

Letter from pretoria central prison essay sample

[Art & Culture](#), [Comedy](#)



Moyez J. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised in Tanzania. His parents were a part of a wave of Indians who immigrated to Africa. Vassanji studied at the University of Nairobi and then at MIT on a scholarship. He earned a Ph. D. in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania. He worked at the Chalk River atomic power station and then moved to Toronto in 1980. He and his wife, Nurjehan Aziz, started the Toronto South Asian Review, in 1981, which continues today as Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad. Vassanji also began writing his first novel in 1980, *The Gunny Sack*, which was published in 1989. The novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and established Vassanji as an important voice in the emerging field of immigrant/minority writers. In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji tells the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania. He examines the themes of identity, displacement and race relations. He also tries to preserve and recreate oral histories and mythologies that have long been silenced.

Nadine Gordimer (born 20 November 1923) is a South African writer, political activist and recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. She was recognized as a woman “ who through her magnificent epic writing has – in the words of Alfred Nobel – been of very great benefit to humanity”.[1] Gordimer’s writing has long dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in South Africa. Under that regime, works such as *July’s People* were banned. She was active in the anti-apartheid movement, joining the African National Congress during the days when the organization was banned. She has recently been active in HIV/AIDS causes. Synopsis

Sir V. S. Naipaul is a Trinidadian writer of Indian descent best known for novels *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* (1979) and *A Way in the World* (1994). His novels, set in developing countries, are known for their pessimistic and cynical tone, often referred to as “suppressed histories.” He received the Nobel Prize in 2001 for his novel *Half a Life*, a story about an Indian immigrant to England and Africa. He has also written several works of non-fiction including *An Area of Darkness* (1965), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), as well as travel writing and several essays.

He was knighted in 1989. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (/ˈnaɪpɔːl/ or /naɪˈpɔːl/; born 17 August 1932), is a Trinidad-born Nobel Prize-winning British writer of Indian heritage known for his comic early novels set in Trinidad, his bleaker later novels of the wider world, and his autobiographical chronicles of life and travels.[1] Naipaul has published more than 30 books, both of fiction and nonfiction, over some 50 years. Naipaul was married to Patricia Ann Hale from 1955 until her death in 1996. She served as first reader, editor, and critic of his writings. Naipaul dedicated his *A House for Mr. Biswas* to her. Naipaul married Nadira Naipaul, a former Pakistani journalist, in 1996.

M. H. ABRAMS' ORIENTATION OF CRITICAL THEORIES

- AN OVERVIEW -

Till today, the chief tendency of modern criticism is to consider the aesthetic quality in terms of relation of art to the artist. M. H. Abrams in his essay “Orientation of critical Theories” tries to trace the growth of criticism in relation of art, artist, audience. Considering a whole work of art, there are four

elements which are well distinguished and made important in almost all the theories. First, there is the work, the artistic product itself. Since this is a human product, the next common element is the artist. The work is directly or indirectly related to the universe inclusive of man, material things, events and ideas. The audiences come as the final element.

On this frame work of artist, work, universe and audience, M. H. Abrams has spread out various theories for comparison. To make matters easier he has arranged the four elements in a convenient triangular pattern with the work of art, the thing to be explained in the center.

Universe

Work

Artist Audience

Any adequate theory takes some account of all the four elements but tends to derive from one of these his principal categories for defining, classifying and analyzing a work of art. Application of this analytical scheme will sort attempts to explain the nature and worth of a work of art into four broad classes. Three will explain the work of art principally by relating it to another thing : the universe, the audience, or the artist. The fourth will explain the work by considering it in isolation, as an autonomous whole, whose significance and value are determined without any reference beyond itself.

