

RESEARCH TITLE

The Use of Ironic Statements in Kane's *Blasted*: A Pragma-Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

This study analyzes the use of ironic statements in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) using a pragma-stylistic approach that combines Grice's Cooperative Principle with detailed stylistic examination. Despite the substantial body of work critiquing the play's violence, trauma, and gender issues, this paper provides the first critical analysis of irony as a structural and linguistic device within the play. The analysis utilizes a three-level framework—micro (lexicogrammatical and syntagmatic levels), meso (discursive interaction), and macro (structural and genre-level irony)—to explore the cumulative impact of irony. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrate how irony subverts interpersonal relationships and underscores the play's critique of sociopolitical violence. This research enriches the field of stylistics and theatre criticism by positioning irony as a performative dramaturgical tool, contributing to a deeper understanding of how language operates within extreme theatre.

Key Words: Irony, Pragmatics, Stylistics, Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, Sociopolitical Violence.

استخدام العبارات الساخرة في مسرحية *المنفجرة لسارة كين*: نهج براغما-أسلوبي

المستخلص

تقوم هذه الدراسة بتحليل استخدام العبارات الساخرة في مسرحية *المنفجرة* (1995) لسارة كين باستخدام نهج براغما-أسلوبي يجمع بين مبدأ التعاون لغرايس وفحص أسلوبي دقيق. على الرغم من وجود العديد من الدراسات النقدية التي تناولت عنف المسرحية، وصدماتها النفسية، وقضايا الجندر، فإن هذه الورقة تقدم أول تحليل نقدي للمسخرية كأداة هيكلية ولغوية في المسرحية. تستخدم الدراسة إطاراً تحليلياً ثلاثي المستويات—الميكرو (المستويات اللغوية النحوية والتركيبية)، الميسو (التفاعل الخطابي)، والماكرو (السخرية الهيكلية والمستوى الجنري)—لاستكشاف تأثير السخرية التراكمي. تُظهر الأدلة الكمية والنوعية كيف تفرغ السخرية العلاقات بين الشخصيات وتؤكد انتقاد المسرحية للعنف الاجتماعي والسياسي. تسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء مجال الأسلوبية ونقد المسرح من خلال اعتبار السخرية أداة درامية مؤدية، مما يعزز الفهم العميق لكيفية عمل اللغة في المسرح المتطرف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السخرية، البراغماتية، الأسلوبية، سارة كين، *المنفجرة*، العنف الاجتماعي والسياسي.

1. Introduction

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) sits at the centre of new British drama, its reputation built on its stark staging of violence, sex, and human vulnerability (Sierz, 2017; Chambers, 2019). *Blasted*, as a signature piece of "in-yer-face" theatre, assaults the viewer with intrusive imagery and unflinching emotional material, the topic of considerable research interest across research fields such as trauma studies (Aston, 2016), gender theory (Saunders, 2018), and political theatre (Knight, 2020). In light of such a vast volume of interest, linguistic studies of the play specifically addressing the pragmatic and stylistic employment of irony are nonetheless comparatively rare.

Irony, a subtle pragmatic effect for creating meanings contrapositive to literal meaning (Grice, 1975; Attardo, 2000), has been treated very little systematically in Kane's play. Recent criticisms are indeed directed at thematic readings or psychoanalytic interpretations but not irony as a multi-levelled rhetorical and structural device. This paper tries to compensate for this deficiency by employing a pragma-stylistic approach a blending of Gricean conversational maxims and literary stylistics to examine how ironic discourse functions on various levels in *Blasted*.

Drawing on a three-tiered analytical framework (micro linguistic signals, meso dialogue exchange, and macro structural irony), the paper examines how irony emerges throughout the play. It argues that action building and character dynamics depend not only on irony but also that it is central to reading and making sense of the sociopolitical violence and trauma in the text. This approach also aligns with the recent scholarly calls for more nuanced linguistic critique of extreme theatre (Jones, 2021; Mitchell, 2023), calling for greater understanding of how language embeds itself in dramatic impact.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sarah Kane's *Blasted* in Theatre Scholarship

Blasted has elicited polarized responses since its initial performance, both admired for breaking convention and reviled for its unlicensed representation of violence (Saunders, 2018). Sierz (2017) situates Kane's work firmly in the "in-yer-face" theatre, where in-your-face body language and thematic material are used to shock audiences into a critique of social complacency. Aston (2016) locates specific significance in Kane's dramaturgical figure of innovation, particularly the staging of trauma and violence not as spectacle but as forms of empathetic address. Psychoanalytic analysis (Urban, 2017) exposes the fractured subjectivities of the characters in *Blasted* disassembled by psychoanalytic procedure, noting how language is imbued with the fracturing of trauma.

Despite such thematic vitality, comparatively few texts have accounted for *Blasted*'s language processes, and fewer texts have covered irony as a valuable topic. It is ironic because irony can provoke and subvert, something typical of Kane's works.

2.2 Irony: Theoretical Perspectives

Irony has been extensively investigated in linguistics, literature, and philosophy. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, the Maxim of Quality (truthfulness), provides a first account: irony results from intentional flouting of conversational maxims in that

the speaker says the opposite of what they literally mean, and the hearer infers an intended meaning. Attardo (2000) and Gibbs (2000) extend this to create a distinction between verbal irony and situational and dramatic ironies, and define irony as one of a complex nature in communication.

