

Verbal Irony

Definition of Verbal Irony

Verbal [irony](#) occurs when a [speaker](#) speaks something contradictory to what he intends to say. It is an intentional product of the speaker, and is contradictory to his/her emotions and actions. To define it simply, it occurs when a [character](#) uses a statement with underlying meanings that [contrast](#) with its literal meaning; it shows that the writer has used verbal irony. Writers rely on the [audience](#)'s intelligence for discerning the hidden meanings they intend to convey. Writers also use ironic similes to convey exactly the opposite of what they intend to say, such as "soft as concrete."

Types of Verbal Irony

[Sarcasm](#)

[Exaggeration](#) or [Overstatement](#)

[Understatement](#)

Examples of Verbal Irony from Literature

Example #1: *Romeo & Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

"Again and again he tried after the tempting morsel, but at last had to give it up, and walked away with his nose in the air, saying: 'I am sure they are sour.' "

"I will not marry yet; and, when I do, I swear it shall be Romeo, whom you know I hate, rather than Paris."

Juliet does not like the decision of her father to marry with Paris, whom she dislikes and instead adores Romeo. Hence, she makes a decision to marry Romeo and tells her mother about it ironically that whenever she would

marry, it would be Romeo – whom she dislikes – and not Paris, thus confusing her mother.

Example #2: *Pride & Prejudice* (By Jane Austen)

“She is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me.”

We can find many fine examples of verbal irony in *Pride and Prejudice*. In this example, we relish ironic flavor of Darcy’s statement, as we later find out that the woman he found unsuitable to dance with, ends up taking a place in his heart.

Example #3: *The Unknown Citizen* (By W. H. Auden)

The title of the poem, *The Unknown Citizen*, employs verbal irony, as the poet describes a person whom everyone knows, yet he is still unknown. Also, by deliberately capitalizing common words, the speaker makes them sound meaningless, ironic, and sarcastic: “the Greater [Community](#),” “Social Psychology,” “Union,” “Public Opinion,” and “High Grade Living.” All of these terms sound formal, pompous, bureaucratic, and arrogant. Simply, through verbal irony, the poet shows how governmental agencies, which should serve human beings, have rather enslaved them.

Example #4: *Oedipus Rex* (By Sophocles)

TIRESIAS:

“You are all ignorant. I will not reveal the troubling things inside me, which I can call your grief as well.”

OEDIPUS:

“Do you intend to betray me and destroy the city?”

All types of ironies are prevalent throughout the entire play, *Oedipus Rex*. One fine example of verbal irony occurs when Tiresias refuses to reveal the prophecy to Oedipus.

In fact, Oedipus has misunderstood Tiresias' statement, "... which I can call your grief as well." By this, Tiresias means that, if he reveals the truth, it would become Oedipus' grief that he is the murderer of his king, Laius. This is a verbal irony which Oedipus fails to realize that this "grief" is going to be an impending fate for him.

Example #5: *A Modest Proposal* (By Jonathan Swift)

"I rather recommend buying the children alive and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs."

Verbal irony is a dominant literary device in this novel by Swift. For instance, in the above statement the author intends to point out that the government should not treat Irish people like animals. In irony, he compares the Irish to animals.

Example #6: *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (By Lemony Snicket)

"Today was a very cold and bitter day, as cold and bitter as a cup of hot chocolate; if the cup of hot chocolate had vinegar added to it and were placed in a refrigerator for several hours."

Snicket uses verbal irony by employing ironic [simile](#). Then, he proceeds to break down this simile, by overturning its meaning. By making a complex structure, the author creates verbal irony to let readers enjoy.

Functions of Verbal Irony

Verbal irony is very common in everyday speech, plays, novels, and poetry, and usually occurs in the form of sarcasm. It depends upon timing and suitable circumstances to achieve its effect. Verbal irony develops funny and dramatic situations. Through verbal irony, writers and poets can convey their bitter messages indirectly, in a less bitter and more effective way. It makes a literary piece more effective by provoking readers into analyzing and thinking harder about a situation. By contrasting and

comparing suppositions with reality, the readers can better understand the writer's intent.

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