

# The Rhetoric of Irony in the Book of Esther

Claudiu-Liviu ONIȘOARĂ\*

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## Abstract

*The Book of Esther is a complex narrative rich in rhetorical devices, with irony being one of its central characteristics. The study delves into the intricate layers of irony that are present in Esther and examines how it functions as a rhetorical tool to convey diverse themes – such as the triumph of the innocents. Through a detailed analysis of situations and key passages, the various forms and purposes of irony employed throughout the text are highlighted. Additionally, by exploring the interplay between dramatic, situational and verbal irony, the paper tries to decipher the profound rhetorical sophistication of Esther and its implications for understanding the narrative's deeper meanings.*

**Keywords:** Esther, irony, narrative, rhetoric

## Résumé

*Le Livre d'Esther est un récit complexe, riche en procédés rhétoriques, dont l'ironie est l'une des principales caractéristiques. L'étude se penche sur les couches complexes d'ironie présentes dans Esther et examine la façon dont elle fonctionne comme outil rhétorique pour véhiculer divers thèmes – par exemple, le triomphe des innocents. Une analyse détaillée des situations et des passages-clés permet de mettre en évidence les différentes formes et objectifs de l'ironie employée dans le texte. En outre, en explorant l'interaction entre l'ironie dramatique, situationnelle et verbale, l'article tente de déchiffrer la profonde sophistication rhétorique d'Esther et ses implications pour la compréhension des significations profondes du récit.*

**Mots-clés:** Esther, ironie, récit, rhétorique

## 1. Introductory considerations

“Meghilat Estēr”<sup>187</sup> (“The Scroll of Esther”) is one of the most controversial and fascinating writings in the Old Testament. Although it has been addressed in doctrine repeatedly and from a variety of

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\* University of Craiova, e-mail: oclauliv@yahoo.com

<sup>187</sup> A translation of the Biblical book in the version of Rabbi Șlomo Sorin Rosen (2023) was taken into account in the writing of this article.



perspectives, the debates on it have not yet been finished; on the contrary, they continue to branch out and develop both in terms of interpretable aspects that are as yet without a clear-cut explanation and in highlighting any other notable issues, where interdisciplinarity<sup>188</sup> in particular plays an essential role.

Before delving into the depths of the subject, a few points should be made. Not infrequently in the approach to *the Book of Esther* references have been made to the ironic situations present in the work. Thus, in order to better understand the elements that make up the analysis, the first aspect that needs to be clarified is the definition of the term „irony”. It has been pointed out in the literature that certain specific features must be emphasised to serve the notion in question, otherwise it could be associated with more and more aspects that ultimately distance it from its true meaning or make it a generic term. Also in doctrine, many interpretations of the meaning/meanings of the term usually start from dictionary definitions, which speak of a linguistic construct with a non-explicit meaning (such as allegory) – whereby the intended meaning is opposed to what is expressed by the words used – and which can also merge with other figures of speech, such as metaphor, hyperbole etc. In short, one can speak of an unexpected event, paradoxical to the expectation created – a surprising reversal of the initial situation. „Deception in some form is implicit in all [...] of these definitions: what appears is not true. [...] there is also the idea of contradiction: what appears is the opposite of the truth” (Hutchens 1960: 353).

The complementary or contrary „impulses” found in the intrinsic dimension of (situational) irony tend to capitalize on the idea of fate or providence acting from the shadows at the right time. Thus, we are not thinking of the hypothesis in which the author is the one who substitutes himself for the ironizing agent, but rather of the hypothesis of the irony of fate/providence [“the rhetorical or dialectic device in which the ironist is clearly seen as deceiver and that of the irony of fate or, as Bishop Thirlwall more broadly put it, practical irony (not necessarily effected by fate). What makes them both irony is that they both fit the basic concept of a purposeful deception in which an intention is carried out through the pretense of carrying out its opposite” (*Ibidem*: 358)]. On the other hand, there are several types of irony in the content of the writing, differing both in terms of their purpose and their construction, which will be analysed one by one, *infra*.

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<sup>188</sup> Interdisciplinarity is a key concept in the context of a story with profound meanings, at the border between philology, history and theology. It seeks to integrate multiple disciplines – which provide the specific language, information and methods – and generates an interface (possibly in multiple forms) for their holistic rendering, resulting in a comprehensive understanding (Reybold, Halx 2012: 326).



