

BROADSHEET

COPY-READY
SHAKESPEARE.
USE IT IN THE
CLASSROOM
TODAY!

Upstairs, Downstairs with Shakespeare's Irony

D. C. Muecke, the noted analyst of language, begins his complicated classification of irony by pointing out that although it takes many forms, irony is, in its essential nature, a "two-story phenomenon" in which there is always some "opposition between the two levels." We might think of irony as a two-story house in which the activities of the people on the ground floor are vastly, perhaps even comically, different from those on the upper floor. Thus, with the famously ironic line "And Brutus is an honorable man," we could say that the words themselves are the house, and inside the house there are two meanings—on the top floor we hear an honest compliment, and on the bottom floor we hear an attack.

House: "And Brutus is an honorable man."

Upstairs: I admire Brutus and compliment his honor.

Downstairs: If he's so honorable, why did he assassinate our leader?

By yourself or with a group read aloud Antony's funeral oration (3.2.73-260). Give some thought to Antony's political purposes and rhetorical techniques. Consider especially the following phrases. Find the two stories of meaning housed in them.

1. "I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke . . ." (3.2.100).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

2. "O masters! If I were dispos'd to stir / Your hearts and minds to mutiny and rage, / I should do Brutus wrong, and Cassius wrong . . ." (3.2.121-24).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

3. ". . . 'tis his will . . . / Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read . . ." (3.2.129-31).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

4. "I fear I wrong the honorable men / Whose daggers have stabb'd Caesar" (3.2.151-52).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

5. "For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's Angel" (3.2.181).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

6. "Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up / To such a flood of mutiny" (3.2.210-11).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

7. "I am no orator, as Brutus is . . ." (3.2.217).

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

Muecke points out that with verbal irony there is not only an ironist (someone consciously and intentionally employing a technique) but also a victim and an audience. In the case of Antony's funeral speech, who is

- the ironist
- the victim
- the audience?

Compare the language in Antony's funeral oration to those in the private words he spoke over Caesar's corpse—"O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth . . ." (3.1.253-75). Do you find instances of irony in this passage? Is there an ironist at work? A victim? An audience? How does this speech help us to understand the irony in the funeral speech?

Muecke identifies several rhetorical methods whereby writers achieve irony. Below is a partial list of them. For each

method, find an example in *Julius Caesar* and chart the upstairs and downstairs lines of thought.

1. **Praise by blame.** The writer purports to insult someone, but contained in the attack is a compliment. "I hate you for winning that contest" sounds derogatory on the surface, but the listener takes the statement as a compliment.

JC Example:

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

2. **Blame by praise.** Here the writer does the opposite, pretending to compliment someone or something while at the same time bringing to mind inferior qualities. "Oh, good show!" to the ears of the man who has just driven off from the gas pump with the hose still attached does not come through as praise.

JC Example:

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

3. **Hyperbole.** By exaggerating greatly, a writer can call attention to the way things really are and thus achieve the two-story effect. "It took me millions of hours to do my homework" might be heard as the inflated calculations of a frustrated speaker.

JC Example:

Upstairs:

Downstairs:

4. **Litotes.** On the other hand, the writer can achieve the same end by deliberately understating the case. "This was no small achievement" points out how great the achievement really was. A politician's confession that "mistakes were made" might bring to mind heinous errors.

JC Example:

Upstairs:

Downstairs: