



Irony

What is Irony?

In general, irony involves a contradiction between appearance and reality. In literature, irony is a deliberate gap between the language used and what is being discussed. Irony results when there is a difference in point of view between a character and the narrator or reader. There are four major types of irony: verbal, dramatic, situational, and cosmic.

Four Major Types of Irony:

1. **Verbal Irony.** Verbal irony refers to spoken words only. Verbal irony occurs when a character says one thing, but suggests or intends the opposite. The contrast is between what the speaker says and what he actually means. For example, in *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony repeats the words "and Brutus is an honorable man" in the famous "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech. Mark Antony's meaning, however, is that Brutus is completely dishonorable because Brutus, Caesar's best friend, joined the other conspirators and plunged a knife into Caesar's chest.

Note: Verbal irony may be confused with sarcasm, but sarcasm is harsh and direct, while verbal irony is implied.

2. **Dramatic Irony.** Dramatic irony involves more than just spoken words. Dramatic irony occurs when the meaning intended by a character's words or actions is opposite of the true situation. The contrast is between what the character says, thinks, or does and the true situation. Further, the character cannot see or understand the contrast, but the audience or reader can. For example, in *Othello*, dramatic irony occurs when Othello refers to Iago as "honest Iago." Unknown to Othello, Iago is a villain who deceives him into thinking that Desdemona (Othello's wife) has been unfaithful. For this, Othello unjustly kills his wife, believing the whole time in Iago's honesty.

Note the difference in examples for verbal and dramatic irony: Antony calls Brutus "honorable" and knows he is not honorable, while Othello calls Iago "honest" and does not know of Iago's deceit.

3. **Situational Irony:** Situational irony defies logical cause/effect relationships and justifiable expectations. For example, if a greedy millionaire were to buy a lottery ticket and win additional millions, the irony would be situational because such a circumstance cannot be explained logically. Such a circumstance seems "unfair."

This sense of being “unfair” or “unfortunate” is a trademark of situational irony. Because people cannot explain the unfairness, it causes them to question whether or not the world makes sense.

4. **Cosmic Irony (or Irony of Fate).** Some irony goes beyond being unfair and is morally tragic. Such irony is often so severe that it causes people to question God and see the universe as hostile. For example, if an honest, hard-working, and generous person buys a lottery ticket and wins ten million dollars, only to die in an auto crash two days later, the irony would reach tragic proportions. When situational irony reaches this scale, it is often called cosmic irony or irony of fate. Such irony typically suggests that people are pawns to malicious forces.

Remember:

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