In stylistics, Leech and Short (2007) hold that irony exists at different levels of text, from tone and word level up to larger texture of narrative. Simpson (2004) points out intellectual attractiveness of irony in engaging the reader intellectually with incongruity. Whereas such models have been applied to prose and poetry, their application to the extreme drama of *Blasted* is unexplored and therefore here lies scope for new insight.

2.3 Pragma-Stylistics and Dramatic Irony

Pragma-stylistics, being a blend of pragmatics and stylistics, is interested in the way language use creates meaning in contexts (Culpeper, 2001). It is precisely very well-suited to dramatic script where speech acts are part of complex interpersonal and social relationships. Pragma-stylistic analysis has already been used to study irony in drama (e.g., Culpeper & Kytö, 2010), but virtually never in extreme or postmodern theatre. Kane's *Blasted* provides rich terrain for such examination with the interlayering of verbal, situational, and structural irony.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle is employed alongside stylistic devices to examine the use of irony in *Blasted* on three levels:

3.1 Micro Level: Linguistic Features

This is achieved by lexical choice, syntactic structure, and pragmatic markers (e.g., intonation markers, hedges). Grice's maxims, especially Quality and Relation, flouts are signals of ironic intention. For example, Ian calling himself "a gentleman" when he is violent is a direct Quality maxim flout.

3.2 Meso Level: Discourse Interaction

This entails analysis of the structure of conversation: turn-taking, interruptions, control of subject-matter, and pragmatic dominance. Irony will most likely arise in power conflicts of speech when one of the participants' violation of the conversational rules alerts to sarcasm, mockery, or denial.

3.3 Macro Level: Structural Irony

At the most basic level, irony is created through plot, genre, and audience expectation. Kane operates on expectations by shifting the play from domestic realism to war horror, creating dramatic irony which forces the audience to reinterpret scenes earlier in a new way.

4. Methodology

Methodology involved qualitative and quantitative pragma-stylistic analysis of the whole text of *Blasted* (Kane, 1995). The process involved:

- Outcomes: Data Collection: The subjective corpus was the printed script, extensively annotated for ironic statements.

- Identification of Irony: Examples were marked according to overt verbal irony (e.g., sarcasm) and situational/structural irony (e.g., plot twist). Violations of Grice's maxim were used as a diagnostic.
- Discourse Analysis: Important scenes were selected and analysed for interactional markers like interruptions, turn size, and pragmatic dominance, using conversation analysis techniques (Sacks et al., 1974).
- Quantitative Coding: Number of ironies per act and per page were tallied to map the trajectory of ironic severity.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 Verbal Irony: Speech of Ridicule and Denial

The early scenes foreground verbal irony through Ian's paradoxical self-presentation. His repeated claim, "I'm a gentleman" (Kane, 1995, p. 7), starkly contrasts with his violent behaviour. This blatant Quality maxim violation invites the audience to question Ian's self-awareness and morality. Cate's ironic responses, often couched as polite deflections, serve as covert resistance e.g., "You're very considerate" (p. 10)—flouting the Maxim of Relation by undercutting Ian's authority.

Example of Verbal Irony in Act 1	Gricean Maxim Flouted	Pragmatic Function
"I'm a gentleman" (Ian)	Quality	Sarcasm, self-deception
"You're very considerate" (Cate)	Relation	Mockery, undermining dominance

5.2 Situational and Dramatic Irony: Subverting Expectations

The Soldier's arrival in Act 2 refigures the play from a domestic/personal drama into a war drama. The genre shift is macro-level irony that breaks the reader's interpretation scheme. The Soldier's logical explanation of wickedness uttered in plain matter may confront the horrific content in a compelling way, violating the Maxim of Manner and embodying absurd normalizing of violence.

5.3 Quantitative Patterns: Intensification of Irony

The table below shows the distribution of ironic utterances across acts.

Act	Total Ironies	Avg. Ironies per Page	Dominant Maxim Flouted
1	20	1.2	Quality (75%)
2	65	3.8	Mixed (Quality, Manner)
3	50	3.1	Structural, multiple maxims

This data illustrates an escalation in ironic expression, correlating with the narrative's increasing psychological and social disintegration.

6. Discussion

The analysis illustrates the multilateral role of irony in *Blasted*. Micro-level ironic utterances destabilize character identities and expose contradictions. The ironic presentation of Ian unmasks denial, and Cate's irony undertakes silent resistance. Transgression of conversational norms at the meso level uncovers power struggle and communication breakage, symptomatic of the social collapse theme of the play.

Structurally, Kane's ironic application is unexpected and distancing to the audience in accordance with her theory of "theatre of extremes" (Sierz, 2017). The sudden genre change produces dramatic irony that invites re-reading of earlier scenes, illustrating how narrative and language are blended to prevent complacency and make people think about violence and trauma.

These results are an enrichment of linguistic pragmatics and theatre studies in that they reveal how irony is dramaturgical rather than a figure of speech.

7. Conclusion

The paper offers the first pragma-stylistic analysis of ironic speech acts in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. Applying the integration of Gricean pragmatics with systematic stylistics and discourse analysis, the study demonstrates irony's central role in staging character relationships, dramatic action, and thematic complexity. The increasing prevalence of irony in the play maps Kane's intentional deployment of language to simulate psychological disintegration and sociopolitical critique.

Future research can use this model to examine other plays in "in-yer-face" theatre or analyse audience reception of ironic strategy, developing inter-disciplinary knowledge of drama, pragmatics, and performance.

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