Chapter Four

Irony

"the world without irony would be like a forest without birds" (qtd. in Muecke, Irony and the Ironic 6).

One could hardly question the importance of the part played by irony in life and literature today in the postmodern context where the words of Duncan in Macbeth assume greater significance, “There is no art to find/ the mind’s construction in the face” (Mac.1.4.12-13). One these days instinctively subscribes to the view “that all good literature must be ironic,” as D.C. Muecke in Irony and the Ironic puts it (3). Irony is a very important critical term as ironical overtones are often seen to be essential to great works of art. It is a term used in different contexts with different senses. It presents a contrast between terms, situations, events or human perception of the chaos of life and the desire for harmony or coherence. Irony makes it possible for the writer to suggest meanings without stating them. Just by juxtaposing two discordant facts in the right place, the writer can create different meanings. One does not need to be told, for example, that Mariammai in Sundara Ramaswamy’s “Thiraikal” (“Many Masks”) is lustfully eyed and unconsciously coveted even by the narrator. Similarly, the reader of
Maupassant's story, "In the Moonlight", hardly needs to be told that the priest, Abbe Marignan, has so far been deceived by faith where beauty of life in this world is concerned. No one expects to be told how rivalry in coaching their pupils in the Tamil story "Enkal Teacher" ("Our Teacher") blights the friendship between the two women teachers. The ironic contrast between their initial amity and their later enmity generates meaning. "Ball-of-Fat" provides the French author with the occasion to bring into ironic juxtaposition the generous, genial and patriotic disposition of a prostitute and the priggishness and pretence, complacency and callousness of her fellow travellers among whom are two nuns and three couples who are supposed to make up the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world", to quote the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:13-14).

"Irony," says Laurence Perrine, "is a term with a range of meanings, all of them involving some sort of discrepancy or incongruity" (224). Irony is said to be one of the resources of the writer used in his or her work to gain compression. Its use may increase the explosive force of a story but a proper understanding and appreciation of its skilful use demands awareness and maturity on the part of the reader. Irony has been used from the days of Socrates to present a contrast between terms, events or situations which mock each other. In her book, Irony, Claire Colebrook points out how "It can also
refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says” (1).

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary has it that “Irony” comes from the Greek word “eironeia” which means “Dissimulation, pretence; esp. the pretence of ignorance practised by Socrates as a step towards confuting an adversary” (def. 1). M.H. Abrams writes, “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” (97). The priest in “In the Moonlight” of Maupassant is made to play an alazonic part in the first half of the story to bring out the fact that he has not “understood God thoroughly, that he penetrated His designs, His wishes, His intentions” (51). Similarly, Ravuthar in “Vikaasam” (“Growth”) of Ramaswamy is made to play the eironic role and outwit his boss with his superior brain. M.H. Abrams goes on to say how the term “irony” continues to have its essential meaning of “dissembling or hiding”, but it is used in modern critical parlance to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects (97). According to The Oxford Companion to the English Language, “Three kinds of irony have been recognized since antiquity” which are

(1) Socratic irony, a mask of innocence and ignorance adopted to win an argument ....
(2) **Dramatic or tragic irony**, a double vision of what is happening in a play or a real-life situation ....

(3) **Linguistic irony**, a duality of meaning, now the classic form of irony. ("Irony")

The *World Book Encyclopedia* refers to "three basic kinds of irony: (1) verbal irony, (2) dramatic irony, and (3) irony of viewpoint" ("Irony"). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* alludes mainly to six types of irony – verbal, structural, Socratic, dramatic, cosmic and romantic (97-100). *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* points out how

In more recent centuries, the rhetorical definition of irony has been supplemented by a number of further elaborations of the concept. Thus, the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel spoke of **romantic irony**, which involves the sense of a discrepancy between the desire for unity and infinity, on the one hand, and the perception of a chaotic and finite world on the other. ("Irony")

Similarly one sees the use today of what one in the academia terms "structural irony". The curious thing which an ironist presents in a work of art is the co-existence of what Muecke calls "irreconcilable, irrelatable 'realities' " (Irony and the Ironic 45).
A classification of the different kinds of irony is not an easy thing to do today as there is a lot of what D.C. Muecke in *Irony* calls "fogginess surrounding the word" (12). So the concept of irony has not been defined with precision as it defies definition. All that one can say is that the term "irony" does not mean today what it used to mean in the centuries that have gone by. In "Useless Beauty" for instance the insensitive man and his sensitive wife ironize each other through their mutual incompatibility. The process of reading a text between the lines and finding what it appears to say and what it really says "characterises much of what counts as literary criticism" to borrow the words of Claire Colebrook (5). One could argue, as she does, "that literature is characterised by its potential for irony, its capacity to mean something other than a common-sense or everyday use of language" (5).

The cases of irony discerned and dealt with in the stories chosen here are situational irony, irony of life and romantic irony. In the first case the irony lies in the situation, where what a character says is undermined by what he or she does or says elsewhere. The irony of life or cosmic irony refers to the limits of human meaning or vision. This kind of irony is seen where humans do not see what they do or the results of their actions or the forces that upset their apple cart. Situational and cosmic ironies are ways of seeing human expectations and their contrary outcomes. Colebrook says that "the
German Romantics elevated irony to an ultimate principle of life ...” (39). She goes on to say that it is these Germans, like the Schlegel brothers, who “influenced the radical theorisation of irony in the twentieth century” (46). Romantic irony seeks to project the idea in more emphatic terms that life in this world is “irremediably flawed” or irreparably contradictory (Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* 22). Irony thus has come to suggest in the words of Samuel Hynes “a view of life which” has recognized that “experience is open to multiple interpretations, of which no one is simply right, and that the co-existence of incongruities is part of the structure of existence” (qtd. in Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* 31).

The two writers here, Maupassant and Ramaswamy, are ironists as most of their stories present human experiences and expectations in terms of their ironic aspects. Their fiction presents the reader with significant insights into life. Being serious writers, they select and arrange their material in order to convey most effectively the feeling or truth of a human situation. They ironically juxtapose different points of view in order to achieve a balanced all-round view to express their awareness of the complexity of life or to bring out the relativity of values to prove that what is good or pleasurable for one is painful for another.

**Irony of Situation**

The fictional writer finds the irony of situation the most important tool
to get across his perception of life and human character. What one sees in it is the discrepancy between what one intends to do and what one actually does or between appearance and reality, or between one’s expectation and fulfilment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate. There is, for instance, a striking disparity between what the public image of the protagonist in “The Duel” of Maupassant and the inner man which the situation of confrontation brings out. Similarly, there is a contrast between what the central male character in Ramaswamy’s “Meikaathal” (“True Love”) thinks he will do and what he really does when the moment for him to act arrives. Iago in Shakespeare’s play, Othello, is not what he appears to be for he himself says, “I am not what I am” (Oth.1.1.64).

The French story begins with what the world outside thinks of the viscount, “In society they called him ‘the handsome Signoles’. He called himself Viscount Gontram Joseph de Signoles”. He is said to “cut something of a figure, as the saying is.” He has an attractive figure, “enough readiness of speech to make some attempt at wit, a certain natural grace of manner, an air of nobility and pride” which together with his “formidable and pleasant” moustache help him to attract the attention of ladies. He is a man of “energetic physique” who has “lived happily, tranquil, in a state of moral well-being most complete” (779). When one of the ladies of his party is persistently ogled by a stranger seated at a neighbouring table, the viscount
asks him “to cease this attention.” The stranger replies with an “obscene word” which attracts everyone’s attention (780). It so angers the viscount that he challenges him to a duel in the manner of a brave man.

