

Irony in Literature and in Life

Foundation Lesson

Teacher Overview

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking					
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Close Reading	Grammar		Composition		
Reading Strategies Determining Author's Purpose Inference Literary Elements Character Detail Diction Plot Rhetorical Shift Figures of Speech Paradox (8 th) Literary Techniques Characterization direct indirect Dialogue Irony dramatic (9 th) situational (7 th) verbal sarcasm Symbolism			Types (modes) Expository comparison/contrast Structural Elements Body incorporation of quotes use of commentary use of evidence		

Students are surrounded by irony in the media and in the halls of their schools. Sarcasm, often called the lowest form of irony, is the form in which they most often indulge, and it is generally the only one that they can name.

Situational irony is a contrast or incongruity between what is expected to occur and what actually occurs.

Verbal irony consists of a character saying one thing and meaning something entirely different.

Sarcasm falls into this category with the additional stipulation that what seems to be praise or approval is actually meant to insult.

Dramatic irony occurs when a reader perceives something that a character in the story does not know.

While students are quick to pick up the irony in situational comedies on television, particularly those that demean adults, they often miss irony in text. This leads to a total misreading due to a misunderstanding of the tone. Teachers have a responsibility to teach students as early as sixth grade to detect irony; those students' reading and thinking lives will be richer for it.

O. Henry made a career out of irony; it occurs in virtually every story he wrote. This American author turned out story after story, many of them sentimental and, some might say, hackneyed. But his stories remain potent, fun vehicles for teaching students to perceive irony as they solve the puzzle of the classic O. Henry story.

Examples of Irony in O. Henry Stories

Situational Irony

In "**After Twenty Years**," Jimmy, the uptight policeman who seems to be a minor character, a mere plot device, turns out to be the longtime friend of the protagonist. The protagonist is revealed to be a gangster, one of those on the policeman's most-wanted list.

Behrman, a seemingly harsh, uncaring minor character in "**The Last Leaf**," dies saving the life of Johnsy, who lives despite the reader's preparation for her death. And Behrman's apparently absurd proclamation that he will one day paint a masterpiece is fulfilled when he paints a leaf realistic enough to convince Johnsy that it is a sign for her to cling to life, as does the (apparent) leaf.

Through a series of coincidences, Tobin, the protagonist of "**Tobin's Palm**," is led to his missing fiancée Katie Mahoney after a seemingly fruitless visit to a fortune teller in hopes of finding her.

A supposed marshal is actually a prisoner, and vice versa, in "**Hearts and Hands**." In this case, appearances truly misrepresent reality.

In "**The Gift of the Magi**," Della and Jim each sells her/his most prized possession in order to be able to afford a gift no longer usable by the other because of the sacrifice each has made.

Dramatic Irony

In “**The Last Leaf**” the reader knows that Johnsy’s chances are not as Sue states. Her remark that the doctor had “said the chances were ten to one” is also an example of verbal irony, as he had actually reported that her chances were one in ten.

In “**Tobin’s Palm**” the reader is aware that the fortune teller is picking up clues from Tobin, but the latter remains willfully ignorant of this fact.

Verbal Irony

Behrman’s declaration in “**The Last Leaf**” that he “will baint (sic) a masterpiece” is actually prophetic, despite the reader’s skepticism; his masterpiece will be the leaf that he paints in order to keep Johnsy’s hopes up and her life intact.

In Easton’s explanation in “**Hearts and Hands**,” he states that he “saw this opening in the West.” He may have actually “seen an opening,” but it was as a criminal. Later, when he says that “duty call,” the implication is that his work requires him to leave, when actually he is being forced to do so by the real marshal. *Note: There is a full discussion of the irony in this story on the following page.*

Paradox

A **paradoxical statement** is made in “**The Gift of the Magi**” when the narrator states that “two foolish children . . . unwisely sacrificed . . . the greatest treasures But . . . of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest.”

Teachers should be aware that, as in many American works from the 19th and early 20th centuries, there exists in some O. Henry stories an “Anglo-centric” attitude that results in the use of disparaging comments and unacceptable terms. A racial term is used, for example, in the story “Tobin’s Palm.” As always, the teacher sets the tone in handling such sensitive materials.

Hearts and Hands

At Denver there was an influx of passengers into the coaches on the eastbound B. & M. express. In one coach there sat a very pretty young woman dressed in elegant taste and surrounded by all the luxurious comforts of an experienced traveler. Among the newcomers were two young men, one of handsome presence with a bold, frank countenance and manner; the other a ruffled, glum-faced person, heavily built and roughly dressed. The two were handcuffed together.

