International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL) ISSN 2249-6912 Vol. 3, Issue 4, Oct 2012, 65-72 © TJPRC Pvt. Ltd.



HUMOUR, IRONY AND SATIRE IN LITERATURE

RAJ KISHOR SINGH

Sanothimi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

ABSTRACT

Humour, irony and satire are technically distinct elements of literature. They have different origins. They are used in different ways with different purposes. The literary works have different modes. Each of them evokes different kind of fun and sense of pleasure. Each of them has generated new kinds of genres. However, they have some interrelations and people often mention them as synonyms. The present article researches these differences and similarities and make inferences to bring up some conclusions.

KEYWORDS: Humour, Irony, Satire, Sarcasm, Incongruity, Figures of Speech, Literary Terms, Rhetorical Devices

INTRODUCTION

Humour means 'the quality of being funny'. It refers to 'an ability to perceive and express a sense of the clever or amusing' thing. Humour consists principally in the recognition and expression of incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. It is frequently used to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct, and is generally thought of as a kindly trait: a genial and mellow type of humor. It is 'the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech.' It is the ability to express humour or amuse other people.

Irony is the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning. It is a technique of indicating, as through character or plot development, an intention or attitude opposite to that which is actually or ostensibly stated.

Irony is a manner of organizing a work so as to give full expression to contradictory or complementary impulses, attitudes, etc., especially as a means of indicating detachment from a subject, theme, or emotion.3 Satire is the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc. It is a literary composition, in verse or prose, in which human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule.

Synonyms of satire are usually irony, burlesque, caricature, parody, etc. Satire refers to literary forms in which vices or follies are ridiculed. Satire is the general term, which often emphasizes the weakness more than the weak person, and usually implies moral judgment and corrective purpose: Swift's satire of human pettiness and bestiality. 4 Irony, sarcasm and satire indicate mockery of something or someone.

The essential feature of irony is the indirect presentation of a contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs. In the figure of speech, emphasis is placed on the pposition between the literal and intended meaning of a statement. One thing is said and its opposite is implied, as in the comment, "Beautiful weather, isn't it?" made when it is raining or nasty. Ironic literature exploits, in addition to the rhetorical figure, such devices as character development, situation, and plot to stress the paradoxical nature of reality or the contrast between an ideal and actual condition, set of circumstances, etc., frequently in such a way as to stress the absurdity present in the contradiction between substance and form.

Irony differs from sarcasm in greater subtlety and wit. In sarcasm, ridicule or mockery is used harshly, often crudely and contemptuously, for destructive purposes. It may be used in an indirect manner, and have the form of irony, as in "What a fine musician you turned out to be!" or it may be used in the form of a direct statement, "You couldn't play one piece correctly if you had two assistants." The distinctive quality of sarcasm is present in the spoken word and manifested chiefly by vocal inflection, whereas satire and irony arising originally as literary and rhetorical forms, are exhibited in the organization or structuring of either language or literary material. Satire usually implies the use of irony or sarcasm for censorious or critical purposes and is often directed at public figures or institutions, conventional behavior, political situations, etc. 5

The above meanings, definitions and explanations taken from different online dictionary resources show relationship among these three terms: humour, irony and satire, but yet they hardly show the differences. Even the relationship is very confusing. Comparison and contrast are not given. Are they really completely synonymous, partially synonymous or not synonymous at all? If they are synonymous, can we use them in substitution? Are humours produced from irony and satire same? Are the senses of humours same? These and many other questions are in mind and this mind makes efforts to search the answers.

HUMOUR IN LITERATURE

Humour is the heart of literature. David Lubar, an author of humorous books for teenagers, pointed out in a recent interview that just as humor fits into most areas of art and entertainment, it fits into literature "where it brings pleasure, eases pain, and makes the world a better place." And although many of us speak of humor as if it were a genre, "it's really an element—actually—makes that an assortment of elements." ⁶

Humour is not a genre. It is a substance. Humor is often used in literature. Sometimes it is the witty banter of the characters, other times it is characterization itself or events that are ironic or absurd that lend humor to a book, poem, story, play, or other literary piece. Since Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* 600 years ago, writers have been making us laugh – with humorous writing from down the ages.