Irony, therefore, is not a subject whose approach is without its challenges. Although recognising it when it is used does not pose great difficulties, these become apparent when *all* the things that are considered ironic have to be explained. This is not surprising: it is easy to associate irony with an effect, a technique or a nuance of a linguistic or literary practice. In the doctrine of rhetoric, for example, irony is seen as a figure of speech in which a person's words express a meaning that is fundamentally opposed to the intended meaning (Kaufer 1977: 90).

Rhetoric is also not simple to define, as it encompasses disparate elements, seemingly at least, such as the fluidity of oratorical expression, the presence of oxymoronic valences by joining the uncertainty of a subject with the intelligibility of explanation, and the engagement between theory and act/fact (Struever 2009: 401<sup>189</sup>). Certainly, starting from precisely these aspects that compose it, a definition can be created by juxtaposing the element of discourse – in principle rendered by its cursiveness and persuasiveness – with the paradox of covering the confusion generated by a subject through the clarity of discourse and with the interconnection between the theory and its result, the act/activity in question, the function or its own element – the „*ergon*” (thus, more simply said, the word in action). By plumbing the depths of the notion one can glean meanings that ultimately converge on the art of eloquence and its particularities that invariably speak of the engagement of the word in a declamatory act of persuasion.

The relationship between *rhetoric* and *irony*, also indicated in the title, is said in the literature to have shrunk in recent decades – if originally irony was a device/tool of the speaker/orator<sup>190</sup>, it has since become a „creation of nature”. Irony has come to mean a separation of perspectives between reality in all its forms and appearance, without, for example, a finer distinction being made between the observation of irony and the observation of paradox or inconsistencies (Kaufer *op. cit.*: 90, 92). Indeed, although the boundaries of the concept have been diluted, taking on many other meanings that have affected its very nature, nevertheless ironic situations in *the Book of Esther* are clear enough to be distinguished from paradoxes, for example. Moreover, in the present situation, the reasons for resorting to this device are understandable, thus returning to the idea of the writer's *device* – more precisely, either to emphasise the providence that ultimately works for the good of the disadvantaged, victims of the

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<sup>189</sup> In elaborating this opinion, Nancy S. Struever starts from the ideas outlined by Marc Fumaroli in the preface to his book – *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe Moderne* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1999).

<sup>190</sup> This can be found in Quintilian's writings, where irony was described as a device/tool at the disposal of the orator/speaker in the development of discourse (Simon 1997: 5).



unjust (divine intervention), or to show the inevitable achievement of justice etc.

In the context of the title, the „rhetoric of irony” refers to the exploration of how irony is used in *Esther* to influence the thread of action in the biblical story (or even the construction of the text *per se*) and to strengthen the emphasis and reception of the moral message that emerges from it. The importance of the approach lies in the fact that such an analysis targets and captures not only what is obvious, but also the messages communicated subtly/indirectly and/or abstractly in the text – an aspect that leads to a deeper understanding of the writing.

## 2. Dramatic irony – a means of building narrative tension

Literary criticism is sensitive in dealing with the subject when it comes to irony as a technique of indicating, through a character or plot development, an intention or attitude contrary to what was originally stated. We can discover irony whenever incompatibilities reach high-level symmetry. Thus, for example, in literature or in life it is not ironic when a war breaks out. But in both cases it is ironic that it should happen on a day of peace recognized *ab initio* as such (Kaufer *op. cit.*: 90). In other words, irony has to fall within certain defining parameters, as stated in the previous section; obviously, irony would not be the case, for example, in a situation where all the prerequisites for the outbreak of war exist and at some point this happens.

Irony<sup>191</sup> in *the Book of Esther* is of several kinds: *dramatic* (when the characters are unaware of certain aspects that the reader can intuit or even be told), *situational* (or „irony of events”, when although the action is going one way, a new twist changes the initial thread – a twist of events) and *verbal* (when a person's words or certain figures of speech used are ironic) (Simon *op. cit.*: 6).

