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**Irony in Elizabeth Bowen's short story
"The Easter Egg Party"**

Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) is considered to be one of the major figures of Anglo-Irish fiction. For her elegant style, great narrative skill and extraordinary aesthetic sensibility she is often compared to such 20th century literary personalities as Virginia Woolf, Iris Murdoch or Muriel Spark. Bowen was a very profuse and versatile author; her literary output includes six volumes of short stories, six novels, a play, an autobiography, a history of the English novel, as well as a multitude of critical essays, articles and reviews. It was with the short story, however, that Bowen started her career as a writer and to which she remained faithful throughout the years. The critical attention Elizabeth Bowen's short fiction has received focuses mainly on such characteristics of her style as modernist indirectness and economy of language, Irish lyricism of description, and Jamesian visual qualities. As critics claim, Bowen's primary concern is the study of a character's psyche, and her stories dwell on such themes as childhood insecurities, adolescent rebellion, the battle of the sexes, feeling of dislocation due to the impact of war experience, or ghostly influence of the past.

"The Easter Egg Party", first published in the collection *Look at All Those Roses* in 1941, focuses on one of the author's favourite themes: the emotional turmoil of a lonely child facing the world of adults. The theme is recurrent in her short fiction, with the mood varying from grief and despair ("The Visitor") to deep love and longing ("Coming Home") through girlish 'intimate whisperings' and affectation ("Charity", "The Jungle") to a cunning intrigue ("Maria"), or a teenage rebellion ("The Little Girl's Room"). "The Easter Egg Party" belongs to Bowen's light-hearted stories. The story has a clearly ironic tone; hence the present paper explores the notion and functions of irony as employed in the text, as well as the mechanism of achieving an ironic effect.

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English definition, *irony* is a "use of words which are clearly opposite to one's meaning, usually in order to be amusing or to show annoyance". In its other sense, irony means a "course of events or a condition which has the opposite result from what is expected, usually a bad result".¹

Similarly, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* explains that "most forms of irony involve the perception or awareness of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, or between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality. In all cases there may be an element of the absurd and the paradoxical. (...) As irony is such an oblique quality or mode of expression, it would be true to say that in many works by many authors we find not so much direct or overt irony, but, rather, an ironic temper or tone; an ironic way of *looking* at things and of feeling about them. (...) Irony has many functions. It is often the witting or unwitting instrument of truth. It chides, purifies, refines, deflates, scorns and 'sends up'. It is not surprising, therefore, that irony is the most precious and efficient weapon of the satirist."²

Traditionally, three kinds of irony are distinguished: verbal irony, dramatic irony and irony of situation.³

¹ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Warszawa 1990, p. 558.

² J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, London 1980, pp. 335 - 340.

³ Laurence Perrine, *Story and Structure*, New York 1974, pp. 215-218.

Verbal irony is a figure of speech in which the opposite is said to what is intended, the meaning is contrary to the words used. In his study *Irony and the Ironic*, D. C. Muecke defines two major techniques of verbal irony.⁴ One of them is “‘going along’ with the ironic butt and placing him in high relief” which may take the form of a praise for blame (ironic agreement), hyperbole (exalting merits), or understatement (minimising defects). The other technique, so called *intaglio* method, isolates the butt or object of the irony not by promoting him or it, but by demoting oneself, playing the naif. The forms of this tactic include pretended doubt where nothing is doubtful, pretended error or ignorance, and pretended apologies, deference or astonishment. Muecke adds, however, that “there are other ways of being ironical which do not obviously involve pretending either to accept the victim’s position or to be incapable of grasping it.”⁵ One of them is irony by analogy, the example of which is a satirical allegory, e.g. *Animal Farm*. Also, the ironic effect can be achieved through employing the character of an *ingenu* who asks questions and makes comments the full import of which he does not realise. In this way, through mere common sense, innocence or ignorance the complexities of hypocrisy or irrationality of prejudice are exposed.

