

## ■ IRONY

### Verbal Irony

"What a nice person you are," Tom told his sister when she slammed the screen door in his face.

Tom's comment is an example of *verbal irony*. In verbal irony speakers say the opposite of what they really mean or what they think is true. All of us speak ironically at times: if you say "What a great day!" when the temperature is 106 degrees in the shade, you are using verbal irony. You indicate what you really mean by the expression on your face and by your tone of voice.

In literature, verbal irony may include the author's attitude toward a subject. In such cases the writer's real attitude contrasts with the attitude he or she pretends to have. What is *ironic* about the following lines?

### Tribute

I do not mind my neighbor's dog,  
In fact I love the cur;  
I like the way he curls his lip,  
I like his mottled fur.

5 I like his bark at 3 A.M.,  
I like his throaty growls,  
I treasure every playful nip  
And both his quivering jowls.

10 His body scarred and overfed,  
His baleful eye, his groans and sighs,  
All strike in me a keen delight  
As on my chest he lies.

Understanding irony requires experience in reading. An inexperienced reader might

be misled into thinking that the writer is truly fond of the neighbor's dog. What words tell you that this is not the case?

### Irony of Situation

*Irony of situation* is the term given to a happening that is the opposite of what one would expect. It is an ironic situation if you take a winter vacation to a tropical island to enjoy the sun, and it rains all the time you are there. In literature very often an ironic twist does not come until the end of a poem, a story, or a play. What is ironic in the following poem?

### The Rich Man

The rich man has his motor-car  
His country and his town estate.  
He smokes a fifty-cent cigar  
And jeers at Fate.

5 He frivols through the livelong day,  
He knows not Poverty, her pinch.  
His lot seems light, his heart seems gay;  
He has a cinch.

10 Yet though my lamp burns low and dim,  
Though I must slave for livelihood—  
Think you that I would change with him?  
You bet I would!

Franklin P. Adams

### Dramatic Irony

Sometimes the words or actions of a character in a play or story carry meaning significant to the audience or reader but not to the character. This is called *dramatic irony*. For instance, a character may discuss her plans for the future while the audience or reader knows that several things will prevent her from carrying out those plans. The purpose of dramatic irony may be to

elicit sympathy for a character, to build suspense, or create a comic effect.

In the cartoon below, what is the reader aware of that the man and woman watching television are not?



"Nothing much . . . just an elephant missing from the circus!"

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A contrast between what appears to be and what really is.

*Verbal irony* occurs when what one says or writes is the opposite of the intended meaning.

*Irony of situation* exists when an event is contrary to what is expected or appropriate.

*Dramatic irony* occurs when the reader or spectator knows more about the true state of affairs than a character does.

"The Rich Man" from *Tobogganing on Parnassus* by Franklin P. Adams. Copyright 1911 by Doubleday & Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

■ Apply to A Man Who Had No Eyes on page 333.