal study *The Way of the World* (1987), he avoids providing a single, summarizing definition. This is also the case for Paul Lewis who discusses humor in fictions of development in *Comic Affects: interdisciplinary approaches to humor in literature* (1989 ch. 3). Nevertheless critics seem to generally agree upon the fact that the genre emerged with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795), which has come to describe the general features of a classical Bildungsroman (Ellis 23; Lewis 78; Maier 318; Moretti 3). Wilhem Dilthey’s discussion of Goethe’s classical Bildungsroman in his *Das Leben Schleiermachers* (1870) can thus provide an initial definition of the genre: “the educated cultivation of a male individual through a harmony of aesthetic, moral, rational and scientific education which leads to a self-reflective urge” (Maier 318). Essentially the genre explores the process of development in the protagonist’s life on the way to maturity (Maier 318).
Placing the genre within the European culture and politics of the period 1789-1848, Moretti posits it to be “deeply entwined with one social class [Bourgeoisie], one region of the world [Europe], one sex [male]” (Moretti x). Although *Pride and Prejudice* has a female protagonist, he considers it a classical Bildungsroman (e.g. 3, 22) and insists that Austen’s novel is part of this genre for its display of features such as social mobility (x), youth as an essential feature (4, 8), interiority (focus on the private and not public sphere) (viii), marriage as a device to create harmony between two classes (Bourgeoisie and aristocracy) (viii, 22ff), and through this marriage the reintegration of the protagonist into society in order to obtain a meaningful life and ‘be part of the whole’ (society) (ch. 1).

While the definitions above are predominantly aimed at male protagonists, several critics have argued for the existence of a female Bildungsroman (see Ellis; Fraiman; McDonnell)². Fraiman and McDonnell argue that it is significantly different from its male counterpart due to society’s restrictions imposed upon women, whereas Ellis underscores the following commonalities:

1) protagonist’s agency, which shows that he or she is actively involved in his or her own development 2) self-reflection, which shows the protagonist’s ability to learn and grow from his or her experiences and 3) the protagonist’s eventual reintegration with society, which demonstrates the fundamentally conservative nature of the genre. (Ellis 25)

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² For a discussion of the female Bildungsroman in Victorian Fiction (*Jane Eyre* and *Mill on the Floss*) see Sarah E. Maier (2007)
From a feminist perspective Ellis argues that while the typical male protagonist of a Bildungsroman experiences an alienation from society because he is psychologically unique and different, the female protagonist’s situation is different (36-37). The protagonist’s alienation in the female Bildungsroman arises due to her economic dependence on her family; and later on her husband and due to the restrictions placed upon her by society (Ellis 36-37). That is, the heroine’s alienation stems from “the difficulty in meeting society’s expectations for women” (Ellis 36). The development of the female character is different from her male counterpart insofar as it is both entwined with societal rules and concerned with her identity (Ellis 36). Most importantly according to Ellis the female protagonists learn in the course of their development to manipulate their behavior due to them becoming aware of society’s gaze which rests upon them:

Each heroine begins as an assured young woman with a strong sense of self, but as the novel progresses, the heroine comes to realize that her view of herself differs from others’ view of her. Her maturation involves learning to see herself as others see her, learning how to experience herself as the object of other people’s gaze. (Ellis 30)

That is, the female protagonist learns and is forced to compromise her individuality with society’s expectations, resulting most often in a marriage as a resolution to this conflict (Ellis 33; Moretti viii, 22ff). From this perspective at least two of Austen’s novels from the period, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, are usefully understood as female versions of the Bildungsroman (Ellis ch. 5). In this view the study of a female Bildungsroman begs
the question as to how this critical point of society’s expectations is dealt with – both in the case of the protagonist and the narration in general. As I intend to show in the analysis below, societal critique is delivered through the use of humor.

Humor is one of the key features of Austen’s novels. Her works are known for “the way she pokes fun at her characters’ little foibles and faults” (Triezenberg 539) and for the intricate manner in which she treats the relationship of wit and sexuality (e.g. Casal; Heydt-Stevenson). Triezenberg also delineates eighteenth-century trends such as the “rise of a new kind of humorous author: the wit. … who can make quick, wry comments” and “the birth of the novel as an accepted form in English literature, and many early novels are humorous” (527-528) – both of which most likely influenced Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, which although not published until 1813 is known to have been preceded by an earlier version (under the name *First Impressions*), which was ready for publication as early as 1797 (Kirkham 91).

