VARIED FACETS OF IRONY

Irony is a figure of speech in which what is actually said is the opposite of what is intended. It is an old literary device, achieved by the use of hyperboles, litotes, sarcasm, satire and understatements. In literature, irony is a technique that indicates a discrepancy or contrast between what is said and what is meant. Cicero defined irony as 'the saying one thing meaning another'[1]. According to Hoakon Chevalier, 'the basic feature of every irony is a contrast between a reality and an appearance'. In other words irony is a contradiction or incongruity between expectation and reality. This disparity may be manifested in a variety of ways. A discrepancy may exist between what someone says and what he or she actually means, between what someone expects to happen and what really does happen, or between what appears to be true and what actually is true. Furthermore, the term *irony* may be applied to events, situations, and even structural elements of a work, not just to statements.

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1. Cicero, De Orators, *2nd Volume* (Trans. E.W. Sutton), London: Heinemann, 1942.

Irony comes from the Greek *eiron*, which itself derives from *eironeia*, meaning "dissembling". In Greek drama, the *eiron* was a character who, although weaker than his opponent, the braggart *alazon*, nevertheless defeated him by misrepresenting himself in some way. The *eiron* often acted foolish or stupid *alazon*. Meiosis, or understatement, was perhaps the *eiron's* most potent – and to the audience, humorous – weapon.To this day, irony often depends on understatement, which requires the audience to recognize that the author, speaker, or character has purposely described something in a way that minimizes its evident significance.

Irony has been called the subtlest comic form. Although understatement may give rise to raised eyebrows or even out right laughter, irony that evokes these reactions is more likely to be achieved through the use of hyperbole, or overstatement, which involves deliberate exaggeration. Irony should not be confused with either sarcasm or satire; although both sarcasm and satire frequently employ irony, the terms are all distinguishable. Sarcasm, which often involves an exaggerated form of irony, is at once more obvious, blunt and nastier; a sarcastic remark is typically directed at a specific person, with the intent to wound and to ridicule. Irony is often directed toward

a situation rather than toward a specific person; even when directed toward a person, irony generally lacks a hurtful aim. Furthermore, whereas sarcasm typically operates by heaping crude – and unfelt – praise on the individual, irony often employs blame. Irony must also be distinguished from Satire, which ridicules human weaknesses in order to spur reform. The satirist derides humanity primarily in an effort to better it. Satire may involve irony, but irony typically lacks satire's ameliorative intent.

So far as modern discourses on irony are concerned, it may be classified into three broad categories: verbal irony, situational irony and structural irony. Verbal irony, also called rhetorical irony, is the most common kind of irony. It is saying one thing but meaning the opposite. In it one meaning is stated but a different, usually an antithetical meaning is intended. It was defined, in other words, as 'saying the contrary of what one means', as 'praising in order to blame and blaming in order to praise'. Verbal irony is nothing but a statement in which the implied meaning is in sharp contrast to the meaning apparently expressed. In an understatement what the speaker means to state is mild, but what he means is intense. In an overstatement the opposite is true. Often a statement becomes ironic due to the

demand of the context. Again, irony may proceed from an explicit or implicit contradiction. It will be quite pertinent to refer to the following lines after sir Plume, urged by the ladies, has stammered out his incoherent request for the return of the stolen lock of hair, the Baron answers him:

"It grieves me much", (replied the Peer again),

who speaks so well should ever speak in vain."[2]

Here we have a straight forward instance of an ironic reversal of the surface statement and there are patent clues in the foregoing circumstances that the Peer is not in the least aggrieved and that poor Sir Plume has not spoken at all well. In Jane Austen's novels verbal irony is the effect of the ironic implication of her narrative. The very opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* offers a beautiful instance of verbal irony:

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."[3]

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2. Alexander Pope: *The Rape of the Lock;* Canto IV; ed. B.V. Sundaram. Macmillan India Ltd. Lines: 131-32. 1980.
3. *Pride and Projudice*; Ch-1; P-231.

The meaning intended in this sentence and gradually revealed by the action is just the reverse of the surface meaning; partial implication of the irony here is that a single woman is in want of a rich husband.

Situational irony, also called irony of situation, derives primarily from events or situations themselves, as opposed to statements made by any individual, whether or not that individual understands the situation as ironic. It typically involves a discrepancy between expectation and reality. Literary examples of situational irony include O. Henry's *"The Gift of the Magi"* and the mythic story of King Midas. In *"The Gift of the Magi,"* both husband and wife give up their most prized possession. The woman sells her beautiful long hair to buy a platinum fob chain for the man's watch; the man sells his watch to buy the woman tortoise shell combs to hold up her hair. In the story of King Midas, Bacchus grants the King's wish that everything he touch be turned to gold; much to his chagrin, the king finds that this power does anything but enhance his true wealth when he hugs his beloved daughter, thereby turning her to gold as well.