*Once the reader finishes reading the story and determines the truth about these two men, he or she realizes that the appearance of each is ironic, for their looks do not match their true qualities. This mismatch is unexpected, and so is a case of **situational irony**.*

As they passed down the aisle of the coach the only vacant seat offered was a reversed one facing the attractive young woman. Here the linked couple seated themselves. The young woman's glance fell upon them with a distant, swift disinterest; then with a lovely smile brightening her countenance and a tender pink tingeing her rounded cheeks, she held out a little gray-gloved hand. When she spoke her voice, full, sweet, and deliberate, proclaimed that its owner was accustomed to speak and be heard.

"Well, Mr. Easton, if you will make me speak first, I suppose I must. Don't you ever recognize old friends when you meet them in the West?"

The younger man roused himself sharply at the sound of her voice, seemed to struggle with a slight embarrassment which he threw off instantly, and then clasped her fingers with his left hand.

"It's Miss Fairchild," he said, with a smile. "I'll ask you to excuse the other hand; 'it's otherwise engaged just at present."

He slightly raised his right hand, bound at the wrist by the shining "bracelet" to the left one of his companion. The glad look in the girl's eyes slowly changed to a bewildered horror. The glow faded from her cheeks. Her lips parted in a vague, relaxing distress. Easton, with a little laugh, as if amused, was about to speak again when the other forestalled him. The glum-faced man had been watching the girl's countenance

with veiled glances from his keen, shrewd eyes.

“You’ll excuse me for speaking, miss, but, I see you’re acquainted with the marshall here. If you’ll ask him to speak a word for me when we get to the pen he’ll do it, and it’ll make things easier for me there. He’s taking me to Leavenworth prison. **It’s seven years for counterfeiting.**”

“Oh!” said the girl, with a deep breath and returning color. “So that is what you are doing out here? A marshal!”

“My dear Miss Fairchild,” said Easton, calmly, **“I had to do something. Money has a way of taking wings unto itself, and you know it takes money to keep step with our crowd in Washington.** I saw this opening in the West, and—well, a marshalship isn’t quite as high a position as that of ambassador, but—”

“The ambassador,” said the girl, warmly, “doesn’t call any more. He needn’t ever have done so. You ought to know that. And so now you are one of these dashing Western heroes, and you ride and shoot and go into all kinds of dangers. That’s different from the Washington life. You have been missed from the old crowd.”

The girl’s eyes, fascinated, went back, widening a little, to rest upon the glittering handcuffs.

“Don’t you worry about them, miss,” said the other man. “All marshals handcuff themselves to their prisoners to keep them from getting away. **Mr. Easton knows his business.**”

“Will we see you again soon in Washington?” asked the girl.

“Not soon, I think,” said Easton. **“My butterfly days are over, I fear.”**

“I love the West,” said the girl irrelevantly. Her eyes were shining softly. She looked away out the car window. She began to speak truly and simply without the gloss of style and manner: “Mamma and I spent the summer in Denver. She went home a week ago because father was slightly ill. I could live and be happy in the

*“It’s seven years for counterfeiting,” states the “glum-faced man.” This is a case of **verbal irony**, since he means for Miss Fairchild to assume that the speaker has received a seven year sentence, when actually it is the handsome young man who is being sent to prison.*

*It is ironic that Easton should say that he “had to do something [because] money has a way of taking wings” and that “it takes money to keep step with [their] crowd”; Easton apparently tried to solve the problem by manufacturing his own money. This is an example of **situational irony**. His statement “I had to do something” is also an example of **verbal irony**, since he does not mean for Miss Fairchild to understand what the “something” truly was.*

Verbal irony: *The business Mr. Easton knows is not the business of being a marshal but of being a counterfeiter*

*Butterflies are symbolic of freedom (in their ability to fly) and beauty. The freedom and beauty of Mr. Easton’s life are truly gone, as he is bound for prison. Miss Fairchild, though, assumes that he has taken a job with the criminal justice system, and will thus have less freedom to “play,” and this is what he wants her to think. This is an example of **verbal irony**. For the astute reader who understands the situation, this is also **dramatic irony**.*

West. I think the air here agrees with me. Money isn't everything. But people always misunderstand things and remain stupid—"

"Say, Mr. Marshal," growled the glum-faced man. "This isn't quite fair. I'm needing a drink, and haven't had a smoke all day. Haven't you talked long enough? Take me in the smoker now, won't you? I'm half dead for a pipe."

The bound travelers rose to their feet, Easton with the same slow smile on his face.

"I can't deny a petition for tobacco," he said, lightly. "It's the one friend of the unfortunate. Good-bye, Miss Fairchild. Duty calls, you know." He held out his hand for a farewell.

"It's too bad you are not going East," she said, reclothing herself with manner and style. "But you must go on to Leavenworth, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Easton, "I must go on to Leavenworth."

The two men sidled down the aisle into the smoker.

The two passengers in a seat near by had heard most of the conversation. Said one of them: "That marshal's a good sort of chap. Some of these Western fellows are all right."