The viscount picks out two men to be his seconds and makes dangerous arrangements with them to fight the duel with a pistol, for, “It was well known that he was good at handling a sword and still better with a pistol” (779). He threatens to use a pistol in the hope that his opponent, George Lamil, will retire from the duel. He only puts on an air of bravado, but he is internally scared of the prospect of a fight. He perceives that he is “thirsty” and drinks “one after the other, three glasses of water” (780). The situation of his getting “nervous” and losing his sleep making him wonder, “Can it be that I am afraid ...” begins stage by stage to expose the contrast between the unreality of his public image and the reality of his private self fraught with the fear of finding his foe a better fighter (781). His friends as well as the reader expect him to prove his mettle, but he panics at the end so much so that “opening his mouth wide, he brusquely” thrusts “the barrel of his pistol into his throat” and pulls the trigger (784).

The same irony presented in the personality of the viscount is shown by the Tamil writer, Ramaswamy, in the character of Varadan in “Meikaathal”. Varadan, a college student, ogles many girls to pass his time. But he falls passionately in love with Joswin and thinks that his love will ever flow and
never come to an end, “Love is a Ganga whose waters flow without interruption” (223). He really begins to love her in a romantic fashion walking every morning “about a mile on the road opposite the way to his college” just to escort her to college (227). He prefers to retain the romantic aspect of his love without ever letting reality alter its fantastic texture. He says, “Love is a thorny path. It has remained so from the beginning of time down to this day. Roads everywhere have been laid with cement or tar but this thorny path remains prickly” (223).

The writer here seeks to demonstrate how romance crumbles as soon as reality breaks in. Varadan’s love for the girl begins to sag when he sees the possibility of his dreams coming true with the girl confessing her affections to her mother and seeking her father’s help to talk to him. The intrusion of reality into the realm of romance helps to expose the hollowness of his love. When he is helped to further his love suit, he backs down trying to withdraw. Varadan never thought that the bogey of marriage would chase him thus, “Varadan never expected that the bugbear termed ‘marriage’ would pursue him. It was a matter that had not entered his realm of dreams or found its way into his consciousness” (223). He finally realizes the gravity of the situation and goes home without so much as taking leave of her. There is only the remnants of the pathos of forlorn romance gnawing at his heart on the train.
The reader of a situational irony sees the victim behaving in confident unawareness of the real state of affairs as in the case of M. Lantin, a clerk, in Maupassant’s story entitled “The False Gems” who happens to meet the daughter of a country physician at an evening party “at the home of the assistant chief of his bureau” (528). He falls madly in love with her at first sight as she captivates him with her “simple beauty” and “the imperceptible smile” which seem to be “the reflection of a pure and lovely soul.” He hears all the people praising her with the words, “Happy the man who wins her love! He could not find a better wife” because she is the “perfect type of the virtuous woman whom every sensible young man dreams of one day winning for life.” Marriage with her makes him “unspeakably happy” as she lavishes “the most delicate attentions on her husband” coaxing and fondling him and “the charm of her presence” is so great that even six years after their marriage he is so delighted to see that he loves his wife “more than during the first days of their honeymoon.” She runs their house with so much prudence and economy that they appear to live in luxury. He could find in his spotless wife only two flaws, “her love of the theater and a taste for false jewelry” (529). She brings home almost every evening a meretricious jewel.

One evening in winter she gets back “chilled through and through” after attending an opera and falling seriously ill, dies of “inflammation of the lungs” a week later. Her untimely death plunges him into profound grief
leaving him in ceaseless tears and memories of the "charm of his beautiful dead wife." Life for him shortly becomes "a struggle" as he is not able to make ends meet and he runs into debt as a consequence (530). He decides to sell the heavy necklace which his wife was very fond of.

Now he is in for the shock of his life. The jeweller he goes to appraises its worth to be "from twelve to fifteen thousand francs" (531). Unable to believe it he goes to another jeweller. He is dumbfounded at being told that this jewel was bought at that very shop for twenty thousand francs and sent to Madame Lantin. The jeweller offers to take it for eighteen thousand francs if he could verify the identity of its owner. M. Lantin is so upset at the realization that all the jewels could have been gifts from a man. The earth seems to tremble beneath him and the tree before him seems to fall. Throwing up his arms, he drops senseless to the ground. The double life that his wife led deepens his sorrow but he gradually reconciles himself to the thought that "With money it is possible to forget even the deepest sorrow. One can go where one pleases and in travel find that distraction which is the surest cure for grief" (532). He sells all the jewels, resigns from his work and enjoys the theatre for the first time in his life. Six months later he marries again. She turns out to be "a very virtuous woman with a violent temper" (533). She causes him much sorrow. The irony here lies in the contrast between the sweetness of his illusion about his first wife and the bitterness of his
disillusionment with her on the one side and the discovery, on the other side that the virtue of his second wife is worse than the vice of his first wife. The more virtuous one’s wife is the more miserable one’s life seems to become.

The French story would remind one of the Tamil story entitled “Illaatha Ontru” (“Something Illusory”). The story begins with a tinge of verbal irony in the third person saying, “Rajasekaran is a literary aesthete” (375). He was one waiting for his literary career to start. He is said to have been disturbed by the dream of translating his picture of life and its essence into literary creations. He did not know why it took him so long to portray his vision of life. One would attribute it to his pride lurking behind modesty. He could feel the urge to write as his mind pulsated with the source of creativity. He expected that he would produce great global literature. It is written, “He began to worry about his aspirations remaining mere dreams. He consoled himself at times that great achievements wait for a great moment of commencement” (376). He dreamed that his encounter with Atmananda Sagar would awaken the literary talent lying latent in him. He thought that the moment of meeting him would enable him to bloom. The days of his fascination with Sagar’s work were sweet. He recalls how delightfully he read his poems by the light of a hurricane lamp and could hardly share his enjoyment with his mother as the poems were in Hindi. He now tries to attend a meeting where he expects to see his literary icon. By the time he gets there
the meeting is over but on the way he catches a glimpse of the man in a car. His face on the notice lying on a chair gives a younger image which reality disproves.

Rajasekaran shares with his friend Alamelu, his fruitless efforts to see his object of admiration. She lets him know the next day the hotel where Sagar could be seen. On his way to the hotel he wonders in what state of mind the writer could be and asks himself whether he could have a free talk with him to find out whose works in the world of literature have fascinated him and what his plans for the future are.

Contrary to his high expectations his talk with the writer turns out to be an exercise in trivialization. The disillusioned literary aspirant’s frustrated frame of mind is seen in these words, “His mind longed to escape and extricate itself from what it aspired and achieved, and its expectation and disappointment and to analyse the whole thing leisurely with detachment” (386). His friend Alamelu’s response to his chagrin gains ironic significance when one sees how the story is titled, “Look here, why do you look for something which does not exist? You have to knock at your own door if it is to open. Fill your pen with ink. That is its beginning” (389).