Humour concerns with emotional aspect. It is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term derives from the humoural medicine of the ancient Greeks, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as humours, control human health and emotion.

People of all ages and cultures respond to humour. The majority of people are able to experience humour, i.e., to be amused, to laugh or smile at something funny, and thus they are considered to have a sense of humour. Satire may rely more on understanding the target of the humour and thus tends to appeal to more mature audiences.

Humour is also used (or probably misused) to mean any type of comedy. Additionally, it was thought to include a combination of ridiculousness and wit in an individual; the paradigmatic case being Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff. It can be verbal, visual, or physical. Non-verbal forms of communication—for example, music or visual art—can also be humorous.⁷

Humour, depending on the level of comprehension of the audience to which it is directed, may be divided into three levels for analysis. There is a universal humour that can be understood by everybody, without regard to culture or formal education. Humour, at the second level, need not be as visual as on the first level. Sexual, political, or religious jokes, where humour acts as a relief from repression or inhibition, belong to this category. The third level of humour requires a high command of language and its stylistic devices. Its main channel of expression is irony. The audience for

this sophisticated humour is cultivated and refined. In it we distinguish two kinds: compassionate, directed to the heart; intellectual, directed to the mind. It is an elitist or high class humour. The humour of the third level never loses its touch of class and charity. 8

Laughing feels good. However, we expect our literature to do something more than simply entertain us. True purpose of literature is uplifting our spirits, shining a cold light on dark truths, giving audience to under-represented voices, or toppling the bourgeois hegemony. Humor can only help in accomplishing these goals.

Humor is a tool, like characterization or dialogue, and it is foolhardy for any writer to rise to the impossible task of communicating the unspeakable with less than all available tools at their disposal. Humor is seen as a necessary element of fiction. From another angle, humor isn't a tool but a sense. We all have some sense of humour.

IRONY IN LITERATURE

Irony is a means to humour. It is a rhetorical device used in most of the modern fiction and literature in general. It is widely used in psychological literary works, for example, in James Joyce's fiction. Irony is a disagreement or incongruity between what is said and what is understood, or what is expected and what actually occurs. It can be used intentionally or can happen unintentionally. Audience's role is very important. Authors can use irony to make their audience stop and think about what has just been said, or to emphasize a central idea. The audience's role in realizing the difference between what is said and what is normal or expected is essential to the successful use of irony.

Irony, in its broadest sense, is a rhetorical device, literary technique, or event characterized by an incongruity, or contrast, between reality (what is) and appearance (what seems to be). Verbal, dramatic, and situational irony are often used for emphasis in the assertion of a truth. The ironic form of simile, used in sarcasm, and some forms of litotes can emphasize one's meaning by the deliberate use of language which states the opposite of the truth, denies the contrary of the truth, or drastically and obviously understates a factual connection.

Henry Watson Fowler, in *The King's English*, says "any definition of irony—though hundreds might be given, and very few of them would be accepted—must include this, that the surface meaning and the underlying meaning of what is said are not the same." Also, Eric Partridge, in *Usage and Abusage*, writes that "Irony consists in stating the contrary of what is meant." 10

There are several types of irony in literature. Three main types are verbal irony, dramatic irony, and situational irony.

Verbal Irony: This is the contrast between what is said and what is meant; e.g. sarcasm.

Dramatic Irony: This is the contrast between what the character thinks to be true and what we (the reader) know to be true. Sometimes as we read we are placed in the position of knowing more than what one character knows. Because we know something the character does not, we read to discover how the character will react when he or she learns the truth of the situation.

Situational Irony: This is the most common in literature. It is the contrast between what happens and what was expected (or what would seem appropriate). Because it emerges from the events and circumstances of a story, it is often more subtle and effective than verbal or dramatic irony. 11

Irony is often an effective way for an author to express ideas of what she thinks describes the society in which she lives. Irony can explore the differences between what a society or person says or does and how they actually live. A society

which claims to value truth and justice, but actually tolerates or encourages lying and injustice is ironic.

