

Irony

In general, irony comes from a Greek word relating to “a withholding of knowledge.” It deals with a discrepancy between what we know or sense and what is actually true. There are three basic types of irony in literature:

- **Verbal irony**

Verbal irony occurs when **a speaker says one thing but means the opposite**. Two key things to keep in mind: the word opposite and the intent of the speaker. First, students will sometimes say that verbal irony is when a speaker says one thing but means something else. Verbal irony is more specific than that—the meaning must be the opposite of what is said. Second, people can say something that is unintentionally ironic, but that is not verbal irony. With verbal irony, the speaker says one thing, but intentionally means the opposite.

For example, you make a silly mistake, and your brother says, “That was smart.” What he means is the opposite of smart. He means you made a really dumb mistake. This is also called sarcasm which adds the warmhearted intention of mockery or derision to the irony (I mean “warmhearted” ironically here—did you catch it?).

There are other types of verbal irony, which we won’t get into right now, and there are degrees of irony, but just keep in mind that verbal irony is spoken with an intent to communicate that the opposite is true.

- **Situational irony**

This is the irony we usually mean when we say something is ironic. **Situational irony is when a situation turns out to be the opposite of what seems appropriate**. When a fireman’s own personal house burns to the ground, we get a sense that such happenings are just wrong. In the short story “The Sniper,” the main character is in a conflict with an unseen antagonist whom he is able to shoot and kill at the climactic moment. When he goes to look at his enemy’s face, he realizes that it was his own brother.

Situational irony cuts deeply into our feelings because it undermines our fundamental sense that things should happen a certain way in life—that there should be a moral order to the world. It shows us that often we are not in control of our own lives and that sometimes the world just doesn’t make sense.

- **Dramatic irony**

In many instances, dramatic irony is the easiest to detect. **Dramatic irony is simply when the reader know something that a character or characters in the story don’t know**. It is called dramatic irony because it is used so often to great effect in drama (plays).

The effect of dramatic irony is to increase suspense and can be used to heighten a sense of horror, fear, excitement, or comedy. When we know a character is about to open the door where we know that a killer awaits, the suspense terrifies us. When, in a sit-com, a man is about to walk unaware into an embarrassing situation, and the audience sees it coming, the result can be hilarious. In both of these instances, the effect is produced through the building of suspense because we have a special knowledge the characters don’t have.