

The Significance of Irony as a Master Trope

Don L. F. Nilsen and Alleen Pace Nilsen*

Abstract

Linguists make a distinction between Surface Structure (Phonology, Graphology, Morphology, and Syntax) and Deep Structure (Semantics and Pragmatics). Rhetoricians make a similar distinction which they call Schemes (Alliteration, Assonance, Rhyme, Slant Rhyme, Eye Rhyme, Scansion, etc.), and Tropes (Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, Irony, etc.). This article makes the claim that for humor scholars, Irony is the most significant of the four Master Tropes. It makes this argument first by comparing and contrasting Irony not only with Metaphor, Metonymy and Synecdoche, but also with Satire, Paradox, and Contradiction. Second, the article compares and contrasts the different types of Irony (Stable vs. Observable Irony, Linguistic vs. Situational Irony, and Accidental, Dramatic, Socratic, and Tragic Irony). And finally, the article explains the historical significance of Irony, and its ubiquity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Irony, Metonymy, Metaphor, Master Trope, Paradox.

Introduction

In the fields of Linguistics, and Rhetoric it is a fairly well-established fact that the four Master Tropes are: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. The Trope of Metaphor (and Simile) works on the principle that concepts share features with other concepts. "Life is a journey" is a philosophical metaphor, and "My love is a rose" is a romantic metaphor. We make a distinction between "live metaphors" and "dead metaphors." Live metaphors are the metaphors in literature, and they are vibrant and fresh because each metaphor is encountered only in the context of a particular literary work. So while live metaphors are the metaphors of literature, dead metaphors are the metaphors of language and linguistics. "Kidney beans," "a

*Prof. Don L. F. Nilsen and Prof. Alleen Pace Nilsen, Emeritus & Honors Colleges, Arizona State University, U.S.A.

head of lettuce,” and “elbow macaroni” are three examples of dead metaphors. Ironically, it could be argued that it is the “dead metaphors” that are most alive, because the dead metaphors are frequently used for reference, and because they are so necessary to language they are used over and over. So although dead metaphors are not fresh, they are very much alive. It is very difficult to talk about kidney beans or heads of lettuce, or elbow macaroni without using these dead metaphors.

Metonymy is the second Master Trope, and this trope is in effect any time a concept is associated with another concept. Thus the pentagon is associated with the military, the oval office is associated with the United States presidency, and the crown and the throne are associated with royalty. Metonymy can relate either to semantic associations (as above) or to phonological associations (as with puns). It could be argued that all figurative language is metaphor, so we need only one trope: metaphor. It could also be argued that all figurative language shows how concepts are associated with other concepts, so we need only one trope: Metonymy. But it could also be argued that we need to make finer distinctions than these, so it is very useful to have at least four Master Tropes.

Synecdoche is the third Master Trope, and this trope is in effect any time two concepts are related to each other in some form of hierarchy, and there are many different types of hierarchies. In a family tree, for example the concept of “parent” is superordinate to the concept of “offspring” and is subordinate to the concept of “grandparent.” A different type of hierarchy is the organizational management gestalt, where the “Vice President” is superordinate to the concept of “Assistant Vice President” and is subordinate to the concept of “President.” Another kind of hierarchical relationship is grammar, where a “Noun Phrase” is superordinate to a “determiner” and a “noun” but it is subordinate to a “Sentence.” Still another type of hierarchy is the “toe” which is connected to (and subordinate to) the foot, which is connected to the “leg” which is connected to the “body.”

I certainly understand that when we talk about the Master Tropes we need to be able to distinguish between Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony, but since I am a humor scholar, I would like to propose that in the field of “Humor Scholarship,” the Trope of Irony is the most important of the Master Tropes. I would now like to present some evidence in support of that claim.

The Ubiquity of Irony in Daily Life

We are constantly surrounded by the ironies of daily life. Banks leave their vault doors open while they chain the pens to the counters. We leave our expensive cars in the driveways while we put our useless junk in our garages. Drugstores make sick people walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions while “healthy” people can buy cigarettes at the front counter. Our slowest traffic happens during rush hour. We sterilize needles for lethal injections. If we want to change the subject, we say, “Not to change the subject, but....” We show our hubris by saying, “Far be it from me to say, but....” We impose our opinions by saying, “I don’t mean to impose my opinion, but...” We beg the question by saying “Clearly...,” or “It is well known that....” In the middle of a traffic jam we see a sign reading, “Lane closed to ease congestion.”

