# "Irony," Alanis Morissette and Me

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A (personalised) definition of irony: a state of affairs, sensation or event that is the opposite or uncannily contrary to what is expected, and often results in an amusing sensation, a feeling, similar to that of *déjà vu*.

I, and perhaps many of us, often feel constrained when constructing our online selves, and the way in which we communicate virtually or technologically, in order to cater to one another. We simplify our processes of communication, otherwise "they" (other people) evade.

For instance, I find that if I convolute my messages or e-mails too much people never answer them properly. They need to be overly or overtly succinct—brief. Amongst my colleagues and peers, it seems as though people are only capable of answering one or two questions in any virtual text message, and no more. They don't have the patience for it. They only look for key words. They almost always answer incorrectly or evasively because that seems to be the way, trend, fashion, or incidental necessity of things now. At best 80 per cent of what I ask or inquire about in an electronic message is answered, and never 100 per cent. And even then, 80 per cent, I would say, is being quite generous. If I ask someone two or three questions online,

they'll answer one. If I ask someone four or five questions online, they'll answer one. And even when we do simplify, "they" *still* continue to evade.

In this sense I sometimes feel that we are also collectively losing our edge in our lack of attention to detail and our lack of appreciation for the subtleties and necessities of the English language, or any way of speaking. With the exception of various academic and professional platforms, we are beginning to lose beautiful, luscious, and rich words like "irony," which most people seem to think means "coincidence" or an unfortunate circumstance of some kind. And popular culture accentuates the misconception(s): movies, TV shows, news presenters, cartoons, and musicians; I have witnessed all of these mediums misuse the term. Looking back, Alanis Morissette's disastrous and catastrophic 1995 song "Ironic" seems, to me, like a final *iconic* nail in the coffin, in terms of how it was received by, and how it affected the public. The song title is "Ironic." The entire song is supposed to be about irony, and instead, ironically, it is not—it is more about unfortunate coincidence(s) or double meaning:

> An old man turned ninety-eight
> He won the lottery and died the next day
> It's a black fly in your Chardonnay
> It's a death row pardon two minutes too late
> And isn't it ironic, don't you think?
>
> It's like rain on your wedding day
>
> It's a free ride when you've already paid[1]

So, no, Alanis. No, I don't "think." I certainly don't think it's "ironic." And here she is, an ingénue swaying the masses via MTV and the GRAMMYs, influencing Western culture to take up the baton in her flailing disregard and misuse the word, ultimately changing, simplifying, and minimising its effect, significance, and meaning. This is one of the negative influences of popular music.

The album *Jagged Little Pill*, from which "Ironic" spawns, was hugely successful. It was massive and successful enough, that from then on, I would be tempted to say that the global scales were ever-so-slightly tipped, and the majority, as opposed to the many more in the minority, of people, would, henceforth, understand

irony to mean coincidence, further sending us into a communicative oblivion and forcing us to lose our communicative "edge" or sophistication. Alanis Morissette may have slayed a word and its meaning, a word I personally love very much.

But let's be fair. Words *do* change over the centuries: "naughty" used to mean that "you had naught or nothing"; "awful" used to mean that someone was "worthy of awe"; a "clue" (or clew) used to mean "a ball of yarn."[2] But I don't think that "irony" should be lost because its meaning is still distinctive and useful. Like *déjà vu*, it is a sensation that we experience regularly. Imagine if we weren't able to describe that? We would be at a loss for words. For me, the distortion or disintegration of its meaning would be a shame. Because everything, and many words, ultimately find a way to become slanderous, or cheapened at least, it seems. Everything ultimately becomes offensive—and we're the ones doing it, to ourselves and to each other. Perhaps the term "ironic" could even become slanderous in a few years? For example: "Oh, he's so ironic" (i.e., a person who is coincidentally and/or inconveniently a gate-crasher at parties or special events). Who knows.

Nevertheless, I am also quite willing to acknowledge that what constitutes irony is often a contentious subject. For instance, any excessive criticism of Morissette's song "Ironic" as wholly unironic *could* be considered unjustifiable. For instance, some of this criticism may be due to the status of her song as "popular." and not literary, "professional" or academic. And funnily enough, according to the definition at the outset of this essay, criticising Morissette's song as not being ironic, ironically, makes it ironic. But that is a much more circular and tautological rabbit hole I will try to avoid here.

The tyranny of (low) popular culture already has a negative influence upon our children and teenage culture (this has been going on for decades, maybe even centuries?). For instance, today this culture often encompasses the negative impacts of the Internet and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which may very well have promoted an egotistically (dis)oriented "selfie" generation that is more inwardly focused and less intellectually resilient. Today's world, and younger millennial generations or Generation Z "tweens" in particular, tend to focus much more on the internal and egotistical constructions of obnoxious "superstars" like

Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, and Jaden Smith, who appear to care less about others in the external humanist sense. And now, there exist many things in common sense or common knowledge that are simply not common sense or common knowledge. For instance, you're not actually meant to "shake … a Polaroid picture." *Outkast*!

