**Irony**

**Definition:** IRONY from *The AMA Handbook of Business Writing*

Irony is a literary technique where the speaker or writer says one thing, but the meaning is something completely different. Irony is often humorous in nature. When a statement uses irony, it is said to be *ironic.* Irony can also imply tragedy or a twist of fate.

**Example:** "It is a fitting irony that under Richard Nixon, launder became a dirty word."—William Zinsser

**Summary Article:** IRONY

From *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*

According to the Roman rhetorician Quintilian (ca. 35-100 ce), *irony* is saying something other than what is understood. By the time Quintilian offered this definition, there were already two intertwined philosophical and rhetorical traditions. Considering the scope and definition of *irony,* and this twin history continues to this day. Irony is at once a general attitude and a localized figure of speech; it can be as broad as the Socratic commitment to knowing that one does not know and as specific as substituting one word for its opposite.

Irony can be considered philosophically as a mode of life or a general relation to knowledge and understanding. It is usually accepted that this philosophical tradition begins with Plato's Socrates, whose mode of questioning in Plato's dialogues is to accept the terms of his interlocutors' definitions and then to push those definitions (occasionally) to the point where the meaning of the discussed term either dissolves completely, leaving only a gap (*aporia*), or at least points to the need to create a definition that is more adequate than the common acceptance of a term's use. Socrates is described in the dialogues as deploying *eironeia,* which in the Gr. tragedies prior to Plato had designated deception or lying but which in the dialogues comes to refer to a strategy for attaining truth, a strategy that *appears* to accept the terms of common sense and received wisdom but ultimately exposes ordinary language to be inadequate. When Socrates asks Thrasymachus, in Plato's *Republic* (ca. 380 bce), for a definition of "justice" and Thrasymachus replies that "justice is the advantage of the powerful" or "justice is paying back what one owes," Socrates accepts these definitions and then goes on to ask whether one would still call "just" actions undertaken by those in power who were mistaken about their own interests or whether returning an ax to a madman could still be a case of justice. Thrasymachus is baffled and *accuses* Socrates of irony, suggesting that (for Thrasymachus, at least) there is something pernicious about Socrates' undermining of everyday lang. and accepted usage. This sense that irony is undermining and linguistically and socially pernicious begins with Plato and continues into the 21st c. Aristotle (384-322 bce), in his *Ethics* and *Rhetoric,* after Plato, suggested that the responsible citizen of good character should not remain distant and detached from everyday truth claims, norms, and conventions. Irony is socially irresponsible in its undermining of shared political conventions. Cicero (106-43 bce) also claimed in *De oratore* that the active and engaged participant in a polity would use rhetorical strategies within his own context but would not, as Socrates seemed to do, have such a distanced attitude to the entire lang. that no engagement or meaning would ever be possible or secure. In the 19th c., both philosophers (Søren Kierkegaard, 1813-55) and literary critics (such as the Ger. romantics associated
with the *Athenaeum* jour.) celebrated Socrates as the only "true" character insofar as he lived his life aware of the impossibility of coinciding completely with everyday lang. In the 21st c., both celebrations and denunciations of Socratic irony remain in force. The Am. pragmatist Richard Rorty (1931-2007) suggested that, given the necessary impossibility of establishing an absolute truth on which a society might establish its norms, all we can do is adopt our norms and political vocabularies, remaining aware that there is a certain provisional and contingent nature to all truth claims. We may be publicly sincere but privately ironic. Rorty endorses a Socratic mode of irony as a general attitude toward life and knowledge, and an acceptance that everyday definitions and conventions can never be adequate to some putative universal and final sense. Rorty's irony has been criticized as an abandonment of philosophical responsibility and as an overly postmod. failure to consider the difficult questions of truth, legitimation, and justification (just as Socrates was ultimately deemed by the court of Athens to have corrupted the youth). Yet Rorty himself criticizes one of the more complex aspects of Socrates' irony: by suggesting that everyday definitions are inadequate to define or establish a final sense for concepts such as justice, truth, beauty or the good, Socratic irony assumes that, when one uses irony to negate or distance oneself from everyday understanding, there will emerge some other, better, universal meaning.

Rorty is in keeping with post-20th-c. refusals to consider that a meaning or sense might transcend ordinary usage and conventions. There has been a widespread rejection of any such "Platonism," any idea that there might be a universal meaning for concepts, such as "justice," and that ordinary lang. ought to be corrected by an appeal to some proper and essential sense. For this reason, many of the 20th-c. and contemp. readings of the two modes of irony, either as a limited rhetorical device or as a style of living whereby one distances oneself from conventions, have been negative. That is, it is not assumed that when one "says something other than what is understood," there is some proper or universal sense that lies outside common sense. For Rorty, this attempt to "eff the ineffable" is a mistake that irony ought to cure. Irony should destroy rather than encourage the demands for universal truth claims. Accordingly, Socratic irony was reinterpreted in the 20th c., with philosophers and literary critics arguing that Socrates indicates a specific way of life, an awareness that there is no ultimate truth or essence of humanity and that one must simply form oneself as a literary character.

