
We have art in order not to die of the truth.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Irony, in its original Greek sense, means the pretense of ignorance in order to ridicule a person or to expose the truth about a situation. We see this very old kind of irony still at work today when a story or movie shows a shrewd country person pretending to be dumb in order to make fun of a city slicker. But irony has also come to have far broader meanings.

Three Types of Irony

We find three kinds of irony in stories, each of them involving some kind of contrast between expectation and reality. **Verbal irony**—the simplest kind—is when we say one thing but *mean* the opposite. We use verbal irony ourselves every day.

If we say, “You sure can pick ‘em” to the man whose team finished last, we are using verbal irony. A parent uses verbal irony when he or she looks up from the string of D’s on Willie’s report card and says, “It is certainly gratifying to find you are getting so much out of your education.”

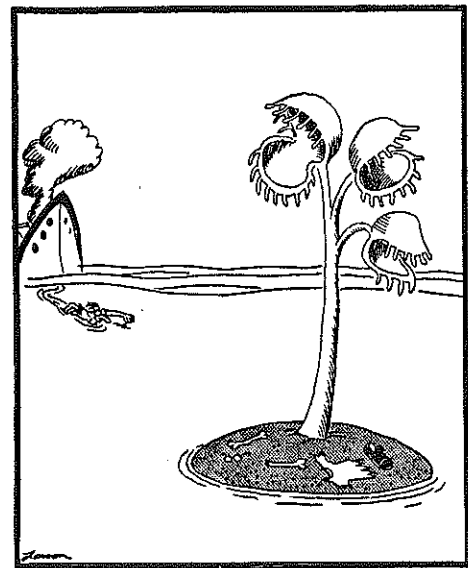
If the speaker goes on to use words in a particularly harsh and cruel way, we see the use of **sarcasm**. Sarcasm intends to wound, to bite in a hurtful way. The person looking at Willie’s report card would be sarcastic if he or she went on to say, “You’re so dumb it’s a wonder you have the sense to get out of the rain.”

Situational irony is much more important to the storyteller: It describes an occurrence that is not just surprising; it is the *opposite* of what we expected. In an ironic situation, what actually happens is so contrary to our expectations that it seems to mock human intentions and the confidence with which we plan our futures. The ironic possibility that this haughty rich man will come begging from us tomorrow or that this girl who is dreading tonight’s party will meet her future husband there keeps our lives interesting. Of course, it does the same for our fiction.

An example of situational irony would be found in a story that told how, after years of searching and after many bloody quarrels over the treasure map, the characters discover the treasure chest and find that it is full of old bottle caps.

A classic example of situational irony is found in the myth of King Midas. This greedy king wishes for a golden touch, but when his wish is granted, something unexpected happens: Midas can no longer eat because even his food turns to gold when he touches it. The golden touch has brought him not only riches, but misery, even death, as well.

Irony and Satire: The Might of the Word



The Far Side.

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“Irony of all kinds is somehow enormously satisfying, perhaps because we know instinctively that our carefully laid plans and ambitions and strivings often come to little.”

Dramatic irony is the kind of irony that occurs when we know what is in store for a character, but the character does *not* know. This is called dramatic irony because it's so often used on stage.

Jean arranges a surprise party for Fred's birthday, and all his friends are hiding behind the curtains waiting for him to arrive home. When Fred, looking haggard, calls into an apparently empty hall, "Hello? Jean? Anybody home? Boy, am I *tired!*" we recognize dramatic irony. Our sense that in a few seconds the exhausted Fred is going to be astonished by a happy-birthday chorus heightens our interest in Fred (we wonder how he will respond).

Dramatic irony adds to our enjoyment of a story because it mimics life, which is forever pulling surprises on us.

Irony of all kinds is somehow enormously satisfying, perhaps because we know instinctively that our carefully laid plans and ambitions and strivings often come to little, while good luck (or bad) often finds unlikely targets.

