

Irony in Modern Life

by Heather Weaver

“Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world’s original sin. If the cave-man had known how to laugh, History would have been different.” —*The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

I have a pair of metallic pink Oxford shoes on a shelf in my closet. They don’t fit, they don’t match any of my clothes, and they wouldn’t be flattering even if they did. I’ve had them since last June, but the only time I ever wore them was the day after I bought them.

Why did I buy them? It’s hard to say, but I guess it’s because they were ridiculous and I wanted to be ridiculous too. I wanted to stomp around and make people think I didn’t have any fashion sense. I wanted people to think I was too intellectual to care about fashion: *if she never learned how to dress, it must be because she has more important things to think about*. I wanted people to think I didn’t care what they thought. I guess that makes me a hipster, but thankfully I’m not alone. In a *New York Times* article called “How to Live without Irony,” Princeton professor **Christy Wampole** writes, “For many Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s—members of Generation Y, or Millennials—particularly middle-class Caucasians, irony is the primary mode with which daily life is dealt.” So she’s not just talking about stereotypical hipsters—everyone’s life is kind of ironic now.

What does that mean exactly? The word “irony” gets thrown around a lot, but in this context “ironic living” seems to refer to the whimsical, self-referential way we have of hiding behind ideas and symbols we don’t actually believe in. Wampole gives the example of “an ad that calls itself an ad, makes fun of its own format, and attempts to lure its target market to laugh at and with it.” As it turns out, my shoe story didn’t really become an example of ironic living until I wrote about it here. Let me explain.

People’s intentional actions can be reasonably classified into three types: sincere, deceptive, and ironic. Most actions are sincere because most of the time people say what they mean and do what they want without putting up any facades. I’m acting sincerely when I buy a pair of shoes because I like them. I’m being deceptive when I don’t like the shoes and only buy them because I want people to think I do. I’m being ironic when I buy the shoes even though I don’t like them *and* I don’t want people to think I like them. I buy them because they’re ridiculous, and when I go out wearing them I want people to know I bought them because they were ridiculous. No one can criticize my fashion sense because no one has any way of knowing what kind of shoes I actually like. Irony has become a defense mechanism for me.

Here’s another example. One of the tags I put on this article is “incoherent pseudointellectual rambling.” I’m making fun of myself, but of course I don’t actually want people to think my writing is incoherent. You can’t call me incoherent, because at the very least I have a coherent opinion about the incoherence of my writing. As Wampole says, “Irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise. To live ironically is to hide in public.”

Ouch.

That isn’t the whole story, of course. People have always wanted to avoid feeling responsible for their choices, but there’s something uniquely modern about ironic living. Ironic behavior requires a relatively high level of self-knowledge, and most of us are more self-aware now than we were in the past (or at least

more self-conscious). Go back three thousand years and you'll find that "consciousness as we know it today [may be] a relatively recent historical development that arose sometime after the Homeric era...Though the ancients had much to say about mental matters, it is less clear whether they had any specific concepts or concerns for what we now think of as consciousness" (Van Gulick).

You don't have to go back anywhere near that far to see that modern technology has allowed us to become more educated and more cosmopolitan than we were even a century ago. TV and the Internet have exposed us to millions of other people just like ourselves. As Wampole says, our tendency toward ironic living "stems in part from the belief that this generation has little to offer in terms of culture, that everything has already been done...This kind of defensive living works as a pre-emptive surrender and takes the form of reaction rather than action." So the Internet makes us narcissistic, but it also reminds us that narcissism is untenable. We're starting to understand for the first time how *gigantic* the world is and how nearly impossible it is to have an original thought when there are seven billion other people walking around thinking about the same stuff.

It's kind of disturbing, and—for better or worse—irony is one of the best ways we have of dealing with it. Wampole writes, "Observe a 4-year-old child going through her daily life. You will not find the slightest bit of irony in her behavior...She likes what she likes and declares it without dissimulation. She is not particularly conscious of the scrutiny of others. She does not hide behind indirect language." Even little kids can be sincere, but we glom onto irony because it seems like a more sophisticated and uniquely human way of relating to the world.

Is this mindset beneficial or harmful? Editorial intern Chi Thuy Le writes, "I started enjoying indie music last summer and truly regarded it as my favorite music genre. I felt slightly more awesome because I was interested in things not many peers had heard about, things that, most importantly, are objectively amazing and strangely unpopular at the same time. But I had to deal with the growing unease of seeing others catching on my favorite indie music and the self-torture from also enjoying more mainstream songs. I figured I should love something because I identified with it, because I adored its aesthetics or simply managed to feel something from it. If there is a reason at all, it must come from me subjectively. I should never celebrate anything only by its label of 'hipster' and especially not on the basis that it helps me feel special or better about myself.

"I don't identify myself as a hipster or anything close to one. However, one thing I have noticed about hipsters is that they have their own world and are very much contented within it. It doesn't mean they are secluded from the larger world (if they are, they have done it by choice). It means they are very self-assured in their culture and in the beliefs and actions of themselves. Calling myself a hipster while suffering from the worst case of self-esteem and identity crisis would have been my irony of living."

Lately I've tried to be more sincere with people—life's too short for mind games that aren't fun—but I wouldn't want to live *completely* without irony. It's obviously problematic when people use irony to avoid facing reality, but in many cases it can be used as a tool for getting more out of life than we would without it. There's something sort of beautiful about making fun of myself, acknowledging the absurdity of life, going through with it anyway. I mean, some mind games *are* fun.