Irony and the Age of Enlightenment

The “Age of Enlightenment” is also known as the “Age of Reason.” Before this period of time it was mythology, superstition, and religion that ruled people’s minds, but the Age of Enlightenment added science to the mix. For the first time in the history of ideas people had a choice in explaining why things are as they are: If they were religious, they could say that God or the Devil caused all things; if they were scientific they could say science caused all these things. So for the first time in the history of ideas there was the possibility of a double vision and a debate as to who was right. And it is exactly this double vision that encouraged irony and paradox to be developed as a way of dealing with two incompatible (or at least paradoxical) ways of looking at the world. It is true that irony had existed before the Age of Enlightenment, as in the story of Oedipus Rex. Or as in Chaucer’s 14th-century Canterbury Tales where an unhappily married merchant grandly praises marriage. Or as in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar where Marc Antony’s extravagant praise of Caesar is ironic. But such pre-Enlightenment instances are more personal than they are social or political. The Age of Enlightenment allowed Irony to be a form of satire in which social and political institutions are targeted and criticized. Jonathan Swift was an important author during the 18th century—the Age of Enlightenment. The Voyage to Laputa in Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels targets the scientific experiments that were being

done in England at the time, and Swift's A Modest Proposal satirically targeted the English takeover of Ireland.

The irony that resulted from the double vision of the Age of Enlightenment has not only allowed a new perspective on everything we do, say, or observe it has become increasingly important both in our literary lives and in our day-to-day lives. Edgar Allan Poe and O. Henry were masters of irony. O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" is doubly ironic, as a husband sells his watch to buy gold combs for his wife's hair, while she sells her hair to buy a gold chain for his watch. There is a story about Catholic and Protestant clergymen who were good friends, but were uncomfortable in the fact that their friend did not have the true religion. So each of them presented such convincing arguments to the other that the Catholic became a Protestant, and the Protestant became a Catholic. Similarly, in the 1980s, Art Buchwald observed that Gary Trudeau was so successful in developing his anti-Establishment figures, that Trudeau became an "honored member of the Establishment."

Irony VS. Satire

Northrup Frye makes a distinction between satire and irony. He says that satire is a criticism of society with a clear understanding in the author's mind of what society should be like, but is not. The author of a satire hopes to persuade readers to work for the author's vision. This point of view can be seen in C. S. Lewis's Screwtape Letters, and in all of the short stories written by Flannery O'Connor. In contrast, authors who create gallows humor or irony do not intend to point their readers in a particular direction, but instead intend to leave them in doubt. Northrup Frye says that whenever a reader is not sure what the author's attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire. Examples of Gallows Humor or Irony include Joseph Heller's Catch 22, Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s Slaughterhouse 5, and John Irving's The World According to Garp.

Linguistic Irony VS. Situational Irony

Linguistic irony is based on language, and requires both a sender and a receiver, while situational irony requires only an observer with a clever mind, as when Lily Tomlin buys a waste basket. The clerk puts it into a paper sack so she can take it home, and the first thing Tomlin

does when she gets home is to put the paper sack into the waste basket. Who's Nobody in America by Derek Evans and Dave Fulwiler is filled with such ironic complaints, such as the one by James M. Gatwood of San Ramon, California. In seven visits to his dentist he spent \$2,800 and the dentist still calls him Sidney. In frustration, Gatwood asks, "Who the hell is Sidney?"

Stabler Irony VS. Observable Irony

Literary critic Wayne Booth uses the term "stable irony" to refer to that which humans create to be heard or read and understood with some precision. He says that stable ironies allows readers glimpses into authors' most private thoughts. In contrast to Stable Irony, there is Observable (or Situational) Irony. An example is when a premature monsoon ruins an army's invasion plans, or when lightning strikes just as a preacher raises his arms in the air to make a dramatic point about God. In such situations, all that is need is an aware observer. Writers and dramatists often work such observable ironies into their plots.

Irony VS. Paradox VS. Contradiction

Because paradoxes appear to be contradictions, they are ironic in that observers must view the paradox from two competing points of view at the same time. They seem contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd, but in some sense they are true. While highlighting breakdowns in our expectations of a logical universe, they are sources of both delight and consternation as the human mind works to figure out how people can in good faith talk about a "large mouse" running between the legs of a "small elephant," or can make sense out of the Yiddish curse, "He should drop dead, God forbid!" Paradoxes are sometimes the result of paradigm shifts in the history of ideas. For example the most basic or earliest meaning of "man" may have been in contrast to "animal." But later in the history of thought, "man" may have developed a more nuanced meaning as it came to be contrasted with "woman." Still later, the word "man" became even more nuanced as it was contrasted with "coward" and took on the meanings of "bravery" and "noble behavior." It was in this sense that David Ben-Gurion in the 1970s called Israel Prime Minister Golda Meir, "The best man in government."