In relation to Austen’s humor, it is worthwhile pointing out ways in which scholarship has sought to theorize humor. One dominant theory of humor is incongruity theory, which views humor as the result of a situation or a combination of ideas perceived as unexpected, odd or puzzling (Lewis 11-12; Martin 6, 63). Since not everybody will find the same combinations of ideas odd or worth to laugh at – our norms and values influence what we accept to find incongruent and thereby humorous differ – incongruity is said to be subjective (Lewis 11-12). In terms of the relationship between humor and literature,

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3 Other definitions of the psychology of humor such as relief theory or superiority theory have equal status and connect to discussion of humor origins and functions (see Martin 15, 36; chapter 2).
and specifically the genre of the Bildungsroman, Lewis posits that humor not only has social functions but also plays an important role when studying the individual. We can study the relations between humor and maturation by exploring the role of humor in both a character’s process of growth but also as a marker of this process (Lewis 109). A character’s good sense of humor – defined as both humor creation and appreciation - can reveal a character’s openness to change, that is his or her adaptive potential (Lewis 21). The kind of humor a character creates and enjoys tells us something “about what issues concern [him/her], about how playful/flexible [he/she is], about [her/his] self-image ... and about how [he/she deals] with others (hostile, compassionate or accepting)” (Lewis 21). Finally Lewis points out that “[b]ecause it contributes to both maturity and to maturation, humor frequently arises in convincing literary treatments of growth or enlightenment” (75).

Lewis, further, stresses the need to distinguish between the form, content, function and context of humor in literary works (8). Since this study is limited, it will mainly focus on the function and context of humor in Austen’s Bildungsroman. The aim of humor criticism according to Lewis’s is “to refine our understanding of the humor we perceive in literature by helping us to see ... how it functions and how it is related to the expressions of values – how, that is, it is one determinant or component of character, genre and writer” (xi). This aim serves as a guideline for analyzing the humor used in *Pride and Prejudice*. Some functions of humor in literature are related to the exercise of power or also the ridiculing of certain characters in order to present (the narrator’s) value judgment (Lewis 31, 33). The latter can be seen as connected to societal critique. While
critics such as Casal and Heydt-Stevenson have mostly focused on examining the relationship between Austen’s humor, gender and sexuality, Lewis discusses explicitly the relationship between humor and maturation in literature. Thus this thesis, which intends to examine the latter, benefits of and is mostly supported by Lewis’s theories, which infuse the essay’s arguments.

One aspect important to mention is the issue of perceived humor – that is humor appreciation by the reader (as discussed by Lewis). While a modern reader in our times might find the society described and ridiculed by Austen amusing, since contemporary values and norms are quite different from the patriarchal society of eighteenth-century England; it is possible that not all the nuances of Austen’s humor have been perceived to the same extent, at the time of the novel’s publication. It would of course depend on the reader and his or her value system – does he or she find these ideas as absurd and incongruous as a modern reader might does? In that case the narrator’s critique might be received – if not it would likely have been missed or neglected. This present study views humor in Austen’s novel from a contemporary viewpoint – which of course affects its reading.

As shown above both humor theory and the Bildungsroman as a genre have been explored by critics. This essay will combine these two areas by analyzing the significance of humor for Austen’s early female Bildungsroman and thus contribute with additional insights to existing research. The first part of the discussion explores Elizabeth Bennet’s development and her sense of humor – that is her use of humor, but also her appreciation
of it. This examination of the role of humor for the protagonist of this Bildungsroman demonstrates how changes in Elizabeth’s sense of humor might be seen as a marker for her growth and maturity. The second part of the discussion then investigates the narrator’s use of humor in the novel in connection to the novel’s societal criticism and its role in framing the protagonist’s development.

**Humor and the Protagonist’s Development**

Elizabeth Bennet is often described by different characters of the novel as possessing wit and humor; be it her cousin Mr. Collins who when proposing to her talks of her “wit and vivacity”, which he wishes to silence (Austen 93); her sister Jane who is used to Elizabeth’s sarcasm (“Laugh as much as you choose, but you will not laugh me out of my opinion” (Austen 76)); or the narrator who describes her character: “But Elizabeth was not formed for ill–humour; and though every prospect of her own was destroyed for the evening, it could not dwell long on her spirits” (Austen 79). The reader becomes therefore acquainted with a character that both appreciates and uses humor in different instances and for different purposes. In order to reveal the role of humor in Elizabeth’s maturation process, it is useful to examine a few relationships with some of the characters important to the protagonist’s development. The majority of this section’s analysis is devoted to the protagonist’s relationship with Mr. Darcy, since it leads to the deciding turning point when it comes to her development and contains the element of suffering and the capacity of self-reflection (typical for the Bildungsroman).