Three types of irony – dramatic irony, tragic irony and Socratic irony – can be classified as situational irony. The term 'dramatic irony' may be used to refer to a situation in which the character's own words come back to haunt him or her. However, it usually involves a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the reader or audience knows to be true. The reader or audience possesses some material information that the character lacks, and it is the character's imperfect information that motivates or explains his or her discordant response. Dramatic irony occurs in a wide variety of works, ranging from the comic to the tragic. Tragic irony is a type of dramatic irony marked by a sense of foreboding. As with all dramatic irony, tragic irony involves imperfect information, but the consequences of this ignorance are catastrophic, leading to the character's tragic downfall. The reader or audience experiences a sense of foreboding while anticipating this downfall. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (430 B.C.), for instance, Oedipus, the King of Thebes, vows to find the murderer of the prior King, only to find out something the audience knew all along: that Oedipus himself is the guilty party.

Incidentally, the plots of Sophocles' plays illustrate the irony implicit in human situation, in which man acts contrary to his

intention, or attains result that is the opposite of what he expected to attain. The catastrophe is due less to the protagonist's character than to circumstances contrived by the gods. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus insists more than once that no part of his tragedy was of his own choice. Shakespeare, on the other hand, allows his characters independence of thought and movement, but at every step they find that their hopes were lies and their knowledge was ignorance. In *King Lear* not only Lear and Gloucester but also other characters discover that they stumbled when they saw. Othello's tragedy may be described as a journey from ignorance about himself, his wife and Iago to complete knowledge which not only brings about his ruin but also gives him illumination. Irony does not spare even the devilish Iago, who in spite of his precautions is betrayed by the unexpected loyalty of his foolish wife. The most pervasively ironical play, is, of course *Macbeth* in which every act is followed by a consequence that is the opposite of what was intended or expected.

Sophoclean irony is deeper than the common view of it that *"what a character says has one meaning for himself and another, more sinister meaning, for those who know the plot."* [4]

4. C.M. Bowra: *Sophoclean Tragedy*

Bradley in his lecture on *Macbeth* confines himself to this verbal aspect of the Sophoclean irony when he concentrates on the utterances of the characters which acquire a sinister meaning not intended by them. Such, for instance, is Duncan's comment on the treachery of Cawdor:

> *"There's no art / to find the mind's construction in the face..."*[5]

Which is interrupted by the entrance of the traitor Macbeth, the Thane of Cawdor, who is received with effusive gratitude. The porter imagines himself to be the keeper of the hell-gate little suspecting how apt this description of himself is! Duncan and Banquo praise the present situation of Macbeth's Castle which is to turn shortly into a slaughter house. In a sense, the abundance of Sophoclean irony in the plot of the play and the predominance of the mysterious forces which seemed to influence human actions bring the play very near to the classical tragedy. *Macbeth*, more than any other tragedy of Shakespeare, shows how man is led on to his doom by some unseen power, we may call it 'Destiny' if we like, and whatever

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5. *Macbeth*, Act - I; Sc. IV; Lines: 12-15

happens in the play is contrary to the intention of the protagonist who himself is the worst victim of irony of fate.

There is also an instance of dramatic irony in Homer when the Suitors in *Odyssey* express their confidence that Odysseus will never return though he has already returned and is there in the hall disguised as a beggar. We find an excellent example of dramatic irony in the dialogue of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, when Iphigenia thinks she has been brought to Aulis to be married to Achilles. Her father Agamemnon can not disclose to her that it is at his command that she has been brought there to be sacrificed. Thus, in dramatic irony we find a situation in a play or a narrative in which the audience or the readers share with the author the knowledge of a character that often remains in the dark. The character expects the opposite of what is going to happen, or makes an observation, but not at all in the way that he means it. The classical Greek tragedians made frequent use of this device. Sophocles's *Oedipus* is a very complex instance of tragic irony. Dramatic irony appears more efficacious when not only the audience or reader, but also someone in the play or narrative is aware of the victim's ignorance, as in the dialogue of Agamemnon and Iphigenia as mentioned above. The efficacy of dramatic irony is greatly

heightened when the victim's words, unknown to him, are appropriate to the real situation about which he is in the dark. An excellent instance is, without doubt, Oedipus's curse upon himself:

"And it is my solemn prayer
that the unknown murderer,
and his accomplices.
If such there be, may wear the
brand of shame.
For their shameful act, unfriended,
to their life's end".[6]

There may be dramatic irony in comedy also. We come across an example in Act II, Sc. V of *Twelfth Night* where Malvolio struts and preens in anticipation of a good fortune, which the audience or reader knows, is based on a fake letter. The dramatic irony is heightened by the fact that Malvolio does not know the presence of the hidden hoaxers who gleefully comment on his ludicrously complacent speech and actions.