In *dramatic irony* the contrast is between what a character says and what the reader knows to be true. As David Lodge puts it, dramatic irony is generated “when the reader is made aware of a disparity between the facts of a situation and the characters’ understanding of it.”⁶ The victim of the irony has a limited perspective, whereas the ironic observer is capable of a more objective and full vision. In *irony of situation* the discrepancy is perceived between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfilment, or between what is said and what would seem appropriate.

Muecke distinguishes two other kinds of irony, namely observable and instrumental irony. Observable irony is explained as things seen

⁴ D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, London 1986, pp. 56-66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁶ David Lodge, *The Craft of Fiction*, Harmondsworth 1992, p.179.

or presented as ironic, and instrumental irony as someone being ironical. As Muecke says, "in observable irony - for example the irony of a robber robbed - there is no ironist and hence no ironic pretence. It seems, however, that the name of irony got attached to situations of the robber robbed kind by the intermediary of a belief in a supernatural agency or a personified and hostile Fate, Life or Fortune." In instrumental irony, on the other hand, "we have an ironist pretending unawareness. While making sure that his real meaning will be inferable, he will write as he has never doubted what he seems to be saying nor ever suspected that what he is really saying could be inferred."⁷ Verbal irony, therefore, seems to correspond to the category of instrumental irony, whereas dramatic irony and irony of situation are related to the notion of observable irony.

As David Lodge points out, unlike other figures of speech, irony is not distinguished from literal statement by any peculiarity of verbal form. An ironic statement is recognised as such in the act of interpretation.⁸ For an ironic statement to be decoded, however, two conditions have to be satisfied. Firstly, it has to reach an addressee, and secondly it has to be understood. A similar process takes place while telling jokes: firstly, an audience is needed, and secondly, the point of the joke needs to be grasped in order to achieve its purpose, i.e. make the audience laugh. There are a few major differences between the discourse situation in speech and a literary text, however. The production and reception of a spoken message normally takes place between an addresser and an addressee within a single context of time and space.⁹ A written message, however, can be read and re-read a long time after it has been composed. Also, potentially it has an infinite number of addressees, i.e. readers. For irony in a literary text to be interpreted as intended, the author has to assume sharing with his readers a common fund of knowledge and experience. Muecke cites

⁷ Muecke, op. cit., pp.36, 38.

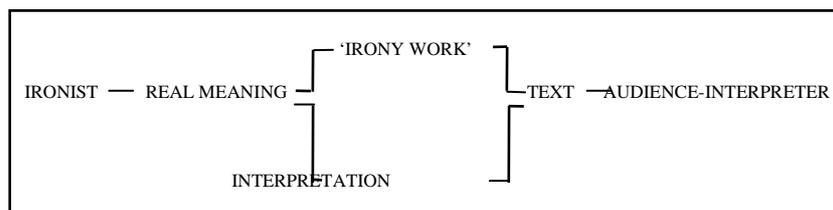
⁸ Lodge, op. cit., p. 179.

⁹ Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short, *Style in Fiction. A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, London 1981, pp 257-8.

Christine Kerbrat-Orecchioni who says that “the interpretation of irony brings into play, besides their linguistic competence, the cultural and ideological competences of ironist and audience.”¹⁰

Such equivalence of author’s and reader’s points of view, uniformity of views and attitudes is what Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* calls a ‘secret communion’ between author and reader¹¹, and what forms the basis of irony. Such an ideal reader then, would reject the expressed literal meaning in favour of an unexpressed ‘transliterated’ meaning of contrastive import¹², or in other words read the ironic message between the lines of the actual text. Muecke suggests the following diagram to illustrate the processes of coding and decoding an ironic message:¹³

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT



By ‘irony-work’ Muecke means a) the transformation of the real meaning or intent into the ironic message, e.g. blame transformed to seeming praise; b) the establishment of the required degree of plausibility; c) the provision of signals (if any). Signals may be a part of the text (e.g. contradictions, exaggerations) or may accompany the text (e.g. gestures). ‘Text’ comprises the plausible message together with any ‘in-text’ and ‘with-text’ signals, all of which the audience as

¹⁰ Quoted after Muecke, op.cit., p.40 (Christine Kerbrat-Orecchioni. “Problèmes de l’ironie” in *Linguistique et Sémiologie, Travaux du Centre de recherches linguistiques et sémiologiques de Lyon*, 1976, Vol.II, p. 30).