"Pretty young to hold an office like that, isn't he?" asked the other.

"Young!" exclaimed the first speaker, "why—Oh! didn't you catch on? Say—did you ever know an officer to handcuff a prisoner to his right hand?"

*The person who "misunderstand[s] things and remain[s] stupid" in this case is Miss Fairchild herself. Again, this is an example of **dramatic irony** if the reader has figured out what the character has not, that Mr. Easton is a prisoner; he cannot respond to her subtle request that he woo her, to allow her to "live and be happy in the West," for he is not a free man. Her statement that "money isn't everything" is also **ironic** since it is the desire for money that has led to Mr. Easton's unpleasant situation.*

Verbal irony: Mr. Easton literally "can't deny a petition for tobacco" from his companion, for Mr. Easton is his prisoner and under his command. As such, he "must go on to Leavenworth."

*As is his pattern, O. Henry reveals the **situational irony** at the end of the story: Mr. Easton is actually the prisoner, and the "glum-faced man" is the marshal.*

Irony in Literature and in Life

An American short-story writer from the late 19th and early 20th century, William Sydney Porter, better known as O. Henry, had a fascinating life that included time spent on a ranch in West Texas, a bank in Austin, and a prison cell in Ohio. He finally moved to Manhattan in New York and made a living and a name for himself through writing stories. His stories always contain a twist in the plot that makes them fun to read. Almost all of them contain **irony**, either **situational**, **verbal**, or **dramatic**.



Situational irony is an odd contrast or incongruity between what is expected to occur and what actually occurs.

Verbal irony exists when someone (such as a character in a story) says one thing and means something entirely different. Sarcasm falls into this category but with the additional stipulation that words which appear to be words of praise or approval are actually meant to insult.

Dramatic irony occurs when a reader (or viewer) perceives something that a character in the story does not know.

In order to completely appreciate the theme of any story, the reader needs to determine how the author feels about the topic of the story, and about the characters. The author's attitude is shown in his **tone**. An author's tone can be, among many others, lighthearted, serious, worried, friendly, aggressive, or inspiring. One of the many possible tones is an ironic tone.

Humor is often ironic; it contains an unexpected situation (situational irony) or words that say the opposite of what is meant (verbal irony). When we hear a comedian make a joke that involves irony, we are usually able to "get" the joke, partly because we are prepared to hear something funny. Here is a silly joke that is ironic:

A horse walks into a party, and the host asks him, "Why the long face?"

This joke makes some people laugh because a horse literally has a "long face," but when someone asks why someone else has a long face, he means, "Why are you so sad?" This use of the idiom "long face" is unexpected, as is the idea of a horse attending a party.

But we don't often expect humor in what we read in school, and so we sometimes miss irony where it does exist. And when we miss the irony, we miss the humor, and we miss the tone. We are left feeling confused, and we certainly don't get the theme.

Directions

1. After reading the short story “Hearts and Hands” and the attached comments on the irony in the story, answer the questions below about the characters and the theme of the story. **Include evidence from the story in your answer.**
 - a. Are the three major characters (Miss Fairchild, Miss Easton, and the marshal) what they first seem to be? How are they different from what we expect?
 - b. Why does Mr. Easton lie to Miss Fairchild? Was he going to lie at first, or was he ready to tell Miss Fairchild the truth?
 - c. Who started the lie? What was this character doing before he told the lie? What does this tell you about why he decided not to tell the truth to Miss Fairchild?
 - d. Which of the three characters does O. Henry admire the most? The least? What evidence from the story supports your answers?
 - e. What does this say about the theme of the story? In other words, what comment about life and people is O. Henry making in this story?

2. Read the O. Henry story “The Last Leaf.”
3. Complete the irony chart on the three types of irony (situational, verbal, and dramatic) in the story. Find at least one example of each type. Comment on the irony by explaining why it is ironic and by discussing its effect.

Irony Chart

Type of Irony	Quote/Situation	Commentary

4. Write a paragraph of at least eight sentences explaining the irony of the character Mr. Behrman. Begin with a topic sentence that tells what the irony is; remember to mention the name of the story and the author in the topic sentence. Below are two examples of topic sentences for the paragraph:

While Mr. Behrman, O. Henry's character in "The Last Leaf," at first appears to be _____, he is later revealed to be the most _____ one of all.

In his short story "The Last Leaf," O. Henry presents Mr. Behrman as a _____ character; it is only at the end of the story that he allows us to know the _____ person that Behrman truly is.

5. In the paragraph, use some of the evidence from your chart as well as any other suitable evidence from the text, and comment on the evidence to persuade the reader that your topic sentence is true.
6. Be prepared to discuss with your classmates the theme of the story "The Last Leaf." Use your paragraph on Behrman to help you determine what O. Henry is saying about life in this story. How does it compare to the theme of "Hearts and Hands"?