

Understanding Irony

What is irony?

Irony is a contrast between what appears to be and what actually exists, between what is expected and what is experienced.

To illustrate, it is ironic that Romeo and Juliet, the only children of bitter enemies, meet serendipitously and fall in love. Another example of irony is a situation in which a New York bank robber held several people hostage but felt responsible to feed them and ordered pizza. When the pizza arrived, he paid the delivery boy. O. Henry's short story "The Ransom of Red Chief" presents a third example of irony when the kidnappers pay a ransom to return the bratty Red Chief to his parents.

Types of Irony

There are three types of irony:

Verbal Irony: When a character says one thing but means another. Example: In scene 1, Oedipus and Teiresias parry. Teiresias says to Oedipus: "I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind." Teiresias calls Oedipus blind, though physically, Oedipus has sight. We learn that Teiresias is referring to insight. Ironically, once Oedipus gains insight, he physically blinds himself.

Situational Irony: What happens is different from what's expected to happen. It is ironic that the murderer whom Oedipus seeks to cast from Thebes and thereafter lift the curse upon the city, is, in reality, himself.

Dramatic Irony: The audience or reader is aware of critical information of which the characters are unaware. When Oedipus states in the Prologos that "by avenging the murdered King I protect myself," dramatic irony is at work. Aware from the beginning of the guilt of Oedipus, the audience realizes that by avenging the murder of Laios, Oedipus, in fact, destroys himself.

Reasons for Using Irony

- Irony can heighten suspense.
- Irony can add humor.
- Irony can assist in developing depth of character.
- Irony can express theme.
- Irony can assist in foreshadowing.

Recognizing Irony

Explain the irony in each of the following examples by identifying the points of contrast. Determine whether the example represents verbal, situational, or dramatic irony.

1. At the opening of scene 1, Oedipus states: "Until now I was a stranger to this tale, as I had been a stranger to the crime."
2. In scene 3 the messenger from Corinth calls himself Oedipus' "savior."
3. At the end of scene 3, Oedipus asks: "How could I wish that I were someone else? How could I not be glad to know my birth?"
4. Teiresias, the prophet, is blind.

Find two more examples of irony in *Oedipus the King*. Explain the irony and identify the type of irony present in each example.

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