

## Introduction

Irony, in its contrariness, has gained a reputation for indeterminacy, for being all but ungraspable except perhaps in the most traditional contexts of wittiness, paradox, the assumption of an opposite, or a perspective of stylish but world-weary commentary. Irony in the more complicated view can now be confounding, a perspective that has become more pervasive, or at least more presumed, in connection with postmodernist or deconstructive assumptions regarding the disassociative properties of language in particular. Irony does, in fact, imply opposition, a consistent if at times hidden presence of the alternate view; and when such alternation is reiterated or compounded, the contrary properties of the ironic become correspondingly more manifest, leading potentially to progressive negation or even self-cancellation. This, in brief, is an attribute belonging innately to a trope with philosophical as well as verbal and aesthetic properties, a trait that may at times contribute to a perception of capriciousness and contradiction.

Yet irony is also capacious, with an ability to imply or embrace a universalized as well as localized or delimited perspective. The existential or ontological implications of the ironic are plenteous, even when coupled with (or, at times, because of) the self-nullifying traits that arise from a fundamental basis in antagonism and conflict. Moreover, the ironic mode is, as Northrop Frye would say, “naturally sophisticated,” one that “takes life exactly as it finds it” (*Anatomy* 41). Indeed, and as a ratio, the more sophisticated the irony, the broader its scope and potential range of implications – even, once again, when a verbal or philosophical complexity goes hand-in-hand with an internal propensity toward negation, ironic self-reference, or tautology. Irony

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is, in other words, fully capable of being ironic in relation to itself. Still, the capaciousness of the ironic manner relates directly to its revelatory capabilities and to its interrelation among conversational, theatrical, literary, and philosophical discourses.

How, then, to proceed analytically with a term that is so innately multifarious? Or, put differently, how to employ by way of reference a single word for so extensive a menu of identities and capabilities? If irony is applicable across a spectrum that extends from stylish badinage to the paradoxical and dialectical, including at given extremes a sweeping existential purview, might it be the case that no single word can contain so much, at least without substantial contextual qualification? Even with that question in mind, and justifiably so, the ambition of this book is to adopt a wide-angle view of this versatile and changeable trope, with an eye toward giving its capabilities a due recognition in the theatrical context. This is not to say that irony cannot be elusive to the point of confounding (a part of its allure, perhaps) but rather that the fullness of the ironic perspective merits as thorough and rounded a set of viewpoints as can be identified and integrated.

Moreover, and since irony evinces such close associations with drama, the aim of the discussion here is to expand rather than constrict its range of possible understandings in specific connection with the theatre. Irony is contradictory, to be sure, yet that very quality is what aligns it so fundamentally with dramatic conflict and dialectic. Irony can be performative as well as verbal, and as such can be communicated through theatrical spectacle as well as in dialogue or thematic implication. While the particular focus of this study is on the recent theatre – beginning with the late nineteenth century – the lengthy ancestry of irony in drama is taken into account. In the nearer historical setting, and pertaining mostly to modern European drama, the discussion in these chapters includes perspectives ranging from New Critical to deconstructive, modernist to postmodern. The approach is phenomenological insofar as emphasis is sustained on the nature and behaviors of the trope per se, but inclusive with respect to critical stances and philosophies of irony. Here again, the effort is to enlarge rather than marginalize the capabilities of the ironic even while acknowledging that a single term is being called upon to denote

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disparate uses and understandings. Even though comprehensiveness may, of necessity, be impossible with respect to ironic iteration, the goal nonetheless is to pursue a rounded perspective, and one that can be useful in applying the myriad incarnations of the ironic to a full range of dramatic expressiveness.

Irony arises in juxtaposition – this in relation to that, with a point of view that is generally implied rather than stated, particularly in Frye’s “sophisticated” mode. In drama, this juxtaposition is wed naturally to conflict – this in opposition to that, with an implicit dramaturgical development arising among the antagonistic parties. Since dramatic conflict is embodied as well as enacted, irony in the theatre is situated typically in character (through verbal expression, representation of personality and deeds, or the dramatic situation itself) or, as a totality, in the assembly of characters or *dramatis personae*. Indeed, the cast of any given play must necessarily contain the conflict – or, by association, the ironic pattern or dialectic. This is the Burkean “philosophic sense in which agon, protagonist, and antagonist can each be said to exist implicitly in the others” (*Philosophy* 77). Dramatic irony is in this sense partnered – not only in the juxtapositions and conflicts but as these elements are personified through characterization. Along these lines, and especially in the theatrical contexts of enactment, embodiment, and dramatic opposition, the nature of irony can be aligned directly to the aesthetic properties of drama itself. Here, too, an inclusive perspective is pertinent, to the extent that fundamental behaviors in theatre relate so typically to irony’s mechanisms. To summarize: the single term, irony, is innately contradictory and can manifest considerable slippage in its definitions and connotations; at the same time, its natural propensities as well as elemental relations to the theatre call for a capacious rather than restrictive perspective for analysis. Further, the fact that historical, cultural, or philosophical trends associated with the modernist and contemporary theatre have added to irony’s multidimensionality might, in fact, be understood as enlarging rather than diminishing the trope’s purview.