These four co-ordinates are not constants but variables. They differ in their importance according to the theory in which they occur. Lets take the

universe as an example. In any one theory, when the artist is said to imitate the aspects of nature then it would be only the beautiful or moral aspects of the world. As Sidney rightly said that the actual world is brassy whereas the poetic world is golden. Consequently, theories which agree in assigning to the represented universe the primary control over a legitimate work of art may vary from recommending the most uncompromising realism to the most remote idealism. Each of the other terms also varies both in meaning and functioning according to the critical theory in which it occurs.

The explanation of art as essentially an imitation of the aspects of the universe was probably the most primitive aesthetic theory. Yet, since its appearance in the dialogues of Plato, mimesis was no more a simple concept. 'Imitation' is a relational term, signifying two items and some correspondence between them. But the philosopher in the Platonic dialogues characteristically operates with three categories. The first category is that of the eternal and unchanging Ideas; the The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 2, No. II - Jul, 2006

second, reflecting this is world of senses, natural or artificial; and the third category, in turn reflecting the second, comprises such things as shadows, images in water and mirrors, and the fine arts.

Aristotle also in defines poetry the Poetics as imitation. His interpretation of imitation is also his own. It is by no means an illusory copy of life or twice removed from reality as Plato believed. On the contrary, they reveal truths of a permanent or universal kind. To prove this Aristotle institutes a comparison between poetry and history. 'It is not the function of the poet', he says, "to

relate what has happened, but what may happen, — what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose.... The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen, Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history the particular. By the universe I mean how a person of certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity. History records particular persons, places or things: poetry infuses a universal appeal into them by stressing what they have in common with all persons, all places, or all things in the same set of circumstances. The pictures of poetry therefore are not mere reproductions of facts but truths embedded in those facts that apply to all places and times. This is the meaning Aristotle gives to imitation.

“Imitation” continued to be a prominent item in the critical vocabulary for a long time after Aristotle – in fact, all the way through the eighteenth century. Particularly after the recovery of the Poetics and the great burst of aesthetic theory in sixteenth-century Italy, whenever a critic was to frame a comprehensive definition of art, he usually included the word “imitation”, or one of those parallel terms which all faced in the same direction: reflection, “representation”, “counterfeiting”, “feigning”, “copy” or “image”.

Through most of the eighteenth century, the tenet that art is an imitation seemed almost too obvious to need any proof. As Richard Hurd said in his “Discourse on Poetic imitation”, published in 1751, “All Poetry, to speak with Aristotle and the Greek critics is properly imitation”.

The concept that art is an imitation, then, placed an important part in neo-classic aesthetics; but closer inspection shows that it did not, in most theories play the dominant part. It was commonly said that art was an imitation – but an imitation which is only instrumental towards producing effects upon an audience. The focus of interest had shifted and this later criticism is primarily oriented, not from work to universe, but from work to audience. The nature and consequences of this change of direction is clearly indicated in Sir Philip Sidney's *The Apologie for Poetry*.

To Sidney Poetry, by definition has a purpose – to achieve certain effects in an audience. It imitates “to teach and delight”. Those who practice it are called makers and prophets, “for these indeed do merely make to imitate and imitate both to delight and teach and delight to move men to take that Goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach to make them know that Goodness where unto they are moved, which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed, yet want there not idle tongues to bark at them”.² As a result, throughout this essay the needs of the audience become the fertile grounds for critical distinctions and standards. The poet is distinguished from, and elevated above the moral philosopher and the historian by his capacity to move his audience. *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, Vol. 2, No. II – Jul, 2006 more forcefully to virtue since he couples “the general notion” of the philosopher with “the particular example” of the historian.

For convenience we may name criticism that, like Sidney's is ordered towards the audience, a “pragmatic theory” since it looks at the work of art

chiefly as an instrument for getting something done. The central tendency of the pragmatic critic is to conceive a poem as something made in order to effect requisite responses in its readers; to consider the author from the point of view of the powers he must have in order to achieve this end.