The discrepancy between a fortune-hunter’s desire and disappointment makes up the narrative strand of Maupassant’s story, “A Fair Exchange”. This ironically titled story is about a notary who ardently wishes to acquire a large
sum of money through dowry. The story is narrated by the nameless man to a lawyer named M. Bontram whose professional work consists in legally separating badly matched couples. The narrator is “not poor but in straitened circumstances, full of care, forced to a constant economy” and he is obliged to restrict his tastes in everything. The narrator has a keen interest in enabling his clients to make what he calls “advantageous marriages.” And this becomes possible for him as he reads “with great care the advertisements on four pages of the newspapers, the wants, offers, little correspondence, etc., etc.” It so happens one day that he comes across a matrimonial ad from a woman with a large fortune, “two million five hundred thousand francs, clear” (479). It fires his imagination particularly when he goes back to his cold and dreary bachelor apartment “which is taken care of by a maid who is also in charge of the kitchen” (480). That evening at dinner he casually refers to that woman in his conversation with his two friends, a spinning mill proprietor and an attorney. In a jovial fashion the attorney suggests the narrator marry her to drive away his “care” (479). The idea haunts him until he decides to write to the woman.

Shortly thereafter the woman turns up to meet him in person. She is a woman of about thirty who impresses him and moves him to pity with her reference to her being without her parents. He lies to her that the response to the advertisement was made by him on behalf of a client of his who has gone
to England for a few days. He makes sure that she has a large fortune. He offers to take her to dinner that evening. When they get back to her room, he asks to see proof of her fortune. Overjoyed at the confirmation of her owning a large fortune, he feels like embracing her and he does it "once, twice, ten times" and he goes on to say, "so much that – with the aid of the champagne – I succumbed – or rather – no – she succumbed." She pleads with him not to "expose" her. The man feels terribly deceived by such a pliable woman. He asks himself, "How much security would one have with a woman who thus yielded?" He spends "a terrible night" being at his wits' end about his desire to marry her and possess her fortune. He could send her back but "the dowry, the handsome dowry, the good dowry, palpable and sure" tempts him to go to the woman the next morning and asks for her hand to repair the wrong he did to her. So under the pretext of atoning for the "wrong" he marries her in the expectation of leading a carefree life (483).

He lives happily with her enjoying her wealth "for six months." Before long he begins to notice her "long visits" to some place "one week Tuesday, the next week Wednesday" (483). Finally he follows her one day and discovers her meeting two children brought by two nurses on a train. That evening, when he asks her whose children she went to see at the railway station, she faints and when she regains her consciousness, she confesses to her having four children who are "the origin of her fortune" (484). His
strange fashion of finding a spouse, he admits, is "as dangerous for the mind as poison is to the body." The revelation of the unfair means by which his wife has amassed her money comes as a heavy blow to the greedy fortune-hunter. He now with hindsight sees how one needs to resist ideas which he says, "enter into us, corrode us, and kill us or render us mad" (479). The story ends on the cryptic advice given to the narrator by the lawyer on being asked what he is to do, "Recognize your children" (484).

The man wants his client to see and understand the error of judgement which he had committed in the process of choosing his wife. Here one could see the discrepancy between the narrator's dream of feathering his nest with the money brought by his bride and the disappointment bred by the discovery of his wife being a woman with a past. This knowledge blights all the happiness that he expected to experience in the wake of the acquisition of wealth. The ironic shift from ecstasy to agony leads him to see that conjugal happiness does not come from mere possession of wealth, but it comes from mutuality of love and trust in marriage.

In "Yethirkollal" ("Encounter") Ramaswamy presents events and situations that turn out contrary to the expectation of the narrator and his wife. The narrator's wife suffers from a serious disease. The nature of which could plunge her into a critical condition needing immediate medical attention. When the doctor confirms that she suffers from one of the diseases which
renders them eligible for an immediate telephone connection, the narrator feels happy. At times of emergency when he rushes to the hospital on his bicycle, there is every likelihood of his being knocked down on the way. So they expect the phone to be a timely blessing. "The phone is kept by the right hand side of his wife. It would never go dead" (556). In the eyes of the narrator, the telephone is not a mere gadget but the supreme power in miniature which could save his wife from her breathlessness (554). In short, he expects the telephone to relieve them of their anxiety, but it turns out to be a source of great annoyance and psychosis as they begin to receive wrong calls. When the critical moment of his wife’s illness arrives, the phone turns out to be of no help and he has to rush out on foot to get his wife medical attention.

At the superficial level, this story could be read like W. Plomer’s essay, "On not Answering the Telephone". On a different plane, it could be seen as a flak on the way a typical Indian phone functions. On yet another level, the author drives home the sad fact of life that the things humans expect to be most useful to them at critical junctures tend to be least useful and even most harmful.

The characters discussed above want things to happen the way they suppose, but the situations that arise go to prove how human intentions, delusions, expectations and sense of propriety clash with reality. Situational
irony seen in the stories cited here brings out the lack of human insight or foresight which accounts for the contradiction between human thought or word and deed or action.

Irony of Life

There is in the fiction of Maupassant and Ramaswamy an element of fatality which both the writers perceive from different angles. Their sense of the quirky way things turn out in life contrary to expectations prompts them to portray such events and situations as life’s ironies. Beneath the wit and humour of their treatment of such ironic fallout of dreams that fail to be fulfilled, one could see eyes “grow misty with tears”, as in the case of the narrator in “Yethirkollal” or in the case of Pankajam who sheds tears obviously at having to lead a life of backbreaking drudgery (556). The phrase, “Irony of Fate,” says The Oxford Companion to the English Language, “like drama, life treats people as if wryly mocking them, delivering at a strategic moment the opposite to what is deserved or at first seemed likely” (“Irony”). “Irony of Fate” according to D.C. Muecke, is “loosely used” even by those who do not believe in fate (Irony 12). The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English illustrates the irony of life thus, “If a poor man inherits a large fortune and dies a month later, one might call it one of life’s ironies” (2nd ed.). This form of irony is demonstrated with dramatic effect by Maupassant in “The Necklace” as O. Henry has done in the “Gift of the Magi” where the
male protagonist sells his watch to buy his wife combs as she has long and luxuriant hair which, however, she sells to buy him a watch chain. Maupassant's story, "The Necklace" is the story of a couple who live in genteel poverty. The man here, M. Loisel, is a clerk in the Ministry of Education like its author. Matilda is his pretty little wife who dreams of being rich like other women around her. Being beautiful and young, she naturally wants to go to dances and parties and hobnob with the rich and powerful people. One evening her husband gets back from work in good spirits because he has received an invitation for them to attend a ball held by the Minister of Public Instruction and his wife. Matilda wants to look her best on this occasion. So she persuades her husband to part with his four hundred francs to buy her the dress which she wants. When she gets her best dress she begins to worry that she has no jewel to wear to the ball. It is M. Loisel who suggests borrowing jewels from Matilda's wealthy friend, Mme Forestier. The day of the ball arrives. She turns up at the function and impresses everyone as "the prettiest of all, elegant, gracious, smiling and full of joy" (30). Even the Minister of Education pays her some attention. She dances "with enthusiasm, with passion, intoxicated with pleasure, thinking of nothing, in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success, in a kind of cloud of happiness that" comes "of all this homage and all this admiration, of all these awakened desires and this victory so complete and sweet to the heart of woman" (30).
When she gets back, she is shocked to find the borrowed necklace missing and her husband goes out in search of it, but they do not succeed in recovering it. So they buy a replacement which costs them “thirty-six thousand francs” (32).

From this juncture begins their “horrible life.” They send away “the maid”, they change “their lodgings”, and they rent “some rooms under a mansard roof.” They toil for ten long years to pay the “frightful debt” caused by it (32). Ten years later, Matilda, happens to meet her friend, Mme Forestier, and tells her that she had “some hard” and “miserable” days after borrowing the necklace from her. She now confides to her how she lost her necklace and replaced it at such a heavy price. There comes now the ironic revelation that the diamonds “were false. They were not worth over five hundred francs!” (33).