Theatre, in recent decades as in past centuries, contains the ironic in ways that are intrinsically and markedly different from narrative fiction, poetry, or other literary art. The reasons for these differences

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are situated in the drama's performative as well as structural or scenic qualities. Irony gains an additional dimension through the theatre's ability to demonstrate an ironic instance or pattern through dramatic action and spectacle. Also, irony in the theatre can be dramatized over the totality of a play's action as well as encapsulated within a single moment of stage imagery. Here too, the essential trait of juxtaposition can, in the theatrical context, be enhanced greatly by what is visual as well as what is verbal.

For the purposes of inquiry here, emphasis is placed on the experiences of dramatic characters – so as to stress the repercussions of the ironic as it is experienced by figures that, in effect, stand for and personify irony under widely varying circumstances. To embody or to enact are related and yet different functions of theatrical character, with enactment pertaining more to the dramatic action while personification and embodiment apply more to what is represented through the depiction of personality or a set of characteristics and predispositions. With respect to character, irony can be conscious – as in the observations of a deliberate ironist – or unconscious, as in situations where an irony catches a stage figure unawares. In addition, theatrical irony can be authorial – in the sense of a mastered or overarching irony that marks the dramatic representation overall – as against an ironic flavor that may be more individually situated in characterization.

In the case of Henrik Ibsen, each of these variations applies. For one example, the action of *Hedda Gabler* as an overall dramatic pattern completes the title character's progress from an ill-advised marriage to George Tesman through the consequent and related encounters with Eilert Loevborg and Judge Brack to a suicide that is the direct and ironic result of these interrelations. As an individual personification, Hedda continually embodies an irony that is, to a large degree, her birthright – hence the choice of self-destruction by gunshot, using one of her military father's ornamental pistols. That Hedda is shown as impassioned, sensual, egoistic, and vengeful – yet at once desperately fearful of shame or scandal – is for Ibsen the portrait of an ironic double bind that once again connects directly with the tragic outcome.

Indeed, similar instances of ironic personification or embodiment in characterization comprise a recurring motif in modernist

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playwriting. Konstantin Treplev, in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, himself a suicide by gunshot, embodies and enacts the ironies of his artistic and filial involvements within a triangle made up of the older writer Trigorin, the dominant figure of the mother Irina, and the young actress Nina as romantic love object. In typical Chekhovian fashion, in which ironies must include a thwarting of desire and mismatching of romantic partners, Constantine is especially victimized. For Bernard Shaw, although certainly not in a tragic vein, the title figure of Mrs. Warren is made to recognize and endure the painful irony of what she herself has created – that is, the defiant personality of her daughter Vivie, who Mrs. Warren has unwittingly fashioned as her own comeuppance.

The personification of irony can apply to duets as well as individual portrayals. The pairing of Halvard Solness and Hilda Wangel in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* makes for a profoundly ironic match that generates a resonance well beyond the limits of either figure's depiction individually. The supreme irony of Lopakhin's purchase of the family estate at auction in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* can only achieve maximum impact in connection with Madame Ranevskaya's investment in the cherry orchard and also with her past, which Lopakhin once shared in the relation of serf to nobility. In Shaw's *Candida*, the effect of Eugene Marchbanks's intrusion in the household of Reverend James Morell attains its full ironic import through a pairing of the intruder with the hapless Morell, not to mention the title figure of the preacher's enigmatic wife. Each of these cases, though individual, exemplifies a typical pattern in the modern and contemporary theatre: the tendency for the ironic to be situated in, and made personal through, the natures and the experiences of dramatic characters, alone or possibly in tandem.

There are categories of irony in theatre that may, in a broad sense, be termed philosophic, due in large part to an extent of application beyond the circumstances of any single play. Such philosophic irony has a long history in the theatre, extending to the tragic, or Sophoclean, perspective on ironic disparity or discrepancy of knowledge. When Oedipus refers to himself as "luck's child," his prideful comment accentuates the degree of dissonance between what the audience may see and the

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limitations of the character's own self-awareness. By the time that *Oedipus the King* was performed, however, Aeschylus had already fashioned the majestic scene in the *Agamemnon* in which the king, stepping down from his chariot and walking on purple tapestries to appease the soon-to-be-murderous Clytemnestra, states: "My will is mine." He is, in this moment, oblivious to his fate; the Greek audience, however, would be witness to his obvious blindness to an omnipotent order of daimon and divinity, not to mention the dissembling of the queen. In the ancient setting at least, such ironic disparities may exist not only among characters but between characters and cosmic powers, notably the gods whose dealings remain ever beyond the divination of the powerful yet mortally delimited.

