Irony in Shelley’s The Cenci

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Scant critical opinion has been concerned with Percy Bysshe Shelley's tragedy, *The Cenci*. Many scholars, in evaluating the work, have mentioned the play only in passing; others who have been concerned with the play have considered it primarily for its sensational theme, structural aspects, and stage history. No critic seems to have devoted a study to Shelley's use of irony in his play; yet many aspects of irony are present. It is with these aspects of irony that this study of *The Cenci* will be concerned.

For this study, it will be useful first to consider briefly the several meanings given to the term *irony*. According to the *New English Dictionary*, irony is first of all "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt."¹ On this level, irony is thus verbal: by words and voice tone does one intend meaning other than that expressed. This aspect of irony, in addition to sarcasm and ridicule included in the definition above, would include the verbal ironies of understatement and hyperbole.

A second aspect of irony, according to the *New English Dictionary*, involves "dissimulation...especially in reference to the dissimulation of ignorance practised by Socrates as a means of confusing an adversary."² This irony is Socratic irony: the

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ignorance pretended makes the false or mistaken notions of the opponent clear and conspicuous.

A third aspect of irony, states the New English Dictionary, presents "a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was or might be expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise or fitness of things." This irony is irony of fate or situational irony: there is a discrepancy in the circumstances or situation between what is expected and what actually happens.

A further aspect of irony is restricted to drama. In dramatic irony, there is a discrepancy, similar to that found in irony of situation, between the expected fortunes of the character and what actually happens to him; but the unique feature of this irony is that the theater audience knows in advance both the expectations of the character and the final outcome of his actions. As R. B. Sharpe points out, this irony operates through the playwright, who prepares the audience for the ironic situation "by letting them in on something not all the characters know." Thus the spectator, according to G. G. Sedgewick, "always sees and knows both the appearance and the reality; and he senses the contradiction between what the ignorant character does and what he would do." Such a contradiction provides for a highly ironic situation.

One additional aspect of irony applicable to The Cenci is that which Alan Reynolds Thompson calls "irony of character": a person's true character is disguised by his appearance and, when revealed, is in sharp contrast to his presented character.

With these aspects of irony set forth and defined, irony in

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3 Ibid.
5 G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), p. 49.
The Cenci can be more clearly understood. Almost as striking, however, as any instance of irony which does occur in The Cenci is the total absence of any instance of dramatic irony in the play. As a term peculiar to drama, dramatic irony is given to what G. G. Sedgewick calls "the sense of contradiction felt by spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition." Sedgewick sets up three requirements for dramatic irony: first, that a character be in conflict with another character, his own circumstances, or some natural law; second, that one of the characters be "ignorant of his situation; the situation as it seems to him differs from the situation as it is"; third, that the "spectator in the theatre always sees and knows both the appearance and the reality." Many situations in The Cenci conform to the first two of Sedgewick's requirements; in no instance, however, does the audience know both the appearance and the reality behind the situation. When the villain Cenci is murdered by assassins hired by his daughter, Beatrice, she states that "all ill is surely past" and the audience believes this with her. The warrant arriving minutes after the murder and calling for Cenci's "instant death" will set off the search for Cenci, the discovery of his murder, and the arrest of Beatrice and her family, events in contrast to Beatrice's belief that all ill is past. Yet the coming of such a warrant is a complete surprise both to Beatrice and to the audience. Shelley has, in fact, taken care to assure that the warrant will be a surprise: up to the point of the murder, no hope of papal intervention to stop Cenci's crimes exists. Beatrice has sent to the Pope a petition for help which, due to the villain Orsino's treachery, never reached him; but the kindly Cardinal Camillo, an ally and friend of Beatrice, does not offer any hope for the Pope to answer a petition weakening paternal power because of the analogy with his own position as spiritual father and head of the church family. Because the audience is ignorant of the coming

7 Sedgewick, p. 49.
8 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
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of such a warrant and of the relenting of the Pope until after Cenci's murder has been realized, this situation cannot properly be called dramatic irony, although several critics, for example, Robert F. Whitman, J. S. P. Tatlock, and R. G. Martin,\(^{10}\) designate it as such. This incident of irony becomes evident only in retrospect, and the audience receives no advance warning that the outcome of Cenci's murder will be other than that expected by Beatrice herself.