¹¹ Leech and Short, op.cit., p. 277.

¹² Muecke, op.cit., p. 39.

¹³ Ibid., p. 41.

interpreter will read in the common socio-cultural context. Interpretation 'reverses' the irony-work: motivated by the signals or the clash of message and context, the interpreter dismisses the plausibility and transforms praise to blame, thus arriving at the ironist's intent.

The above mechanism of decoding irony can be employed to interpret "The Easter Egg Party" which is a brilliant satire on spinster egocentricity, with a number of ironies at work. Therefore, we shall discuss the story as an ironic narrative and identify the kinds of irony present in the text as well as their function.

Eunice and Isabelle Evers, "unmarried sisters, with everything in common", are idealistic, energetic and kind-hearted ladies "just over fifty" who have spent their lives "attending committees for the good of the world". They are well known and generally respected for their concern with children. So when Misses Evers learn about "what had either happened or nearly happened" to a one-time-friend-of-theirs and her little girl Hermione (the reader never gets to know what it was, but apparently something terrible), they decide to come to the rescue. They issue an invitation for Hermione to stay with them for some time. Once the invitation is accepted, the sisters are given a great opportunity to satisfy their sense of a mission. Being professional children specialists, Misses Evers set up a systematic project of "restoring Hermione's childhood to her". Hermione's days in West Wallows are planned carefully with every sort of entertainment that the sisters can think of. They show Hermione the neighbour's pigeons, teach her to climb trees, jump brooks, or ride a donkey, they take her primrosing and bird's nesting. Strangely enough, none of this seems to work. Hermione jumps into the brook, falls off the donkey, and when she at last gets interested in bird's nesting, all the excitement wanes when she cannot touch the eggs:

The glossy blues, the faint greens, the waxy buff-pinks, the freckles seemed to her to be for nothing: while the sisters, breathless, held apart the branches she now looked only glumly into the nests. When they found a brood of fledglings she ran six yards back and said: 'Ugh! Fancing leaving eggs just for *that*!' (533)

The worst disaster of all, however, is the Easter egg party. Misses Evers' idea was to let Hermione meet West Wallows children and possibly make some friends. Therefore, the sisters design a competition where children are supposed to look for little Easter eggs hidden all over the garden and the orchard. The winner with the most eggs gets a prize: a china Easter rabbit. Hermione, however, is being difficult from the very beginning. She has to be persuaded to come downstairs and join the other children. Then she remains reserved and does not socialise with anyone but a little dumb boy who happens to lag behind the others. Though even he is soon taken away by his sister. Being too self-conscious and frustrated to look properly for the eggs, Hermione resorts to a deception: she steals another girl's eggs, and runs away for the rest of the afternoon. The sisters have no choice but to hush up the 'scandal': they give the prize to the legitimate winner and order some new games. When the party is over, Hermione sneaks in and at the first opportunity announces that she wants to go home. Her decision is irreversible as she simply cannot take it any longer at the Evers'. The sisters send her home the next day but are devastated by Hermione's attitude. They feel they have done everything to take good care of her, and they cannot see where they have failed. Hermione leaves a deep "scar in their hearts".

This is quite an abrupt and not at all happy ending. It sharply contrasts with the generally light and jovial mood of the story. Also, Hermione's frustration and feeling of alienation are not pretended, trivial or funny. The clash between the comic tone of the story and the seriousness of the theme accounts for one of the sources of irony in the text. Ironic tone, in fact, pervades the whole story.