The modern theatre has employed irony of the philosophic variety in several key ways, including at times dramatic situations with notable affiliations with their ancient predecessors, especially in the context of tragic drama. Halvard Solness, even more so than Oedipus, is aware of a "luck" that has marked his life to such a pronounced degree that he wonders what power in or outside of himself might be participatory in a guiding of events. Ibsen draws attention to Solness's luck by having the master builder himself as well as other characters (Aline, Dr. Herdal) refer to it on several occasions, but he illustrates it most vividly and scenically through Hilda Wangel's intrusion into the Solness household – an arrival laden with ironic implications. In *The Master Builder*, the interventions of chance, happenstance, and meaningful "luck" are so mysteriously appropriate that a strong impression of an overarching and supersensory order ensues – for Solness and perhaps for the observer in the theatre as well.

In the case of Chekhovian drama, an ironic tone emerges typically and familiarly from the foibles and miscalculations among characters in their everyday and often misguided pursuits, but in this instance, too, irony in the philosophic mode can achieve a connotative power well beyond the immediate circumstances. In his major plays, and often with reference to factors of time, Chekhov transforms an ironic (and at times comedic) world-view into a universalized statement. With Chekhov, as with Ibsen, the use of irony can transcend the quotidian and imply a destiny, thus entertaining a philosophic

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question of what may be transcendent or cosmically sensical, albeit mysterious, by contrast with the commonplace or apparently random.

While the ironic may be associated in such rare instances with something perpetual, or with some veiled quality of transcendence, the realms of aesthetics and dialectic provide the more typical theatrical settings for irony's philosophical capabilities. In the former, irony is understood as a property closely related to dramaturgical principles having to do with the structure of action; in this context observations can follow that align the trope with the art of drama itself. Regarding dialectic, the strategy of Bernard Shaw (as prime example) is to juxtapose thematic components in ways that highlight rather than resolve an array of ironic oppositions. The dialectical debate that is carried out, for instance, in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is designed to set forth and then elaborately complicate the terms of argument – in this case having to do with a capitalistic versus a survival impulse, together with what Shaw might suggest is for sale in human affairs more generally. In the absence of a “well-made” dialectical synthesis, Shaw's tactic is to leave any concluding impressions of Mrs. Warren's or her daughter Vivie's “way of life” for an audience to decide. The kinship of irony and dialectic, so strongly evident in Shavian drama, is in fact a partnership that is characteristic of a much broader spectrum of dramatic action, perhaps especially in the Burkean sense of an equation between these two terms and – in the context of irony as one of “Four Master Tropes” – with the “dramatic” as well (*Grammar* 503, 511).

A key affiliation between irony and drama lies in the ways in which opposition has a developmental or progressive aspect. That is, while irony is always based in comparison, juxtaposition, and opposition, dramatic action tends to advance and also interrogate the opposing elements. This, in brief, is the ironic pattern in drama that is proposed as an innate property by Kenneth Burke and elaborated by Bert O. States, notably in the latter's *Irony and Drama*. Here once more the philosophic aspect is allied directly with the dramaturgical, but here also the negative propensity of the ironic can be pronounced. With respect to Pirandello's theatre, and in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* particularly, a flummoxing set of intersections concerning what is true, illusory, or “theatrical” turns the ironic dialectic into

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a progressive and accelerating co-negation among the antagonistic terms. In this scenario, and unlike the Shavian dialectic that aims for a provocative equipoise among terms, the dramatic development evinces a *sentimento del contraria* leading ultimately to cancellation. This, in effect, is dramatic irony as ne plus ultra – or, from a different angle, as nihilism. Irony in drama may have, as Burke would say, an “internal fatality” (*Grammar* 517), but it also contains the implicit wild card of non-containment that arises when opposition goes unchecked and can run the full course of its ironic potentials, ontologically as well as dramaturgically.

Absurdist irony, in one respect a hyperextension of this negative proclivity, can bring with it a cancellation of logic, sensible cause and effect, and – as in Eugene Ionesco’s conception of the “anti-play” – a radical devaluation of the communicative capabilities of language. And yet, the ironic development need not be taken to the extremes of, say, *The Bald Soprano*, for irony’s negative propensities to be strenuously felt. Rather, Ionesco’s drama can be understood simply as a deliberate exaggeration of what is already built into the ironic mode, most particularly in relation to language. As Hayden White observes, the ironic trope “provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language.” More broadly, White identifies irony’s “apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition” with a tendency to “engender belief in the ‘madness’ of civilization itself” (37–38). It should be noted here, and perhaps ironically, that at these extremes the ironic trope in the theatre can move interchangeably to comic or tragic polarities, as the degree of negation can be similar in either instance of genre.

