

Dramatic irony



Dramatic irony occurs when the audience and perhaps one or more characters possess knowledge that the remaining characters do not. Playwrights use this technique to enhance the dramatic effect of certain key moments and scenes, since it engages the audience more directly in the unfolding action.

This narrative technique shows characters at their most vulnerable – the audience can see how limited the characters' knowledge of the world is, and how feeble their attempts at comprehending and controlling their circumstances really are.

The effect of dramatic irony can be either tragic or comic, depending on the nature of the misunderstanding and the degree of sympathy elicited by the characters.

Shakespeare uses dramatic irony extensively in his plays. In *King Lear*, Gloucester is guided by his banished son, Edgar, but because Gloucester is blind and Edgar is disguising his true identity, only Edgar and the audience know the true situation. This shared knowledge draws the audience and Edgar closer together, and also increases sympathy for Gloucester, who is reduced to a childlike dependence and bewilderment.

The pathos of these scenes is intensified by Gloucester's line: 'If Edgar live, O bless him', an expression of love and remorse that Edgar hears yet cannot acknowledge to his father. A similar use of dramatic irony to create tension and pathos occurs when the mad Lear seems unable to recognise his banished daughter, Cordelia, at the end of Act 4.

For much of *Hamlet*, the audience knows that Hamlet is only pretending to be mad, while the other characters struggle to understand his behaviour. At times this **use of dramatic irony produces a comic effect**, such as when Hamlet banters with the earnest Polonius in Act 2 Scene 2: Polonius thinks Hamlet is 'far gone', perhaps out of love for Polonius' daughter, Ophelia; the audience, though, can see how easily Hamlet manipulates the thoughts of the older man. In this way we are encouraged to laugh at Polonius, although his observation that Hamlet's madness has some 'method in't' suggests he is a little shrewder than he sometimes appears.

A more complex and moving scene occurs when Polonius and Hamlet's father, Claudius, arrange for Ophelia to meet with Hamlet while they

eavesdrop on the conversation (in Act 3 Scene 1). Even though we know that Hamlet is maintaining his 'antic disposition', it is extremely difficult to discern Hamlet's true motives or feelings in this scene. In this case, **dramatic irony creates tension and sadness** as we gain a heightened sense of Hamlet's isolation and vulnerability. Ophelia's despairing cry, 'O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown', sums up our sense that Hamlet's loss of reason and purpose is no longer entirely feigned.

Imagery

Just as in novels and short stories, patterns of imagery are used in drama to convey the dominant ideas and to generate a sense of coherence and unity. Recurrent words and images in the language of the characters – such as frequent references to time in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* – often foreground the playwright's main concerns.

Imagery 'colours' the language used by a character, and can therefore cast them, or the attitudes and beliefs they hold, in a positive or negative light. It can also suggest a complexity to a character's situation that leads the audience to view them more sympathetically.

The many images of blood in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (first performed in 1606) operate on a number of levels, from signalling Macbeth's state of mind at various points in the play to reflecting Scotland's unnatural state of violence and bloodshed.

These images include Macbeth's early vision of a bloody dagger, and his later sense of being 'in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er'.

Such images **convey Macbeth's psychological state**, yet they do not condemn him unambiguously. He is immersed in the blood of others as a direct result of his own actions; in this he is the stereotypical dictator, ruthlessly abusing his power for self-preservation. However, he is able to reflect on his situation and express it in powerful, evocative images. It is this fusion of poetic self-awareness and sheer brutality that makes his character not simply repellent, but complex and compelling.

For more on imagery, including explanations of simile, metaphor and symbol, see Chapter 6, pages 159–67.