Ian Reid feels that “the falsity of the lost article becomes symbolic of the basic situation” which he goes on to point out, “amounts merely to a contrived demonstration of ‘the irony of fate’.” It is in his words “a sad irony” (61).

The ironies of life have fired the imagination of both the French and the Tamil writers. Ramaswamy’s “Muthalum Mudivum” (“The Beginning and the End”) is a story with a title suggestive of life’s irony. It signifies that the promise at the beginning of the story finds its fulfilment in a totally different fashion. The heroine here is ditched by her young lover, Rasa, but Azhagu’s
girlish fascination for his palatial house results in her becoming the second
wife of her lover's father.

The attractive house of Arumugam Pillai made the little girl Azhaghu
so much excited when she visited the house with her mother Maragatham to
have a look around it and admire its beauty. When they were about to leave,
Azhaghu refused to return home as she liked the newly built house better than
her own muddy house which made Maragatham feel insulted before Nayagi,
her childhood friend and the wife of Arumugam Pillai. Finally Maragatham
took her away by force with a few smacks. Arumugam Pillai had become rich
very recently by exploiting the poor. His pompous lifestyle, attitude, the way
he drove his car, his behaviour towards former friends made him out to be a
typical nouveau riche.

The next day Azhaghu again went to Nayagi’s house without being
noticed by her mother. Nayagi told Azhaghu if she wanted to stay in their
house, she should marry Rasa, her son. Azhaghu acquired great rustic beauty
when she grew into a fifteen-year old girl. Azhaghu fell in love with Rasa.
Now she was more attracted to Rasa than to his house. When Rasa completed
his school education, Arumugam Pillai decided to send his son for higher
studies. On the day before his departure, Rasa and Azhaghu secretly met in
the backyard of his house. Rasa promised her that he would marry her after
becoming a doctor and asked her to wait only for four years. He would not
mind other’s objections and leaving his sentence unfinished, he “being filled with passion, drew her near and hugged her. In the dark they were both united” (19). But after four years Arumugam Pillai receives a letter from Rasa stating that he was in love with a North Indian girl and he was to marry her in a week’s time in Bombay. So Azhaghu’s dream got shattered. Rasa’s sudden marriage to a stranger badly broke Nayagi’s heart and she died. And it was Azhaghu who had been chosen by Arumugam Pillai to be his second wife. Thus her childhood wish of living in the palatial house comes true, but it is an irony of life that casts her into the role of her lover’s stepmother.

Maupassant’s story “The Piece of String” deals with the life of poor peasants. The story begins with the description of the people who throng at the market-place at Goderville. Maître Hauchecome happens to see a piece of string lying on the ground in the vicinity of the public square of Goderville, and picks it up. It is noticed by Maître Malandain, a harness maker who has been “on bad terms” with him (34). He feels a little ashamed of taking “a bit of string out of the dirt” before his enemy (34-35). He tries to hide it under his “blouse, then in his trousers’ pocket” (35). He is the sort of man who believes “that everything useful ought to be picked up” (34).

An announcement is shortly made to the gathering at the market by the “public crier” to say that “a black leather pocketbook containing five hundred francs and some business papers” had gone missing and “The finder is
requested to return same with all haste to the mayor's office or to Maître Fortune Houlbreque of Manneville; there will be twenty francs reward" (35). As the farmers discuss the chances of its recovery and finish their coffee at a tavern there, "a chief of the gendarmes" appears at the entrance, asking for Maître Hauchoeune. The man replies, "Here I am" and, "surprised and disturbed," swallows "at a draught his tiny glass of brandy," and sets out to accompany the gendarmes to the mayor's office repeating "Here I am, here I am." The mayor, "a stout, serious man with pompous phrases" tells him, "you were seen this morning to pick up on the road to Benzeville, the pocketbook lost by Maître Houlbreque of Manneville." The poor country farmer looks at the mayor terrified as he is suspected. He denies taking it, but the mayor says that Maître Malandain, the harness maker, saw him pick it up. The poor old man now remembers the man watching his taking a piece of string, and flushes with anger. He takes out the string from his pocket and shows it to the mayor. But he is not taken at his word. He swears that he has not taken the purse but the mayor asserts, "After picking up the object you stood like a stilt, looking a long while in the mud to see if any piece of money had fallen out." He choke with anger and asks him how anyone could tell such lies and take away "an honest man's reputation" (36). His enemy, the harness maker, repeats his assertion that it was picked up by him. He is even searched, but nothing is found on him.
The innocent man is sent away with the warning that the prosecutor will be consulted for further action. The story of his picking up the purse spreads all over the place and he makes only vain attempts to deny its veracity. One reads here, “And he grew angry, becoming exasperated, hot and distressed at not being believed, not knowing what to do and always repeating himself” (37). He loses his peace of mind and spends a sleepless night as nobody believes his version.

The next day, the lost pocketbook with its contents is recovered and returned to its owner by Marius Paumelle. This man is reported to have found it, and not knowing what it contained, takes it to his employer. The irony here lies in the refusal of Hauchecome’s neighbours and fellow farmers to see his inner sense. He is confused to see why he is dubbed “a big rascal” or an “old sharper.” Everybody thinks that he is “mixed with” the loss of the pocketbook. His enemy gloats over the dishonour of the man. The more he defends himself, the more incredulous his listeners become and behind his back they say, “Those are lying excuses.” One sees how tragic the rest of his life turns out to be:

His mind, touched to the depth, began to weaken.

Toward the end of December he took to his bed.

He died in the first days of January, and in the delirium of his death struggles he kept claiming his innocence, reiterating:
"A piece of string, a piece of string – look – here it is, M’sieu the Mayor.” (38)

This story brings out the sad fact of life that trivial things at times have a tragic bearing on one’s life which is surprisingly out of proportion to their size. These are what one could term the “ironies of life”.

An equally tragi-comic situation in which a man’s apple cart is upset demonstrating one of life’s little ironies in a humorous fashion could be seen in Maupassant’s story, “Christmas Eve”. It is the tale of a man who had “a big piece of work” on a Christmas Eve and wanted to spend all the time at his desk refusing every invitation to supper (704). But the merry makers in the neighbourhood distracted him so much that he at last decided to have a sumptuous meal and enjoy himself. Asking his maid Angela to get the supper ready, he went out to get a pretty female companion to eat and sleep with.

One learns that he has “a weakness for stout women”, for he says, “The more flesh they have, the better I like them, and a female colossus would be my ideal.” So on seeing a plump woman opposite a theatre, he exclaims, “By Jove! What a fine girl!” He sees first only her rear part and makes up his mind to have her because, according to him, “a woman’s face is the dessert” which merits consideration after other aspects of her person. So he “hastened on, overtook her and turned round suddenly under a gas lamp. She was
charming, quite young, dark, with large, black eyes.” He propositioned her at once and “she accepted without any hesitation” (705).

She was so happy to be in his place and see the sumptuous meal. Being delighted by her obese figure, he says, “She was superb, so beautiful that she astonished me, and so stout that she fairly captivated me.” But she appeared to be in low spirits; yet she told him, “Don’t let us think of troubles!” Saying this she began to drink and revive her spirits evoking greater admiration in him. After enjoying his dinner with her and hearing his neighbours making merry he felt that he “was quite right to go out and bring in this girl” (705).