In addition to being a general attitude or point of view whereby one might characterize entire texts as ironic—such as Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* of 1729 and its "logical" argument for cannibalism as a means of solving the problem of hunger and poverty—irony is also a trope. Socrates' use of irony was wide ranging, sometimes encompassing a critical attitude toward knowledge—accepting that one uses a lang. even if it remains inadequate to capture the higher and essential truths of concepts such as truth and beauty—but sometimes restricted to specifically rhetorical cases of irony. Here, rather than the mode of a character or way of life, there is the substitution of one term for its opposite, so that Socrates will hail a sophist as "wise" when the context of the dialogue and its devel. suggest otherwise. One way in which this contrariness of meaning—Quintilian's "saying something other than is understood"—can be explained is through a theory of tropes. If other figures, such as metaphor, substitute like for like, irony substitutes opposites. Irony differs from other tropes or figures in its capacity to work differently according to context and differently within context, depending on who is reading or listening and how one is situated in relation to the speaker. Jane Austen's opening of *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"—is read as irony only if one does not accept the economic norms of the bourgeois marriage market. James Joyce's opening sentence of "The Dead" (1914)—"Lily, the
caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet"—is marked as ironic only if one has the ling. resources to know that one cannot be literally run off one's feet. Irony has a hierarchical dimension, excluding some members of the audience from its "other" or implied sense.

That "other sense" remains difficult to secure and accounts for the multiple senses and levels of irony. These could be summarized as the following:

1. Simple rhetorical irony, the substitution of one sense for another. (Samuel Johnson's example from the dictionary of 1755 was "Bolingbroke was a holy man," an example that demonstrates that the implied sense would always depend on context and assumed values.)

2. Dramatic irony, where a character speaks in such a manner that the audience or reader recognizes the limited or contradictory nature of his or her speech. This occurs in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar when Marc Antony repeatedly declares that "Brutus is an honorable man" while detailing Brutus's duplicity. In this case, a character is using irony as a figure within his own context. More complex dramatic irony occurs in Macbeth where the audience hears the witches' predictions in one sense, Macbeth in another; and this is compounded if we anticipate the tragic course of events to follow. Dramatic irony is not confined to on-stage drama. It includes cases in which the audience or reader understands something quite different from the speaker's intended sense and can include nonfictional cases. We can perceive an irony in Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" speech, e.g., if we know that, for all his hope, events would run entirely contrary to his envisioned and expected future. In cases of fictional texts, characters such as those in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues can express extreme religious propriety or love, while the events narrated by that very character reveal the opposite. In "My Last Duchess," the character declaring his love reveals himself to be violently controlling, while "In the Spanish Cloister" is spoken from the point of view of a morally zealous monk whose accusations of his fellow monastery inhabitants disclose his own envy and malevolence.

3. Tragic irony, where events follow a course despite, and often because of, characters' attempts to control their own fate. The audience sees a course of events unfolding, despite the characters' efforts to command their own destiny. It is Oedipus's attempt to avoid the predicted killing of his own father, e.g., that leads him to pursue the course of events that he has sought to avoid.

4. Cosmic irony occurs when the universe or cosmos appears to correct, or fly in the face of, our expectations. This has a literary mode, as in Thomas Hardy's novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891), in which the peasant family's attempt to regain its honorable lineage results in the ruin of the well-meaning and noble Tess. This sense of cosmic contrariness captures one of the dominant popular uses of the word irony, when sports commentators, newscasters, or popular songwriters use ironic to signal that, despite our intentions, life plays itself out in a contrary direction.

5. Romantic irony is defined by the Ger. literary theorists of Jena in the Athenaeum jour. and taken up by 20th-c. theorists such as Paul de Man, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, defines irony as the "permanent parabasis of tropes," suggesting that irony is not limited to a figure of speech within a text but opens a point of view outside the text's own frame—parabasis—in which the reader or audience gains a sense of the text as text, not as a sign referring to some proper sense or meaning.

6. Postmod. irony is generally diagnosed or celebrated as the recognition of a loss of stable or
shared meaning. Those like Rorty or (in different ways) de Man regard irony as a liberation from the idea that words are direct markers of some underlying meaning or natural referent. Others regard postmod. irony as nihilistic, as evidence for a loss of faith in public legitimation and shared understanding.

7. Irony as a trope or the substitution of a word for its opposite can range from sarcasm, the aim of which is usually to wound, such as John Searle's "That was a brilliant thing to do," to a negation without a secure opposed sense as in W.H. Auden's use of the word "clever" in his poem "September 1, 1939": "as the clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade."

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