Dramatic irony, as its name suggests, refers to the whole narrative construction on which the plot is built and developed. Although it is more typical for theatre, given the story's charge, *Esther* is imbued with this dramatic tone through the events and twists it undergoes, setting new courses of action, of which the reader is indirectly and implicitly aware, but the characters less so, or not at all.

For example, the character of Haman, a high ruler in the court of Ahasuerus (most often identified with Xerxes) is the main target of this kind of irony and is completely unaware of how events actually unfold. In

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<sup>191</sup> We can also point out that irony is a process by which all originally rendered meanings and images are deconstructed to the point where their true nature/face is revealed and the unaltered reality (or a new reality) is thus outlined.



the end, he ends up as the victim of dramatic irony and more situational irony, hanging himself on the scaffold he had prepared for his rival, the Jew Mordecai/Mordechai (*Esther* 7:10). Not even the prophecy of his counsellors and his wife, Zeresh, were able to somehow „awaken” him from the grip of the end he was heading toward alone: „Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is Jewish, you will not prevail against him – for surely you will fall before him” (*Esther* 6:13). Here there is an allusion to the fact that a ray of hope might have been glimpsed for Haman if he had given up his vanity and, falling before Mordecai, begged forgiveness (*cf.* Rosen 2023: 156 note A).

It has been said in the doctrine that whatever its type, irony in *the Book of Esther* can be considered „stable irony”, due to the fact that the original situation is replaced, implicitly or explicitly, by a new one that does not raise questions or doubts – its purpose is clear – unlike a possible „unstable” irony (Simon *op. cit.*: 6). As noted earlier, the dramatic irony aimed at Haman was a „stable” one. One can easily understand why things took such a turn without explanation. Justice was established with the support of providence absent only in appearance. Although this twist was somewhat predictable and at one point explicitly pointed out, it nevertheless generated suspense/drama throughout its development to its climax.

Another significant circumstance in which the dramatic irony builds is that which concerns Esther – by concealing her real identity (she is Jewish, by her original name Hadassah). Although at first there is no real danger of a discovery, it is nevertheless implied that the Jews were not the most privileged minority in the empire, especially since Haman was *ab initio* an enemy of the Jewish people (he was Agagite – *Esther* 3:1<sup>192</sup>) and held a high position in the king's court. The situation changes abruptly from the moment of the first decree (*Esther* 3:12-15), which referred to the destruction of all the Jews in the empire, the possibility of revealing the real identity becoming a real critical point. Consequently, the suspense builds as the action unfolds, considering that the readers know her secret, while Ahasuerus and his rulers are unaware of the concealment; the tension created causes the reader to worry if Esther will be discovered, but this does not happen – in other words, the irony does not lead to an outcome that will bring any harm to Esther or her people, but, on the contrary, changes things by relieving the tension and reversing the initial situation in Haman's case. Esther, having done nothing wrong by guarding her true identity (in fact, protecting herself), is not discovered until she herself chooses to reveal her identity at the appropriate time (*Esther* 7:4).

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<sup>192</sup> Haman was descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites, a people who had always been in conflict with the Jewish people.



This dramatic irony can be said to end with a sense of relief for the reader, as at the end point the revelation does not lead to repercussions.

The dramatic irony can also be seen through the structure of the book. Although short and fast-paced, the writing is interesting – to say the least – when it comes to the scheme on which it is built. It can be rendered as follows:

A – Introduction and Exposition (Chapter 1)

B – The king's first decree (Chapters 2-3)

C – The clash of personalities of Mordecai/Mordechai and Haman (Chapters 4-5)

D – The king's insomnia (*Esther* 6:1)

C' – Mordecai/Mordechai triumphs over Haman (Chapters 6-7)

B' – The king's second decree (Chapters 8-9)

A' – Epilogue (Chapter 10) (Berg 2021: 41<sup>193</sup>).

One can see the simple but precise symmetry underlying the text. Certain events – such as the feasts – are repeated, but the outcomes differ and change the *status quo*; these twists and turns create both narrative tension and suspense, and a deep emotional involvement of the reader in the story. The first decree is changed by the second, Mordecai/Mordechai defeats his rival Haman, and all ends well.

