

# One Page Concept Review: Dramatic Irony

## What is it?

Dramatic irony is the irony that is inherent in the words, actions, or situations in a work of literature that is understood by a reader, audience, or observer-- but not grasped by the characters. It is more commonly found in drama than in other types of literature.

To give an example, much of the tension in horror movies is that the audience understands that the characters are acting in ways that are contrary to their best interests. The audience understands this either because it explicitly knows more than the characters (e.g., the serial killer lurks outside) or because it understands the genre conventions of horror movies (e.g., it is always a bad idea to split up and investigate an unexplained occurrence on one's own). If the reader, audience, or observer is in on the secret and the characters are not, that's dramatic irony.

## Why should I care?

In terms of the multiple choice or the Q1 or Q2 essays, you probably don't have to worry about dramatic irony. This is because dramatic irony requires enough context so that actions can be interpreted in two ways (based on the limited understanding of the characters versus the more complete understanding of the reader, audience, or observer), and this is unlikely to happen in either short poems or short prose excerpts (constrained by the length).

However, if you're writing about *Twelfth Night* (the one work we've read this year where it is an important element) for a Q3 essay, framing the analysis in terms of dramatic irony is a sophisticated sounding way of completing the task that, in practice, is not actually that hard to pull off.

## How do I do it?

- **Compare what the characters *think* that their actions mean to what the reader, audience, or observer *knows* that their actions mean.** It really is that simple.
- **Dramatic irony can build suspense.** Suspense is defined by an anxiety or excitement about what may happen. One obvious way to generate it is when characters are oblivious to important facts that the reader, audience, or observer knows. To borrow an example from filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, a bomb exploding may be exciting, but it is not suspenseful. However, if the audience knows that the bomb is under the table while the characters do not-- instead carrying on their conversation or meal as normal-- this creates tension, as the viewer wonders if the characters will learn the truth in time to avert catastrophe.
- **Dramatic irony often generates humor.** Anytime a character does not possess all the facts, misunderstandings can arise, and such misapprehension is the fuel of comedy. It can lead to cases of mistaken identity, assertions that are ridiculous in context of the actual truth, or conversations where characters think they are communicating, when they are really engaging completely different ideas (to give just three examples).
- **Dramatic irony can build sympathy for a character.** Since the reader, audience, or observer knows more than the leading characters, it encourages them to anticipate, hope, or fear the moment when a character learns the truth about what is really happening. By emphasizing this vulnerability, it invites observers to sympathize with their predicaments.

- **When present, dramatic irony tends to develop larger themes.** In tragedies, dramatic irony is often used to emphasize the disastrous consequences of incomplete understanding for innocent people. In comedies, disaster is avoided (at least in the end), but the potential for disaster invites the audience to laugh at the precarious nature of human ambition. Sometimes this manifests in a shared recognition that the human condition is defined by an incomplete understanding of the world. Sometimes this manifests in a satiric targeting of a particular human folly that is held up to ridicule and censure. Whatever is going on, though, look for thematic ideas that circle around self-knowledge and the ability for humans to accurately make sense of the world around them.

## How do students screw this up?

### Not Knowing What You Are Talking About

- **Use the term accurately.** If you are engaging dramatic irony on the AP exam, it is almost certainly because you are choosing to engage it. This is because dramatic irony requires enough context so that actions can be interpreted in two ways, and this is unlikely to happen in either short poems or short prose excerpts. Therefore, since you are choosing to write about it, make sure you actually understand what you're talking about and be able to articulate the idea convincingly.
- **Do not overcomplicate the idea.** The reader, audience, or observer understands more than the characters do, and so the reader, audience, or observer interprets the actions of the characters differently than the characters do themselves. There really isn't more to it than that. You're comparing what the observer knows to what the characters *think* they know.

### Not Connecting It to an Argument

- **Pointing out instances of dramatic irony isn't going to accomplish anything if you're not connecting it to meaning.** If you're writing about dramatic irony, you're probably writing a *Twelfth Night* essay. Because the idea of dramatic irony is predicated on the difference between how characters view their actions and themselves and how the audience views their actions and character, you are probably going to want to focus on how dramatic irony relates to the development of character or the development of a character arc. Specifically, both Viola and Sebastian behave in certain ways because they believe that their sibling is dead; however, the audience knows differently. Duke Orsino thinks that he is in love with Olivia, but the audience sees that he is actually falling in love with the person that he thinks is Cesario. Malvolio believes that Olivia is in love with him, but the audience understands that Malvolio is the victim of an elaborate practical joke. In all three cases, the characters possess false knowledge that contributes to their lack of self-knowledge. In order for there to be a happy ending, they have to learn wisdom by the end of the play. The conflict between appearances and reality which is the chief idea that Shakespeare is engaging in the play, and the dramatic irony is central to advancing this conflict.
- **Consider using dramatic irony as a framing device.** If you're writing about a specific character, body paragraph one could be organized around what the character thinks his or her actions mean. The evidence would then discuss how their limited understanding of the world is mirrored in their limited understanding of themselves. The second body paragraph would contrast this foolishness with the wisdom that true knowledge reveals, an understanding that the audience possesses, but the characters do not until Act V. The conclusion (after summarizing what you've proved) would then sum up the larger idea about human folly and human happiness that Shakespeare is articulating in documenting the gap between false knowledge and wisdom.