

Irony Vocabulary

ambiguity (adjective form: *ambiguous*): intentional ambiguity in literature can be a powerful device, leaving something undetermined in order to open up multiple possible meanings; when we refer to literary ambiguity, we refer to any wording, action, or symbol that can be read in divergent ways

cosmic irony: another term for situational irony-- especially situational irony connected to a fatalistic or pessimistic view of life; this term is usually only used when a major antagonist is fate or destiny

dramatic irony: a situation in a narrative in which the reader or audience knows something about present or future circumstances that the character does not know; in that situation, the character acts in a way the reader/audience recognizes to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or the character expects the opposite of what the reader/audience knows that fate holds in store, or the character anticipates a particular outcome that unfolds itself in an unintentional way

facetious: (tone word) meant to be humorous or funny; not serious

hyperbole (adjective form: *hyperbolic*): exaggeration or overstatement for effect; this can take the form of words, descriptions, tone, or states of being (such as a when a character's actions or manner are inappropriately or comically broad, caricatured, or emotional)

irony (adjective form: *ironic* or *ironical*): the gap between expectation and reality (verbal, situational, dramatic)

juxtaposition (verb form: *to juxtapose*): arrangement of two or more ideas, characters, actions, settings, phrases, or words side-by-side or in similar narrative moments for the purpose of comparison, contrast, rhetorical effect, suspense, or character development

litotes: a type of meiosis in which deliberate understatement is created through use of the negative: "You know, Einstein is not a bad scientist." (i.e., Einstein is a good scientist.); litotes is recognizable in English by negatives like not, no, non- and un-.

meiosis: deliberate understatement for effect; this can take the form of words, descriptions, tone, or states of being (such as a when a character's actions or manner are inappropriately or comically stoic, terse, or unemotional); using the technical term (meiosis) is less common than simply labeling examples as "understatement"

oxymoron: a specialized form of paradox in which paired words appear to contradict or cancel out themselves; simple or joking examples include such oxymora as *jumbo shrimp*, *sophisticated rednecks*, and *military intelligence*; the richest literary oxymora seem to reveal a deeper truth through their contradictions.

paradox (adjective form: *paradoxical*): using contradiction or the seeming cancelling out of ideas in a manner that reveals a deeper truth through their contradictions, such as noting that "without laws, we can have no freedom;" Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* also makes use of a famous paradox: "Cowards die many times before their deaths" (2.2.32)

parody: a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing

peripeteia (adjective form: *peripatetic*): the sudden reversal of fortune in a story, play, or any narrative in which there is an observable change in direction; in tragedy, this is often a change from stability and happiness toward the destruction or downfall of the protagonist.

poetic justice: the phrase and the idea was coined by Thomas Rymer in the late 1600s, claiming that a narrative or drama should distribute rewards and punishments proportionately to the virtues and villainies of each character in the story; thus, when a particularly vicious character meets a despicable end appropriate for his crimes, we say it is “poetic justice”

sarcasm (adjective form: *sarcastic*): a type of verbal irony intended to cause pain; the difference between the two is one of tone

sardonic: (tone word) disdainfully or skeptically humorous; grimly mocking or cynical

satire (adjective form: *satiric*): the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues

situational irony: a situation in which actions have an effect that is opposite from what was intended, so that the outcome is contrary to what was expected

verbal irony: the speaker intends to be understood as meaning something that contrasts with the literal or usual meaning of what s/he says; the different sorts of discrepancy between the meaning of what is said and what is meant give rise to different kinds of verbal irony; NOTE: the irony can be gentle, self-mocking, caustic, facetious, flippant, etc., all dependent on context and tone

Irony and Tone

Red flags that the tone of a work may be ironic:

- overstatement and exaggeration (hyperbole and hyperbolic diction)
- understatement, understated diction choices, and understated reactions
- situational ironies
- ridiculous events or reactions are treated as if they were ordinary events

I would also suggest that everyone also take a few moments to read my blog post about irony that reproduces a section from Clare Colebrook’s *Irony*. You can find it at my web-page near the Irony Presentation.