



## DIFFERENT TYPES OF IRONY IN LITERATURE

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### Abstract

In this article the main types of irony is discussed in different contexts of literary works in which variety of meanings brings out under special content of irony. Moreover, irony and satire can express subtle difference yet with their own particular peculiarities.

**Keywords:** irony, sarcasm, verbal irony, situational irony, comic irony, dramatic irony.

### INTRODUCTION

The term irony entered the English language in the sixteenth century and comes from the French “ironie” and before that, from the Latin “ironia.” All these terms originate from the ancient Greek stereotypical character known as Eiron. An Eiron figure brings down his opponent by understating his abilities, thus engaging in a type of irony by saying less than what he means.

Irony is a means to humour. It is a rhetorical device used in most of the modern fiction and literature in general. It is widely used in psychological literary works, for example, in James Joyce’s fiction. Irony is a disagreement or incongruity between what is said and what is understood, or what is expected and what actually occurs. It can be used intentionally or can happen unintentionally. Audience’s role is very important. Authors can use irony to make their audience stop and think about what has just been said, or to emphasize a central idea. The audience's role in realizing the difference between what is said and what is normal or expected is essential to the successful use of irony.

Irony is a manner of organizing a work so as to give full expression to contradictory or complementary impulses, attitudes, etc., especially as a means of indicating detachment from a subject, theme, or emotion. Satire is the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc. It is a literary composition, in verse or prose, in which human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule.





Synonyms of satire are usually irony, burlesque, caricature, parody, etc. Satire refers to literary forms in which vices or follies are ridiculed. Satire is the general term, which often emphasizes the weakness more than the weak person, and usually implies moral judgment and corrective purpose: Swift's satire of human pettiness and bestiality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Irony, sarcasm and satire indicate mockery of something or someone. The essential feature of irony is the indirect presentation of a contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs. In the figure of speech, emphasis is placed on the position between the literal and intended meaning of a statement. One thing is said and its opposite is implied, as in the comment, “Beautiful weather, isn't it?” made when it is raining or nasty. Ironic literature exploits, in addition to the rhetorical figure, such devices as character development, situation, and plot to stress the paradoxical nature of reality or the contrast between an ideal and actual condition, set of circumstances, etc., frequently in such a way as to stress the absurdity present in the contradiction between substance and form.

Irony differs from sarcasm in greater subtlety and wit. In sarcasm, ridicule or mockery is used harshly, often crudely and contemptuously, for destructive purposes. It may be used in an indirect manner, and have the form of irony, as in “What a fine musician you turned out to be!” or it may be used in the form of a direct statement, “You couldn't play one piece correctly if you had two assistants.” The distinctive quality of sarcasm is present in the spoken word and manifested chiefly by vocal inflection, whereas satire and irony arising originally as literary and rhetorical forms, are exhibited in the organization or structuring of either language or literary material. Satire usually implies the use of irony or sarcasm for censorious or critical purposes and is often directed at public figures or institutions, conventional behavior, political situations, etc.

## ANALYSIS

As a literary device, irony is often misunderstood. Although many of us learn about irony in our high school English classes through works of theater like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, many people feel unsure of what irony means—or how to use it correctly. But when deployed with skill, irony is a powerful tool that adds depth and substance to a piece of writing.

The definition of irony as a literary device is a situation in which there is a contrast between expectation and reality. For example, the difference between what





something *appears* to mean versus its literal meaning. Irony is associated with both tragedy and humor.

Irony, in its broadest sense, is a rhetorical device, literary technique, or event characterized by an incongruity, or contrast, between reality (what is) and appearance (what seems to be). Verbal, dramatic, and situational irony are often used for emphasis in the assertion of a truth. The ironic form of simile, used in sarcasm, and some forms of litotes can emphasize one's meaning by the deliberate use of language which states the opposite of the truth, denies the contrary of the truth, or drastically and obviously understates a factual connection.

Henry Watson Fowler, in *The King's English*, says "any definition of irony—though hundreds might be given, and very few of them would be accepted—must include this, that the surface meaning and the underlying meaning of what is said are not the same." Also, Eric Partridge, in *Usage and Abusage*, writes that "Irony consists in stating the contrary of what is meant."

Irony is often an effective way for an author to express ideas of what she thinks describes the society in which she lives. Irony can explore the differences between what society or person says or does and how they actually live. A society which claims to value truth and justice, but actually tolerates or encourages lying and injustice is ironic. Irony can be used in any number of ways in fiction. In fact there are different categories that can be found in fiction, depending on the type of story being told. For instance, a character's and/or a reader's carefully laid expectations are turned on their head. For instance, a man who pursues what he thinks is the perfect woman, eventually learns that she isn't as perfect as he or the readers thought.

Irony can occur when the reader knows things in the story that the characters do not--for example, audiences are aware of the fact that Viola in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is actually a woman dressed as a man, even when other characters are not. Sarcasm and satire are also forms of irony that can be employed within fiction.

