

IRONY

One of the enduring themes in literature is that things are not always what they seem to be. What we see — or think we see — is not always what we get. The unexpected complexity that often surprises us in life — what Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick* called the “universal thump” — is fertile ground for writers of imaginative literature. They cultivate that ground through the use of [irony](#), a device that reveals a reality different from what appears to be true.

Verbal irony consists of a person saying one thing but meaning the opposite. If a student driver smashes into a parked car and the angry instructor turns to say “Great job,” the statement is an example of verbal irony. What is meant is not what is said. Verbal irony that is calculated to hurt someone by false praise is commonly known as [sarcasm](#). In literature, however, verbal irony is usually not openly aggressive; instead, it is more subtle and restrained though no less intense.

In Gilman’s “[The Yellow Wallpaper](#),” the narrator says, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in a marriage.” Does “one”? If there were no irony intended in the statement, the reader would chuckle and say, “One sure does! That’s marriage for you! Lots of mockery makes everyone happy.” We know immediately that we’re not supposed to agree. We scowl at John and wonder to what degree the narrator believes her own statement. Is she conditioned to

believe she should be laughed at or is she burying feelings of resentment and even anger that might come out as the story progresses?

Situational irony exists when there is an incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. For instance, at the end of Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," we expect Mrs. Mallard to hug her husband and shed tears of joy when he returns, not to die. In Ellison's "[King of the Bingo Game](#)," we expect that the protagonist will be handed a check when the bingo wheel lands on double zero, the only number that signifies a win, but he is instead clubbed and hauled off stage. In each of these instances the ironic situation creates a distinction between appearances and realities and brings the reader closer to the central meaning of the story.

Another form of irony occurs when an author allows the reader to know more about a situation than a character knows. **Dramatic irony** creates a discrepancy between what a character believes or says and what the reader understands to be true. In Flannery O'Connor's "[Revelation](#)," the insecure Mrs. Turpin, as a member of "the home-and-land owner" class, believes herself to be superior to "niggers," "white-trash," and mere "home owners." She takes pride in her position in the community and in what she perceives to be her privileged position in relation to God. The reader, however, knows that her remarks underscore her failings rather than any

superiority. Dramatic irony can be an effective way for an author to have a character unwittingly reveal himself or herself.