Following the typical female Bildungsroman scheme of an Austen novel, Elizabeth sets out as a self-confident young lady that shows her sense of humor in several instances
(Ellis 30). One of these is the encounter between her and Lady de Bourgh at Rosings Park, when Elizabeth is confronted by the latter about her growing up and background. As a reaction to Lady de Bourgh’s indignation about Elizabeth and her sisters growing up without a governess, for example, Elizabeth “could hardly help smiling” (Austen 141). Instead of being intimidated by a person of higher social rank and age, Elizabeth is amused by Lady de Bourgh’s taking affront at her lack of appropriate education; quite the opposite: she states frankly and boldly her opinion when asked about her sisters’ entering society:

“But really, ma’am, I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement …."

“Upon my word,” said her ladyship, “you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person. Pray, what is your age?”

“With three younger sisters grown up,” replied Elizabeth, smiling, “your ladyship can hardly expect me to own it.” (Austen 141-142)

Elizabeth counters Lady de Bourgh’s ‘attack’, which is supposed to set her in her ‘right place’, with effortless ease and boldness. Instead of showing Lady de Bourgh the outmost adoration and subordination, like the rest of the attending society, Elizabeth challenges her in standing up for herself and answering the impertinent questions in an unexpected manner. As mentioned before then humor can be the result of a situation that is perceived of as unexpected and incongruent (Lewis 11-12; Martin 6, 63). Elizabeth’s incongruent responses lend the situation a humorous character, which is enhanced by the narrator who
reveals to the reader that: “Lady Catherine seemed quite astonished at not receiving a
direct answer; and Elizabeth suspected herself to be the first creature who had ever dared
to trifle with so much dignified impertinence” (Austen 142). The narrator’s support of
Elizabeth in this instance suggests them to be in collusion against Lady de Bourgh and
the social conventions and expectations she represents. Thus this scene provides the
author with a possibility to poke at Lady de Burgh and indirectly criticizes by using
humor and her protagonist. Through Elizabeth and the narrator’s eyes the reader then
might just be amused when experiencing this scene, since it is the Lady who to a certain
degree is debunked in her insolent way of treating Elizabeth, and her haughtiness which
becomes a ‘laughing’ matter.

This instance also provides an example for the use of humor in order to exercise power
(Lewis 31ff). In trifling with Lady de Bourgh’s impertinence, Elizabeth refuses to submit
herself to the power of a higher social class. This can be either attributed to youthful high
spirits or also we can detect another feature of the Bildungsroman here – her negotiation
of her place in society. In the context of the nineteenth century Bildungsroman Maier
mentions the female Bildungsroman to contain the element of conflicts and tensions,
which are related to a woman’s negotiation of her place in society under the social
context’s restrictions (320). These restrictions are manifested in internal family and
external societal struggles (Maier 320-21). This is a feature that appears to be just as valid
for Austen’s earlier novel of development. In the scene above we can see how Elizabeth,
a woman of comparably lower class (to Lady de Burgh) and few financial means
struggles in this position. Her confrontational wit is demonstrated by her incongruent and
unexpected behaviour, and she refuses to subordinate herself and simply accept her position.

Another relationship which is telling when it comes to Elizabeth’s sense of humor and her development is the one with her father. Mr. Bennet takes on the role of being Elizabeth’s mentor in teaching her how to handle her mother’s simple-mindedness by ridiculing Mrs. Bennet and her often scheming intentions as for instance in the case of Elizabeth’s older sister and Mr. Bingley. This influence of a mentor-figure is an essential feature in the Bildungsroman genre (McDonnell 212-13). Mr. Bennet, who judges his favourite daughter to have “more of quickness than her sisters”, provides continual support, and he thus contributes to Elizabeth growing up to be an outspoken young Lady who strives after what she wants and rejects what she does not (Austen 6). For instance she refuses her cousin’s Mr. Collins’s proposal whereupon her father reacts in the following allied and humours way: “An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do NOT marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you DO” (Austen 97). Thus even though the reader is not directly exposed to Elizabeth’s childhood (a typical Bildungsroman feature) (McDonnell 199), the novel’s events adumbrate an involved part on Mr. Bennet’s side. It is presumably due to him that she becomes the free-spirited and intelligent character, who we observe to possess wit and humor. She grows into a woman not afraid to confront characters like the Mr. Darcy and Lady de Bourgh, thereby refusing to comply with social norms. And as Ellis mentions, one typical feature of Austen’s Bildungsroman is an assured young woman for a heroine, who starts
out with a strong sense of self (which she needs to learn to control) (30). Elizabeth learning from her father to handle her mother’s moods, is demonstrated in her reaction to her mother’s treatment of her following her rejection of Mr. Collins’s proposal: “She talked to Elizabeth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns. … Elizabeth, sometimes with real earnestness, and sometimes with playful gaiety, replied to her attacks. Though her manner varied, however, her determination never did” (Austen 98). Elizabeth, just as her father, chooses at times to counter her mother’s attack in a playful manner. Therefore Mr. Bennet seems to represents a mentor-figure for Elizabeth, who handles life’s challenges (in this instance her mother) by laughing them off. Her parents being as they are provides Elizabeth with a freedom of choice (mostly in marriage partner due to the period’s restrictions), which is an enabling condition for her path to maturity.

