

Irony in Fiction

By
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Google “irony” and you quickly find it’s a word that means different things to different people. Some people even claim irony is dead. A writer in *Time* announced 09/11/01 as its death date because he believes that was the day irony came and bit the U.S. in the...well. The gravity of that day notwithstanding, we all know, as Robert McKee points out in *STORY*, “...life is rarely all sunshine and strawberries, nor is it all doom and drek; it is *both*...”

A workaholic labors day and night, making gobs of money, but cannot find a true love to share it with. This isn’t a made-up character; many of us could point to a friend in this ironic situation. We can claim with confidence irony is not dead in real life, which is the springboard for storytelling. And it’s certainly not dead in current storytelling. Consider the themes in popular culture this year: a vampire who lives forever, but constantly tries to salvage what’s left of his humanity (*Trueblood*), the anarchist committed to the laws of brotherhood and society (*Sons of Anarchy*), even the trendy anti-hero (*The Dark Knight* and *My Own Worst Enemy*).

So irony exists. It might even be all the rage. But to discuss it, we should try to define it.

First, we can rule out what irony is not. The modern meaning of the word differs from Socratic Irony, the very first kind, and an animal unto itself. Socratic Irony is the wise teacher pretending ignorance in order to draw out students’ knowledge. Socratic irony has no place in good storytelling, but it does have a kissing cousin in bad storytelling. More on that later.

Irony also is not particularly friendly. It uses discomfort to push us in a certain direction. It is meant to make us think, absorb, and understand difficult truths that we cannot quite put into words.

Now for what it is. For our purposes here, we can stick to the three types of irony laid out in *Writing Fiction* by Janet Burroway because they’re the ones that apply to storytelling:

Verbal, Dramatic, and Cosmic.

Verbal Irony is the simplest kind. The basis for jokes, for sarcasm, the double entendre, and rhetorical questions, it relies on stereotypes and common knowledge. Saying that it speaks to the human condition probably gives it too much dignity. But

verbal irony has its place in storytelling, of course. Authors are wordsmiths and verbal irony relies on words.

Dramatic Irony has one rule: the reader knows something the character does not. For a clear-cut example, think oblivious teenagers doing the backseat tango in a slasher film. The audience knows the killer is watching them with a knife in his hand. The characters do not.

Multiple POVs, unreliable narrators, cultural differences, obvious character flaws, and redemption and punitive plots are all common devices to showcase dramatic irony. Some stories even start at the climax, throwing out suspense in lieu of theme. I would lump “sufficient foreshadowing” in dramatic irony, too. No matter how it’s done, the reader must be led to an early, omniscient conclusion regarding the coming climax, without the characters reaching the same conclusion, and without the reader thinking: *What an idiot! A ghost says GET OUT, you GET OUT!!* (Not always an easy job.) Resolution occurs in dramatic irony when the character catches up with the reader.

Cosmic Irony requires the most trust between writer and reader because it relies on conflicts within the human condition. The writer must trust the reader to come to the intended conclusion, *to get what I mean, man*. Aristotle said dramatic action (showing, plot) implies the metaphysical (meaning, theme). This type of irony often relies more on symbolic action and metaphor, ultimately requiring more showing than telling. In George RR Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, when Ser Jaime the Kingslayer loses his hand, he loses that which is most dear to him: his ability to fight. But Martin never waxes poetic about how Jaime also lost the one thing that made him so evil, and how maybe it’s a fresh start in a better life. As time goes on, we *watch* Jaime grow into a better person, gaining more admirable qualities. The judgment call on the affects Martin’s torture has had on Jaime’s character are left to the reader to determine. Some readers might miss it, but Martin trusts that most of us are paying attention.

So that’s what they are, verbal, dramatic, and cosmic ironies. But even well-defined, irony is not...ironclad. It lives on a sliding scale, relying on discrepancy between actions and results, appearance and reality. It’s a dicey proposition. Since it requires three equal players, writer, reader, and victim (character), the writer must first decide how well she wants the reader to relate to the victim. For instance, for tragic irony the writer relies on sympathy for the protagonist to enhance the ironic punch. In nihilistic irony, the writer relies on plot and action, maybe making the victim less likeable, so that a reader distances himself from the character and concentrates on the circumstance instead. Paradoxical irony is a balance between the two.

In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner uses the classic tale of Helen of Troy to demonstrate decisions the writer must make regarding the scope and scale of irony.

Achaean society, which Helen married into, is by any standard barbaric and crude. Nonetheless, their fidelity to kin and country is an admirable quality. No self-respecting Achaean is going to let some Trojan steal his wife, much less his queen, even if she wants to go, even if it means dying for it. Who knows why? They might adore their queen, Helen. They might have a tradition of venerating war. They might

have been waiting for a chance to invade Troy anyway. Or not. A storyteller can reconstruct backstory any way he likes.

By contrast, the Trojans are sophisticated, but morally lenient. No one makes Paris return Helen, after all. Perhaps Paris didn't realize the Achaeans, who had just been so hospitable, would come after her. Or, maybe he's a spoiled prince, used to having things his way. And did Helen know the Achaeans would come? Was she too coddled and protected to ever understand the Achaeans? Or did she know full well what would happen and decided to assert her independence at any cost?

Again, such backstory and motivation is left to the discretion of the storyteller. The writer must decide *how and why* the characters think and behave the way they do. These decisions tip the scales toward or away from ironic themes and affects the degree of sympathy for the characters. If a writer is going for full-on cosmic ironic treatment, then he must combine characterization, backstory, plot, quirks of fate, and even settings to enhance that statement.

Treading such murky, stump-filled waters is risky, though. When trying for the subtlety that irony requires, a writer might accidentally fall back on Socratic Irony. In storytelling, this includes deliberately keeping secrets from readers, who, if they're sophisticated enough to understand irony, are probably clever enough to see through the Merlins, Gandalfs, and Professor Dumbledores in our stories. Worse, we run the risk of playing tricks, even to the point of *dues ex machina*, in order to trap readers with their own ignorance. It's the quickest way to replace irony with insult.

Many well-told stories contain no ironic message, maybe even a couple in *Electric Spec*. But irony makes the reader *think*. Irony skews readers toward the writer's worldview, if even for a few moments. Irony requires empathy, which is a noble goal for any artistic endeavor. But most of all, stories that end in irony tend to be the most memorable and enduring, those stories that make us say: *Yes! Life is just like that!*