

IRONY

Irony always involves contradiction. The 5 main types of *irony* in literature are: (1) *verbal irony*--contradiction between what is said and what is meant in an extreme overstatement (as in sarcasm) or in an extreme understatement; (2) *Socratic irony*--contradiction between the position or feigned ignorance of the speaker in discourse and what the audience infers to be so; (3) *dramatic irony*--contradiction between what a character thinks is so and what turns out to be so; (4) *situational irony*--contradiction between what a character thinks is so and what the audience knows to be so; (5) *irony of fate*--contradiction between what happens by coincidence and what one expects in the normal course of events. Coincidence is usually an unconvincing contrivance, but in some cases, as in the novels of Thomas Hardy, fateful coincidence is part of a convincing tragic vision. The ability to recognize irony is said to be a measure of intelligence.

Huckleberry Finn includes all 5 types of irony. Twain employs *Socratic irony* as he narrates through Huck, whose thinking exhibits *situational irony*; Huck uses *Socratic irony* when he lies; the sarcastic Pap Finn displays both *verbal irony* and *situational irony* in his racist diatribe; and the ending of the book seems to be happy but that is *dramatic irony* because Huck, Jim and Tom appear to be free but all three are still in mental bondage due to their conditioning--if a reader understands that, the *irony* also becomes *situational*. Television sit-coms rely heavily on *situational irony*. Teachers use *Socratic irony* when they pose questions to which they think they have the answers. When Huck arrives at the Phelps place at the very time they expect Tom Sawyer and gets mistaken for Tom, that is *irony of fate*--as Huck acknowledges at the beginning of the story: "There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth."

The major examples of irony sustained through a long American narrative are *Benito Cereno* by Melville, *Huck* by Twain, *Daisy Miller* by James, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Crane, and *The House of Mirth* by Wharton. *Ethan Frome* and "Roman Fever" by Wharton also are rich in irony, as are "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" by Crane. The two most ironic scenes in American literature are the first scaffold scene in *The Scarlet Letter* when Reverend Dimmesdale begs Hester to expose him as the father of her child and the scene in *Huck* when he decides to betray his "conscience" and go to Hell rather than turn in Jim.

Twain, Crane, Wharton, Bierce, and Flannery O'Connor are consistently ironical, like comedians such as Will Rogers and wits such as H. L. Mencken and Dorothy Parker. One particularly humorous example of irony is the last line of "A Village Singer" by Mary Wilkins Freeman. The most famous ironical poem in American literature is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot. "Landing Zone Bravo," Tim O'Brien's encapsulation of the Vietnam War, has a bitterly ironic ending. Other outstanding examples of ironic short stories include "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" by Katherine Anne Porter, "Revelation" and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by O'Connor, and "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver. The most outstanding ironic novels since the 1960s are *The World According to Garp* by John Irving and *White Noise* by Don DeLillo.

Irony is a main instrument of *satire*--criticism through ridicule. The most notable American satirists after Ben Franklin are Hugh H. Brackenridge in *Modern Chivalry*, Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis, particularly in *Babbitt*. John Irving became famous for his satire of radical Feminists in *Garp*, followed by John Updike with his satire of Feminists in *The Witches of Eastwick* and DeLillo with *White Noise*, a satire of Feminists and the decadence of "higher" education. Henry James advised all fiction writers to cultivate irony, as did the later Modernists. However, after the 1960s irony became a cynical stock response in Postmodernist fiction, a fixed pose of alienated sophistication bitterly criticized by David Foster Wallace as a fear of being human, before he hanged himself in 2008.

Michael Hollister (2012)

HANDBOOK DEFINITIONS

"*Irony*: According to its classical, rhetorical definition, irony is the statement of one thing by a writer when he means to suggest something else. But this definition leaves many manifestations of *irony* wholly or partially unaccounted for. It might be more useful to view *irony* as the existence of a second perspective

on a statement or action, of which the reader is made aware. This would encompass the statement of an opposite, which the reader can see through, as well as various shades of overstatement (*hyperbole*) and understatement (*meiosis*). But it would also include dramatic or narrative situations in which a character is unaware of the full significance of a statement or in which a character is assigned a fate which is unexpected but appropriate (*dramatic irony*).

An *irony* is not sufficiently explicated by the simple statement of the implied meaning. For example, Swift's suggestion to eat babies to alleviate Irish poverty suggests more than that the eating of babies is not the solution. The repulsiveness of the suggestion also develops an attitude in the reader toward the problem and toward the objects of Swift's satire. Thus, the mode of statement and its gentleness or severity provide more than a variant method of statement. *Irony* becomes useful for the suggestion of complex attitudes, but it must always maintain an obviousness...dictated by the context and the desired tone. The emphasis on the detection and explication of *irony* has been a useful contribution of the New Critics, who see *irony* or *paradox* as the structural core of many poems, providing balances and tensions that account for much of the complexity of these poems. Historically, *irony* has been the major rhetorical weapon of the satirist."