The pragmatic orientation was characterized by far the greatest part of criticism from the time of Horace through the eighteenth century. In the course of time and particularly after the psychological contributions of Hobbes and Locke in the seventeenth century, increasing attention was given to the mental constitution of the poet, the quality and degree of his "genius". Gradually, the stress was shifted more and more to the poet's natural genius, creative imagination, and emotional spontaneity. As a result the audience gradually receded into the background, giving place to the poet himself, and his own mental powers and emotional needs and this led to the introduction of a new orientation into the theory of art.

"Poetry". Wordsworth announced in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". On this, the ground idea, he found his theory of the proper subjects, language, effects, and value of poetry. Almost all the major critics of the English romantic generation phrased definitions or key statements showing a parallel alignment from work to poet. M. H. Abrams calls this way of thinking, "in which the artist himself becomes the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged",³ as the expressive theory of art.

In general terms, the central tendency of the expressive theory may be summarized in this way: a work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind. The paramount cause of poetry, is not, as in neoclassic criticism a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause – the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression of the elements constituting a poem, the element of diction, especially figures of speech, becomes primary, and the burning question is, whether these are the natural utterance of emotion and imagination.

The first test any poem must pass is no longer, “ Is it true to nature?” or “ Is it appropriate to the requirements either of the best judges or the generality of mankind?” but a criterion looking in a different direction, namely, ‘ Is it sincere? Is it genuine?’ Does it match the intention, the feeling, and the actual state of mind of the poet which composing? The work ceases then to be regarded as primarily a reflection of nature, actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself.

There is also a fourth procedure the objective orientation, which on principle regards the work of art in isolation from all these external points of

reference. The objective orientation was just beginning to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The aim to consider a poem as Poe expressed it, as a “ Poem per se The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 2, No. II – Jul, 2006

written solely for the poem’s sake” 4 in isolation from external causes came to constitute one element of the diverse doctrines usually huddled together by historians under the heading “ Art for Arts Sake”. T. S. Eliots dictum of 1928, that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing is widely approved, however Eliots’ own criticism sometimes departs from this ideal; and it is often joined with Macheish’s verse aphorism, “ A poem should not mean but be”. In sum, Abrams has analysed the growth of criticism thematically, chronologically, historically and critically. This wins a special place for him in the genre of criticism.

Philosophy and Literature

Ironies and Paradoxes

ABSTRACT: In contemporary literary culture there is a widespread belief that ironies and paradoxes are closely akin. This is due to the importance that is given to the use of language in contemporary estimations of literature. Ironies and paradoxes seem to embody the sorts of a linguistic rebellion, innovation, deviation, and play, that have throughout this century become the dominant criteria of literary value. The association of irony with paradox, and of both with literature, is often ascribed to the New Criticism, and more specifically to Cleanth Brooks. Brooks, however, used the two terms in a

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manner that was unconventional, even eccentric, and that differed significantly from their use in figurative theory. I therefore examine irony and paradox as verbal figures, noting their characteristic features and criteria, and, in particular, how they differ from one another (for instance, a paradox means exactly what it says whereas an irony does not). I argue that irony and paradox — as understood by Brooks — have important affinities with irony and paradox as figures, but that they must be regarded as quite distinct, both in figurative theory and in Brooks' extended sense.

In contemporary literary culture there is a widespread belief, or feeling, that ironies and paradoxes are closely akin. This is due in part to the huge importance that is given to the use of language in contemporary descriptions and estimations of literature. Ironies and paradoxes seem to reflect and embody the sorts of linguistic rebellion, innovation, deviation, and play, that have throughout this century become the dominant criteria of literary value. The explicit association of irony with paradox, and of both with literature, is often ascribed to the New Criticism, and more specifically to Cleanth Brooks. Brooks, however, used the two terms in a manner that was unconventional, even eccentric. He seemed to think of irony as a principle of order and unity: not so much a feature of language or meaning as a sort of coherence yoking disparate elements together, rather like Aristotle's conception of wholeness and integrity in *Poetics* 8 (Brooks 1951).