Just at that time “a deep groan made” him turn around (705). The woman “continued to utter painful sighs, as if she were suffering horribly.” Suddenly the woman “uttered a cry, a heart-rending cry” causing him to rush to her with a candle in his hand (706). To his great consternation and chagrin, the fat woman who held out the prospect of a pleasant night turned out to be a woman in labour. She writhed in pain and yelled bringing in all the neighbours and spoiling not only his craving for a nice night but also his peace of mind for days, months on end with her prolonged stay. He even had to pay regularly for the maintenance of the child though he managed to send the woman out when she grew thin and repelled him.

How things turn out contrary to human expectations is repeatedly brought out by Maupassant in his stories. The hero here wanted to play the
part of Providence but Providence willed otherwise. The Tamil critic, R. Thirunavukkarasu, in his book Sundara Ramaswamy: Oru Kathaikkkaarar (Sundara Ramaswamy: A Story-Teller), has this to say:

Life cannot be contained within the framework of rules and regulations or fixed limitations. Its borders cannot be determined. It cannot be lived imposing on it one’s decisions. Sundara Ramaswamy thinks that it has no room for preconceptions. This outlook on life is revealed in his story “Vaazhvum Vasanthamum”. (89)

The French and the Tamil stories here prove that the course of life generally does not run according to one’s expectations. One has to accept its twists and turns with resignation. The woman one falls in love with may not often be the woman who turns out to be one’s spouse. One cannot always have one’s way because life with its ironies is as capricious as nature herself.

In “Vaazhvum Vasanthamum” (“Life and the Vernal Season”), the Tamil writer seeks to bring into focus the fundamental contrast between the realities of life and the romantic fancies, fun and frolic which a few men have in the spring of their youth. The scenes depicted here are those in a bank where four unmarried men make eyes at women. At the start Rajamoni is quite an immature youth and feels terribly shy when Venkataraman talks about his wife. He does not join Nagarajan, Krishnamoorthy and Veerakumar
when they ogle women. But he soon overcomes his modesty and participates in the pleasant activity as he attains maturity. He finally happens to see a girl of small stature and they exchange smiles. Nagarajan and Krishnamoorthy compete with each other eyeing up a college girl who has uncommon beauty. They always talk about women in which Veerakumar does not join them. Yet one day he surprises others by standing on his toes to look at the college girl. From that day on it grows into a habit with him to admire her beauty (203).

The passage of time brings in its train changes on the lives of these men and the objects of their admiration. Venkataraman is transferred to another place and complains of his problems in life. The college girl, Kalyani, the object of their ogling, gets appointed in their own office as a typist and turns out to be less admirable with the foolish mistakes she commits in her typescripts. She is married now and soon has a baby. Krishnamoorthy obtains a new job in an insurance company. Nagarajan parts from his beloved, Rajam, in his neighbourhood. She marries another man while he marries his cousin who brings him fifty sovereigns of gold. Veerakumar becomes the accountant in their bank.

The characters portrayed here with rich Ramaswamian humour thus change with the times and come to terms with reality which they see is different from the romance of their premarital days. The title signifies the gulf between one's dreams of life and the stark realities that one has to encounter
in life. Life follows its own course quite often upsetting human dreams of its probable trajectory.

In the story, "Mayil" ("Peacock") of Sundara Ramaswamy's latest collection titled Maria Daamuvukku Ezhuthiya Kaditham (Letters written by Maria to Damu), the narrator recalls an incident which took place fifty years ago. The narrator used to go to Suchindram frequently to buy medicine from the famous physician. Whenever he went there, he would leave the medicine with the junior physician and go out to roam over the place. One of his visits remains painfully etched on his memory. He had heard from his friend, Chandran, about the captivating beauty of Kolamma, whose son, Thanu used to get private tuition from his friend. In the temple, the moment he saw Kolamma, he could recognize her from the vivid description Chandran had given him. Chandran's intimacy with her had kindled not only his imagination but his jealousy as well. Here now he experienced ecstasy as the woman sat with her son near the cage of the peacock. The little boy was getting excited as the peacock put out its head and ate the food offered by the mother through him. Suddenly, the narrator's ecstasy of perceiving the exceptional beauty of Kolamma turned into agony and dismay as the peacock put out its head next and pecked at the left eye of the boy which the narrator could see hang out like the kernel of a palmyra fruit.
Fifty years later, when the narrator visits his old friend Chandran, who in his old age comes back to live at Suchindram, Chandran gives him the gist of a book there thus, "There are for every event reasons which one does not perceive". He goes on to say:

There takes place a bus accident at a place where many people move around. In it only one person gets killed. Why that particular life is destroyed is the question. Scientific research is being carried out in the hope that answers to such questions can be found in the future. The question 'why' forms the basis of all such things. (22)

The irony seen in the stories of the second section here focuses on the circumstances that turn out to be beyond human control. Both the authors dwell on human limitations through the employment of irony in this form. The French and the Tamil writers here strip "life bare", as David Coward puts it, and reveal the reality of the human predicament (xii).

**Romantic Irony**

Romantic irony emerged out of the philosophical speculations of the Schlegel brothers, for Muecke says, "The principal 'ironologist' of this period was Friedrich Schlegel, but his brother, August Wilhelm, Ludwig Tieck and Karl Solger will also be mentioned" (Irony and the Ironic 19). What German Romanticism has done is to amplify the vision of the artist to such an extent.
as to bring into his or her range the other side of the coin, for as D.C. Muecke confirms it thus “The ironist who avoids one-sidedness by dexterously bringing in the opposite position as no less valid may be regarded as having achieved a more or less detached or objective stance” (Irony and the Ironic 26). Irony in its romantic form enables a writer to transcend subjectivistic barriers and view things from a different or an alternative viewpoint. The artist who looks at human life from a superior position sees both the mean and magnificent things which humans do on earth. This, according to Goethe, “is the mark of a real artist” (Muecke, Irony and the Ironic 27). This kind of irony is not just signalling the opposite of what is said or done. It is rather the expression of both sides or viewpoints at once in the form of contradiction or paradox. I. A. Richards too defines this form of irony as “the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses” so as to achieve what he calls “balanced poise” (qtd. in Muecke, Irony and the Ironic 26).

“Madame Tellier’s Excursion” is an example of what one might call romantic irony. In it one can see that Maupassant is neither purely romantic nor purely realistic but both. He has the gift to see romance in reality because in stories like “Madame Tellier’s Excursion” or in “In the Moonlight” or in “Ball-of-Fat” he illustrates it. In the first story one sees a provincial brothel whose owner closes it for “a day and a night” as she has to attend the confirmation ceremony of her brother’s daughter. The inmates of the brothel
go with her to be present on this sacred occasion. Gerald Gould in his Introduction to Guy de Maupassant’s Short Stories translated by Miss Marjorie Laurie exclaims:

What an opportunity for crude contrast between sin and innocence! – what scope for cheap sentiment and cheaper irony!
Yet somehow the elements of farce and tragedy are mingled, are subdued to a deep and moving beauty; somehow, by art’s most mysterious alchemy, an eternal law asserts itself in and through the grossest details. (ix)

The story of “Madame Tellier’s Excursion” gives its author the occasion to visualize the confirmation ceremony on the spiritual front and the sexual baptism given by the inmates of Madame Tellier’s brothel on the physical front. The author remarkably succeeds in depicting here the Pharisees of French society who secretly visit Madame Tellier’s brothel, and on the other side delineating the real pathos here where one sees the harlots displaying their genuine faith. They kneel down in Church and sob like children. “Men, women, old men and lads in new blouses were soon sobbing; something superhuman seemed to be hovering over their heads – a spirit, the powerful breath of an invisible and all-powerful being” (66). When the confirmation ceremony is over, they could be visualized going back to their regular sexual services to entertain the respectable men who so impatiently await them. The
customers of Madame Tellier's place are said to be not rakes, but upright men. The irony reaches its peak as one learns that in spite of her profession Madame Tellier is "quite virtuous, and even the girls in the house could not discover anything against her" (55). She is said to be keeping up her personal moral standards with her serious conversation. Although she is genial and jovial in the company of her select customers, there is seen to be what the author calls "a shade of reserve about her which her new occupation" has "not quite made her lose" (55).

