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Exploration of Irony

Rational:

Irony is a common and powerful and creative element used in a variety of media ranging from television shows to literature. However, it is easy to get lost in the different kinds of irony on top of being able to discern what is and is not ironic. As the meaning of irony has somehow melded into language and events that just happen to be coincidental, but have nothing to do with irony in the first place. In its simplest form, irony is a contradiction between what is expected and what is reality of a situation. On top of that there are three types of irony that can occur in any form of media: situational irony, where an event that occurs outside of what is expected; verbal irony, where something said is contradictory to what is meant or implied; and dramatic irony, where the audience knows more about the events in a story than the characters that reside within that story.

The importance of being able to understand irony can help a student be able to critically think as well as be able to discern and recognize persuasive rhetoric. By having them be able to recognize situations or dialogue that is ironic can also lead to understanding the genre of satire. Satire contains literary elements that often criticize concepts through exaggeration and humor and can get confused with irony they are found together a majority of the time. The key difference being that irony is a creative tool that can add onto a scene or bring attention to a theme, and satire is a genre of media that criticizes concepts and ideas through the exaggeration of implied faults within them.

So, the point of this unit of study is to help students develop and hone their critical analysis skills through the understanding and explanation of irony. To try and help engage students with the material it can also help to use a variety of different kinds of media by combining literary canon with other forms of media: such as dramas and graphic novels.

Launching into the Class:

On the first day of class to help showcase irony in its simplest form, as well as to symbolically create a fresh start, have the students spend five to ten minutes writing on a separate piece of paper what they think irony is and then have them store those pieces of paper away without having them discuss what they wrote down. It acts against the usual student's preconceived notion that a teacher would have them talk about what the students just wrote down. This would be explained to the class along with that this is an exercise in setting aside preconceived thoughts on irony to be able to explore it with another perspective. Next the students could look at the lyrics of the song "Ironic" by Alanis Morissette and determine if the song is ironic or not[[1]](#footnote-1) to open a means of discussion and engage the students in the topic of irony.

Currently, there are three videos on the [TED-Ed site](http://blog.ed.ted.com/2014/09/18/is-it-actually-ironic-3-ted-ed-lessons-on-irony/)[[2]](#footnote-2) that define the different types of irony in a simple and easy to understand way. On top of that, students can try and piece together a variety of situations that would fit in different categories of irony to help them further understand the intricacies of irony.

The main bulk of the work will come in the form of them keeping a journal or blog (which ever has easier access to by the teacher and their students) where the student would keep track of various kinds of irony that they happen upon in the course material along with, if they want, their day to day life. They would have to determine which type of irony that situation is as well as explain their reasoning as to why it fits in that type of irony. In doing so it will help students develop critical and analytical minds as they search for their answers. For a more creative approach, students could also try and write how to make other situations in the course work ironic.

The centerpiece for the unit is Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as it utilizes different elements of irony. For example, the firefighters in the story are ironic in that they start fires rather than put them out. The story is a Dystopian novel where books are banned for being "harmful" to the minds of people, and anyone found owning a book has their home set ablaze. The plot centers around protagonist and firefighter, Guy Montag, as he comes to find beauty in the books that he once relished in burning.

One way to help engage the class into *Fahrenheit 451* is to pair it with the authorized comic adaptation by Tim Hamilton. Having the students start with the comic could a way to help them get acclimated to imagery and give them a sense of the general story before they dive deeper into the second read of the book and how Bradbury uses irony to explain the nature of his satire. The second read of the book would provide a more detailed perspective for students to utilize in a analytical paper that delves deeper into the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Extending Beyond the Centerpiece:

As a break from reading *Fahrenheit 451* (or after reading either versions), the class could look at canonical plays that utilize irony. Having students read the plays can be another engaging way to look at irony and how it can function inside their stories. It's also a more apparent way of looking at dramatic irony especially with some of the works of William Shakespeare. Some plays I would suggest looking at are:

* *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde*;* a satirical comedy about characters that struggle with the social obligations of upper-class society, the love of particular names and invented identities to hide from said obligations. It largely centers around the complicated love between four characters: John/Ernest and Gwendolen as well as Algernon and Cecily. This would be fun read for students as the fast and witty dialogue could lead to a fun class activity.