Similarly Elizabeth’s relationship with Mr. Darcy – involving humorous exchanges and witty commentaries – is defining for her development according to the Bildungsroman scheme. It leads to the important marker of the maturation process. The tone of their relationship is set after their first encounter at a ball in which Mr. Darcy insults Elizabeth’s pride by refusing to invite her to dance and commenting on her appearance as “tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt [him]” (Austen 11). Being offended and hurt, Elizabeth henceforward engages in attempts to tease and mock him in order to unmask his perceived proud and disagreeable character (Austen 10-11). She uses humor to defend herself against his scrutiny (by laughing off his criticism), but also to provoke him (Austen 10-11). One such witty conversation occurs at Mr. Bingley’s estate, Netherfield Park, when Elizabeth is asked to walk through the room with Miss Bingley.
Darcy makes an apparently “shocking” remark about him observing the ladies’ figures from his sitting position (Austen 51) and when Miss Bingley wonders how to punish him for it, Elizabeth answers: “Nothing is so easy, if you have but the inclination …. We can all plague and punish one another. Tease him – laugh at him” (Austen 51). Elizabeth shows herself to be aware of the use and effect humor can have. In this instance humor could take a hostile form, which is one function described by Lewis: “humor is often a safe way to vent hostility” (Lewis 100). Though Elizabeth’s teasing cannot be said to be aggressively hostile, one can certainly detect a notion of dislike towards Darcy, who is the target of her mocking. When Miss Bingley informs Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy is not a worthy subject of her humor (since there is nothing to be laughed at), Elizabeth mocks this attitude of attributing Mr. Darcy with perfection, while admitting that she likes to laugh about other people: “Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at!” cried Elizabeth. “That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to ME to have many such acquaintances. I dearly love a laugh” (Austen 52). In response Mr. Darcy rejects the notion of him being perfect and expresses his disdain for people who only seek laughter in life:

“The wisest and the best of men … may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke.”

“Certainly,” replied Elizabeth—“… I hope I am not one of THEM. I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, DO divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without.” (Austen 52)
Elizabeth defends herself by saying that she only laughs at a character’s weaknesses, which he apparently lacks – and once more she is mocking his ‘perfect’ character. Her admitting to owning these weaknesses herself and being able to laugh at them is also important, since it shows that she is capable of self-scrutiny (a mature trait according to Lewis 21). In thus studying each other’s characters Elizabeth and Darcy come to the conclusion that: “‘… YOUR defect is to hate everybody.’ ‘And yours,’ he replied with a smile, ‘is willfully to misunderstand them’” (Austen 53). The reader can follow the exchange in which Elizabeth tests her own, admittedly biased, hypotheses concerning Mr. Darcy’s character, using witty attacks and maybe willfully wrong accusations (since it serves the purpose of ridiculing him – even if he might perceive it as flirting). Humor as used by Elizabeth in this scene, one of many with Darcy, can be seen to serve a cognitive function (and integral part of maturing), since it allows her to test her hypotheses without ‘getting hurt’ or affronting anyone, that is being taken too seriously and risking embarrassment (Lewis 75).

