

Irony. In Greek comedy the character called the *eiron* was a dissembler, who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon*—the self-deceiving and stupid braggart. (See in Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957.) In most of the modern critical uses of the term “irony,” there remains the root sense of dissembling, or of hiding what is actually the case; not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects.

Verbal irony (which was traditionally classified as one of the *tropes*) is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed. The ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, but with indications in the overall speech-situation that the speaker intends a very different, and often opposite, attitude or evaluation. Thus in Canto IV of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), after Sir Plume, egged on by the ladies, has stammered out his incoherent request for the return of the stolen lock of hair, the Baron answers:

“It grieves me much,” replied the Peer again,
“Who speaks so well should ever speak in vain.”

This is a straightforward case of an ironic reversal of the surface statement (of which one effect is to give pleasure to the reader) because there are patent clues, established by the preceding narrative, that the Peer is not in the least aggrieved and does not think that poor Sir Plume has spoken at all well. A more complex instance of irony is the famed sentence with which Jane Austen opens *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”; part of the ironic implication (based on assumptions that Austen assumes the audience shares with her) is that a single woman is in want of a rich husband. Sometimes the use of irony by Pope and other masters is very complicated: the meaning and evaluations may be subtly qualified rather than simply reversed, and the clues to the ironic counter-meanings under the literal statement—or even to the fact that the author intends the statement to be understood ironically—may be oblique and unobtrusive. That is why recourse to irony by an author tends to convey an implicit compliment to the intelligence of readers, who are invited to associate themselves with the author and the knowing minority who are not taken in by the ostensible meaning. That is also why many literary ironists are misinterpreted and sometimes (like Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century) get into serious trouble with the obtuse authorities. Following the intricate and shifting maneuvers of great ironists like Plato, Swift, Austen, or Henry James is a test of skill in reading between the lines.

Some literary works exhibit **structural irony**; that is, the author, instead of using an occasional verbal irony, introduces a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning and evaluation throughout the work. One common literary device of this sort is the invention of a **naïve hero**, or else a naïve narrator or spokesman, whose invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader—who

penetrates to, and shares, the implied point of view of the authorial presence behind the naive *persona*—just as persistently is called on to alter and correct. (Note that verbal irony depends on knowledge of the fictional speaker's ironic *intention*, which is shared both by the speaker and the reader; structural irony depends on a knowledge of the author's ironic intention, which is shared by the reader but is not intended by the fictional speaker.) One example of the naive spokesman is Swift's well-meaning but insanelly rational and morally obtuse economist who writes the "Modest Proposal" (1729) to convert the excess children of the oppressed and poverty-stricken Irish into a financial and gastronomical asset. Other examples are Swift's stubbornly credulous Gulliver, the self-deceiving and paranoid monologist in Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" (1842), and the insane editor, Kinbote, in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). A related structural device for sustaining ironic qualification is the use of the *fallible narrator*, in which the teller of the story is a participant in it. Although such a narrator may be neither stupid, credulous, nor demented, he nevertheless manifests a failure of insight, by viewing and appraising his own motives, and the motives and actions of other characters, through what the reader is intended to recognize as the distorting perspective of the narrator's prejudices and private interests. (See *point of view*.)

In *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) Wayne Booth identifies as **stable irony** that in which the speaker or author makes available to the reader an assertion or position which, whether explicit or implied, serves as a firm ground for ironically qualifying or subverting the surface meaning. **Unstable irony**, on the other hand, offers no fixed standpoint which is not itself undercut by further ironies. The literature of the *absurd* typically presents such a regression of ironies. At an extreme, as in Samuel Beckett's drama *Waiting for Godot* (1955) or his novel *The Unnamable* (1960), there is an endless regress of ironic undercuttings. Such works suggest a denial that there is any secure evaluative standpoint, or even any determinable rationale, in the human situation.

Sarcasm in common parlance is sometimes used as an equivalent for all forms of irony, but it is far more useful to restrict it only to the crude and taunting use of apparent praise for dispraise: "Oh, you're God's great gift to women, you are!" The difference in application of the two terms is indicated by the difference in their etymologies; whereas "irony" derives from "eiron," a "dissembler," "sarcasm" derives from the Greek verb "sarkazein," "to tear flesh." An added clue to sarcasm is the exaggerated inflection of the speaker's voice.

The term "irony," qualified by an adjective, is used to identify various literary devices and modes of organization:

Socratic irony takes its name from the fact that, as he is represented in Plato's dialogues (fourth century B.C.), the philosopher Socrates usually dissembles by assuming a pose of ignorance, an eagerness to be instructed, and a modest readiness to entertain opinions proposed by others; although these, upon his continued questioning, turn out to be ill-grounded or to lead to absurd consequences.