Irony can be used in any number of ways in fiction. In fact there are different categories that can be found in fiction, depending on the type of story being told. For instance, a character's and/or a reader's carefully laid expectations are turned on their head. For instance, a man who pursues what he thinks is the perfect woman, eventually learns that she isn't as perfect as he or the readers thought.

Irony can occur when the reader knows things in the story that the characters do not---for example, audiences are aware of the fact that Viola in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is actually a woman dressed as a man, even when other characters are not. Sarcasm and satire are also forms of irony that can be employed within fiction. The satire, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, addresses ideas about how the military brass sees itself and how it actually operates. It is very much steeped in irony.

Irony is effective because it prevents the author's work from becoming didactic. Since most works of fiction that employ irony tend to deal with serious issues, such as the hypocrisy in religion, society, or government, a more serious or realistic approach risks becoming pretentious. Irony, particularly satire, can be an effective way to not only approach such topics but do so in way that is humorous or entertaining (though it's important to point out that not all satire is funny).

Another reason why irony is effective is because it allows readers to see the discrepancies the author is pointing out about humans or society. For instance, in *Twelfth Night*, audiences are able to witness the absurdities that Elizabethan society placed on decorum within courtship rituals and the ways those rituals are complicated by gender expectations.

With irony, unlike most literary tropes, readers are let in on the joke. They see and know things of which the characters themselves are not aware. Thus, it gives them a sense of distance from the story. This allows them to parse the ideas and themes that are being expressed in ways that are not always readily available in stories that do not employ the use of irony. Irony also allows readers to understand characters in ways that the characters don't know of themselves. For example, the irony in Shakespeare's *King Lear* allows audiences to understand the kind of hubris that King Lear represents and also allows them to understand how this hubris leads to his downfall. Irony helps readers and audiences gain a greater understanding of human nature. ¹²

SATIRE IN LITERATURE

Satire is the mind/wits; irony is the reasoning/rhetorical tool; humour is the substance. Satire is a genre of literature, and sometimes graphic and performing arts, in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, and society itself, into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society.

A common feature of satire is strong irony and sarcasm—"in satire, irony is militant"—but parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre are all frequently used in satirical speech and writing. This "militant" irony or sarcasm often professes to approve of (or at least accept as natural) the very things the satirist wishes to attack. Satire is nowadays found in many artistic forms of expression, including literature, plays, commentary, television shows, and media such as lyrics.

Satire is a technique employed by writers to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society by using humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule. It intends to improve the humanity by criticizing its follies and foibles. A writer in a satire uses fictional character, which stands for real people to expose and condemn their corruption.

A writer may point a satire toward a person, a country or even the entire world. Usually, a satire is a comical piece of writing which makes fun of an individual or a society to expose its stupidity and shortcomings. In addition, he expects that whosoever he criticizes improves his character by overcoming his weaknesses.

Satire and irony are interlinked. Irony is the difference between what is said or done and what is actually meant. Therefore, writers frequently employ satire to point at the dishonesty and silliness of individuals and society and criticize them by ridiculing them. Most political cartoons which we witness every day in newspapers and magazines are examples of satire. These cartoons criticize some recent actions of political figures in a comical way. Some shows on television are examples of satire like "The Daily Show", "The Colbert Report", and "The Larry Sanders Show". These shows claim to target what they think are stupid political and social viewpoints.

There are numerous examples of satire in Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn". He uses satire as a tool to share his ideas and opinion on slavery, human nature and many other issues that afflicted American society at that time. Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" is an example of poetic satire in which he has satirized the upper middle class of eighteenth century England. It exposes the vanity of young fashionable ladies and gentlemen and frivolity of their actions. For example, Pope says about Belinda after losing her lock of hair:

"Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,

Or some frail china jar receive a flaw,

Or stain her honor, or her new brocade"

The line mocks at the values of the fashionable class of that age. The trivial things were thought of equal to significant things. For Belinda, loss of her virtue becomes equal to a China jar being cracked. Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver Travels" is one the finest satirical works in English Literature. Swift relentlessly satirizes politics, religion, and Western Culture.