Dramatic irony is cleverly used to underline the conflicts between the characters and intensify their impact. For example, when Haman is convinced that he will succeed in destroying Mordecai/Mordechai and his people, and the action seems to develop in this direction (in assent to the above scheme), the narrative tension increases in proportion to the development of the story thread. However, at the climax, Haman himself is executed and the Jews are saved, contrary to initial expectations.

In conclusion, dramatic irony in *the Book of Esther* is an effective means of building narrative tension and deepening the meaning of the text. Its role is also to enrich the reader's experience, who becomes more engaged in the story, and to broaden the perspective on the theme. On the other hand, the role of dramatic irony in character development should also be highlighted. They are often caught in ironic situations, through which their personality and hidden motivations are revealed.

### 3. Situational ironies in *the Book of Esther*

Certain situational ironies serve to form dramatic ironies. Sometimes the two are considered to complement each other (or to be the

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<sup>193</sup> Reference is also made to other authors who have proposed this structure of *the Book of Esther*, such as Joyce Baldiwn, Mervin Breneman, Yehuda Radday or Michael Fox, some of them faithfully following the scheme and others in a similar way, but with some differences regarding point D.



same thing), except that the latter are associated with the dramatic genre in general. We disagree with this view, as the specificity of each does not seem to be a component of a literary genre, but rather a defining element that operates (or has applicability) whether we are referring to species of the dramatic genre or species of the epic genre. For example, the fact that in a dramatic irony the reader is put on the spot or given the information to deduce certain things that some characters are not aware of to a certain extent is not a specific aspect of the dramatic genre; moreover, examples of such ironies have been given in *the Book of Esther* that fit the definition.

To begin with, mention should be made of the situation in *Esther* 1:3-4, where the feast given by Ahasuerus (Xerxes, most likely – in the third year of his reign) in honour of his chieftains and rulers is depicted. This first banquet is exaggerated in everything from its participants, duration, and ostentatious wealth, the irony in this case being used with the intention of pointing out that early readers of the book may have known that that period of feasting was abruptly ended by Xerxes' unsuccessful campaigns against the Greeks. It is fairly certain that the author has indicated this time of feasting so that the period indicated is historically viable, but also ironically significant (Reid 2008: 64). Of course, in this case we can also see the language ironies involved in the circumstance, through the hyperbolization of the banquet and its descriptive elements, so these will also be presented in the section on verbal ironies.

*The Book of Esther* depicts a dynamic rhetoric, not only in the idea of Jews living in a foreign country, but also of women having to endure and adapt to a way of life in a society dominated by hostility against women. In the former case, *Esther* constitutes a rhetoric of exile in the Jewish tradition, one that is directed towards resilience, survival or even emancipation within a foreign form of government (Zaeske 2000: 197, 199).

The atmosphere described in the book seems to be one of danger, of risk for disadvantaged groups – women and the Jewish minority. Both the rhetoric of Queen Vashti, bold and trenchant to the king's call, and that of Mordecai/Mordechai – Esther's cousin – of not bowing to the high ruler Haman, thus showing pride and boldness, do not seem to be the best approaches and although they support, reinforce the dignity of the characters in question, they lead to the loss of the crown to Vashti, or the threat of death to Mordecai/Mordechai and all the other Jews in the empire. On the other hand, Esther's rhetoric seems to be the wisest: she takes her time, acts diplomatically and methodically, fasts for three days, does not immediately tell the king Ahasuerus what is troubling her, but arranges several feasts until she finally reveals her fear of the unjust tragedy that was pressing upon her and her people (*Ibidem*: 200).





Some situational ironies are even „ironies of fate” in *Esther*. They deepen the unpredictability of the epic thread, but also the complex relationships between human actions and divine intervention in human destiny and history – even if it is subtly rendered – for example, through a sleeplessness at the appropriate moment that reminds Ahasuerus of the reward he owed to Mordecai/Mordechai and that brings the latter the recognition and honours he deserves. Thus, one of the notable examples of the ironies of fate is Haman's initial high position, as he is portrayed as a member of the elite of society, as part of the ruling class, as a high-ranking official who, through a turn of events, ends up being executed on the scaffold prepared for his rival. Moreover, Mordecai/Mordechai ends up being promoted in his place as a reward for his loyalty and efforts to protect the king's life, while Haman is punished for his attempt to destroy the Jewish people. However, the king did not necessarily intend to humiliate and execute Haman, just as he did not necessarily intend to elevate Mordecai/Mordechai to royal status. As has been said in doctrine (Reid *op. cit.*: 121), according to an old adage, „pride comes before a fall”, and also anticipates the denouement. Moreover, the denouement shows that fortune not only changes, but even surpasses the original, for Haman had never had the honours that Mordecai received.