Irony in the comic context has an ancestral tie to comedy of manners that dates to the origins of this sub-genre in the Restoration and extending through the comedies of (most notably) Oscar Wilde, Noel Coward, and more recently, Tom Stoppard. The Restoration truewit is often an ironist in the observation of, typically, the hypocritical culture in which he or she flourishes. Figures such as Mr. Dorimant (*The Man of Mode*) or Mr. Horner (*The Country Wife*)

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demonstrate their verbal as well as sartorial superiority through wittiness to a degree so exacting as to set them definitively apart from less showy or nimble minds. Simply in irony's verbal context, opposition and deliberate contrast or contradiction remain key factors, often to accentuate in an arch or wry manner the acumen or acuity of perception that distinguishes the speaker. When Oscar Wilde observes famously (through his character Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) that, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (174), he is simply reversing an expectation to produce the sardonic effect. Such a tactic is reiterated by Tom Stoppard, in *Arcadia*, when Septimus Hodge wittily parries his protégé Thomasina's curiosity concerning "carnal embrace" – which, for the deft Septimus, is "the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef" (1). Irony's own embrace may extend to the vastness of a cosmic joke, as in Chekhov, but a less rarified theatrical usage is through comedic wit, typically reliant on paradox, inversion, or simply a telling antagonism between terms, ideas, or expectations. With comedy of manners, and in the hands of Stoppard or Shaw as well as Wilde, performative irony is likely to be part of the theatrical milieu, as a visual disparity is brought into bold relief through stage spectacle. At the close of *Arcadia*, for instance, a waltzing couple provides a potent image of what the audience, but not the two characters, would recognize as an ironic duet with a terrible consequence; the gleeful Thomasina Coverly will soon die in a fire that could have been prevented had the gallant Septimus Hodge been willing to accept the invitation to her room following the dance.

Ironic wit pertains commonly to sarcasm – as Cleanth Brooks would say, the "most familiar form of irony" (Zabel 730) – but even within that typicality, the scope of ironic implication is potentially extensive. In *The Well-Wrought Urn*, and with particular relevance to poetry, Brooks underscores the "importance assigned to the resolution of apparently antithetical attitudes," with respect to factors including "wit, as an awareness of the multiplicity of possible attitudes to be taken toward a given situation" and "irony, as a device for definition of attitudes by qualification" – also noting "paradox, as a device for contrasting the conventional views of a situation" (257). Extrapolating Brooks's arrangement from its deliberately poetic and literary

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contexts, such associations might apply also to spoken or performative wit, and to variations on the sarcastic or sardonic in dialogue.

The ironist is adept in the art of the antithetical, but needs to be dependent upon others, or at least one other, who is also in the know – an affinity that may exist among characters in a play or between given characters and the audience. The dependency of irony upon mutuality – quite simply, the need for another party to get the joke or the implication of meaning – is associated with the trope's connection with the referential, perhaps especially with respect to cultural phenomena or the temper of a particular moment in time. Moreover, irony has been seen as sharing this propensity with a postmodernist inclination toward artistic or linguistic referentiality – or, to say it differently, toward the quoting of something that is known in the context of something that is “new” (with the quotation itself qualifying the conception of newness). In this context at least, the affiliation would seem to open up a further range of ironic resonance and help also perhaps to liberate the ironic from historically binding categorizations – that is, from an understanding of irony as something that is delimited per se by historical period.

Yet there is also an important sense in which irony's predilections toward cultural referencing can be restrictive, perhaps especially so in the postmodern relationship. From this perspective, and precisely to the extent that the ironic is a tone of choice for enlightened disillusionment or *weltschmerz*, the necessity for mutuality (getting the joke) has been adaptive to levels of an immediate cultural discourse, often with a prompt from the transitive (and likewise adaptive) voices of media and the languages of popular culture. In this situation, the potential for transcendent, not to say universalized, associations of the ironic is curtailed by the need for broadband communicative conduits for the moods and tones of a given present day. Irony in these circumstances tends to be more situational, ephemeral, or “virtual” by contrast with what might be perceived as more embracing or continuous, even if mysteriously so. Irony's gravitation, under such circumstantial conditions, is away from mystery or the inclusive cosmic joke and more toward what may be, for a time at least, most wryly penetrating or culturally on target. For the theatre, alone with its ancient heritage among other dramatic arts