A turning point for Elizabeth’s development is her reception of a letter from Mr. Darcy, casting her earlier judgments regarding him into doubt; her reaction being the following: “She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. ... feeling she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. ... I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself”” (Austen 136). She is forced to rethink and doubt herself, eventually overthrowing her preconceived opinions. The letter makes her question her own assumptions and this
process of her self-doubting constitutes Elizabeth’s suffering period, an element which is a typical female Bildungsroman attribute (McDonnell 205-206). According to McDonnell this crisis of identity, typical for the suffering heroine, consists of a change in judgment and a growing awareness of consciousness (205-206). This process is reflected in the citation above. However Austen’s novel and protagonist do not dwell on this suffering element and instead of wallowing endlessly, the novel shows how Elizabeth’s “spirits soon [rise] to playfulness again” (Austen 321). She can even mock her own ‘fate’ in a conversation with her sister Jane: “… if I have very good luck, I may meet with another Mr. Collins in time” (Austen 295). The narrator states that “it may be easily believed that [Elizabeth’s] happy spirits which had seldom been depressed before, were now so much affected as to make it almost impossible for her to appear tolerably cheerful” (Austen 183). In spite of that, one can observe that even during her suffering period, Elizabeth maintains a certain humor. When for instance visiting Rosings one last time before her departure, Elizabeth could not think “without a smile, of what her ladyship’s indignation would have been [when hearing of Darcy proposing to Elizabeth]”. “[Q]uestions with which she amused herself” during that visit were: “What would she have said? how would she have behaved?” (Austen 180-1). She is thus able to be amused by her own fate. It could be argued that Austen’s intention by creating a female character able to handle her emotions as well as Elizabeth does, is to argue against the period’s perception of women as being very sensitive, emotional creatures who are not capable of controlling their emotions (and using their intellect).
It becomes most obvious that her humor helps her overcoming this period of suffering in comparison with her older sister Jane, who is dejected after being abandoned by Mr. Bingley (Austen 130); while Elizabeth on the other hand is estimated by her aunt Mrs. Gardiner to have the right attitude or sense of humor to handle this challenging period: “It had better have happened to YOU, Lizzy; you would have laughed yourself out of it sooner” (Austen 121). Her aunt thus vows for her capability of “laughing” herself through the pain of a lost love - her capability to grow from suffering instead of breaking.

And when Elizabeth herself analyzes her behavior towards Darcy she notices that: “I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one’s genius, such an opening for wit, to have a dislike of that kind” (Austen 192). And even though admitting to having been biased and unjustified in her behavior, she shows that with some distance, she is well able to scrutinize her behavior in a self-reflective and introspective manner. Elizabeth thus reveals herself to possess the capability of self-reflection, which is one of the Bildungsroman protagonist’s attributes (Ellis 25; Maier 318-319). The subject of her scrutiny is her behavior towards Darcy, especially her teasing and mocking him – she admits to having chosen him as a subject for her (abusive and hostile) wit without any substantial reason. As we could see earlier, her choosing him for her mocking might be related to her own hurt pride (which says nothing about his character) and also public opinion (which is based on pure assumption –connected to his appearance and superficial clues). We might conclude from these self-reflective urges that Elizabeth’s use of humor beforehand can be ascribed a notion of naiveté, since she did simply not think before bantering.
The events after the reception of Darcy’s letter let the reader observe a change in Elizabeth’s use of wit. When she talks to Mr. Darcy about Mr. Bingley, who has easily forgiven Darcy for his interference in his life, “Elizabeth could not help smiling at [Darcy’s] easy manner of directing his friend” (Austen 314). However she does not fall back into old habits:

Elizabeth longed to observe that Mr. Bingley had been a most delightful friend; so easily guided that his worth was invaluable; but she checked herself. She remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin. (Austen 314)

Her ‘old’ self would have openly and directly mocked Bingley’s nature and thereby offended Mr. Darcy. However she has learned to control these impulses and learned to think ahead – her way of considering this shows her to have grown and become more mature. She has however not lost her sense of humor, which the reader can observe in a conversation with Darcy: “My good qualities are under your protection …; and, in return, it belongs to me to find occasions for teasing and quarrelling with you as often as may be” (Austen 321-322). Thus Elizabeth’s sense of humor survived her suffering period and as shown above helped her through it. Now she is even able to laugh about her past impertinence, and this is arguably a sign of her maturity.

As observed, Elizabeth’s sense of humor allows her to handle the challenges presented to her in form of social threats (Lady de Bourgh’s attack), or family conflicts concerning her
own future (dealing with her mother upon rejecting Mr. Collins proposal), as well as in Mr. Darcy’s revelation regarding his character. Her father, who with his sarcasm and dry humor serves as her mentor-figure, stands out as supporting and teaching her to take life’s challenges (such as her cousin’s proposal and her mother’s anger) in a playful manner. As Lewis points out: “if humor allows us to stand back from our pain, rationality, seriousness and fear - than it should contribute to growth by allowing us to bend rather than break” (21). Elizabeth’s sense of humor helps her to ‘bend’ and handle the challenge of a suffering period - typical features for the female Bildungsroman (McDonnell 198). The use of humor in the novel then serves to highlight the maturation process of the protagonist in this Bildungsroman.