The way I view this from my perspective as a secondary school teacher, and a millennial, is complex. The way in which all people/students learn is radically different: some are visual, others are not, and some pupils are altogether different again—they might be practical, logical, creative, and so forth. I think students need to be taught "how" to learn in a way that values patience as opposed to excessive impulsivity, which can lead to mistakes being made through haphazard or over-excited behaviour. Or, to be less one-sided, there is, of course, a time and a place for impulsivity: in play and some creative endeavours, etc. Ultimately, all I know is that we have to take responsibility for our own actions, and I don't believe Alanis Morissette is taking responsibility for hers in the construction of her ironically un-ironic song. Her song exhibits carelessness, clumsiness, and impulsivity without restraint or proper careful consideration towards herself and towards others also.

Call my perspective overly entitled and biased, if you will, yet these occasionally tangential thoughts and opinions are not meant to be expressed as fundamental facts by any means! Their purpose is to tempt you, the reader, to disagree and wince at many of these misguided musings and behavioural traits. Some of my narratorial biases might be seen as unique and unreliable, whilst others are perhaps quintessentially generational and/or self-entitled. I just want to challenge you, though, with the end game of perhaps reclaiming some of that dormant, floundering "edge" you may have lost.

In the case of language and virtual communication, we seem to be actively and consciously driving towards an Orwell-like *1984* paradigm, where a kind of Newspeak is taking over and dominates our texting, SMS, e-mails, instant messaging, acronymic language, emojis, emoticons and GIFs. We've already seen it in the apparent or potential universal loss of words like "irony." and in my anecdotal example at the outset of this piece.

Now I feel I have to actively engage in altering, mutating, and deforming what I have to say or write so that people will understand and actually respond to me. Less is more. And I engage in virtual communication too, just as much, to keep the peace, to move along and to get along. I have no intention of being any kind of martyr by going against the grain of perceived or supposed "normalcy" and the trend and the fashion of today's online "net delusion." I'm happy to talk about it, to write about it, to express my views on paper, but I'm not going to start an argument with every person who does wrong by me in this sense. Who am I to call the shots in this way? I have no right. All that I care about is how *I* behave, write, speak, communicate, and interact with others overall. If I were to argue with everyone about it, I would have next to no friends, and I would be dubbed an impractical out-of-touch intellectual (wannabe). Though in actuality, I don't believe that being labelled as such by the greater "masses" would bother me all that much anyway.

In 2016, I was once asked to join in with a group of punters to take some "selfies" at a club in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I refused, saying that "I don't believe in selfies." And I don't—I severely dislike them. I believe they're one of the worst proactively open, overt, and self-indulgent practices that has developed in my lifetime. But I'm not about to successfully change a billion people's minds about them. I was told by one of them to "get off [my] high horse," and so I succumbed, so long as I was not the one holding the camera/smart phone when the ridiculously hedonistic photo was taken, for I do not want to be the one actually physically engaging in the active process of taking or coordinating the shot. If you can't beat them, join them, in a way, inevitably… even if it is a degenerative slump that isn't exactly going to improve over time, but at least I'll be dead before I witness the loss of *too* much. There is already enough loss to handle in any one lifetime as it is.

There exist "demons." Scars, hindrances, burdens, or obstructions we encounter in our lives, due to compromise, illness, bad fortune, poor luck, or regret over the things we have or haven't done. Do these "mistakes" and "misfortunes" chip away at us gradually (like the "selfie" sentiment—to me— mentioned previously, the lack of integrity that we see, read and hear, which challenges us, so we are perpetually forced to contemplate it) so that there is less and less left of our own sense of self as we

roam and plod along? Or do we bounce back? Are we resilient in a way that enables us to keep moving forwards, getting stronger? Adapt or die, so to speak. I am not sure.

I just want, for myself and all of us, to be able to communicate genuinely with one another, without having to constantly struggle against the grain of an overly processed and homogenised culture, pointlessly battling it out in a communication that is (or could further become) lost, forgotten, neglected, mutated, deformed, or stillborn.

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NOTES

[1] Alanis Morissette. *Jagged Little Pill*. Maverick, 1995, compact disc.

[2] Curzan, Anne. "20 Words that once Meant Something Very Different." Ideas.Ted.Com. http://ideas.ted.com/20-words-that-once-meant-something-very-different/ (accessed August 9, 2016).