

39 Irony

Her face, viewed so close that he could see the almost imperceptible down on those fruit-like cheeks, was astonishingly beautiful; the dark eyes were exquisitely misted; and he could feel the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him. She was very slightly taller than her lover; but somehow she hung from him, her body curved backwards, and her bosom pressed against his, so that instead of looking up at her gaze he looked down at it. He preferred that; perfectly proportioned though he was, his stature was a delicate point with him. His spirits rose by the uplift of his senses. His fears slipped away; he began to be very satisfied with himself. He was the inheritor of twelve thousand pounds, and he had won this unique creature. She was his capture; he held her close, permittedly scanning the minutiae of her skin, permittedly crushing her flimsy silks. Something in him had forced her to lay her modesty on the altar of his desire. And the sun brightly shone. So he kissed her yet more ardently, and with the slightest touch of a victor's condescension; and her burning response more than restored the self-confidence which he had been losing.

"I've got no one but you now," she murmured in a melting voice.

She fancied in her ignorance that the expression of this sentiment would please him. She was not aware that a man is usually rather chilled by it, because it proves to him that the other is thinking about his responsibilities and not about his privileges. Certainly it calmed Gerald, though without imparting to him her sense of his responsibilities. He smiled vaguely. To Sophia his smile was a miracle continually renewed; it mingled dashing gaiety with a hint of wistful appeal in a manner that never failed to bewitch her. A less innocent girl than Sophia might have divined from that adorable half-feminine smile that she could do anything with Gerald except rely on him. But Sophia had to learn.

ARNOLD BENNETT *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908)

178

IRONY

IN RHETORIC, irony consists of saying the opposite of what you mean, or inviting an interpretation different from the surface meaning of your words. Unlike other figures of speech – metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche etc. – irony is not distinguished from literal statement by any peculiarity of verbal form. An ironic statement is recognized as such in the act of interpretation. When, for example, the authorial narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* says, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a fortune, must be in want of a wife," the reader, alerted by the false logic of the proposition about single men with fortunes, interprets the "universal" generalization as an ironic comment on a particular social group obsessed with matchmaking. The same rule applies to action in narrative. When the reader is made aware of a disparity between the facts of a situation and the characters' understanding of it, an effect called "dramatic irony" is generated. It has been said that all novels are essentially about the passage from innocence to experience, about discovering the reality that underlies appearances. It is not surprising, therefore, that stylistic and dramatic irony are all-pervasive in this form of literature. Most of the passages I have discussed in this book could have been analysed under the heading of Irony.

Arnold Bennett employs two different methods in this passage from *The Old Wives' Tale* to put his characters' behaviour in an ironic perspective. Sophia, the beautiful, passionate but inexperienced daughter of a draper in the Potteries, is sufficiently dazzled by Gerald Scales, a handsome commercial traveller who has inherited a small fortune, to elope with him. The embrace described here is their first in the privacy of their London lodgings. What should be a moment of erotic rapture and emotional unity is revealed as the physical conjunction of two people whose thoughts are running on quite different tracks.

Gerald in fact intends to seduce Sophia, though in the event he lacks the self-assurance to carry out his plan. Even in this embrace he is at first nervous and tentative, "perceiving that her ardour was exceeding his." But as the intimate contact continues, he becomes more confident and masterful. There is probably a sexual pun

179

hidden in "His spirits rose by the uplift of his senses," for Bennett frequently hinted in this fashion at things he dared not describe explicitly. Gerald's sexual arousal has nothing to do with love, however, or even lust. It is a function of his vanity and self-esteem. "Something in him had forced her to lay her modesty on the altar of his desire." Like "the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him" earlier, this florid metaphor mocks the complacent thought it expresses. The use of the word "altar" carries an extra ironic charge since at this point Gerald has no intention of leading Sophia to the altar of marriage.

Up to this point, Bennett keeps to Gerald's point of view, and uses the kind of language appropriate to that perspective, thus *implying* an ironic assessment of Gerald's character. The description of his timidity, vanity and complacency – so very different from what he *ought* to be feeling in this situation – and the slightly absurd, inflated rhetoric in which he represents his emotions to himself, are enough to condemn him in the reader's eyes. In the second paragraph, however, Bennett uses the convention of the omniscient intrusive author to switch to Sophia's point of view, and to comment explicitly on her misconceptions, adding to the layers of irony in the scene.

Sophia's thoughts are more creditable than Gerald's, but her words, "I've got no one but you now," are partly calculated to endear him to her. This merely reveals her naivety, however. As the "burning" Sophia utters this sentiment in a "melting" voice, Gerald is "chilled" by the reminder of his responsibilities. He responds with a non-committal smile, which the infatuated Sophia finds charming, but which, the narrator assures us, was an index of his unreliability and a portent of disillusionment to come. The authorial voice, dry, precise, urbane, overrides the "inner voice" of Sophia to expose the fallibility of her judgment.

The reader, privileged with knowledge denied to the participants in the scene, looks over the author's shoulder with pity for Sophia and contempt for Gerald. One of Bennett's *Notebook* entries reads, rather surprisingly, "Essential characteristic of the really great novelist: a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion"; his treatment

of Gerald fell short of that high standard. This type of irony leaves us with little work of inference or interpretation to do; on the contrary, we are the passive recipients of the author's worldly wisdom. If the effect does not seem as heavy-handed as it easily might, that is because the acuteness of Bennett's psychological observation earns our respect, and because he allows characters like Sophia to "learn" from their mistakes, and survive them.