

One Page Concept Review: Verbal Irony

What is it?

Verbal irony is when the speaker communicates an idea that is meant to be understood in some other way than what a literal reading of that idea would suggest. The degree to which this divergence occurs is the degree to which the statement is ironic. Note that this discrepancy between apparent and intended meaning is not limited to a literal reversal, nor is the only mode of verbal irony that of sarcasm. Indeed, some have argued that sarcasm is not, strictly speaking, irony at all, since it is so obvious in intent as to preclude misunderstanding (and is, therefore, completely straightforward). I disagree (since there is always a hypothetical audience not clever enough to understand even the most blatant sarcasm), but the fact that such a debate exists at all is a testament to how tricky the concept of verbal irony is to quantify. In any case, verbal irony can be gentle, self-mocking, caustic, facetious, flippant, etc., all dependent on context and tone.

What verbal irony always has is the possibility of misunderstanding, since verbal irony requires the simultaneous advancing of two competing narratives: the literal meaning and the intended meaning. This is complicated by the fact that, despite the name, the concept of verbal irony need not necessarily involve ideas that are spoken. It can be the advancing of an attitude toward something, so long as it implies a narrative. For example, I can wear a t-shirt of some cheesy hair metal band from the 1980s because I am a legitimate fan (no irony) or because I recognize that the music is cheesy and think that this cheesiness is funny. This is complicated again by the fact that I can *both* be a fan of the music *and* recognize that it is cheesy (and am, on some level, mocking myself). Either way, there is still a gap between literal meaning (*I love this band!*) and intended meaning (*This band is cheesy!*). Only context reveals the actual meaning.

Why should I care?

The most important application of verbal irony is in terms of tone-- when a narrative stance is intended to be read in a non-literal manner. If you miss the fact that the tone is ironic (as in my band t-shirt example), you are missing the intended reading and coming to a conclusion that is the opposite of what is intended. This is obviously problematic in terms of analyzing it effectively.

How do I do it?

- **Be alert to the possibility of irony in the tone of a text.** When reading a literary text for the first time, always ask yourself if you should be reading it straight or with some degree of irony. If you read an ironic text literally, not only are you missing the point, but you will reach the exact opposite conclusion that you were intended to reach. The red flags that the tone of a work may be ironic are **1)** overstatement and exaggeration (hyperbole and hyperbolic diction); **2)** understatement, understated diction choices, and understated reactions on the parts of the narrator or characters; **3)** situational ironies; and **4)** ridiculous events or reactions that are treated as if they were ordinary events (absurdities that pass without comment).
- **Unreliable narration can be analyzed in terms of verbal irony.** Here the discrepancy is between the claims made by a character (not only in their words, but in their attitudes and actions) and the fact that the texts intends for you not to take these claims at face value. The majority of the time when there is unreliable narration, the intended response is for readers to judge these characters and find them lacking in some key aspect-- that they are (unknowingly) providing the material for a critique of their own behavior.
- In this context, **irony is the most obvious tool of satire.** Satire is the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices. If you are going to write about satire, always make your analysis revolve around the *target* of the satire. As with verbal irony in general, satire need not be harsh or biting. In fact, one often encounters literary characters that

are simultaneously ridiculous or flawed, yet completely relatable and/or sympathetic. Indeed, they're often relatable and sympathetic precisely *because* they are ridiculous and flawed.

- **Keeping this in mind, of the major works you've read this year here are the most obvious instances of an author at least partially ironizing important characters, grouped into three broad categories.** **1)** Characters who are limited in their points of view (yet are nonetheless at least broadly sympathetic): Michael in *The Cat's Table* (because he is young and doesn't always understand his situation completely); Elena and Lila as children in *My Brilliant Friend* (because they are young and don't always understand their situation completely), Herman Broder in *Enemies, a Love Story* (though you are meant to understand and pity him more than sympathize with his persistent weakness); Pip in *Great Expectations* (though you are supposed to be disappointed by many of his actions during the second third of the book); Toru in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (you are supposed to figure out Kumiko has left him before he does, though his naiveté and lack of cynicism should be viewed as a virtue); and Azaro in *The Famished Road* (because he is young and doesn't always understand his situation completely); **2)** Characters who are excessive or ridiculous (yet are nonetheless at least broadly sympathetic): most of the secondary characters in *Great Expectations* (Dickens tends to treat most of his characters broadly); Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* (who is arrogant and spoiled, but doesn't realize it until the end); Dad in *The Famished Road* (who usually means well, but generally takes things way too far); all of the obsessive Buendías in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (though some are more sympathetic than others); and all of the main characters in *Twelfth Night* except Malvolio (though he is still supposed to generate some degree of sympathy). **3)** Characters who are excessive or ridiculous (and are held up to ridicule or censure): Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (though Dickens has too optimistic a view of human nature to completely withhold sympathy); Mr. Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* (who is a deliberate caricature to satirize avarice and class blindness); Jack Durbeyfield in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (another deliberate caricature to satirize provincial stupidity and class envy); Madame Koto in *The Famished Road* (treated humorously at first, but becoming increasingly sinister); and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (again, not totally lacking in audience sympathy).

This is not to claim that these characters are being completely-- or even consistently-- ironized (the nearest to this would be *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Twelfth Night*), merely that at various points the authors use the excesses and limitations of these characters to comment on or critique something (when a literal reading of the words and actions of the characters would seem to suggest a more straightforward agenda). To give a straightforward example, when Elena and Lila treat Don Achille as if he is a monster from a fairy tale, because the text adopts their point of view, a literal reading would suggest that he is indeed an ogre (rather than a local big shot with criminal connections). Here, the text is trying to reveal something about the perspective of children, how seemingly innocuous situations can be magnified into momentous events in the mind of a child.

How do students screw this up?

Not Recognizing It

Once you figure out there is some degree of irony, it isn't terribly difficult to write about as long as you have a solid grasp of the idea. This is particularly true of actual satire, where all you have to do is analyze how the text is mocking or criticizing some undesirable behavior or idea. If nothing else, just memorize the list of what I call the "red flags" in the first bullet point and use them to break the idea down.

What has to happen, though, is for you to be open to the possibility of irony. If you are just reading for plot and not actively questioning the text, this cannot happen.