Irony is effective because it prevents the author's work from becoming didactic. Since most works of fiction that employ irony tend to deal with serious issues, such as the hypocrisy in religion, society, or government, a more serious or realistic approach risks becoming pretentious. Irony, particularly satire, can be an effective way to not only approach such topics but do so in way that is humorous or entertaining (though it's important to point out that not all satire is funny).

Another reason why irony is effective is because it allows readers to see the discrepancies the author is pointing out about humans or society. For instance, in *Twelfth Night*, audiences are able to witness the absurdities that Elizabethan society





placed on decorum within courtship rituals and the ways those rituals are complicated by gender expectations.

With irony, unlike most literary tropes, readers are let in on the joke. They see and know things of which the characters themselves are not aware. Thus, it gives them a sense of distance from the story. This allows them to parse the ideas and themes that are being expressed in ways that are not always readily available in stories that do not employ the use of irony. Irony also allows readers to understand characters in ways that the characters don't know of themselves. For example, the irony in Shakespeare's *King Lear* allows audiences to understand the kind of hubris that King Lear represents and also allows them to understand how this hubris leads to his downfall. Irony helps readers and audiences gain a greater understanding of human nature.

## DISCUSSION

### Main Types of Irony

There are a number of different types of irony, each meaning something a little different.

### Dramatic Irony

Also known as tragic irony, this is when a writer lets their reader know something that a character does not. This is the contrast between what the character thinks to be true and what we (the reader) know to be true. Sometimes as we read we are placed in the position of knowing more than what one character knows. Because we know something the character does not, we read to discover how the character will react when he or she learns the truth of the situation. For example, when the reader knows that the bus roaring down the highway is headed for an elevated freeway junction that hasn't been completed yet, it fills the audience with anticipation and dread for what they know is coming: the passengers' horror and shock. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, each young lover takes the poison, thinking the other is already dead—the dramatic irony comes from the audience wanting them to know the whole story before taking this final action. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello trusts Iago—but the audience knows better. Learn more about dramatic irony in our complete guide here.

### Comic Irony

This is when irony is used to comedic effect—such as in satire. Jane Austen was a master of irony and dialogue. Her preoccupation with social divisions, and the witty and insightful tone with which she revealed hypocrisy and parodied people





contributed heavily to her voice. Austen opens *Pride and Prejudice* with a famous line implying that men are the ones who hunt for a wife; however, she makes it clear throughout the narrative that it is actually the other way around.

### **Situational Irony**

This is the most common in literature. It is the contrast between what happens and what was expected (or what would seem appropriate). Because it emerges from the events and circumstances of a story, it is often more subtle and effective than verbal or dramatic irony.

"O my love, my wife! Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty." Romeo finds Juliet drugged and assumes she is dead. He kills himself but then she awakens, sees that he is dead and kills herself. From the drama "Romeo and Juliet" by William Shakespeare. It is very sad because both lovers killed themselves by mistake, which led to a tragic outcome instead of the happy ending that the lovers expected.

This is at play when an expected outcome is subverted. For example, in O. Henry's classic tale, *The Gift of the Magi*, a wife cuts off her long hair to sell it in order to buy her husband a chain for his prized watch. Meanwhile, the husband has sold his watch in order to buy his wife a comb for her hair. The situational irony comes from each person not expecting to have their gift be undercut by the other's actions.

### **Verbal Irony**

This is a statement in which the speaker means something very different from what he or she is saying. Think of the knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: with both his arms sliced off, he says, nonchalantly: "It's just a flesh wound." He is ironically (and comically) underplaying the severity of his injury.

Create a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually happens, as in these examples. Verbal irony is type of irony that we have not focused on here, but you can learn more about it at the second link, below, under "More about irony." The author uses irony in this story to compel the reader to stop and think about love, sacrifice and what is truly valuable.

Sarcasm is a conversational device characterized by saying the opposite of what one means. Sarcasm comes from the Greek "sarkázein," meaning to "tear flesh" and indeed, sarcasm is deployed in a mocking, sneering, and often witty tone. This means it can be self-deprecating, with the speaker mocking themselves; or aimed at someone else, in a teasing manner.





The key difference between irony and sarcasm is that sarcasm characterizes someone's speech. Irony can additionally describe situations or circumstances. There are some cases in which someone could say something that is considered both ironic and sarcastic, but sarcasm is not a literary device.

## CONCLUSION

Irony is the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning. It is a technique of indicating, as through character or plot development, an intention or attitude opposite to that which is actually or ostensibly stated.

**Dramatic irony** - another term to be used to express known as tragic irony, this is when over an event characters' feelings is reversed from obvious one and readers yet are able to look over and have something in mind.

**Situational irony** – as being the most common in literature, it is the contrast between what happens and what was expected (or what would seem appropriate).

**Verbal irony** - this is a statement in which the speaker means something very different from what he or she is saying.

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