The ironic factor to be first detected in a literary text is usually verbal irony. In "The Easter Egg Party", there are numerous examples of verbal irony, the object of which are Misses Evers:

They were simple and zealous women, of an integrity rooted in flawless sentiment; they bowed to nothing but their own noble ideas, and flinched from nothing but abandoning these. (...) Eunice and Isabelle Evers were both just over fifty: their unperplexed lives showed in their faces, lined only by humour, and their frank, high foreheads. They were Amazons in homespuns, Amazons without

a touch of deprivation or pathos; their lives had been one vigorous walk. Like successful nuns, they both had a slightly married air. (529)

The ironic strategy adopted in the story is one of overemphasis, or exalting merits: everything about the Evers sisters seems nice, proper and praiseworthy. Outwardly, not a single fault appears in their spotless characters. If approached carefully however, the text reveals quite a few signals in the form of a contradiction or hyperbole, implying that in fact they are far from being perfect. What is actually meant in the above passage by 'flawless sentiment' and 'unperplexed lives' is naivety in the sense of being childish. When the narrator says that Misses Evers 'bowed to nothing but their own noble ideas, and flinched from nothing but abandoning these' he seems to hint that they are rather stubborn, narrow-minded and inflexible. The ironic (and at the same time comic) effect of this short passage is further enhanced by means of a paradox achieved through juxtaposing two contrastive images. The sisters are 'Amazons in homespuns': strong, brave and independent women warriors being at the same time wonderfully practical housewives. As 'successful nuns' they have 'a slightly married air'. One can be either a nun or a wife though, or be none of these for real. There is a further contradiction in saying that "any unspeakable thing happening to any child was more upsetting to them than if they had been mothers." (530) They can be further characterised as prudish to such an extent that they never dare to say openly what it was that happened to their friend; as a result readers are left in the dark about it also:

So that when their eye was drawn - they were unmarried sisters, with everything in common, and had, in regard to some things, one eye between them - when their eye was drawn by a once-quite-familiar name to an obscure paragraph in their daily paper, their hearts (or their heart) stopped. The case was given in outline, with unusual reticence. When they saw what had either happened or nearly happened - they were not quite clear which - to the little girl of a friend they had known as a little girl, shyness and horror drove a wedge between them; they became two people whose looks could not quite meet. Across the breakfast table of their large cottage, in the half-acre garden already gladey and glittering with the first greens of spring, they failed to discuss the matter. (529)

Typical spinsters, the sisters are full of 'heroic energy' and affectation, and tend to overreact, which is reflected in the text by the use of such hyperbolic expressions as 'their heart stopped', 'shyness and horror drove a wedge between them', or when towards the end of the story the narrator says that Hermione "has left a sort of scar, like a flattened grave in their hearts". Although they would never admit it, they also like to moralise and perceive themselves as guardian angels who will take up a tedious task of "restoring Hermione's childhood to her" by "taking Hermione out of herself" and "teaching her not to 'hint'". The above passage provides also a sample of the way Misses Evers are characterised throughout the story: they always come together and are spoken of as 'they', 'the sisters', or 'Misses Evers'. The two characters are hardly individualised, which emphasises the unreliability of their image on the one hand, and creates an ironic effect on the other.

There are many more clues in the text which suggest that the sisters are not such saints as they might seem. First of all, "they issued the invitation on an impulse but awaited the answer with no drop in morale", which means that despite their declared intention of help, they are not so ready to get involved, and the impulse was probably curiosity, or rather mere prying. And although "they did not shrink from facts, for they attended committees for the good of the world", "most facts got to West Wallows a little bit watered down": Misses Evers could accept some failures or unpleasant events but to a reasonable extent. Real tragedies or disasters are out of the question. Their hypocrisy is also revealed in their attitude towards "what happened" to their friend. They would never admit any open criticism, but at the same time cannot help it:

It was against their natures to judge Dorothea (the friend they had known as a little girl) in any way. All the same, across what line, into what world had she wandered in these years since her marriage, since they had lost sight of her, that her little girl should be exposed to such things as this? Dorothea's marriage had failed. Must one know she failed as a mother? (530)

All the questions in the above passage remain unanswered, suggesting that the sisters assume they already know the answer. In

this way, their narrow-mindedness is displayed: their opinions are based on stereotypes and prejudices they are unable to abandon.

