
An Analysis of Irony in the Unknown Citizen, Rite of Passage and Bully

Writers often use many tools while writing. Irony is just one example. When writers want their words to have a double meaning, they use irony. It is often clear when the words of the narrator or character of the writing is different from the meaning that the writer is implying. Irony is present in the poems, "The Unknown Citizen" by W.H Auden, "Rite of Passage" by Sharon Olds, and "Bully" by Martin Espada.

In the poem "The Unknown Citizen", Auden's use of irony is easy to see. In this poem he is describing a citizen who is essentially unremarkable. This person has not done anything wrong, and describes him by saying, "and all the reports on his conduct agree, that, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint". The fact that he has written a poem which is praising someone for being so mediocre is ironic in itself. Another use of irony in this poem is when Auden says, "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard." With this quote, Auden is saying that there could be nothing wrong with this citizen. However, because of his use of irony, his words have another meaning. Auden is implying that even though he lived a boring life where he did no wrong, it doesn't necessarily mean he was completely happy.

"Rite of Passage" by Sharon Olds includes irony as well. This poem talks about children at a party, but holds a deeper meaning. When Olds describes the scene as "a room full of small bankers, they fold their arms and frown," this is an example of irony because while it sounds like she is describing adults, she is actually describing the children. Another example of irony that Olds uses in this poem is when she says, "like Generals, they relax and get down to playing war, celebrating my son's life." This line shows her use of irony because WWII was happening when this poem was written. War is obviously a terrible thing, but this example is ironic because the children are casually playing it, having a good time, and doing it all while celebrating her son's birthday. A birthday is the celebration of another year of someone's life, but these children are playing a game that is about death.

The poem "Bully" is another good example of a poem that contains irony. Espada describes this school by saying, "now the Roosevelt school is pronounced Hernandez". Espada continues by saying that "Roosevelt is surrounded by all the faces he ever shoved in eugenic spite," which is an example of his irony. This is ironic because this school was named after Roosevelt, someone who participated in the Spanish-American war. However the children that now fill the school are spanish speaking children. They depict the type of people that Roosevelt fought

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against, but now they attend his school and “plot to spray graffiti in parrot-brilliant colors across the Victorian mustache and monocle”.

Writers and poets often use irony in their work. It is a tool used to make their words have multiple meanings. Sometimes it can be hard to see at first. “The Unknown Citizen” by W. H. Auden, “Rite of Passage” by Sharon Olds, and “Bully” by Martin Espada all are poems that include good examples of the use of irony.

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