M. M. Liberman & Edward E. Foster
A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms
(Scott, Foresman 1968)

"*Irony*: A broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance. *Verbal irony* is a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning. We may say, 'I could care less' while meaning 'I couldn't care less.' *Irony* is likely to be confused with *sarcasm*, but it differs from *sarcasm* in that it is usually less harsh. Its presence may be marked by a sort of grim humor and 'unemotional detachment,' a coolness in expression at a time when one's emotions appear to be really heated. Characteristically it speaks words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise. In a popular song, a farmer says to the wife who has abandoned him, 'You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille.' At a certain depth of *irony*, saying what you do not mean gives way to being unable to say what you mean, as in Prufrock's outburst, 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!' (which, ironically, seems to be just what he means).

The effectiveness of *irony* is the impression it gives of restraint. The *ironist* writes with tongue in cheek; for this reason *irony* is more easily detected in speech than in writing, because the voice can, through its intonation, easily warn the listener of a double significance. One of the most *ironic* remarks in literature is Job's 'No doubt ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you.' Antony's insistence, in his oration over the dead Caesar, that 'Brutus is an honorable man' bears a similar *ironic* stamp. Goldsmith, Austen, and Thackeray, in one novel or another, make frequent use of *irony*. Jonathan Swift is an *arch-ironist*. His 'Modest Proposal' for saving a starving Ireland, by suggesting that the Irish sell their babies to the English landlords to be eaten, is perhaps the most savagely sustained *ironic* writing in literature.

Alexander Pope used *irony* brilliantly in poetry. The novels of Thomas Hardy and Henry James are elaborate artistic expressions of the *ironic* spirit, for *irony* applies not only to statement but also to event, situation, and structure. One of Hardy's volumes of short stories is called *Life's Little Ironies*, and even the 'little' is *ironic*. In drama, *irony* has a special meaning, referring to knowledge held by the audience but hidden from the characters. In *tragic irony*, characters use words that mean one thing to them but have foreboding, different meaning to those who understand the situation better. In contemporary criticism *irony* is used to describe a poet's 'recognition of incongruities' and his or her controlled acceptance of them. Recent criticism, prompted particularly by Northrup Frey's *Anatomy of Criticism*, has concentrated on many sorts of *irony* as the typical habit of the *eiron*, who does not and cannot speak directly. Other critics important in the analysis of *irony* are Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, and Harold Bloom."

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

“*Irony*: Greek *eironeia*, simulated ignorance. The use of words, with humorous or satirical intention, so that the meaning is the direct opposite of what is actually said. *Irony* implies also the simulated adoption of another’s point of view for the purpose of ridicule and sarcasm. *Irony* developed from the element of concealment or simulation. From *eironeia* came the name *ieron*, a dissembler, a stock character of Greek comedy. Being undersized, he resorted to various forms of deception to overcome *alazon*, the braggart captain. Socrates, in discussion, adopted another person’s viewpoint in order finally to ridicule him and reveal his weaknesses. This was known as *Socratic irony*.”

Swift is the greatest master in English of sustained irony. F. R. Leavis, in his masterly analysis of this prose writer in *Determinations*, says: ‘Swift’s irony is essentially a matter of surprise and negation; its function is to defeat habit, to intimidate and to demoralize. What he assumes in the ‘Argument Against Abolishing Christianity’ is not so much a common acceptance of Christianity as that the reader will be ashamed to have to recognize how fundamentally unchristian his actual assumptions, motives and attitudes are. And in general the implication is that it would shame people if they were made to recognize themselves unequivocally. If one had to justify this irony according to the conventional notion of satire, then its satiric efficacy would be to make comfortable non-recognition, the unconsciousness of habit, impossible. Another example is Defoe’s ‘The Shortest Way with Dissenters,’ where the writer pretends to advocate what he actually disapproves of. (Defoe was himself a Dissenter).’

Dramatic irony: This is the device of putting into a speaker’s mouth words which have for the audience a meaning not intended by the speaker. Sophocles used *dramatic irony* with great effect in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Shakespeare presents it strikingly in *Troilus* and *Cressida*, and in *Macbeth* when the drunken porter jestingly talks of being the porter at Hell’s gate. There is a second type of *dramatic irony*, where words spoken by a person later recoil upon him. After the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth says to her husband, ‘A little water clears us of this deed’; yet in the sleep-walking scene she says that all the waters of the ocean will not remove the stain of blood from her hand. In Galsworthy’s *Strife*, Roberts contends that anyone can ‘stand up to nature’ if only he has the will. The death of his wife from weakness and starvation brings it home to him that he is wrong.”

A. F. Scott
Current Literary Terms
(Macmillan/St. Martin’s 1965)