As for paradox, Brooks seemed to regard it as a quality in language very like Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarisation: that is, a deviation from conventional language designed to wrench our perceptions and our thoughts into

unaccustomed, and therefore enlightening, pathways. Paradox, in this view, is a device which compensates for the limitations of conventional language, and is thus the only way in which poets can express the unconventional insights that are their stock in trade. Paradox, for Brooks, is not just useful and entertaining, but necessary. “ Paradox”, he writes, “ is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry” (Brooks 1949, p. 3, my italics). Brooks was not, of course, the first to say this kind of thing, nor was the New Criticism the first to draw attention to irony and paradox as sources of literary value.

The history of Romanticism is filled with similar sentiments, and they are among the factors that define what Romanticism is, or was. It was the first of the rebellions against the Enlightenment, and not least against the ideal of a Cartesian clarity of language. The early Wittgenstein — it is not altogether fanciful, however anachronistic, to see the early Wittgenstein as the last of the Enlightenment philosophers — said that everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly, and everything that can be put into words can be put clearly (Wittgenstein 1961, 4. 116). Nearly a century and a half earlier, Wordsworth had written that the best poetic diction was the language of ordinary men — the very language that, according to Wittgenstein, “ disguises thought” (Wittgenstein 1961, 4. 002). Keats, far from being impressed by the notion of thinking clearly, said that poets should be content with half-knowledge.

Friedrich Schlegel spoke of “ the impossibility ... of total communication” (Schlegel 1797, 108). It was also Schlegel who explicitly connected irony with

paradox: “ Irony”, he wrote, “ is the form of paradox” (Schlegel 1797, 48). And he it was who made the memorable, if gnomic, remark that irony can be defined as “ logical beauty” (Schlegel 1797, 42). The yoking of irony and paradox together has by now become such a commonplace that it is bound to arouse suspicion, and it is my purpose here to find out whether the connection is justified. The problem arises in part because none of the great works of Classical rhetoric — Quintilian, say, or Aristotle — connected them with one another. In Classical rhetoric they were merely figures of speech, and not especially important ones. If, in our own time, the two terms have acquired different, or extended, meanings, they are none the less derived from an originary source in figurative theory. It is therefore my intention to examine them primarily as figures.

This, as we shall see, will also throw light upon the thinking of Cleanth Brooks and anyone else with similar views. Irony as a figure of speech — verbal irony — has three necessary and sufficient conditions: (i) the speaker’s meaning is partly stated and partly unstated; (ii) the stated and the unstated meanings are in semantic contrast with one another; (iii) the meaning intended by the speaker, and understood by the listener, consists of the stated and the unstated meanings taken together. I will look at each of these in turn. The first condition is also the best known. The definition of irony as saying one thing but meaning another is at least as old as Quintilian, and in our own time Paul Grice has examined the oddities of this kind of locution in some detail. Grice, however, has also made it clear that irony is a special case of saying one thing and meaning another. Very often irony does

not occur at all. One of Grice's own examples will illustrate this point (Grice 1989, p. 32): A. I am out of petrol.

B. There is a garage round the corner.

B's reply means more than it says, and could be written in full as, " There is a garage round the corner, which I believe is still open, and you should be able to get petrol there". The latter part of the reply, the unstated part, is what Grice calls an " implicatum", and it is characteristic of most implicata that they complement and complete the stated part of an utterance. It is their function to make conversational sense of remarks which would otherwise seem irrelevant or tangential. Sometimes, however, the unstated part of an utterance, instead of being semantically continuous with the stated part, is in semantic contrast with it. This is the mark of irony, and is the second condition of irony. There are two relevant kinds of semantic contrast. One is a divergence between sense and reference. If I describe the wearing of a nose-stud as a " revolutionary outrage", the sense and the reference clearly do not match.