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6. Sophocles: *The Theban Plays*, Penguin Books Ltd.(1947); P-32; Translated By E.F. Watling.

Socratic irony, also called dialectical irony, is, loosely speaking, situational in nature. The term stems from Plato's depiction of Socrates. In his early-fourth-century B.C. dialogues, Plato recounts Socrates' habitual practice of acting foolish or naïve when questioning his fellow citizens. Having assumed the role of the 'eiron', Socrates successfully forced his 'opponents ' to recognize the irrationality or preposterous implications of their positions by using their own responses against them.

The third major category of irony is structural irony. Works that exhibit structural irony contain an internal feature that creates or promotes a discrepancy that typically operates throughout the entire work. Structural irony depends on a knowledge of the author's ironic intention which is shared by the reader, but is not intended by the speaker where as verbal irony depends on knowledge of the speaker's ironic intention which is shared both by the reader and the speaker. One may find instances of structural irony in Swift's *Modest Proposal*, Browning's "soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" and in Vladimir Nabakov's *Pale Fire*.

Structural irony should not be confused with situational irony. The former involves some sustained feature that makes up part of the very frame of the work, whereas the latter involves an event or comment keyed to the plot rather than to the work's structure. In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), a misunderstanding about identity serves as the basis of the comic plot and pervades the work. Similarly in *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus' ignorance that a man he murdered in the past was the prior King of Thebes underlies the plot and leads to his tragic fall from grace. Although both of these works are based on their protagonists' lack of crucial knowledge, both involve situational rather than structural irony, for the ironic discrepancies arise from the story line rather than the structure or form of the work itself.

Two types of irony – cosmic irony and romantic irony – can be classified as structural irony. Cosmic irony, also called 'irony of fate', arises from the disparity between a character's belief in his or her ability to shape his or her destiny and the audience's recognition that an external, supernatural force has the power to manipulate or even control that character's fate. Just as the unreliable narrator serves as a structural device giving rise to structural irony, so the

supernatural force of cosmic irony makes the irony structural rather than situational in nature. The use of cosmic irony is more than a matter of plot. It typically involves some powerful deity with the ability and the desire to manipulate or even control events in a character's life. The character subject to this irony believes erroneously in free will. Whether or not the character acknowledges the deity's existence, he or she persists in attempting to control or at least affect events. Cosmic irony inevitably involves a tragic outcome. Ultimately, the character's struggle against destiny will be for naught; he or she will have to succumb to forces larger than himself or herself. Cosmic irony is notably apparent in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d' Urbervilles* (1891), where Hardy's view of the influences which shape the lives of his characters is much less kindly and Hardy concludes the tragedy of Tess with the bitter comment: "The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess". The echo of Shakespeare's lines, in *King Lear*,

'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods

They kill us for their sport."

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7. *King Lear* (New Arden Edition); Act IV, Sc-I, 38-39.

is unmistakable. Incidentally, Hardy's irony is not directed at human egotism or at the disparity between assumed and real worth but at the very condition of human existence. His novels are built primarily upon the doctrine of the Irony of Fate as commonly understood. The fault is largely in our stars that we are so. Homer, the first of the ancients, is at one with Hardy, the first of the moderns, in knowing and showing the relentlessness, and hopelessness of Fate.

The term 'irony of fate' suggests a contrast between the protagonist's conscious aspirations and what fate has ordained for him. Cosmic irony shows the contrast between men's feverish endeavours and the nonchalant universe as in Hardy's *The Dynasts*. In his novels too Hardy repeatedly hints at some external force or forces at work, and several important developments are made to hinge on 'those whimsical coincidences' which assume large proportions in his works. If 'coincidences' and 'circumstances' and 'fate' are 'whimsical' at first, with the dual suggestion of quaintness and caprice in the word, the quaintness becomes increasingly ironical as the novels progress. Courses of events initiated by the actions of the characters themselves are being taken over by such 'forces', leaving the men and women powerless and wretched; for example, Fanny Robin's death (in Far

From the Madding Crowd) and the events immediately following illustrate increasingly ironical workings of 'fate'. One may conclude that Hardy sees the hand of fate in the ironical situations – 'the strange conjunctions of circumstances', as Hardy writes – an intentional interference by Destiny in the affairs of men, or a system in which all things tend toward sorrow and irony.