The Narrator’s Humor and Eighteenth Century Society

During the Romantic period in England women faced limited rights and restricted possibilities for development due to a dominant patriarchal society (Greenblatt 9). More specifically, they “were provided only limited schooling, were subjected to a rigid code of sexual behavior, and (especially after marriage) were bereft of legal rights” (Greenblatt 9). Jane McDonnell describes the “perfect femininity in a patriarchal society” as representing “the submissive ideal for a woman: gentle, modest, sweet-tempered and obedient, she makes herself useful as a virtual servant to the family” (201). However attention was raised to these issues by works like Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) in which she argues for women’s rights and “challenges long-established assumptions about women’s role in society” (Greenblatt 548). We might therefore assume that Austen has been influenced by her time, since as observed above
Elizabeth’s nature (including her being humorous and plain-spoken) is partly contrasting to this ideal of women of her class during the time, and she undergoes, as shown, a certain growth. The fact that Elizabeth develops into the particular kind of woman she does can actually be perceived as critique against women’s social position and the lack of self-determinacy due to it. The novel uses humor to explore women’s options and possibilities of development in a number of ways. When discussing for instance Jane’s (missing) display of her feelings for Mr. Bingley, Miss Lucas explains to Elizabeth that: “In nine cases out of ten a women had better show MORE affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on.” And also “When she is secure of him, there will be more leisure for falling in love as much as she chooses” (Austen 19-20). These citations serve to show how women had to advertise and thrust themselves upon men in order to find security in marriage (or otherwise risk exclusion from society). The latter citation especially shows the use of irony to demonstrate how social pressures lead to marriages of convenience and more importantly that a woman’s happiness is not considered to be important – falling in love is a minor issue that can be ‘fixed’ afterwards. Women are perceived as interchangeable goods, not individuals with rights of their own. This becomes especially clear when Mr. Collins chooses Elizabeth for a bride. Once he finds out that Jane, who was his first choice, is soon to be engaged: “Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth— and it was soon done— done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire. Elizabeth, equally next to Jane in birth and beauty, succeeded her of course” (Austen 63). The narrator’s use of ironic satire in this instance hardly fails to point out the promptness with which Mr. Collins’ choice of future wife changes – as if he were to pick out a piece
of furniture. This satiric remark can be perceived as a critique against the marriage market of the time and the importance attached to getting married because it is expected of people. Little attention was paid to what people’s lives would look like thereafter. Mr. Collins for instance neither finds Elizabeth’s wishes worth considering nor can he possibly imagine Elizabeth not wishing to marry him. Elizabeth having plans or wishes for a life (or development) of her own, appears out of the question. Mr. Collins thereby represents a patriarch, who as described later is ridiculed and thereby criticized quite a bit by the narrator.

Also Mrs. Bennet is both described by the narrator, and revealed in her behavior, to be a dense character whose:

… mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (Austen 6)

This description and several other instances in which she is ridiculed, serve the purpose of highlighting her simple-mindedness and flubbed values in order to influence the reader – which is one of the functions of humor in literature according to Lewis (33). Lewis highlights that “[w]hen we laugh with a given character we must at the moment feel that the subject at hand is a fitting one for amusement; when we laugh at a character we must feel that his or her qualities are at the moment ridiculous” (35). And since shared humor
expresses shared values, the narrator’s use of humor and the reader’s appreciation of humor have to be in line in order to enjoy it (Lewis 35). If this is the case, then we as the readers might laugh at Mrs. Bennet and thereby her world view, her values, whilst joining Mr. Bennet and the narrator in their amusement. This amusement however might also contain social critique aimed at these values and at a society which allows a woman to develop into such an impertinent figure. The narrator’s ridicule of Mrs. Bennet’s exaggerated self-absorbed character demonstrates in these instances her fickleness and weakness in character. She could not care less about her Elizabeth’s happiness – the most important thing is for her to get married (to Mr. Collins) – which reflects society’s opinion at the time. She is both product and part of a society which didn’t allow women to pursue an independent journey of development. Ridiculing both Mr. Collins’s and Mrs. Bennet’s behavior and values then might include ridiculing society and its patriarchal order, including the stiff societal conventions which were to be followed. Her younger daughters, especially Lydia, are equally ridiculed as being the product of a society which ascribes marriage and décor as women’s sole life purpose. Lydia is described as possessing an “ignorance and emptiness of … mind” as well as being “[v]ain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrolled!” (Austen 198). Talking to her sisters she exclaims: “Have you seen any pleasant men? Have you had any flirting?” and “how I should like to be married before any of you” (Austen 188). These outbursts unmask her only content in life to be her focus on men and her single goal to get married. She seems without intellect and willing to sacrifice her own happiness in marrying a dishonorable man, who really does not care about her at all, but only about his financial gain. Although it ought to be mentioned that the reader gets the impression that Lydia is not aware of her naive
choices, which is most likely the effect of having grown up with her mother. The result being situational irony, described by Kelley Griffith as a “situation [that] differs from what common sense indicates it is, will be, or ought to be” (74). It is ironic then that marriage, a happy occasion, should result in just the opposite – denouncing the dimensions and absurdity of social conventions at the time.

