Literary Techniques - Jane Austen

Jane Austen's distinctive literary style relies on a combination of parody, burlesque, irony, free indirect speech, and a degree of realism. She uses parody and burlesque for comic effect and to critique the portrayal of women in 18th-century sentimental and gothic novels. Austen extends her critique through irony; she often creates an ironic tone through free indirect speech in which the thoughts and words of the characters mix with the voice of the narrator. The degree to which critics believe Austen's characters have psychological depth informs their views regarding her realism. Some scholars argue that Austen uses realism because of her finely executed portrayal of individual characters and her emphasis on "the everyday". Others disagree, they believe that her characters lack a depth of feeling, and that she is more of a moralist than a realist.

Austen's novels have often been characterised as "comedies of manners". Compared to other early 19th-century novels, Austen's have little narrative or scenic description—they contain much more dialogue. Austen shapes a distinctive and subtly-constructed voice for each character. Throughout Austen's work there is a tension between the claims of society and the claims of the individual. Austen is often considered one of the originators of the modern, interiorised novel character. Plenty of the characterisation is done through speech. Almost every character in the novel gets to talk first and be summed up by the narrator later.

Read this dialogue between Mr and Mrs Bennet in Pride and Prejudice.

Mrs Bennet has just heard that there is a new, single neighbour who has moved into a nearby house.

Mrs Bennet: "Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

Mr Bennet: "How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

"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 may like you the best of the party."

"My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty."

From just these few lines, we learn that Mrs. Bennet is vain and stupid, and Mr. Bennet likes making fun of her without letting her in on the joke—which pretty much sums up their personalities and their relationship. What else can we learn?
Tasks

Now read the following passages. With a partner, discuss and write down what we can learn about the characters, then share your ideas with the class.

1) Mr and Mrs Bennet are talking to each other.

Mrs Bennet: “Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion for my poor nerves.”

Mr Bennet: "You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these last twenty years at least.”

2) Lydia Bennet is talking to her elder sisters after going shopping.

"And we mean to treat you all," added Lydia, "but you must lend us the money, for we have just spent ours at the shop out there." Then, showing her purchases—"Look here, I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty; but I thought I might as well buy it as not. I shall pull it to pieces as soon as I get home, and see if I can make it up any better."

3) Mr Collins is making a marriage proposal to Elizabeth Bennet.

"My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into further consideration, that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females."

4) Mrs Bennet has just heard that Mr Darcy has proposed to her daughter Elizabeth (Lizzy).

“Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr Darcy! Who would have thought it! And is it really true? Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane's nothing to it-nothing at all. I am so pleased-so happy. Such a charming man!-so handsome! so tall!-Oh, my dear Lizzy! pray apologise for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Every thing that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me. I shall go distracted.”

Think about...

the words and vocabulary the characters use... sentence structure and length... use of punctuation... repetition... pauses... interaction/ relationships with other characters...

Now, choose one of these scenarios and write a dialogue, thinking about how you can communicate the characters' personalities.

An argument between a husband and wife.
A marriage proposal.
A conversation between two friends at the shops.
A conversation between two friends at a football match.
A conversation between siblings about some exciting news.