The term 'romantic irony' was principally introduced by Friedrich Schlegel. Other German writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also made use of this form of irony in their writings. By this term they wanted to designate a mode of dramatic or narrative writing in which the author builds up the illusion of representing reality and then shatters it with the revelation that the author, as artist, arbitrarily creates and manipulates the characters and their actions. Romantic irony is the irony of the fully conscious artist. It was Laurence Sterne whose use of a self-conscious and wilful narrator in *Tristram Shandy* has much to do in the development of this concept. Byron persistently uses this device in his great narrative poem *Don Juan* for ironic and comic effect.

Although irony constitutes the mark of Austen's excellence, opinions differ as to the nature of this irony. Andrew Wright holds that her irony arises from her world view. According to him, irony is the juxtaposition of two mutually incongruous views of life. In Kierkegaard's opinion, true irony is always present in a writer and is something which he cannot assume or put off at will. Jane Austen has a perception of the contradiction in human experience and she is, in fact, concerned with both aspects of the contradictions as she perceives. Chevalier says, irony is, "a mode of escape from the fundamental problems and responsibilities of life". He further says, "irony characterises the attitude of one who, when confronted with the choice of two things that are mutually exclusive, chooses both". This is only another way of saying that he chooses neither. He cannot allow himself to abandon one for the other, and, if necessary, he abandons both. But he reserves the right to derive from each the greatest possible massive enjoyment. And this enjoyment is 'irony'. On the other hand, no ironist can be an unpractical theorist nor can he or she offer a clear and present answer. Vigour, humility, sympathy – are all three in the ironist's search; and finally there is judgement, but never serene certainty. Irony springs as the result of the quest for meaning in the universe, as the result of human experience. This

result is the divided vision – the vision of Chaucer, Cervantes, Swift and Jane Austen.

It is no exaggeration to state that irony is Jane Austen's forte and much of her humour emanates from her use of irony. Of course, it is not necessary that irony should always be incorporated in comedy. The co-existence of irony and humour is not also axiomatic. Rather, high tragedy and irony are often found to go hand in hand. An ironist recognizes the direct opposite in human experience. His or her interest is objective and he or she is detached or isolated, but not indifferent. The ironist is withdrawn but not removed. The ironist is a passive observer of the human scene and so may be moved to compassion or sympathy, disgust or laughter, disdain or horror, and uniquely combines complexity, distance and implication in a rare and artistically fruitful manner.

In this connection one may refer to Chaucer's use of Irony through the devices of understatement and insinuation as illustrated in the portrait of the Monk in *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*:

"And I say his opinion was good;

what should he studie, and make him selven wood,

Upon a boke in cloistore always to pore,

Or swinken with his hands and laboire,

As Austin bit? how shall the world be served?

Let Austin have his Swink to him reserved."

In a sense *The Prologue* is replete with Chaucerian irony. We have the description of Madame Eglantyne's French which was not the correct French as spoken in Paris but the French of an English finishing school — which of course was a very different matter!

"And French she spak ful faire and fetisly,

After the scole of straitford atte Bowe,

For French of Paris was to her unknowe".

Chaucer's jest is obvious in the case of the Merchant who was always talking of his profits:

"This worthy man full well his wit beset,

And no one ever guessed he was in debt."

Chaucer's irony is crystal clear when he says that the Lawyer was the busiest man in England— 'and yet he seemed busier than he was'. Chaucer remarks about the Doctor of Physik are equally ironical:

"For gold in physik is a cordial

Therefore he lovede gold in special".

Irony is visible in the much-married Wife of Bath. She had enjoyed happines with five husbands, and she was quite prepared for a sixth. There is an ironical remark about her hood:

"Her coverchiefs ful fyne were of ground;

I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound."

When the inconsistency between what one is and what one should be is 'unconscious', Chaucer's irony is the mildest —though not less hilarious for its mildness. The Prioress is a good example. The poor innocent lady does not know that most of her habits and activities — like keeping small hounds, feeding them so richly, putting on a gold brooch with an ambiguous motto, her excellent table – manners, French pronunciations, etc—are not so integral a part of

nunhood as she supposes. But she takes all these quite seriously and Chaucer, 'taking' them with an almost equal seriousness, shows the irony of her life.