Nor do they match if I call a major gun-battle an " altercation". In the first of these the description connotes more than, and in the second it connotes less than, what is required by the thing to which it refers. Ironies generated in this manner are " ironies of scale", and in the language of traditional rhetoric they are, respectively, hyperbole and meiosis. The other kind of semantic contrast occurs whenever the contrast between the stated and the unstated meanings is so complete that one is a negation of the other. The negation can take the form of a contradiction: for instance, Mark Antony's statement

that Brutus is an honourable man is contradicted by his unstated claim that Brutus is not an honourable man. Negation can also take the form of contrariety: for instance, if the statement “ It’s a marriage made in Heaven” has the unstated meaning “ It’s a marriage made for money”, these two assertions are contraries of one another.

Contrariety and contradiction are types of logical opposition, so we can refer to both of these as “ ironies of opposition”. To sum up. I distinguish (i) ironies of scale, subdivided into hyperbole and meiosis, and (ii) ironies of opposition, subdivided into ironies of contradiction and ironies of contrariety. Both ironies of scale and ironies of opposition instantiate a semantic contrast between the stated and the unstated meanings of ironic utterances.

Semantic contrast is thus a necessary condition of irony. We now come to the third necessary condition, and we can best approach it by considering the difference between hyperbole and meiosis on the one hand, and bombast and euphemism on the other.

The purpose of the latter is to conceal or disguise the truth. When a man who empties dustbins is called a sanitary engineer, this is designed to conceal or disguise the fact that his job is menial, smelly, and poorly-paid. When a dictator is called Our Great Leader this is meant to conceal his mediocrity and his fear. Both euphemism and bombast may have unstated meanings for at least some people, but their intention is really to minimise and eventually to abolish any unstated meanings. What is actually said is meant to replace what is not said. Their role, as Wittgenstein might have put it, is to disguise thought — and that is, in effect, to change from one thought

to another. It is quite otherwise in the case of hyperbole and meiosis, and, in general, in the case of irony. The purpose of all kinds of irony is to reveal the truth, or, at any rate, to focus our attention on it.

It may seem an odd way of doing so — revealing or emphasising a truth by not stating it explicitly, by actually stating the contrary or the contradictory, or over or understating it. Yet that is how irony works, as we well know. Understanding irony requires a complex act of interpretation: not just an interpretation of the words uttered, but also an inference of the unstated meaning, and an understanding of the relation between the two. Many studies of irony suggest that we interpret an irony by mentally setting aside the stated meaning and replacing it by the unstated meaning. This is clearly, and fundamentally, wrong. The ironic statement “ Brutus is an honourable man” does not have the same meaning as the non-ironic statement “ Brutus is not an honourable man”.

They may make the same assertion; they do not have the same meaning. The meaning of an irony is not determined by its truth conditions, but by an interaction between what is stated and what is not. If a slightly deaf Roman turned to his neighbour and asked what Mark Antony had said, and got the reply, “ He said that Brutus was not an honourable man”, this would be a distortion, a sort of falsification, of the facts. The deaf Roman would not have been told a lie, but he would have been prevented from understanding what Mark Antony had said. We now turn to paradox. This is a term that must be used with some care. In philosophy it is a topic that has provoked great interest and some disagreement: disagreement, in part, about how to

resolve certain paradoxes, and in part about whether there are different kinds of paradox. In general, however, philosophers tend to give the name “paradox” to any statement which on the surface seems straightforward and innocuous but which turns out, on further examination, to have consequences which undermine some fundamental laws of logic, thought, or language. Paradox as a figure is just the opposite.

Here, the name refers to a statement which on the surface seems false, contradictory, or nonsensical, but which turns out, on further examination, to reveal a hitherto unconsidered truth. It is this that might seem to connect paradox with irony. In both cases, it seems, there is an explicit surface meaning and then a secondary, concealed meaning which is the real point of the utterance and constitutes its truth value. However, this apparent similarity is misconceived. Let us look at some examples of paradox. George Bernard Shaw and G. K. Chesterton are prolific sources of paradox, but Oscar Wilde is better again. “It is only very shallow people”, he observed, “who do not judge by appearances”. Again, “Those who try to lead the people can only do so by following the mob”. Or, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.

Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth”. Let us consider how we interpret the first of these: “It is only very shallow people who do not judge by appearances”. The initial or surface meaning is the meaning of the words themselves; there is no ambiguity or mystery here. However, what the words state conflicts with the conventional view that shallow people judge by appearances and wise people look beneath the appearance to the reality

beneath. (It is interesting to find Platonism alive and well in the conventional wisdom of the man and woman in the street!) How is the conflict resolved? It is resolved in Wilde's favour. After a few moments' thought, we might be led to reflect: Shallow people do not realise that appearances are as much a part of things as what lies underneath, and that there is no reason to think that they are a less significant part.

After all, appearances are produced by the things of which they are appearances. Experience and wisdom tell us that if the appearance is wrong to start with, it is usually the case that everything else is wrong as well. In other words, we come to accept Wilde and to reject the conventional view. It must be noted that this does not involve the discovery of a concealed or unstated meaning. Rather, it involves an acceptance of the original statement. This is quite different from irony. In the case of irony there is a second, unstated meaning that must be taken together with the stated meaning. In the case of paradox the stated meaning is all that there is. From the point of view of their semantic structure, irony and paradox could hardly be more dissimilar. A paradox means exactly what it says; irony does not. This explanation of figurative paradox brings us back to Cleanth Brooks.

For Brooks, as I have said, "paradox" was the name of a quality very like the defamiliarisation or deautomatisation which we associate with the Russian Formalists and the Linguistic Circle of Prague. It is unlikely that Brooks was aware of these European thinkers when he was writing about irony and paradox, but he was working in the same kind of area. If Oscar Wilde's paradoxes can be taken as paradigms, then their function is precisely that of

alerting readers to hitherto unconsidered truths, and it is a function executed by writing something that flies in the face of conventional wisdom. So too, according to Brooks, Wordsworth wrote in a way that confounded conventional perceptions and beliefs, and replaced them by insights of greater exactitude and depth. If Wordsworth did not use language that is obviously paradoxical in the manner of Oscar Wilde, it is none the less arguable that its role in the economy of its readers' knowledge and sensibility is much the same. Irony is a different matter.

Of course, I have dealt here only with verbal irony. Other kinds of irony are commonplace in literature — narrative irony in Swift, dramatic irony in Sophocles, conversational and intellectual irony in Plato — and all forms of Romantic irony depend on the supposition that there are some truths that cannot be stated, but which can be vaguely glimpsed or half-known through our encounters with words. If they cannot be put into words clearly, they can at least be hinted at by words, and these half-known truths are in some ways deeper and more important and more personal than other truths. It is irony in this sense that was meant by Brooks. If I understand him correctly, he wanted to say that a hidden, glimpsed-at, half-known level of meaning produces the wholeness and integrity of a literary work.

No matter how disparate, fragmented and circuitous its language and its surface meaning might be, there is a second, unstated layer of meaning which holds it together and gives it sense and coherence. As with verbal irony, the stated and the unstated meanings may dialectically conflict, but ultimately they combine to produce an integrated and meaningful whole. In

some ways, therefore, Brooks's use of the terms irony and paradox are significantly close to their primary usage in Classical rhetoric and contemporary figurative theory. What is also clear is that there seems to be no justification for taking irony and paradox together. Whether as figures, or in the extended sense of Brooks and others, paradox and irony seem quite distinct.

Paradox relies on the clarity and exactness of language; it shows that truth can be expressed by words alone. Irony uses words to point beyond language. Irony shows that there are some truths which, though they cannot be articulated in words, can none the less be expressed by means of words. Irony, like many other figures, is a way of transcending and ultimately extending the limited resources of everyday language, of ensuring that it does not disguise thought but is both the midwife and the medium of thought. Not everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly, but everything that can be thought at all can be put into words.