Another example of the irony of circumstance concerns the complicated administrative system of writing decrees and bringing them to the attention of the people, which is described at length on two occasions, the details seeming to ironize the Persian system (*Ibidem*: 95). On the one hand, it is complicated, rigorous and seemingly infallible, and on the other hand, paradoxically, there is the possibility that it could be changed/cancelled, so its fragility and instability is emphasised.

The ironies of circumstances, situations, events in *the Book of Esther* are essential to the development of the characters and themes of the story. They highlight human nature and limitations in the face of forces greater than themselves, such as providence, fate or justice, and thus contribute to the richness and depth of the narrative.

#### **4. Verbal ironies in *Esther***

Verbal irony, as a rhetorical device, can be seen in the very first chapter of the book, where the author describes at length, minutely and exaggeratedly the court of king Ahasuerus, in contrast to the appearance of power it displays. This appearance stems from the fact that the king is unable to resolve the situation with his queen and his wife, Vashti, on his own, having to call in an entire council to manage her rebellion. Ahasuerus seems to be dependent on his rulers and counsellors, acting at their





influence, the only times he can act on his own behalf being when he throws feasts or offers things and honours to those deemed worthy.

At the same time, although the royal decrees and laws organising court life were numerous and covered some of the most minute matters, yet, ironically, the laws are broken and never even get to the point where sanctions are applied – as in the case of Mordecai/Mordechai, who refuses to bow to the high official Haman and escapes punishment (Simon *op. cit.*: 9).

Two defining examples of verbal ironies are found in *Esther* 6:6-11 and 7:7-8:

– first, through the scene in which Haman and Ahasuerus appear, where the king asks Haman, „What should be done for the man whom the king is delighted to honor?” (*Esther* 6:6). Haman, believing with all his strength and arrogance that the king is referring to his person, suggests a series of most exalted honours, the irony operating when, contrary to his expectations, Ahasuerus reveals that those honours are to be done in honour of „Mordecai the Jew” by Haman himself, „without omitting anything that he has spoken”;

– then, after Esther points to Haman describing him as a „wicked man” and „an enemy”, the king becomes enraged and goes out into the garden of the banquet hall, and subsequently Haman, realising the danger he was in, tries to soften Esther by falling on her couch. King Ahasuerus sees this and says: „Would he actually assault the queen while I am in the palace?” (*Esther* 7:8). Surely Haman would not have dared to do what the king suggested; what he was really trying to do was to beg for his life, and by persuading Esther, she in turn would persuade the king.

As can be seen, all types of irony in *the Book of Esther* can relate to the same circumstances, only they operate from a different angle (and have different peculiarities) or they can partially succeed and intertwine; for example, a dramatic irony can be seen in the situation where Haman accepts Esther's invitation to the banquet unaware that Esther knew of his plots against the Jews, which the readers were already aware of at that point. Then, as presented before, both the verbal irony of *Esther* 7:8 and the situational irony – Haman's total downfall – follow and intertwine.

## 5. Conclusions

Analysis of the rhetoric of irony in *the Book of Esther* reveals a set of literary techniques and devices used in a sophisticated way to highlight the theme, characters and conflicts of the story. Through dramatic, situational and verbal irony, readers are given a deep yet subtle insight into the plot and the characters involved.

Dramatic irony is used strategically to create narrative tension and to highlight the contrast between expectations and reality, thus



contributing to the emotional impact of the text. Circumstantial irony captures the unpredictability of fate, highlighting the complexity of human nature and the intricacies of fate and providence, while verbal irony adds an element of humour and/or carnivalesque, revealing character traits of the characters.

Together, all these forms of irony construct a subtle and refined rhetoric that illustrates not only the author's technique in the use of language, but also his skill in structuring the text and using the necessary tools to portray universal themes (such as the pursuit of justice), create human typologies and suspense.

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