

Simile & Irony

1. What is simile?

A **simile** is an expression which describes a person or thing as being similar to someone or something else. For example, the sentences “he runs like a deer” and “be as white as a sheet” contain similes.

A **simile** is a figurative expression in which an element is provided with special attributes **through a comparison with something quite different**. The words *like* or *as* create the comparison, e.g., “O My Luve’s like a red, red rose.”

Minds are like parachutes, they only function when they are open.
(Dewar)

True love is like ghosts, which everybody talks about and few have seen.
(Rochefoucauld)

X is like Y in respect of Z

If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.
(John Keats)

The author who speaks about his own books is almost as bad as a mother who talks about her own children.
(B. Disraeli)

X is as Z as Y

Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind.
(Helen Keller)

Noise proves nothing: often a hen who has merely laid an egg cackles as if she had laid an asteroid.
(Mark Twain)

Marriage resembles a pair of shears, so joined that they cannot be separated; often moving in opposite directions, yet always punishing anyone who comes between them.
(Sydney Smith)

Laws and police regulations can be compared to a spider’s web that lets the big mosquitoes through and catches the small ones. (W. Zingref)

X resembles Y; X...as if...y...

As empty vessels make the loudest sound, so they that have least wit are the greatest babblers.

As a well-spent day brings happy sleep, so a life well spent brings happy death.
(Da Vinci)

2. What is **irony**?

Irony is language in which the intended meaning is different from or opposite to the literal meaning.

Verbal irony includes overstatement (hyperbole), understatement, and opposite statement.

I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. (Voltaire)

He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed. (Albert Einstein)

That habit of looking on the bright side of every event is worth more than a thousand pounds a year. (Samuel Johnson)

Twenty years of romance make a woman look like a ruin and twenty years of marriage make her look like a public building. (Oscar Wilde)

He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career. (G. B. Shaw)

...This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together...
(Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess," ll. 45-46)

Oh, sure, I just love to have four papers fall due on the same day.

Dramatic irony occurs when a reader knows things a character is ignorant of or when the speech and action of a character reveal him to be different from what he believes himself to be.

Special Insight

Dramatic irony occurs in real life as well as on stage. One afternoon I was sitting at the end of an 18-foot wooden bench in a narrow corridor of the basement of a university library, facing a row of five or six soft drink machines—drinking a Coca-Cola that had cost me two dollars and twenty-five cents. After having lost three quarters in the first machine and another three in the second, I had gratefully accepted a Coke from the third. Before sitting down, I had torn a sheet of paper in half, had written "Out of Order" on both halves, and had stuck my two "signs" up on the useless machines. In a moment, a tired-looking, bespectacled young man in a seersucker suit approached the first machine, read the sign, moved to the second machine, read the sign, and then put his quarters in the third, taking his Coke without special gratitude. While I was drinking my Coke, reading, as usual, I saved four people one dollar and fifty cents each, though none of them was aware of me. (From *Aspects of Composition*, pp. 205-206)

3. The function of irony

(1)

Figurative comparisons bring unfamiliar things home to your reader and make abstractions come to life.... Figurative language gives the reader something to look at, touch, or listen to. (143)

James A. W. Heffernan & John E. Lincoln

Ex. Advice is like snow; the softer it falls the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into mind. S. T. Coleridge

(2)

Words express ideas and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get hold of new ideas. Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already, it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh.... The similes of the poets do the same and therefore, if they are good similes, give an effect of brilliance.

(1410b) Aristotle: *Rhetoric Book III*, Chapter 10

Ex. Wealth is like sea water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame. Schopenhauer

Flatterers look like friends, as wolves like dogs. R. Chapman

(3)

The successful literary simile will point a likeness not usually discerned yet not so far-reaching as to be purely subjective and therefore uncommunicative. (75) R. Chapman

Ex. They who provide much wealth for their children but neglect to improve them in virtue, do like those who feed their horses, but never train them to be useful. Socrates

A man should be like tea which shows its real worth when getting in hot water. Booker T. Washington

The public buys its opinions as it buys its meat or takes in its milk, on the principle that it is cheaper to do this than to keep a cow. So it is, but the milk is more likely to be watered. S. Butler

4. Avoid the following similes

It is also good to use metaphorical words; but the metaphors must not be far-fetched, or they will be difficult to grasp, not obvious or they will have no effect. Aristotle (Rhetoric)

In similes, as in all kinds of comparisons, the writer needs to be concerned that the comparison is apt, fresh, and meaningful to the reader.

John E. Jordan

Ex. soft as cloud; Soft as tar in the sunshine
Soft as an overripe banana