Why Shelley chose not to present such an event as an incident of dramatic irony is uncertain: he could have, with minor changes, inserted passages to reveal the outcome of the murder to the audience. Certainly The Cenci would be a more powerful play had Shelley chosen to exploit the possibilities for dramatic irony implicit in this instance, for as Sedgewick contends, "the more distinguished the drama is, the more fruitful the idea of dramatic irony becomes. From Aeschylus to Ibsen...the sense of it is all pervasive and exceedingly active."\(^{11}\)

While ignoring dramatic irony, Shelley did include many other aspects of irony in The Cenci. Several instances of verbal irony, in which the speaker's meaning is opposite to that which his words express, occur in the play. Understatement, the form of verbal irony in which, according to Sedgewick, one says "less than one thinks or means,"\(^{12}\) is frequently used for effect. Count Cenci, the villain and monster-like criminal, uses understatement when he describes a murder in almost gentle tones:

A man you know spoke of my wife and daughter:
He was accustomed to frequent my house;
So the next day his wife and daughter came

\(^{10}\) Robert F. Whitman, "Beatrice's 'Pernicious Mistake' in The Cenci," \(\textit{PMLA}\), LXXIV (June, 1959), 253; and Tatlock and Martin, eds., \textit{Representative English Plays}, p. 747. Whitman, Tatlock, and Martin do not indicate the sense in which they use the term; however, according to the standard definitions of dramatic irony, the incident does not qualify.

\(^{11}\) Sedgewick, p. 49.

\(^{12}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 6.
And asked if I had seen him; and I smiled:
I think they never saw him anymore.

And the effect achieved by Count Cenci's words is one of horror; but his actual words, being understated, imply no such thing.

A second example of understatement occurs in a speech of the Pope, quoted by one of his cardinals, concerning Cenci's treatment of his sons. Cenci longs for the death of two of his sons, and a hint is given that, when their deaths opportunely occur, Cenci is perhaps responsible. Cenci has celebrated their deaths by holding a great banquet; yet the Pope, when informed of Cenci's outrageous conduct, merely shrugs that disobedient children sometimes cause concerned parents to become "exasperated to ill" (II. ii. p. 756). That Cenci is driven to "ill" is understatement indeed—Cenci's sole delight lies in not merely ill but in pure evil, a fact that Cenci himself has revealed early in the play.

A further aspect of verbal irony, that of sarcasm, in which the speaker's words express strong and bitter condemnation although couched in the language of extravagant praise, occurs at least once in The Cenci. When Beatrice and her family, sentenced to die for the murder of Count Cenci, await death in prison, the stepmother hopes for a pardon from the Pope. To such hopes Beatrice replies by using sarcasm:

No, mother, we must die:
Since such is the reward of innocent lives;
Such the alleviation of worst wrongs. (V. iv. p. 781)

Clearly Beatrice does not believe that execution is the way to alleviate the wrongs suffered by her family at the hands of Count Cenci; by praising execution as "the reward of innocent lives," she effectively expresses her bitterness toward her fate by using sarcasm.

A second aspect of irony, that of Socratic irony, occurs in one instance in The Cenci. This irony, employing dissimulation
for the purpose of confusing an opponent, appears when Beatrice and her family stand accused of murder before the court. Believing firmly in the rightness of the death of Cenci, Beatrice refuses to confess to actual murder:

Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord,
I am more innocent of parricide
Than is a child born fatherless. (IV. iv. p. 771)

To the man she had hired to commit the murder, Beatrice then demands: “Am I or am I not/A parricide?” The hired assassin, cowed by the sternness of her gaze, can only cry, “Thou art not!” and ask that he receive sole punishment for the deed (V. ii. p. 776). Thus Beatrice’s firm conviction that she has been justified in taking her father’s life and she is therefore innocent of murder has lead her into an open lie before the court of justice, and her testimony, given to confuse the judges and acquit her of the dead, serves as an example of Socratic irony. Such irony becomes more vivid when Beatrice’s first words in the play, “Pervert not truth” (I. ii. p. 748), are recalled.