(<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/92303.The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest?ac=1&from_search=true>)

* *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare; the classic tragedy about the titular characters attempt of trying to be together, despite each belonging to house despising the other. Shakespeare uses dramatic irony to great effect where the audience already knows the tragic fate of the characters and still hold onto hope by the end. Also if the teacher is feeling adventurous they could look into *YOLO Juliet* adapted by Brett Wright as it does the whole play as though the characters were text messaging each other.

(<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18135.Romeo_and_Juliet?ac=1&from_search=true>)

(<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/23743762-yolo-juliet>)

* *Othello* by William Shakespeare; Another one of Shakespeare's tragedies that centers around the love between the exotic Moor Othello and the Venetian Lady Desdemona. This is a prime example of dramatic irony where the audience is aware of the plotting Iago but they remain unable to stop the coming betrayals.

There are also film adaptations of these plays that could be considered and the students could write in their journals about how irony is utilized, to what purpose (whether there is or isn't a purpose) and why they think that.

As a way to end the unit or as a side project for the class, the students could try reading a book from the young adult genre that utilizes a sarcastic narrator. Such texts could be:

* *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson; Told through journalistic entries by female protagonist Melinda as she deals with social alienation after she crashed an end-of-summer party while struggling with a dark secret that she wants to reveal, but can't bring herself to do so. Though when she finally is able to speak about what happened, everything comes crashing down.
* *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher ; a sports fiction story about a snarky teen named, T.J. Jones (the "J" being redundant), as he creates Cutter High School's first swim team while dealing with other issues: his school that favors jocks, bullies that harass his friends, and a racist Cutter High alumni that harasses him.
* *Godless* by Pete Hautman; Bored with his parent's religion, Jason Bock decides to create a religion of his own which worships the town's water tower. He recruitment of a variety of other teens that leads to dangerous grounds as Jason tries to maintain order in his newly established religion. The question is: will he be successful in maintaining this new faith or will he doom himself and his friends to destruction?

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4043.Godless?from_search=true>)

* *Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon; Madeline is afflicted with a strange disease that causes her to be allergic to everything. Though her disease leaves her plenty of time for reading, this also leaves her trapped inside the white walls of her room and house. Then one day, a new boy moves in next door that throws Madeline's life into love filled chaos.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18692431-everything-everything?from_search=true>)

* *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie; Junior is a Native American who is fighting against his own destiny of becoming like his drunken ancestors. He leaves the troubled grounds of his high school on the rez to live a life in a community of white farmers where the other Native American is his new school's mascot.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/693208.The_Absolutely_True_Diary_of_a_Part_Time_Indian?ac=1&from_search=true>)

* *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green; A romance that centers around Hazel as she battles a tumor that's slowly killing her. However, at one of her Cancer Kid Support Group she meets a boy by the name of Augustus which leads both on a touching and emotional journey.

In Conclusion:

Students by the end of the unit should be able to see how irony can play a role in understanding a story, providing dramatic tension and how it can embody criticisms in a satire. At this time, students could bring out the sheets of paper that contained their definition of irony (if they still have it) and cross compare it with the perspective they have now, where they now can share their original thoughts with others. For the final project, I would suggest that the students utilize their journal entries to write about how irony plays a more critical role in understanding the themes of *Fahrenheit 451* or if they want a more creative project they could try and write a short narrative that utilizes dramatic or situational irony based off their entries; verbal irony would be a bit of a stretch to write a meaningful narrative around. Irony is a powerful literary tool that can be used to great effect if expressed correctly, and being able to recognize it is important in being able to view the world in a different perspective.

Works Cited

(Summaries of books I did not have access to were from Goodreads.com as shown under their respective summaries)

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1. I personally find some irony in "Ironic" because it doesn't contain ironic situations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Works Cited for the direct link to the videos [↑](#footnote-ref-2)