The role of satire is to ridicule or criticize those vices in the society, which the writer considers a threat to the civilization. The writer considers it his obligation to expose these vices for the betterment of humanity. Therefore, the function of satire is not to make others laugh at persons or ideas they make fun of. It intends at warning public against and changing their opinions about the prevailing corruption in the society. ¹³

Outstanding among the classical satirists was the Greek dramatist Aristophanes, whose play *The Clouds* (423 BC) satirizes Socrates as the embodiment of atheism and sophistry, while *The Wasps* (422) satirizes the Athenian court system. The satiric styles of two Roman poets, Horace and Juvenal, became models for writers of later ages. The satire of Horace is mild, gently amused, yet sophisticated, whereas that of Juvenal is vitriolic and replete with moral indignation. Shakespeare later wrote Horatian satire and Jonathan Swift wrote Juvenalian satire.

From the beast fables, fabliaux, and Chaucerian caricatures to the extended treatments of John Skelton, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Erasmus, and Cervantes, the satirical tradition flourished throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, culminating in the golden age of satire in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The familiar names of Swift, Samuel Butler, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Richard Steele, Henry Fielding, and William Hogarth, in England, and of Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, La Fontaine, Molière, and Voltaire, in France, suggest not only the nature of the controversies that provided a target for the satirist's darts in both nations, but also the rediscovery and consequent adaptation of the classical models to individual talents.

In the 19th century, satire gave way to a more gentle form of criticism. Manners and morals were still ridiculed but usually in the framework of a longer work, such as a novel. However, satire can be found in the poems of Lord Byron, in the librettos of William S. Gilbert, in the plays of Oscar Wilde and G. B. Shaw, and in the fiction of W. M. Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Samuel Butler, and many others. American satirists of the period include Washington Irving, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Mark Twain.

Although 20th-century satire continues to register Horatian or Juvenalian reactions to the enormities of an age dominated by fear of the atom bomb and plagued by pollution, racism, drugs, planned obsolescence, and the abuse of power, critics have discerned some shifts in its source. In some instances the satirist is the audience rather than the artist. The so-called put-on, whether a play (Samuel Beckett's *Breath*, in which breathing is heard on a blacked-out stage), a joke (Lenny Bruce's nightclub routines), or an artifact (John Chamberlain's smashed-up cars), seeks to confuse its audience by presenting the fraudulent as a true work of art, thus rendering the whole concept of "art" questionable. More conventional contemporary satirists of note are Sinclair Lewis, James Thurber, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, W. H. Auden, Philip Roth, and Joseph Heller. ¹⁴

COMPARISON

Satire and irony are often closely related, but there are important distinctions between the two. A form of criticism, satire uses humor to accomplish its goals. One technique that satire uses is irony. Irony focuses on the discrepancies between what is said or seen and what is actually meant. Simply, satire and irony hardly differ because one, satire, often uses the other, irony.

Both satire and irony can be found in literature, television, movies, theater and even in artwork. Satire, however, is a genre, whereas irony is a technique.

Although satire and irony are arguably linked, they are not exclusive to each other. Irony occurs not just in satire but in dramatic and comedic art as well. Likewise, satire also uses many other rhetorical and comedic techniques, such as ridicule, to accomplish its goal.

Satire is a form of comedic criticism. Although it sometimes uses seemingly harsh techniques, its aim is not cruelty but rather to point out faults in government, society, individuals or the human condition. Satire is an attempt to draw attention to these faults, either to encourage a change or to force awareness.

Just as a comedy uses jokes to make people laugh or an action movie uses explosions to thrill the audience, satire uses irony to make a humorous criticism. There are several types of irony, but they all base their humor in selective, often intentional, ignorance. Using words in an opposite way in which they are intended is, perhaps, the simplest form of irony.

