

The Necessity of Irony (Part 2)

Remember when you sassied your mom or your teacher, and she said, “Don’t use that tone with me,” followed by this observation, “I don’t like your attitude”? That’s irony you delivered, and it was effectively understood. We all know how to make verbal irony work; we use it every day. But we can make verbal irony happen simply through changing the tone of our voice. “That’s a terrific tie” is either a sincere statement of appreciation or the very opposite depending on the speaker’s tone (though in Alaska, any appreciation of a tie could be said always to be ironic).

On the page, though, a writer cannot simply change the register of his voice and convey irony. Irony comes from carefully chosen words, and a carefully constructed sense of the narrator’s role in the story, essay or poem in question.

Here’s how it works: We authors create a narrator, a surrogate self. That narrator is never as fully complex as we are, but is an element of ourselves that will deliver our intended tone in all that’s said in the narrator’s voice. The gently ironic voice of a Jane Austen narrator can both mock her characters and at the same time assure us that in this story there will be no murder or mayhem. Her narrator’s tone sets the readers’ expectations. And because Jane Austen’s narrators are tonally consistent, we grow comfortable with them and accept the premises of the author behind them. If she’s successful, Jane Austen’s attitude becomes our attitude. Austen’s author’s attitude and her narrator’s tone are very close. And our attitude should be close to Austen’s as well. Poor Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennett, they mean to get it right and eventually they do, but through it all we love them just the same and know they will come to no serious harm. Tone teaches us that understanding.

And if Austen is not successful? That can happen, and when it does a writer is in trouble. Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” is a good example. Here’s a typical paragraph:

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.

Yep, we’re talking about eating children as a way of solving problems of poverty and overpopulation. And Swift goes on to note the many useful items that might be made of their hides.

Every time I have taught this essay to an undergraduate class, somebody has missed the irony. How does it work? A flat understated tone is coupled with an outrageous idea (admittedly Dick Cheney has made a career of this kind of tone and his outrageous ideas are not ironic). The title is the first tip. Is this idea really a modest proposal? The distance between the author and the narrator in this case is great

and grows even greater as he outlines his ideas for using children for food and clothing. The distance between the narrator and the subject is very small. To get the author's true attitude, a reader must share that gap of distance to the narrator and his subject. To see the author as in agreement with his narrator results in a completely backwards reading of the essay. But it can and does happen.

The ideal attentive reader is alert for tone as he or she reads and works back from tone to find the author's attitude. The relationship of tone to attitude is pretty formulaic. A great distance (distance of emotional or intellectual engagement) between author and narrator ought to create the same distance between reader and narrator. And a similar distance, the distance between narrator and the story or essay or poem he's telling, should also be shared by the reader.

Sometimes our difficulty with tone and attitude is simply a function of our inability to share an author's attitude. Here are the closing lines from Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (a poem I happen to like a great deal), spoken by a man to his lover as they gaze out across the English Channel to France.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

And here is a line lifted from "The Dover Bitch," American poet Anthony Hecht's mocking response where he asks how it would feel to be a woman brought to a romantic setting only to be addressed as "a cosmic last resort." Kind of pops Mathew Arnold's Victorian bubble in a phrase. The tone of the poem cannot overcome Hecht's own ironic skepticism. It's just too earnest for this cynical American.

And of course, Jane Austen does fail for many American readers. Maybe her irony is too subtle, too sly. Maybe we Americans don't have enough manners to grasp a novel of manners. When irony does fail to convey the proper distance to readers, though, it puts those very readers at odds with the narrator. An unhappy reading experience follows.

It's on us, writers, to pay close attention to tone, to be aware of our own attitudes and to try to be more or less consistent as we apply them. Let's call this attention "ironic self-awareness." What this means is simple: a writer is constantly monitoring how he presents his narrator. In the world of non-fiction and in some poetry, this means watching ourselves be our selves, to use that self-consciousness

as a way to monitor tone (it's also a good way to stay out of trouble in our walking around lives). So we are constantly checking our tones and considering whether they will create the right sense of distance for a reader.

Once again, this is something we've been doing pretty much automatically since we were kids. All we're doing now is paying closer attention. This self-awareness feels awkward at first, but you'll get used to it. Just like wearing a tie.