**Irony** is a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as give it a very different significance. In Greek comedy the character called the *eiron* was a dissembler, who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon*, the self-deceiving and stupid braggart. **Verbal irony** is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed. The ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, with indications in the overall speech-situation that the speaker intends a very different, and often opposite, attitude or evaluation. Why should anyone want to use this strange mode of discourse, Linda Hutcheon asks in *Irony’s Edge*, where you say something you don’t actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude toward it? **Structural irony** occurs when an author introduces a structural feature, such as a naïve speaker or hero, which serves to sustain a double-layered or two-storey meaning and evaluation throughout the work. The juxtaposed double-layered meanings are in a relation of antagonism or disharmony. **Dramatic irony** occurs when the audience knows more about a character’s situation than the character does and, foreseeing an outcome contrary to the character’s expectations, ascribes a sharply different sense to some of the character’s own statements.

A broad definition of the dramatic monologue is a poem in the first person spoken by someone who is indicated not to be the poet. A narrower definition, based on Robert Browning’s famous dramatic monologues, is one in which a first-person speaker who is not the poet unwittingly reveals his/her character in colloquial conversation with a silent auditor. We have to assess the speaker’s character and personality and the dramatic situation from their words alone. We understand more about the speaker than s/he intends to reveal and the poet actually states, and there is an ironic discrepancy between the speaker’s self-image and a larger judgment that the poet implies and the reader must develop. Robert Browning’s “The Last Duchess” is a classic of the genre: a) a persona, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment (the Duke negotiates with an emissary for a second wife); b) the speaker addresses and interacts with an auditor, but we know of the auditor’s presence, what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker (hence a monologue, albeit in a dialogical context); c) the main principle controlling the poet’s formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker’s temperament and character. Dramatic monologues engage what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the “double-voiced discourse” that serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. The Duke betrays himself with his words, through confessions that are wittingly— (“and I choose / Never to stoop”)—and unwittingly revealing: (“She had / a heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad”).

In dramatic monologues, the speaker’s utterance is objectified as the speech of an Other and surrounded by “so-s/he-says” quotation marks, and at the same time it comes across as a spontaneous and authentic outpouring by a first-person speaker. By placing the speaker’s utterance under tacit quotation marks, the reader accentuates the structural irony of the dramatic monologue, the double-voiced irony opened up by the poet / speaker slippage which creates a disparity between what the speaker says and the reader infers from what is ironically implied by the poet. In effect, the collusion between poet and reader surrounds what the speaker says with “so-s/he-says” quotation marks to “cite” it with an ironic inflection that “reads” their interpretation into the speaker’s words. The perceptual doubleness and double-voicedness that is common to all dramatic monologues is intensified when they are written in the vernacular or in “dialect.” DM’s split sense of objectified / subjective discourse maps onto the written-print / spoken word hierarchy, and because writing seems more calculated, intentional, and “authoritative” than apparently spontaneous or even inadvertent speech one tends to assign it more interpretative weight. Potentially the literate reader and writer are in a superior position to the speaker who is stigmatized by contrast as illiterate / uncultured / “black” / naive.
My Last Duchess

Robert Browning

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Fra Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, 'Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, 't was all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace -- all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, -- good! but thanked
Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech -- (which I have not) -- to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark' -- and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
-- E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!