Dramatic irony involves a situation in a play or a narrative in which the audience or reader shares with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the literary

character unknowingly acts in a way we recognize to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or expects the opposite of what we know that fate holds in store, or says something that anticipates the actual outcome, but not at all in the way that the character intends. Writers of Greek tragedy, who based their plots on legends whose outcome was already known to their audience, made frequent use of this device. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, for example, is a very complex instance of **tragic irony**, for the king ("I, Oedipus, whom all men call great") engages in a hunt for the incestuous father-murderer who has brought a plague upon Thebes; the object of the hunt turns out (as the audience, but not Oedipus, has known right along) to be the hunter himself; and the king, having achieved a vision of the terrible truth, blinds himself. Dramatic irony occurs also in comedy. A comic example of dramatic irony is the scene in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (II. v.) in which Malvolio struts and preens in anticipation of a good fortune that the audience knows is based on a fake letter; the dramatic irony is heightened for the audience by Malvolio's ignorance of the presence of the hidden hoaxers, who gleefully comment on his incongruously complacent speech and actions.

Cosmic irony (or "the irony of fate") is attributed to literary works in which a deity, or else fate, is represented as though deliberately manipulating events so as to lead the protagonist to false hopes, only to frustrate and mock them. This is a favorite structural device of Thomas Hardy. In his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) the heroine, having lost her virtue because of her innocence, then loses her happiness because of her honesty, finds it again only by murder, and having been briefly happy, is hanged. Hardy concludes: "The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess."

Romantic irony is a term introduced by Friedrich Schlegel and other German writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to designate a mode of dramatic or narrative writing in which the author builds up the illusion of representing reality, only to shatter the illusion by revealing that the author, as artist, is the creator and arbitrary manipulator of the characters and their actions. The concept owes much to Laurence Sterne's presentation of a self-conscious and willful narrator in his *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67). Byron's great narrative poem *Don Juan* (1819-24) persistently uses this device for ironic and comic effect, letting the reader into the narrator's confidence, and so revealing the latter to be nothing more than a fabricator of fiction who is often at a loss for matter to sustain his story and undecided about how to continue it. (See Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*, 1980.) This type of irony, involving a *self-conscious narrator*, has become a recurrent mode in the modern form of *involved fiction*.

A number of writers associated with the *New Criticism* used "irony," although in a greatly extended sense, as a general criterion of literary value. This use is based largely on two literary theorists. T. S. Eliot praised a kind of "wit" (characteristic, in his view, of seventeenth-century *metaphysical poets* but absent in the Romantic poets) which is an "internal equilibrium" that implies the "recognition," in dealing with any one kind of experience, "of other kinds of experience which are possible." ("Andrew Marvell," 1921, in *Selected Essays*, 1960.) And

I. A. Richards defined irony in poetry as an equilibrium of opposing attitudes and evaluations (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, 1924, chapter 32):

Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry which is.

Such observations were developed by Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and other New Critics into the claim that poems in which the writer commits himself or herself unreservedly to a single attitude or outlook, such as love or admiration or idealism, are of an inferior order because they are vulnerable to the reader's ironic skepticism; the greatest poems, on the other hand, are invulnerable to external irony because they already incorporate the poet's own "ironic" awareness of opposite and complementary attitudes. See Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1943), in *Critiques and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert W. Stallman (1949); Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure" (1949), in *Literary Opinion in America*, ed. M. D. Zabel (3d ed., 1962).

D. C. Muecke, *Irony* (1970); A. E. Dyson, *The Crazy Fabric, Essays in Irony* (1965); Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974). A suggestive and wide-ranging earlier exploration of the mode is Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* (1841; trans. Lee M. Capel, 1965).

Ivory Tower. A phrase taken from the biblical Song of Songs 7:4, in which the lover says to the beloved woman, "Thy neck is as a tower of ivory." In the 1830s the French critic Sainte-Beuve applied the phrase "tour d'ivoire" to the stance of the poet Alfred de Vigny, to signify his isolation from everyday life and his exaltation of art above all practical concerns. Since then "ivory tower" is often used (usually in a derogatory way) to signify an attitude or a way of life which is isolated from the everyday world and indifferent or hostile to practical affairs; more specifically, it is used to signify a theory and practice of art which insulates it from moral, political, and social concerns or effects. (See *aestheticism*.)

Jeremiad. A term derived from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who in the seventh century B.C. attributed the calamities of Israel to its violation of the covenant with Jehovah and return to pagan idolatry, denounced with gloomy eloquence its religious and moral iniquities, and called on the people to repent and reform in order that Jehovah might restore them to His favor and renew the ancient covenant. As a literary term, **jeremiad** is applied to any work which, with a magniloquence like that of the Old Testament prophet (although it may be in secular rather than religious terms), accounts for the misfortunes of an era as a just penalty for its social and moral wrongdoings, but usually holds open the possibility for reforms that will bring a happier future.

In the *Romantic Period*, powerful passages in William Blake's "prophetic poems" constitute short jeremiads, and the term is often applied to those of Thomas Carlyle's writings in which he uses a resonant biblical idiom to denounce the social and economic misdeeds of the *Victorian Period* and to call for drastic reforms. The jeremiad, in its original religious mode, was a familiar genre in the sermons and writings of the *Colonial Period* in America, at a time