In spite of the fact that they want to appear generous, they prove to be quite mean. When they decide to throw the Easter egg party, they are afraid that it may 'run them in for more expense'. So they buy "three dozen sweet eggs - a little reduced in price, as Easter was just over", and after the game is over, they carefully examine the extension of damage done to the garden:

While Eunice poured out, and kept the chatter going, Isabelle, with the whistle, slipped out for a thorough look. Sadly, sadly, she saw some trampled daffodils - the nicer the set of children, the larger their feet. When she got to the end of the orchard she saw the gap forced through the hedge, and her heart sank. (536)

The interesting feature of verbal irony in "The Easter Egg Party" is the fact that it is uttered by the narrator only. None of the characters ever makes an ironic remark, and they do not realise that they are victims of irony.

What can be inferred from the text about real natures of the Evers sisters thanks to the narrator's verbal irony, is ironic in a more general sense of incongruity between appearances and reality, which accounts for irony of situation. Also, the characters of the story are the victims of irony of situation in its second aspect, i.e. the contrast between expectations and fulfilment. What is intended as nice a holiday in the country turns into a total disaster, a series of mutual disappointments. Drawing some false conclusions from the vague article about their friend, Misses Evers thought Hermione to be 'a poor thing', a lost and lonely child, a bit forgotten by her mother and desperate for attention. Hermione, however, is quite an independent, spoilt and vain girl living "in the dark glass dome of her own inside world". She also turns out to be much less childish and infantile than the sisters would think, and than they are themselves:

'I think those lambs are pretty,' said Hermione, suddenly pointing over a wall. 'I should like a pet lamb of my own; I should call it Percy.'

'Well, perhaps you could make a friend of one of these lambs. If you go every day very quietly into the field - '

'But I want it to be my own; I want to call it Percy.'

'Well, let's call "Percy", and see which of them comes . . . Percy, Percy, Percy!' called Isabelle, leaning over the wall. None of the lambs took any notice: one of the sheep gave her a long, reproving look. Hermione, meanwhile, had frigidly walked away. (532)

At the same time Hermione is very natural in her reactions, which unfortunately are not what Misses Evers would expect.

'This is honey from our own bees, Hermione.'

'Goodness.'

'It tastes quite different from other honey, we think.'

'Yes; Mummy said you kept bees. Do you keep doves, too?'

Eunice glanced at the white forms that whirled rather frighteningly over the wind-teased garden. 'Those are the next-door pigeons; they keep on flying over, so we have the fun of them.'

'The next-door cat in London keeps getting into our larder. I do hate cats.'

'Oh, but you must like Barbara - and she's got two kittens.'

'Cats always do that, don't they?'

(...)

She sat on the bed, with her tongue feeling round one cheek, while Eunice unpacked her two suitcases for her. 'Oh, what pretty clothes and things,' said Eunice deprecatingly. 'But I don't think you'll have a chance to wear most of them here. You'll want to wear old clothes and simply tumble about.'

'I haven't any old clothes. Mummie gives them away.' (531)

Isabelle pointed out the village pond with its white ducks, the saddle-back church tower, the Beacon on the top of the steep, green, nursery-rhyme hill, the quaint old sign of the Spotted Cow which made all children laugh - Hermione did not smile. (532)

Hermione never pretends to like or appreciate things just because the sisters are proud of them. And when finally irritated and fed up with the sisters' overwhelming hospitality, Hermione does not hesitate to express her feelings openly:

She was, presumably, waiting: the moment the door opened, she said, without looking up: 'I want to go home now.'

'But Hermione - '

'Mummy said I needn't stay if I didn't like it. She said I could come straight home.'

'Dear, this isn't because you think *we* are . . . upset about anything?'