Much of the irony in The Cenci is in the form of irony of fate or situational irony, the aspect of irony in which the outcome of certain events is opposite from that which is expected. In one highly emotional scene, for example, Beatrice rushes to her family, entreaty them to protect her from her father. She trembles and cries in near-hysteria:

He comes;
The door is opening now; I see his face;
He frowns on others, but he smiles on me. (II.i.p. 753)

A doorknob turns; a door opens; the family shrink back in terror—and a servant strolls into the room. In another scene between Giacomo, brother of Beatrice, and Orsino, himself a villain almost comparable to Count Cenci, Giacomo is outraged when Orsino suggests that they flee from justice and leave Beatrice to face alone a certain conviction for murder. When Giacomo accuses Orsino of villainy, Orsino assures him that such a suggestion was made not in seriousness but as a test of
his loyalty. Orsino then reveals that marshals have come to arrest Giacomo but have allowed him a brief moment of respite which he suggests that Giacomo spend with his wife and family. Giacomo is overwhelmed by such display of friendship, and he regrets his previous suspicions of Orsino's conduct: "O generous friend! How canst thou pardon me?" (V.i.p. 773). Giacomo rushes out, expecting to escape the marshals. These officers, however, await him at his home to arrest him, not at Orsino's home as he believes. In this ironic situation, Giacomo's expectation, a brief reunion with his wife, is reversed, and he receives a warrant for his arrest.

Several strong instances of situational irony concern the murder of Count Cenci. The first involves the hired assassins. Beatrice pays them for the murder with bags of gold and gives to one a gold robe which once belonged to her prosperous grandfather. When she presents the robe, she encourages the assassin to "Live long and thrive!" (IV. iii. p. 769). It is, however, this gold robe which ironically reveals to the officers the hiding place of the murderers:

This fellow wore
A gold-inwoven robe, which shining bright
Under the dark rocks to the glimmering moon,
Betrayed them to our notice. (IV. iv. p. 771)

After he has been tortured and confessed the murder, the assassin himself recognizes the irony of his situation:

When the thing was done
You clothed me in a robe of woven gold
And bade me thrive: how I have thriven, you see.
(V. ii. p. 774)

Thus the assassin has been betrayed by the thing which was his reward for committing murder; his expectation of a long and prosperous life is replaced by torture and death.

Another instance of irony of situation concerning Cenci's murder occurs when Beatrice has received word from the
assassins that Cenci’s murder has been carried out. Beatrice is calm, and she maintains that “all ill is surely past” (IV. iii. p. 769). Her words prove highly ironic, for at that moment, a papal legate enters the Cenci palace with a warrant for Cenci’s “instant death” (IV. iv. p. 770). Finding Cenci murdered, the legate arrests those present for murder. The stark irony of the warrant for Cenci’s death which arrives only minutes after his murder is highly effective, and the outcome makes a mockery of Beatrice’s belief that “all ill is surely past.” Robert F. Whitman sees the purpose of this instance of irony as the prevention of the audience’s being “carried away by Beatrice’s sense of her own innocence, and to make clear that the moral order in terms of which she is blameless has betrayed her.” Concerning the warrant, Whitman believes that

the irony simply calls our attention to the fact that had Beatrice waited—restrained from murder—she would have been provided with other means of escape. By taking the law into her own hands, she has rendered ineffectual a remedy which would have saved her without destroying her...By introducing at this point a now-futile means of escape, Shelley permits us to question whether Beatrice is indeed a ‘weapon in the hand of God,’ and suggests that, ill having repaid ill, all ill is not surely past. 13

