

Irony

By looking at points of view and narrators, we begin to see the importance of literary perspective. At times that perspective can create irony, an incongruity between what a character or narrator says and does and what the readers know to be true. Three types of literary irony include verbal, situational, and dramatic.

Verbal irony occurs when a character says one thing but means something else. We do this often in our own lives. Suppose you wake up late, you're out of hot water, you're caught in traffic, you miss your first class of the day, you get a large power bill, and the day continues like this. When you meet a friend on the street who asks how you are, you say with frustration, "It's been a great day!" This is verbal irony--you say it has been a great day when your tone, expression, and experience all say it has not been a great day.

Situational irony occurs when what happens is different than what readers believe will be happening. Suppose a couple have been dating for a couple months. The young man begins to think of marriage and can easily imagine the two of them going to altar. He has purchased a ring and is ready to propose that very night. He believes she feels the same.

The young woman, on the other hand, has frequently felt uncomfortable at how the relationship has been progressing; in fact, not only are things moving too quickly for her, but she just doesn't agree with some of his goals and ambitions. She begins to consider breaking off the relationship. She believes he feels the same.

That night at dinner, each of them will learn that what he or she was expecting was not what the other has wanted. This is situational irony.

Dramatic irony occurs when the readers are aware of what is happening while the narrator or characters do not. Imagine again that Dracula horror movie at the beginning of lesson on setting. Suppose that in Count Dracula's castle a young maiden is sitting before a mirror brushing her long hair. The Count comes behind her, but she doesn't see him in the mirror because he has no reflection. As an audience we tense because we know what is happening while the young maiden does not. This is dramatic irony. Unlike situational irony, dramatic irony lets us as readers in on the secret, and it often leads to added suspense.

Dramatic irony also exists in "The Story of an Hour." When Mrs. Mallard sees her husband, she dies. The narrator concludes the story with the line: When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of joy that kills. But as readers, who have just moments before seen Louise Mallard as a goddess of Victory because she supposes she is free from a restricting relationship, we question whether she dies from the joy of seeing her husband or from realizing she is no longer free. This is dramatic irony.

Irony, then, allows us to explore incongruities within literature and within life.