Maupassant here seems to reflect over different perceptions of morality which are differently appraised in different contexts. There is said to be "violent" and "deeply rooted" "prejudice against prostitution" in "large towns" but it is viewed in certain "country places in Normandy" as a normal and "a paying business." A peasant does not scruple to send "his daughter to keep a harem of fast girls, just as he would send her to keep a girls' school" (54). Joseph Rivet, Madame Tellier's brother, does not feel ashamed of his sister being a madam, for it is written, "His sister's occupation did not trouble his scruples in the least, and, besides, nobody knew anything about it at Virville" (59). Madame Tellier does not consider running a brothel to be violative of the biblical commandments although she is seen to be a Christian. Where lucrative occupations are concerned, moral codes and their violations do not seem to matter; but at individual and familial levels she seeks to avoid
their violations, for she does not yield to the temptations of the flesh till her return from the confirmation ceremony and she does not like her brother Rivet making love to "Rosa the Jade", one of her professional harlots (56). At the close of the story, she is seen to enter into an understanding with her platonic lover, Vassi and enjoy "a holiday" which results in her being generous to her customers who are charged only for the champagne. She here really gives morality "a holiday" (71). Thus she is seen by the author on the one side to render "unto God the things that are God's" and, on the other, to the flesh what belongs to it (Matt. 22:21).

The romantic ironist finds contradictory truths in what he or she observes as in Maupassant's priest realizing that spiritual ardour and physical passion are co-existent in God's scheme of things. Robert Scholes seems to concur with this view as he writes:

If we accept the justice of the priest's comic education, we accept with it a particular view of life. There is a touch of satire as well as comedy in this tale. The priest's view of the workings of the universe is being subjected to an ironic scrutiny that is implicit in the way the story is worked out, and is almost explicit in the point of view from which the story is told. (181)

Contradictions in literary texts are productive of multiple points of view. The voices of the morally good men and women who travel with the
morally bad Elizabeth Rousset, a harlot in Maupassant’s story “Ball-of-Fat”, mirror the moral dirt which they condemn in the sinning woman. The story centres on the attitudes of the little group which consists of ten people – three married couples, two nuns, and two individuals: Cornudet, a patriotic republican and Elizabeth Rousset who is nicknamed “Ball-of-Fat” because of her plumpness. The first couple, M. Loiseau and Mme Loiseau, are wine-merchants who make handsome profits from sale of “bad wine at a good price to small retailers in the country.” The man is said to be “full of deceit and joviality.” His wife is “the order and arithmetic of” his “house of commerce” (5). M. and Mme Carrè-Lamadon make up the next couple who display their dignified social position, opulence and sense of honour. Next come the Count and the Countess Hubert de Breville who represent the noble class behind which one could see the moral degradation which they denounce in lower classes. Near the Countess sit two nuns, who pick at “long strings of beads” and mutter “Paters” and “Aves” (6). These people from the affluent segments of society look askance at the prostitute. The atmosphere, however, begins to thaw finally when they are “in the midst of an interminable plain” where they could get nothing to eat or drink but have to share the contents of her “large basket” filled with delicious food and fruit (8). They, like the five foolish virgins in the parable, have been in too much of a hurry to think of bringing food with them. She even becomes almost popular when they hear that she
has refused to go to bed with the Prussian officer at Tôtes saying, "You may say to the dirty beast, that idiot, that carrion of a Prussian, that I shall never change it; you understand, never, never, never!" (17-18). Their feelings change dramatically when they discover that the Prussian officer has decided to keep them all there until Elizabeth Rousset submits to his wish. They begin to wonder "Since it is her trade, why should she refuse this one more than another?" (20-21). From this point on, she is subjected to every kind of pressure from her fellow-travellers. She is made to see how "The need justifies the means." She receives no active support even from Cornudet or the nuns, who seem to feel, "God accepts intentions and pardons the deed when the motive is pure" (22).

After swallowing her pride she spends a night with the hated Prussian officer for the sake of her travelling companions. In the morning, she is treated by the group as if she were infected with some deadly disease. Her encounter with the man leaves her no time to buy any of the provisions she needs for the rest of the journey. All her companions on their way eat the food they have bought. They do not offer the hungry harlot even a crump from their basket. Tears come to her eyes as she remembers how she had shared her food with them. Seeing her tears Mme Loiseau indulges "in a mute laugh of triumph" and murmurs "She weeps for shame." The two "good
sisters” begin “to pray again, after having wrapped in a paper the remainder of their sausage” (27).

None of the characters here escapes Maupassant’s irony, except perhaps the poor prostitute of Rouen. Cornudet, who seems to be cast for the role of the chorus and hums the “Marseillaise” unceasingly after the resumption of the journey is far from upright. He tries unsuccessfully to seduce Elizabeth Rousset on the first night at the inn. So he does nothing to strengthen her resistance and does not care to offer her food when she is humiliated and hungry. Martin Turnell comments, “The Marseillaise is a comment on the cowardice of the middle classes certainly, but also on Boule de Suif who panders to it, on the nuns, disregard of Christian teaching, and on the neutrality of the singer.” He goes on to say how “The coach with its load of discredited individuals, like the disintegrating armies, disappears into the void to the strains of the Marseillaise” (206). As the story ends one sees how those who pick up stones at the humiliated woman become the objects of contempt and condemnation. The romantic ironist helps one to come out of one’s subjectivistic prejudices and perceive objectively both sides of the coin, as it were; and makes one see the mean and the magnificent things that men and women do in life.

Ramawamy in his role as a romantic ironist, demonstrates in “Mei + Poi = Mei” (“Truth + Falsehood = Truth”) how truth, in order to be saleable,
has to be adorned with lies. Some of his stories subtly establish the fact that human values have changed as human attitudes towards life and society have undergone alterations. In the case history of the lawyers cited here, one is made to see how Gandhian values are preserved in a rather paradoxical fashion and practised in a parodical manner. The story here gets narrated through the discussions of a few characters who get together in the house of Muthaiah which they considered to be their "Sabai" (assembly).

Dr. Joshua has been involved in an illicit liquor case. The narrator comes to know the secret information revealed by Joshua’s lawyer’s junior, Padmanabha Pillai. It is learnt that the police intercepted Dr. Joshua’s car and seized about 20 bottles. Joshua came out on bail. The discussion in the assembly centres on him. Muthaiah asks if the doctor was in the car at that time. Padmanabha Pillai, who comes in while the narrator and Muthaiah are reading a novel’s manuscript, says that the doctor was present in the car. Muthaiah is surprised to hear of it and sits back absorbed in thought. Arulraj Ponnappa, a lawyer, also makes his appearance there. Padmanabha Pillai starts reading the manuscript from where Muthaiah left off.

Padmanabha Pillai then asks Arulraj if there is any difference between a writer who makes money by presenting to the reader a pack of lies disguised as truth and one who obtains money by handing one a cheque when there is no money in the bank and absconds. The latter says that he forgets the sections
which differentiated the two. Padmanabha Pillai remarks that a talented lawyer could eliminate the difference and send the writer to prison.