The Ironic World of Fiction

In its very largest sense, irony describes one of two broad attitudes a writer may take toward the fictional world. As their creator and the master of their destinies, a writer totally controls the characters of a story. Some storytellers arrange the characters' fates to *mock* all their plans. Suppose a storyteller tells of an old prospector who has been searching for a secret lode of gold all his life. But the storyteller decides that when the old man finds the gold and begins chipping away at the rock, he will cause an avalanche that will bury him and the gold under a ton of debris. That author is depicting a very **ironic world**, where humans, however ambitious and fortunate, have no control over an uncaring destiny.

The opposite of this ironic writer is the author who creates a world in which the characters' dreams and quests *do* come true and where they all "live happily ever after." We know then that we are enjoying a **romance**, a fictional world that is far from ironic and one that sometimes is more entertaining than truthful. (Think of the difference between the unlucky prospector described above and the protagonist in "Trap of Gold," page 149.)

One of the very oldest plots is the one that goes this way: Boy meets girl, boy almost loses girl, boy wins girl. (Today the characters' roles are often reversed: Girl meets boy, etc.) A romantic writer would stick to that plot line: The boy (or girl) would get what he is seeking, even though he has had to go through various ordeals testing the strength of his devotion. The story would end with the two young people together at last and the promise of a happy future rather securely planted in the reader's mind.

What would an ironic writer do with this plot? The ending would not necessarily be happy. The boy (or girl) might win his heart's desire, but perhaps there are hints that the girl might not be right for him (as in "The Fatalist," page 24), or that she is only marrying

him because she was rejected by her true love. Or perhaps by the time she wants to marry him, it's too late—he wants someone else.

The story of Cinderella meeting her Prince on a crowded dance floor and then being rescued from a life in the ash heap is a romance. To realize how different irony is, think of all the movies today that are based on this old plot, but that give it an ironic twist. In an ironic version of the Cinderella plot, the hero and heroine would not be rewarded at the end with happiness ever after. There would probably be no fairy godmother transforming mice into footmen and pumpkins into golden coaches. The mice would remain mice, and if Cinderella said she saw a fairy godmother, she'd probably be admitted to the hospital for psychiatric tests. (Another version of a modern, ironic Cinderella plot is on page 344.)

Satire: A Social Purpose

Satire is a close relative of irony and often uses irony to accomplish its purpose. **Satire** is any writing that uses ridicule to bring about social reform: The satirist wants to expose and eliminate human stupidity and wickedness. Greed, injustice, cruelty, and deceit are all targets of the satirist. To make people recognize these human insufficiencies, satirists will often exaggerate their characters' faults—so much so that we have to laugh at them.

Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* is one of the most famous satires in the English language. The story is merciless (and hilarious) in mocking people in seventeenth-century England who thought their nation was the most civilized on earth. George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* is another famous satire, one that uses barnyard animals to mock the way people abuse political power.

Comedians on television use satire all the time, often to make fun of themselves. The long-running television show *M*A*S*H* used satire to make us laugh (and cry) at the insanity of war.

Satire and irony are often confused. This is probably because both are often found in the same story. But irony can work without a satiric intent, and a satire can hit its target without using any of the forms of irony.

These two forms of expression—irony and satire—come out of a common inkwell, which holds plenty of acid. Ironic and satiric writing can be humorous: it can lay bare a weakness or a pretense, and it can also invite laughter at someone's expense. Irony and satire may sometimes sting; they may sometimes be cruel in purpose and in effect; but it would be a mistake to reject them.

Whenever I hear the ancient claim that "the pen is mightier than the sword," I think of irony and satire. A pen that uses irony or satire can even become a sword, and it can be taken up in a good cause. Irony and satire can hold up to us the mirror of art and reveal our own faults and foolishnesses. They can make us aware of all the ways in which we humans persuade ourselves that we are righteous and right-minded—when, in fact, we just may be dead wrong.

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Hawkeye (Alan Alda) and Radar (Gary Burghoff) see eye-to-eye. Scene from the television show *M*A*S*H*.