Lewis Carroll was a master of parody. He would write things like “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast,” and “The rule is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today,” and “Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.” Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snickett) was also a master of parody. He wrote, “It doesn’t take courage to kill someone. It takes a severe lack of moral stamina,” and “Assumptions are dangerous things to make, like bombs, for instance, or strawberry shortcake—if you make even the tiniest mistake you can find yourself in terrible trouble,” and in The Miserable Mill, when a worker gets his leg mangled, his fellow workers give him a coupon for 50% off at the Ahab Memorial Hospital in Paltryville.”

Socratic Irony

Socratic irony occurs in a teacher-student relationship. The teacher pretends to be ignorant and willing to learn from the student, but then asks adroit questions that expose the weaknesses in the student’s arguments. The name comes from the Greek philosopher Socrates (c. 470-399 B.C.), who developed the Socratic method of teaching by asking questions designed to expose the innermost thoughts of his students. Along with Aristotle and Plato, Socrates is given credit for laying the philosophical foundations of Western culture.

Dramatic Irony

In literature, dramatic irony occurs whenever the audience or one of the characters knows something that the other characters do not know. Oedipus Rex is a good example. Jerzy Kosinski’s novel and movie Being There is another example. This is the story of a mentally disabled gardener named Chauncey Gardner. Because he is dressed so well, and is seen in wandering in a very affluent neighborhood, Chauncey is mistaken for a sage, and a great visionary. As he makes ordinary comments appropriate to his gardening, his listeners supply grandiose metaphorical meanings. In George Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara, one of the tensest moments for the audience is when a character enters a shed that they know is filled with explosive, and this character lights up a cigarette. Even young children have the skill to appreciate dramatic irony. In Goldilocks and the Three Bears, kindergarten children are amused that while the bears are puzzled, the children know what happened to Baby Bear’s porridge.

Children also like the fun of seeing how the youngest goat in the story of The Three Billy Goats Gruff sets out to fool the troll who lives under the bridge. And in the modern picture book, Miss Nelson is Missing by Harry Allard and James Marshall, children are amused that by looking carefully at the pictures, they know—while the students in Miss Nelson’s classroom do not know—that the horrible, mean substitute teacher, Miss Viola Swamp, is really their very kind and loving Miss Nelson—in disguise.

Tragic Irony

Some scholars feel that Tragic Irony only occurs when a significant figure, like a King, falls from grace. Thus Oedipus Rex from Greek drama, and King Lear from Shakespeare’s drama are examples of Tragic Irony. Other scholars, however, feel that the person who falls from grace does not have to be a significant figure. These scholars would consider Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman to be an example of Tragic Irony. Joseph Heller’s Catch 22 and other examples of Gallows Humor can often be described as Tragic Irony. The title of Heller’s antiwar novel is so intriguing that it is now in dictionaries as the name for any tricky problem, especially one for which the only solution is denied by a circumstance that is inherent in the problem. In Catch 22, Yossarian would be excused from flying bombing missions if he were declared insane. However, the fact that he is trying to get out of flying bombing missions is evidence that he is sane. Therefore, he has to keep flying. A second Tragic Irony for Yossarian is that he could go home after flying a particular number of missions, but each time he gets close to this number, the number gets larger. Yossarian’s “Catch 22” is similar to the Catch 22 of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, as their numbers of deployments are increased, and the time of their deployments is also increased. In July of 2012, a news story revealed that, ironically, an average of one soldier per day was committing suicide while serving in an institution designed to prevent death. Other Americans can also be faced with ironies that are tragic to them and their families. Some people can’t get a job until they have experience, and they can’t get experience until they get a job. Some authors can’t get their manuscripts published until they have an agent, but they can’t get an agent until they have published manuscripts. A newspaper story under the headline, “Texas in Catch-22” told about a Texas State law forbidding the execution of anyone insane. The story went on to tell about a prisoner on death row that refused to take the medication that would keep him sane.

Ending

Joseph Heller said, "When I grow up, I want to be a little boy." Oscar Wilde said, "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing." Gertrude Stein said, "There isn't any answer. There ain't going to be any answer. There never has been an answer. That's the answer."

References

- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Frye, Northrup. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace, and Don L. F. Nilsen. *Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace, and Don L. F. Nilsen. "Irony." In *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, Volume II. Ed. Maurice Charney. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005, 394-409.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace, and Don L. F. Nilsen. *Names and Naming in Young Adult Literature*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007.