Joshua’s lawyer is not confident of winning his case. The fact that “the guilty will be punished” is affirmed (238). Padmanabha Pillai says that Joshua is innocent because there were no bottles in his car. It was the ruse of the police to place the bottles in the car and arrest him. Joshua thought that he was on his way to see a patient. The man taking Joshua was a police stooge. This information surprises Muthaiyah. Arulraj wants to know how Padmanabha Pillai has collected this information. He says that he was present when Joshua narrated it to the senior lawyer. Arulraj then observes “no patient and no client tell the doctor and the lawyer the full truth even if their throats are slit.” Padmanabha Pillai wants to know if there is no exception to this rule. Then Arulraj cites an example where a client confessed to him how he had stabbed a man to death with a knife as short as one’s little finger. It was incredible but true. Arulraj thought that he could through cross examination render it incredible from the medical point of view and thereby win the case. The police had cooked up a good story. The narrator asks why a story was cooked up while truth was on their side. Arulraj looks at the narrator’s face seeming to pity his lack of experience. It is embarrassing for him. The lawyer says, “without decoration truth loses its lustre” (238). The chopper produced in the court was as long as one’s lower arm. Before the
judge a blood stained dhoti and shirt were unfolded for him to see. The actual perpetrator of the crime went to see a midnight movie wearing the same clothes which had no stain of blood. There were a blacksmith and a launderer to testify to the veracity of the chopper and the clothes. The certificate of the doctor could easily be obtained. Muthaiah’s lack of experience is seen in his surprise at it all. Arulraj sought to tell the truth by hushing up another and thereby turn the culprit into an innocent man. But the police told lies in order to prove the truth and got the culprit convicted. Arulraj tells Muthaiah, the ridiculing writer that he could afford to be an idealist as he had inherited wealth from his father. Padmanabha Pillai touches the manuscript copy of the novel and gets up saying that Muthaiah is no idealist but a spinner of tales.

The verdict was pronounced awarding a two-year jail term to Joshua. Fortunately there was provision to pay a fine in place of imprisonment. He paid it and came out. Arulraj asks Padmanabha Pillai how much was paid to his senior. Rupees two thousand was paid to him by Joshua. Muthaiah wants to know if it had to be returned to the client. It is the same as in the case of a doctor and a writer, say Padmanabha Pillai and the narrator. But Muthaiah says that it is not so in the case of a mango seller who could never sell rotten mangoes. Padmanabha Pillai quips that the quality of the writers’ fruit could be known only after tasting it. Muthaiah’s retort is that even Brahma keeps turning out rotten fruits. Arulraj is sick of everything in the world.
Mimicking Padmanabha Pillai’s voice and pointing his forefinger, Muthaiah says, “There is nothing wrong in the clamour of some people that the basic principle of their law is that even if a hundred criminals get away unpunished, no innocent person should be punished.” Padmanabha Pillai answers that no innocent man was punished. Muthaiah asks him if it isn’t double talk. Padmanabha Pillai says, “Truth is our motto. Joshua sold bottle after bottle, heaped up money, got caught, punished and Dharma won.” Muthaiah asks him what his senior’s argument was. It was only the truth. At the time of the arrest there was nothing incriminating in the car. Joshua was under the assumption that he was being taken to see a patient. He was innocent on that day. This was his senior’s contention. It was a stratagem of the police to round him up. The guilty man was punished. Arulraj says that by telling lies and using their tactics, the police proved the truth. “So am I doing to the best of my ability,” says Muthaiah and goes in carrying the manuscript and the assembly breaks up (240). What the romantic ironist here strives to do is to prove that truth and falsehood are not only co-existent but complementary at times as in the cases cited by the members of this little “assembly”. What the priest in “In the Moonlight” realizes through an epiphanic experience is logically analysed in this Tamil story and accepted as the reality of existence – contradictions do exist and demand to be seen as parts of the whole.
Ramaswamy, like the French writer, believes that life cannot be contained within the boundaries of human assumptions, for it defies all calculations and spills over. In the story “Kovil Kaalayum Uzhavu Maadam” ("The Temple Bull and the Plough Ox") the author drives home the irony which militates against the morally reassuring allocation of divine punishment to the indolent and reward to the industrious. The suggestive title, “the temple bull” here refers to Vairavan Pandaram who sponges on society in the name of God and the nameless old man who works like a “plough ox” for the benefit of the community.

Throughout the story, the author focuses on the contradiction between the parasitic nature of Pandaram and the industrious workmanship in the old man. Pandaram is a strong and well-built man who takes up the life of a mendicant, and is not worried about anything. The author describes him thus:

What a majestic appearance he has! He has royal radiance; he is sturdily built; he has the beard that befits great sages. He has holy ash on the forehead, chest and upper arms. On holy ash he wears sandal paste and has placed saffron on it. He has tied around his waist over his dhoti an ochre towel. (53)

On the other hand, the diligent old man is seen to be

Lean in body as a dried fish. Just a fruit whose juice has been squeezed out. The veins on his shins stand out throbbing. His
hair has grown thick like a jungle. He has a dirty towel around his waist. He is a little hard of hearing. That could be discerned on his face. (53)

One night the old man arrives at the dilapidated temple, where Pandaram and the female dog fed by him dwell. He seeks Pandaram’s permission to spend that night there as he is footsore. Vairavan gives him the dog’s share of the food and turns away the dog without its meal. Vairavan has a lazy routine. He bathes in the morning, puts up his hair with great care and rubs sandal (54). It takes nearly an hour to complete his make up. He goes out carrying a long pole with a suspended bowl on either end to receive rice as alms. The next day when Pandaram goes on his usual rounds for begging, the old man cleans the ground around the temple and makes it neat and tidy.

The old man could not even imagine staying idle and he is proud that he has been working for forty years without getting tired. On Saturdays, Pandaram takes an oil bath and does not go out. He spends a lot of time rubbing his carefully maintained body. On a Saturday, while Pandaram applies oil on his body, the old man sharpens his knife and narrates the story of his life. He proudly says that his hardy hands are clear proof of his industrious habits. He belongs to a family of palmyra climbers. People of his locality know how hard he works. Now as he has grown aged, he is not able to climb trees. Moreover, he fell sick the previous year. He could work only
on the soil, but no one hires him. He led a marital life with a good-natured woman who took care of him like a mother when he fell sick. One day she left the world leaving him alone and miserable. Neither of his two sons was useful to him. One fell from a palmyra tree and died. The other grew up into a rogue and tried even to cut off his dead mother’s earlobes to take her gold jewels. The old man chased the boy away threatening to cut him to pieces with a chopper. The rich landlord for whom the old man worked for twenty years, sacked him when he lost his strength for doing heavy work. Whenever Pandaram wishes to eat delicious meals or wants to buy dhotis, he collects money in the name of conducting festival at the temple.

Pandaram is seen to be a self-centered man; but the old man, though weakened and wearied by his sad experiences in life, is seen to be an extrovert who wants to work for the welfare of others. The sight of a mother beating her child for drinking more water than that she could spare makes him understand how much the people of that area suffer without sufficient supply of drinking water. So he decides to dig a well there. Every day the old man goes out to dig the well and works all day until he finds water at the bottom. He takes up the difficult task and achieves his goal through his laborious work. He ignores Pandaram’s discouraging words. He grows so thin as the days go by. Pandaram feels that the old man has really gone crazy about the well. The women breaking stones at the quarry, help him to take out the rain
water from the well, but they make fun of him for his labour. One day Pandaram goes to the spot and is taken aback to see the back-breaking work done by the old man.