The beauty of works of literature is mainly due to the different types of figurative forms of speech that is used by many of the literary masters. Irony is one of the popular figurative forms of speeches. This is primarily because of its use in contemporary forms of literature, and even in performance arts. Since irony is commonly used in satires, many people would often equate the two together. It is true that the use of irony is a vital and integral component in satires. Irony and satire are completely two different literary terms. ¹⁶

How do humor and irony correlate? Dews et al. speculate that the element of surprise "yielded by the disparity between what is said and what is meant" may trigger humor. ¹⁷ Colston and associates have argued that contrast/incongruity is at the root of irony. Giora argues that humor and irony share some basic mechanisms. Namely, they both violate the "graded informativeness requirement," but they do so differently: a joke goes from an unmarked meaning to a marked one,

while irony does the opposite. It is unnecessary to review the extensive literature on the role of incongruity in humor in this context. It remains to be seen if the incongruity of humor can be reduced to the contrast of irony, and vice versa. Moreover, it is not clear if such notions as inappropriateness, insincerity, etc., reduce "cleanly" to contrast.¹⁸

Also, if irony is a form of indirect negation¹⁹ and humor is based (in part) on local antonymy²⁰/²¹, it follows that both humor and irony include negation as a significant constituent of the phenomenon. However, Colston argues that "contradiction" is not necessarily involved.²²

The connection between irony and humor at the perlocutionary level is fairly commonsensical and is borne out. Toplak and Katz also find that sarcastic speakers are seen as funny.²³ One of the chief instruments of satire is irony: to achieve either requires timing and a touch that is as precise as it is light.

There is a difference between humour and satire that some readers appear to be missing. The latter has a long and distinguished tradition of using shocking parallels to make people think. That was the intent, but there is no real objective way to test the success of irony.²⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Both irony and satires are literary terms that are commonly used to portray something that is contrary to the truth, in order for this to be exposed to the general public for the purpose of awareness and change. Irony is a figure of speech that portrays the contrary of the truth about something through the careful play of words and wit. Satire is a literary form, or genre, that is commonly used through the use of graphic arts, or in the form of a performance. Irony is a figure of speech, therefore it is limited to written and spoken forms. On the other hand, since satire is a literary form, it can be presented in a variety of different methods, ranging from literary pieces, such as commentaries, to performances, and even in illustrations accompanying editorials. Humour is a general term signifying a non-serious reaction to the literature by the audience, a light-hearted, frivolous, whimsical reaction, caused by an unexpected departure from reason or sense—a play on words, a clever analogy, an understatement, etc. It can have a hidden threat or criticism in it but is not to be taken seriously. Humour may be produced from irony as well as satire. However, the main function of humour is to momentarily amuse the reader or audience member.

REFERENCES

- 1. Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com/humour
- 2. Retrieved from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/humour
- 3. Retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony
- 4. Retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/satire
- 5. Retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony
- 6. Retrieved from http://shrdocs.com/presentations/15505/index.html
- 7. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humour
- 8. Retrieved from https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/20195
- 9. Retrieved from http://evankingston.com/humors-uses-in-literature/
- 10. Retrieved from http://udleditions.cast.org/craft_ld_irony.html

- 11. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony
- 12. Retrieved from http://voices.yahoo.com/irony-literature-it-used-6386106.html?cat=2
- 13. Retrieved from http://literarydevices.net/satire/
- 14. Retrieved from http://www.questia.com/library/literature/literary-themes-and-topics/satire-in-literature
- 15. Retrieved from http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-difference-between-satire-and-irony.htm
- 16. Retrieved from http://www.differencebetween.net/language/difference-between-irony-and-satire/
- 17. Dews, S., J. Kaplan, and E. Winner. (1995). Why not say it directly? The social functions of irony, Discourse *Processes*. v. 19. p. 348.
- 18. Giora, R. (1995). On irony and negation, Discourse Processes 19. pp. 256-257.
- 19. Ibid.
- 20. Raskin, V. (1985). Semantic Mechanisms of Humor. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- 21. Attardo, S. (1997). The semantic foundations of cognitive theories of humor, HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research. v. 10 (4). pp. 395-420.
- 22. Colston, H. (2000). "Dewey defeats Truman": Interpreting ironic restatement, Journal of Language and Social Psychology. v. 19 (1). p. 1563.
- 23. Toplak, M., and A. Katz. (2000). On the uses of sarcastic irony, Journal of Pragmatics. v. 32 (10). pp. 1467-1488.
- 24. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.73.5506&rep=rep1&type=pdf