One of the most striking examples of irony of situation in The Cenci concerns Beatrice’s attitude toward the murder of her father. She firmly believes that, in her case, murder is justified and that she is therefore innocent on any crime. Before the court, she denies any guilt and, according to her brother Gicomo, she “stands like God’s angel ministered upon/By fiends” (V. i. p. 773). Later in prison, Beatrice still stands firm in her belief that the murder of Count Cenci was an event ordained by God:

The God who knew my wrong, and made
Our speedy act the angel of his wrath

13 Whitman, 253.
Seems, and but seems to have abandoned us. 
Let us not think that we shall die for this.

However, in the words of Robert F. Whitman, "she does die for it, and the implication seems to be that the God who made her 'the angel of his wrath' has abandoned her." In light of Beatrice's strong conviction that her actions were condoned by God, her comment and her later execution are highly ironic. She expects a heaven-ordained justification for her father's murder which will result in a pardon for her; for her actions, however, she receives the man-made penalty of death by execution.

Situational irony also occurs in the play in Cenci's criminal treatment of Beatrice. To Cenci, who delights in evil, the thought of incest with his daughter is the greatest evil which he can conceive, but he believes that such an act will render Beatrice "meek and mild" (I. iii. p. 752). Carlos Baker effectively points out the irony of situation involved in Cenci's mistaken notion:

It is the supreme irony of the drama that the means chosen by the count to establish final mastery are the best means he could have fixed on to harden Beatrice's soul to the point where she is ready to do murder. Out of the darkest experience of her life, the temporary derangement caused by her father's attack, Beatrice rises with a resolution:

Ay, something must be done;
What, yet I know not.
Suicide is out of the question, and legal action is quickly rejected. Murder, the bold redress of the insufferably wronged, remains.

Beatrice thus responds to her father's horrible act in a way Count Cenci never imagined possible. Instead of becoming "meek and mild," she fixes with resolution and unwavering

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14 Ibid.
purpose upon a plan to murder her father for the wrong she has suffered.

Other instances of irony of situation occur throughout the play. One such instance involves the murderers' device for concealing the fact that Cenci was murdered. They plan to conceal the violence by strangling Cenci and tossing his body from a balcony to make it seem as though it had fallen there naturally. The body, ironically, catches in a tree; when it is found by the papal legate, the officer knows that it could not have fallen in such a way unless it were thrown, and he begins the cry that Cenci was murdered. In another situation, when the legate plans to take Beatrice and her family to Rome to stand trial for murder, Lucretia, stepmother of Beatrice, protests in terror. Beatrice reassures her, saying that in Rome their innocence will be brought to light. In Rome, however, they will be tortured and judged not innocent, but will be sentenced to die. Here, as in the incident involving the disposal of Cenci's body, the expectation and the outcome of the situations are opposite, and irony of situation results.

On another level, irony, according to A. R. Thompson, can manifest itself in character; a person's true character can be disguised by his appearance and when revealed, can be in sharp contrast to his presented appearance.16 Such irony of character occurs in *The Cenci* with respect to the smile of the villain of the play, Count Cenci. In its usual applications, a smile indicates "pleasure, favor, kindliness, amusement, derision, or scorn";17 as Cenci uses his smile, however, it indicates actual disaster or death for the one on whom Cenci smiles. Cenci smiles when he celebrates the deaths of his two sons at his banquet (I. iii. p. 751); he smiles when he lies to Giacomo's wife about her dowry which Cenci himself had actually stolen (III. i. p. 762); he smiles as he relates the fate of the man who used to visit his house (I.i. p. 747). That his smile holds no clues to the evil which underlies it is evident by the comments of the visitors at

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16 Thompson, p. 17.
17 *The American College Dictionary*, ed. by Clarence Barnhart (1948), 1140.
Cenci's banquet: "I never saw such blithe and open cheer / In any eye!"; "I see 't is only raillery by his smile" (I.iii. p. 750). Cenci, however, smiles on Beatrice as he contemplates the evil he will inflict upon her, and she alone of the characters recognizes the deadly effect of Cenci's smile when she cries in terror, "He frowns on others, but he smiles on me" (II. i. p. 753). Cenci's smile, by thus promoting evil and disaster, at times masks his true character by presenting a facade of cheer and mirth which hides the evil basic to Cenci's true personality.