At last he falls ill and refuses to go to a doctor to take treatment. His last wish is to have a drink of water from the newly dug well. When Pandaram tells him that the members of a rich man’s family quenched their thirst with the water from the well and that the rich man himself promised to have its wall erected and provide it with a rope and pulley, the old man feels delighted.

The Tamil story puts one in mind of the French story titled “A Useful House” where one sees two bosom friends, Count Robert de Bordenave, a bankrupt aristocrat who sponges on his friend, Sebastien Quillianet, who comes from an obscure labourer’s family and rises from rags to riches by dint of hard work. The roguery of the extravagant aristocrat and the gullibility of the millionaire who values his honour are presented for the reader to see. They are what I. A. Richards would term “complementary impulses” (qtd. in Muecke, Irony and the Ironic 26). Pandaram’s lot in life as a parasite has left him free from sorrow or suffering. He has throughout been a dishonest idler. The old man’s lot in life, on the other hand, has been a tale of drudgery and dreariness. His marriage had a tragic termination; the death of his elder son saddened him further; the roguery of his younger son enraged him. And to top
it all, his employer's summary dismissal without any money at the end of twenty years left him terribly soured but not selfish. Finally he had to quit his home and throw in his lot with the idle parasite.

Romantic irony thus enables one to see realities on either side. Irony in its different forms corrects one's naïve assumption that all is gold that glitters. "The Diary of a Madman" was written by Maupassant probably to drive home in a fictional fashion the words of Christ uttered to the Pharisees of his day who had gathered to stone a harlot to death, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7). There is in every person a dichotomy between their outer face and inner self. The contrast between one's apparent image in the public eye and one's real image makes up the narrative strand in this story. Here is a Janus-faced magistrate "whose irreproachable life was a proverb in all the courts of France." He died at the ripe old age of eighty-two, "honored by the homage and followed by the regrets of a whole people." Lawyers, young counsellors and even fellow judges used to bow low to salute him out of reverence for the man with the "grand face, pale and thin, illumined by two bright, deep-set eyes." He spent all his career "in pursuing crime and in protecting the weak." He could "read in the recesses of" the minds of criminals "their most secret thoughts" (563).

The discovery of the departed man's diary among the "records of great criminals" in his desk causes a virtual volte-face in everyone's attitude
towards the apparently “upright” magistrate (563). In the diary titled “WHY?” he tells of the human instinct to kill and derive pleasure from this brutal act. He makes here a confession of how he went on a killing spree behind the back of his admiring public. His first victim is the goldfinch of his servant. He chocks it and later cuts it with scissors and enjoys seeing “the blood trickle” (564). His next victim is a small boy left alone in the wood. He strangles him, but he could not satisfy his passion for killing as he did not see blood. He admits, “If I had seen the blood flow it seems to me I should be tranquil now!” (565). And his uncontrollable urge to see blood makes him kill with a spade a fisherman, sleeping on a river bank. His justification for spilling blood is given thus:

It is not enough to kill beasts; we must kill man too. Long ago this need was satisfied by human sacrifice. Now the necessity of living in society has made murder a crime. We condemn and punish the assassin! But as we cannot live without yielding to this natural and imperious instinct of death, we relieve ourselves from time to time by wars. Then a whole nation slaughters another nation. It is a feast of blood, a feast that maddens armies and intoxicates the civilians, women and children, who read by lamplight at night the feverish story of massacre. (563-64).
There is in everyone the instinct to seek pleasure even at the expense of the lives of fellow-humans. This urge makes humans out to be more harmful than beasts, for the writer says through the diary of the apparently honourable magistrate, “The beast kills without ceasing, all day, every instant of its existence. Man kills, without ceasing, to nourish himself, but since in addition he needs to kill for pleasure,…” (563). He derived pleasure out of the execution of the fisherman’s nephew whom he had condemned to be guillotined. It is this impulse that leads Renardet in “Little Louise Roque” to rape and murder a twelve-year old girl as he sees her coming out of a stream naked after her bath like a “little rustic Venus” (1002). Maupassant describes him as “A man of energy and even of violence, born to make war, to ravage conquered countries and to massacre the vanquished, full of the savage instincts of the hunter and the fighter, he scarcely took count of human life” (1004). He was “the mayor of Carvelin and the largest landowner in the district” who lived like a gentleman “greatly liked in the district” (988-989).

It is again what the “upright magistrate” calls “the irresistible need” which makes the narrator in “Fecundity” to molest a maid at an inn and mar her life. The magistrate’s words, “he kills to live, and he lives to kill,” are translated into action here (563). Governed by the hedonistic impulse, the rapist or the slayer does not see the upshot of what he does which hinders his vision of the other side or the opposite point of view. It is in this context that
Claire Colebrook feels that “Ironic must recognise that we can never overcome singular viewpoints and achieve a God-like point of view; we are always subject to a cosmic joke” (50). She goes on to say that “The ironic attitude must not just take a delight in seeing the clown slip on a banana skin ... It must recognise that we are all part of this falling; we are always dupes and effects of a life with a power well beyond our control and recognition” (51). It is to this human limitation that the narrator’s friend in “Thiraikal” refers when he tells him, “This matter would not have agitated your mind so much if you had taken her out to a hotel somewhere at your first encounter with her” (374). The narrator is shown to be no better than Kurian George and the men of his ilk who had brought Mariyammal for the satisfaction of their sexual urges. This comment hurts the narrator but as he kept remembering it he began to wonder if it could be true. When he thinks over it now with his ego removed, he could see its truthfulness (374). It is here that irony appears in its romantic form. Romantic irony is here seen to reverse the relation between “origin and effect, between origin and fall,” to quote the words of Colebrook (49). D.C. Muecke quotes Wellek to point out that Friedrich Schlegel came to believe that irony was the “recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality” (qtd. in Irony 19). To give an ironical presentation of life the writer, according to Muecke, needs to be “creative and critical, subjective and
objective, enthusiastic and realistic, emotional and rational, unconsciously inspired and a conscious artist” (Irony 20).

It may be seen that in a logical piece of writing a contradiction turns out to be counterproductive while in a literary piece contradictions are productive. One does not need to be told what roles irony in its different forms plays in various spheres of human activity. “The importance of irony in literature” as in life “is beyond question” (Muecke, Irony and the Ironic 3). Irony is seen to have a corrective function or rather the function of making the reader see realities on either side. There is in Aristotelian terms not only a peripeteia or reversal in the reader’s understanding but also an anagnorisis or recognition of the true state of affairs. Irony is seen to provide the writers with the means to unify the apparent contradictions of human experience. The stories cited here demonstrate the fact that things are not what they seem to be and that things turn out contrary to expectations. Irony provides the reader with the contrast between reality and the fallibility of human perception, which forms the basis of the fictional realms created by Maupassant and Ramaswamy. Their fiction presents the reader with significant insights into life. Being serious writers, they select and arrange their material in order to convey most effectively the feeling or truth in its ironical form. The reader with an ironic vision perceives here the reverse of what really appears to be at first sight. The unexpressed meaning delivered by the author is missed by the
reader who is not “ironically developed” to borrow the words of Kierkegaard (qtd. in Muecke, *Ironic and the Ironic* 42). Irony in the fictional realms of the two writers, one may say, is something more than a mere literary device – it is seen to inhere in the outlook of the authors on life and human nature. Their use of its different forms is dictated by this outlook.