The use of irony can also be seen in the presentations of Reeve, Pardoner, Summoner and Friar. In fact, Irony has passed through the whole gallery of portraits; in neither of these cases is Chaucer violent or really satirical. He is simply ironical and he makes us feel that it is the weakness or foolishness of others — the desire to commit sin and get away as lightly as possible in one case, and the desire to purchase salvation at a low price in another — that inspires or gives opportunity to these men to be what they are. As a result, his presentations are devoid of spite and cynicism, and are irradiated by a genial kindliness and a consummate knowledge of human nature.

But a work like Fielding's *Jonathan Wild The Great* is not truly ironic, only because the irony in it is not thematic but at best rhetorical. In this connection it may be remarked that to Fielding irony has surely been congenital. We find such irony practically in every page of *Tom Jones*. One may cite here only a few prominent examples. There is the irony of the famous scene in Molly Seagrim's

bedroom. Amidst Molly's protestations of love for Tom, the curtain falls, and Squire, "the professed champion of the rule of right and the eternal fitness of things" is discovered in a ridiculous posture. His affectation and pretension is thus exposed, and he appears in his true colours, a hypocrite. There is also the irony of Captain Blifil's falling dead of apoplexy at the moment of his meditations, "on the fine state that would accrue to him at Allworthy's death, and taking the measure of that piece of land which was to suffice him for all times to come". Many of the chapter headings themselves are ironical e.g. the one entitled, "A receipt to Regain ths lost affections of a wife". It is only in *Jonathan Wild* that his irony becomes, "grim, relentless and terrible". Equally important are Fielding's dexterous uses of *dramatic ironies of situations and motives in Tom Jones. To cite some* examples: Sophia jumps to the conclusion that her aunt has detected her fondness for Jones, and tries to put her off the secret by showing the utmost sprightliness towards Blifil. The squire was delighted; the aunt was not altogether so pleased. For Sophia overacted her part, that her aunt was at first staggered, and began to suspect some affectation in her niece. "Did you think, child, because you have impressed upon your father, that you could impose upon me?" So she dexterously wheedles out a frank avowal of Sophia, and to their

mutual consternation the clever aunt finds that her niece meant Jones and the niece that her aunt meant Blifil. The thrice-refined irony of these misconstructions reminds us that a dozen years ago the author had been adopting Molie're to the English stage. And there are more instances of dramatic ironies – of like nature at bottom – of many other incidents, paradoxical situations, misunderstandings and mental somersaults in *Tom Jones*.

Although Jane Austen and Swift are dissimilar in most respects, they are perhaps the greatest ironists in English literature. Swift's irony is savage and destructive but Austen's is gentler and keener. An ironist should not assume an air of superiority. Jane Austen's irony is blended with humour, but Swift's is rarely humorous. His satirical purpose is too pronounced ~~where as~~ Whereas Jane Austen is more interested in drawing out entertainment from society than in reforming it. It is the strength of this woman novelist that she is less inclined to lose touch with life and ordinary human experience than her predecessors. In fact, Jane Austen's novels constitute a criticism of life.

The novels of Jane Austen give us primarily a view of middle class people in the daily rounds of family life in provincial towns. She knew these classes of society through and through, and for her such a strip of society was a world in itself in range and diversity of character. Austen was neither a social philosopher nor a romancer, but only intent on the comedy of human nature. So it was practically an inexhaustible source for her. By presenting this quite mode of life Jane Austen explores human experience in her characters with all the thoroughness possible to the comic mode she has chosen. Significantly, it is an ironic, unillusioned and yet sympathetic view of human nature and its flair for comic incongruity that informs Austen's works at her mature level. It is her quiet but incisive irony that has helped her present the characters, not as types but as individuals.

Significantly, Jane Austen descended from a neo-classical tradition of the comedy of manners; while harking back to the 18th century tradition, she rejected those parts of it which anticipated Romanticism. It is as a witty and ironic observer of human inconsistencies and ludicrousness, rather than a painstaking recorder of consuming passions and elements of emotions that Austen represents the 18th century, particularly, in its neo-classical aspects.

In this connection, it is equally important to note that in any passage from her maturer work, whether narrative, descriptive prose, or dialogue, the reader's mind is made to operate actively on at least two levels – first, the level of the obvious, where Jane Austen states what is, or seems to be, immediately apparent to everyone, and secondly, a level of implied criticism, even of denunciation, which uses the very same words to suggest that in a properly and justly ordered world this very same accepted state of affairs would not be tolerated or allowed to go unchallenged.