Two situations do not seem to fall into any established definitions of irony; the effects of these instances, nevertheless, are highly ironic. Perhaps they might be termed "thematic irony" or "irony in retrospect" because they do not involve isolated events or situations but rather ideas and concepts which pervade the entire scope of Shelley's tragedy. One example of such irony lies in the attitudes toward death expressed by Beatrice during the course of the play. It is perhaps an ironic trait of human nature to look upon death ambiguously, to see it as a tragedy and an end of life as well as a rebirth and a joyful beginning. Beatrice herself expresses the ambiguity of the nature of death when she says:

Death! Death! Our law and our religion call thee
A punishment and a reward.—Oh, which
Have I deserved? (III. i. p. 759)

Beatrice seems to deserve both during the play. Before the murder, under Cenci's evil personality, she looks upon death solely as a reward, a means of escape, a joyful event:

Oh, God! That I were buried with my brothers!
And that the flowers of this departed spring
Were buried on my grave! (I. iii. p. 752)

After the murder, however, the evil in her life has been removed and she no longer looks upon death as a thing to be desired. She is, in fact, appalled to hear the words that condemn her to execution, and she now looks on death solely as a punishment:
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Can it be possible I have
To die so suddenly? So young to go
Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!

How fearful! To be nothing! (V. iv. p. 780)

It is a mark of the strength of Beatrice’s character that she later regains her composure and goes calmly and quietly to her death, but her loss of control when she hears the words of condemnation and her previous longing for death well illustrate the irony involved.

A second instance of this “thematic irony” or “irony in retrospect” develops through the attitudes toward crime found in the play. Cenci, caught up in his evil delights, first states his attitude: “I am what your theologians call / Hardened” (I.ii. p. 748); and he contemplates incest with his daughter. Cenci sees himself, according to Milton Wilson, as “an instrument to scourge mankind for its sins,” and Cenci himself states:

I do not feel as if I were a man
But like a fiend appointed to chastise
The offenses of some unremembered world. (IV.i. p. 767).

As Cenci’s evil increases, his son Giacomo develops a similar attitude toward evil. When the first attempt to murder Cenci fails, Giacomo states, in words echoing those of Cenci, “I am hardened” (III, ii. p. 764); and he plans a second murder attempt.

Even Beatrice ironically develops the same attitude toward crime as she, too, becomes “hardened” during the course of the play. In defending her actions, she “stands like God’s angel ministered upon / By fiends” (V.i. p. 773), an attitude quite similar to that of Cenci who also saw himself as a scourge. Milton Wilson thus maintains that Beatrice has ironically “taken

over some of the characteristics of her father.”

It is highly ironic that the Beatrice of the first act, described as “the gentle Beatrice,” has become the hardened Beatrice who can lie before the court of justice, refuse to admit her guilt or complicity in Cenci’s murder, and acquiesce in letting the hired assassin take sole blame for the deed. This ironic situation, like those involving the attitudes toward death, occurs not in a single incident but develops and is recognized through the course of events of the play. It appears only in retrospect, and it pervades the theme and spirit of the drama.

Irony in *The Cenci* thus manifests itself in many forms: verbal, situational, thematic, Socratic; but at no time does the irony most effective in drama, dramatic irony, appear. It is an indication of Shelley’s powers as a dramatist that he is aware of most ironic situations throughout the tragedy and that he is able to use irony effectively and dramatically in his play. It is equally an indication of one of his weaknesses as a dramatist that he failed to recognize the possibilities for including instances strong in dramatic irony; had Shelley done so, the tragedy of Beatrice Cenci would be a more effective, more vital dramatic work.

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