Identifying Irony

**Function of Irony**

Like all other figures of speech, irony brings about some added meanings to a situation. Ironical statements and situations in literature develop readers’ interest. Irony makes a work of literature more intriguing, and forces the readers to use their imaginations to comprehend the underlying meanings of the texts. Moreover, real life is full of ironical expressions and situations. Therefore, the use of irony brings a work of literature to the life.

A contrast between the reality and appearance is the essence of every irony. Given the context in which Jane Austen was writing, a novelist as an ironist had to be subtle enough to distinguish between the conventionally accepted aspects of social environment and what lay beneath the veneer of the context and this precisely was Austen’s forte. Irony is the soul of Austen’s novels and it is this very trait of her narrative technique that has infused in *Pride and Prejudice* a sort of life and vigour, making it a timeless read. Austen has employed different kinds of ironies to add richness and a bright spark to her novel; to poke fun and also as a mild corrective.

**Examples of Irony in *Pride and Prejudice* – Identify the type**

In Pride and Prejudice, by Jane Austen, Mr. Darcy says of Elizabeth Bennett that she is not "handsome enough to tempt me," but he falls in love with her in spite of himself.

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

"An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. --Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*."

"Stupid men are the only ones worth knowing after all."

“Well, my comfort is, I am sure Jane will die of a broken heart, and then he will be sorry for what he has done”

“I would not wish to be hasty in censuring anyone; but I always speak what I think."

“‘What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books and make extracts.’  
Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.”

“She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, and I have no opinion of her.”

“They were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good-humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of being agreeable where they chose it, but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank, and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others. They were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother’s fortune and their own had been acquired by trade.”

**Examples of Irony – Identify the type**

1. If vegetarians love animals, why do they eat all their food?
2. Merchandise sold in Australia to celebrate Australia day is made in China.
3. If you have a phobia of longs words you have to tell people that you have Hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia?
4. Trying to find your glasses, but you can’t see to find them.

**Examples of Irony in Other Literature – Identify the type**

***Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare**

In this famous love story the audience can foresee the tragic ending long before Romeo and Juliet themselves know what’s going to happen. At the end of the play, Romeo finds Juliet and believes her to be dead though the audience knows she’s taken a sleeping potion. Romeo kills himself with this false knowledge. Juliet then wakes up and, finding Romeo truly dead, kills herself as well.

***Julius Caesar* by Shakespeare**

MARK ANTONY: But Brutus says he was ambitious; / And Brutus is an honourable man.

In this quote from Julius Caesar, Mark Antony is seemingly praising Brutus after the assassination of Julius Caesar. However, this is an example of irony since Mark Antony is in fact implying that Brutus is neither ambitious nor honorable.

***The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry**

In this short story, a young, poor couple struggle with what to buy each other for Christmas. The woman cuts her hair and sells it to buy a watchband for her husband. Meanwhile, the husband sells his watch face to buy combs for his wife’s hair. The outcome is the opposite of what both parties expect.

**The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (By Samuel Coleridge)**

Coleridge wrote:

“Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.”

In the above-stated lines, the ship – blown by the south wind – is stranded in the uncharted sea. Ironically, there is water everywhere, but they do not have a single drop of drinkable water.

**Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal***

He begins seemingly in earnest, discussing the sad state of destitute children:

*[…] whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound, useful members of the commonwealth, would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.*

Seems reasonable enough. But things take a very ironic turn:

*“I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.”*

Is Swift sincerely proposing that we eat children? No, but he has indeed inverted our expectations and written a wonderfully ironic essay.

**Test Your Knowledge of Irony - Quiz**

**1. Choose the best irony definition:**  
**A.** An unfortunate coincidence in which the worst possible ending comes to pass.  
**B.** A contrast between expectations for what is going to happen and what actually does happen.  
**C.** A biting comment meant to be both humorous and true.

**2. Which of the following statements is the best situational irony definition?**  
**A.** A statement that a character makes that is in odds with the way she feels.  
**B.** A situation in which the audience knows something the characters in the play do not.  
**C.** A result that is very different from what was expected.

**3. Which of the following scenarios is an example of situational irony?**  
**A.** A marriage counsellor who files for divorce  
**B.** Winning the lottery after playing it for years  
**C.** Ten thousands spoons when all you need is a knife

**4. Which of the following statements is not an example of situational irony in Sophocles’s play Oedipus the King?**  
**A.** Oedipus blinds himself, which takes away his ability to see, but leads to deeper wisdom.  
**B.** Oedipus kills his father.  
**C.**When Oedipus finds out he has killed his father he renounces his crown. Before he learned who his real father was, Oedipus seemed to have gotten power illegitimately, but the truth of his paternity means that he is, in fact, fit to rule.

**5. Is the following an example of situational, dramatic, or verbal irony?**

In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus kills his own father without realizing that the man is actually his father. This act brings on a plague and Oedipus swears that he will murder the man responsible, not knowing that he himself is responsible.

**A.** Dramatic irony  
**B.** Situational irony  
**C.** Verbal irony

**6. American President John F. Kennedy’s final reported conversation (before being shot to death in Dallas) was with a woman who announced, “Mr. President, you can’t say that Dallas doesn’t love you.” JFK agreed, “That’s very obvious.” Why is this an example of irony?**

**A.** The event was very tragic, and thus it was ironic.  
**B.** JFK was aware that he was in danger, and thus employed verbal irony when he asserted that Dallas must love him, knowing this wasn’t the case.  
**C.** In retrospect, this conversation was ironic because the outcome of the situation was completely at odds with what anyone would have expected to happen.