'I can't help *what* you are,' said Hermione, quite dispassionate. 'Couldn't you get some other girl to stay with you? There's nothing for me to do here; I mean, I can't do anything. (...) And you never let me talk, all the time, you never let me touch anything. You keep on making me take an interest in things, and you never take the slightest interest in me. Mummy said you were interested in me, but now I don't believe her. I feel just as if I was dead, and I do want to go home.' (537)

The above passage sheds some light on the reason why Misses Evers were doomed to fail since the very beginning and the holidays could not work out. Their idea of what is good for children is completely different from that of Hermione's, their understanding of 'taking interest in someone' has nothing to do with Hermione's. It is here that the dramatic irony of the story is generated: the reader is aware of the facts of a situation whereas the character has a wrong understanding of it. Misses Evers are stuffy bigots. They have their own image of reality, contaminated by their conservatism and egocentricity. Misses Evers are spinsters, and though they think themselves to be children specialists, they are not. If they are interested in children it is only because they are childish themselves and want to satisfy their fantasies that "centred round ponies and bread-and-jam on the beach". In fact, they are described as "blowing that bubble world that is blown for children by children-loving grown-ups - perhaps, also the dearest of their own pleasures lay there." (529) Their interest in children is not genuine. They create some artificial reality, 'blow that bubble world', and what is worse, they do it for their own fun. They never really wanted to help Hermione. Instead, they had the mission of "restoring her childhood to her"; it was a task to be completed. But all they could actually do was only to copy the pattern of parties and competitions which they used to organise for local children. Hermione is not local,

however, and she feels alienated and frustrated in a new environment. The sisters fail to realise that because they never saw Hermione as an individual. They never wanted to know her emotions, fears or desires; they never asked her a simple question “What would you like to do today?” They want Hermione to make some friends through the party but, ironically, they design a competition which makes it impossible. Instead of playing together, children become rivals:

The children - the boys were small, the girls large-sized, some of them quite lumpy - glanced at each other, tittered and moved off. For some distance they stayed in compact formation, like explorers advancing in dangerous territory; though all the time their sharp eyes were glancing left and right. Then, in the glittering sunshine of the garden, shreds of pink wool began to be discerned. One by one children bounded off from the others, glancing jealously round to see that no one was on their tracks. (534)

Misses Evers are the victims of dramatic irony throughout the story because they are too self-centred (and therefore limited in their vision) to be able to interpret Hermione’s behaviour and see their own mistakes. Given the narrator’s ironic comments and Hermione’s point of view, however, the reader is capable of a much wider perspective and interpretation of ironies residing in all the misunderstandings and disasters.

Muecke points to a close affinity between dramatic irony and irony of situation: “Ironies of Event [situation], for example, which operate in time, have a clear dramatic structure, the typical case involving a victim with certain fears, hopes or expectations who, acting on the basis of these, takes steps to avoid a foreseen evil of profit from a foreseen good; but his actions serve only to lock him into a casual chain that leads inevitably to his downfall.”¹⁴ The reader of “The Easter Egg party” observes the same situation: despite their motives, Misses Evers’ intentions are good; no matter how hard they try, however, they fail because they do not know all the facts about Hermione’s problems and act on some false assumptions.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

To conclude, the function of irony in "The Easter Egg Party" is to deny the appearance and reveal the truth about Misses Evers. Through the technique of exalting merits vices are being exposed: throughout the story the image of Misses Evers changes from respected children-loving ladies into egocentric childish spinsters, though the very word 'spinster' is never actually used in the text. The ironic effect is achieved by means of various in-text signals in the form of verbal irony as well as irony of situation and dramatic irony. On the plane of verbal irony the author refers to the image of an elderly housewife contrasted with the image of a brave Amazon ("Amazons in homespun"). The basis for irony of situation is the clash between expectations and fulfilment: Misses Evers' intentions and actions and quite the opposite results. Irony of situation is also visible in the discrepancy between appearance and reality, i.e. in the fact that a child turns out to be mature where adults prove childish. Misses Evers are also victims of dramatic irony because, unlike the reader, they do not have the proper understanding of the situation - till the very end of the story they cannot see where they have failed.