In contrast, Mary seems the only daughter unaffected by her mother’s stupidity and her father’s wit. She is presented as an extremely earnest character, who takes everything and everyone (too) serious and literal. Not perceiving the subtle notions of teasing and humor – she utters opinions which could stem from an encyclopedia:

“Pride,” observed Mary, “… Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us.” (Austen 18)

The narrator thus depicts Mary as an odd character, who during this era might have been perceived as an educated woman (Greenblatt 9). Although Romantic feminists like Wollstonecraft argued for the necessity of women being taught to use their mind, these educated women “remained targets of masculine scorn” (Greenblatt 9). Mary, who contemplates and reflects, uses her mind. While her youngest sisters are ridiculed by the narrator for being too silly and emotional, Mary lacks this element – and is seemingly mocked because of it. Her comments often appear absurd to the reader since her manner
of talking is perceived as stiff, and as she self says: “but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required” (Austen 29). It is possible that the narrator intended to mock the extremes of sentiment and reason - arguing for a blend or balance in portraying Elizabeth (who incorporates both feelings and intelligence) as admirable and preferable to the reader. Also by caricaturing Mary, the narrator seems to mock the notion of education women losing their attractiveness. In this way the narrator criticizes those stating that women are neither capable of nor should use their mind(reason and those, who state the opposite – that women, just as men, should prefer reason over sentiment. The fact that Austen lampoons some of the female characters the way she does could also be argued to serve several purposes simultaneously. While it allows her to criticize the restricted possibilities of a woman’s formation in a society focused on superficial values and match-making (with no prospects for intellectual development for women), it also hides the in Elizabeth’s own development entailed criticism. The fact that despite these given conditions she develops and that her nature contradicts social conventions thus appears less threatening, since she is not the only type of woman Austen presents.

The narrator continues her critique through humor when dealing with the issue of the novel as a genre by ridiculing Mr. Collins (and thereby the genre’s reputation):

Mr. Collins readily assented [to read to the Bennets], and a book was produced; but, on beholding it (for everything announced it to be from a circulating library), he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he
never read novels. Kitty stared at him, and Lydia exclaimed. Other books were produced, and after some deliberation he chose Fordyce’s Sermons.

(Austen 61)

Mr. Collins, who is presented to the reader (by the narrator and Mr. Bennet) as a pompous clerical character favored by nature with a certain stupidity, states that while he “consider[s] music as a very innocent diversion, and perfectly compatible with the profession of a clergyman”, he thinks of novels as being immoral and hazardous, probably since he advances the same views on this literary genre as his contemporaries (Austen 89). Austen’s time saw the rise of the novel as a primarily female genre (Greenblatt 25). Although a very popular literary form during the period, the novel as such was also perceived as “not quite respectable”, since its structure “seemed to require fewer skills than other literary genres” like poetry and drama (Greenblatt 25). Not only did women represent the majority of its readership but by the 1780s equally as many novels were published by women as by men (Greenblatt 25). Detractors of the genre argued that “[i]t attracted … an undue proportion of readers who were women, and who, by consuming its escapist stories of romantic love, risked developing false ideas of life” (Greenblatt 25). By combining the caricature of a clerical and these attitudes towards this literary genre, the narrator reaches one aim: the mocking of such a criticism of the novel. Since it is a character that the reader has been taught to laugh at who utters these opinions, it is likely that his opinions receive the same treatment: they are laughed at. The description of Mr. Collins, who “was as absurd as [Mr. Bennet] had hoped” (Austen 61), can also be interpreted as criticism towards the institution of the church and the clerical
professional, who had the role of upholding of moral standards according to which women were ascribed a certain role.

Using then this ill-reputed form as a novel depicting the formation of a young woman, Austen chooses wisely since a genre mainly read and used by woman allows her to both criticize existing social conventions (less importance being attached to a ‘female’ literary genre) and reaching the ones concerned or affected: women. Despite the image of this literary form it can be seen to be one if not the only way for a female contemporary author of the period to share her opinions and contribute to public discourse, although in an indirect, ‘hidden’ way. Instead of directly criticizing society – the literary medium of the novel (which was accepted to be used by women, since it was seen as harmless or rather not taken serious as a literary form), permitted the female author to criticize society by both using fiction and in this fictional work humor. The use of humor then in *Pride and Prejudice* was a ‘safe’ way for Austen to proclaim her opinions without risking being seen to ‘disturb’ the existing order. Her opinions as mentioned concerning the situation of women and the possibilities for a self-determinant development are thus hidden behind both her humor and the literary genre of choice: the novel of formation. As Lewis says, humor is a device to safely test hypotheses, but in this case it safeguards the critique behind its mask (Lewis 75). The use of humor in *Pride and Prejudice* in order to criticize the period’s society, allowed Austen to express her criticism without openly offending anyone. It allowed her to contribute and take part in society’s dialogue – which in politics and the general public sphere was impossible for women at that time (Greenblatt 547ff).
Another aspect of the period’s society being mocked by the narrator concerns the hypocrisy of the local society of Longbourn, which is represented in its rapid change of opinion connected to the Bennet’s daughters’ suitors:

All Meryton seemed striving to blacken the man [Mr. Wickham] who, but three months before, had been almost an angel of light. He was declared to be in debt to every tradesman in the place …. Everybody declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world; and everybody began to find out that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness.

(Austen 247)

Mr. Wickham, who was previously judged to be of good character (based on superficial facts as appearance and manner), is suddenly perceived as a terrible, despicable man. His elopement with Lydia prompts the local society to identify his real character. As a result, the Bennets are both pitied and judged for allowing this man into their family. However within a short time the good image of the Bennets is recovered, since Jane is to marry the rich and honorable Mr. Bingley: “The Bennets were speedily pronounced to be the luckiest family in the world, though only a few weeks before, when Lydia had first run away, they had been generally proved to be marked out for misfortune” (Austen 295).

This ridicule of public opinion shows how absurd it is that one depends on it, even though it is often based on pure coincidence. However it can make or destroy one’s place in society, especially since women’s reputation and thereby their chances of marriage (a life included in society) depend on such an unstable institution.
Conclusion

There is no doubt that humor plays an essential role in Austen’s early Bildungsroman *Pride and Prejudice*, both on the level of character development as well as societal critique. Being quite an outspoken and humorous young lady, Elizabeth contradicts the period’s ideal of women’s roles and expected behavior, thereby conveying some of the author’s social critique against the patriarchal society of the period (by showing that women can and should develop). Her confrontational wittiness, which she uses to defend herself against the scrutiny of people of higher rank, such as Lady de Bourgh and Mr. Darcy, allows her to negotiate her place in society. Her sense of humor allows us to trace her development from an already quite self-secure young woman into a more mature version of herself, who learns to consider others’ feelings when being humorous and teasing. She overcomes the suffering period typical in the Bildungsroman, by “bending instead of breaking” to paraphrase Lewis (21). Humor becomes her means to reflect on her situation: to stand back and deal with her emotions rationally. In other words, humor becomes central for Elizabeth’s ability as a Bildungsroman heroine to achieve self-reflection and thereby maturity. And once again, militating against the period’s notion of women not being able to think reasonably or use their mind. Women were thought to be creatures of emotions and considered inferior to men, not worthy of an intellectual development of their own. While the narrator uses ridicule and ironic satire to mock certain characters, such as Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughter’s as well as society; she shows Elizabeth capable of both using humor for her own purposes (such
as unmasking Mr. Darcy) and appreciating humor (together with her father she often mocks laughable characters – Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins). The purpose of this contrast of the narrator’s use of humor is to influence the reader’s sympathies – while teaching us to laugh at lampooned characters such as Mr. Collins, Elizabeth is made sympathetic since she is not the butt of jokes – rather she is actively engaged in mocking others. When laughing then at this image of marriage-obsessed women (Lydia for instance) or the clerical patriarchal moralizer Mr. Collins, the reader perceives their values just as ridiculous as their characters. It is in this roundabout way of using humor that the author reaches the goal of criticizing society and its conventions - by presenting certain values as desirable and others as less so. This manner of criticizing through humor and with help of a ‘feminine’ genre such as the novel (of development) allows Austen to practice criticism without offending anyone directly. The feature of humor is thus essential and interwoven in a web of social critique containing her protagonist’s nature and development.
Works Cited


