

modern muse

IRONY APPRECIATION 101

WINE COLLEGE

I was in London in April, 1994. I saw the premier telecast of England's equivalent of *Roseanne*. "Have you noticed how many American shops and stores there are now in London?" she asked. "I went into one the other day. When I came out I had a really bad haircut, was wearing a terrible shirt, and had completely lost the capacity to appreciate irony."

I told that story to my friend Piltz. He reminded me of the scene in *East of Eden* in which James Dean borrows money from his prostitute/madam mother in order to bail his harsh, puritanical father out of debt. "Don't you think that's ironic?" Piltz remembered her saying. "If you don't think that's ironic, you better not go to college." Maybe that college curriculum should include Irony Appreciation Hour 101.

Irony is Newt Gingrich having a lesbian half-sister. Irony is Candace Gingrich having a heterosexual half-brother. Irony is Bill Clinton as Commander-in-Chief. Irony is Robert McNamara once again, thirty years later, agreeing with the Commander-in-Chief about the Vietnam War.

Irony is Bob Dole playing the generational card two years after Clinton did, but in the opposite direction. "One last time, put your trust in the generation that won The War and brought America a half-century of pre-eminence," he urges. Ironically, that's appealing: Bill Clinton is the only American President born after 1924. "Don't trust anyone over thirty" somehow became "Don't trust anyone under seventy." Now that's ironic.

Irony is having a great country and being unable to find a great person to lead it. Irony is the Founding Fathers giving the vote only to white male land-owners like themselves. Now, in the late 20th Century, we strive toward the ideals that our Founding Fathers articulated but did not attempt. Don't you think it's ironic that we are proud of earlier Americans who did not even try, but embar-

rassed and concerned about ourselves as we reach for the congruent reality beyond hypocrisy?

Irony is America's leading the world in environmental awareness and in the development of environmental technologies, but backing off just as the world begins to address these things along with us and a huge market begins to develop. Irony is having the edge in these technologies—a \$300 billion industry expected to double by 2010—and not subsidizing their development and exportation.

Irony is subsidizing the tobacco industry, which has a lesser return on investment than do environmental technologies, while we

Irony is Newt Gingrich having a lesbian half- sister...[and] Bill Clinton as Commander-in-Chief.

subsidize research that shows the product to be dangerous. Irony is reforming the health care system while promoting high-fat food, tobacco, alcohol, caffeine, and guns.

H.L. Mencken defined democracy as that governmental system in which millions of people go to the polls and vote for Calvin Coolidge to be President of the United States. Capitalism, similarly, is that economic system in which Mike Tyson, a convicted rapist, is likely to be paid 40 to a 100 million dollars to let us watch him beat up on an older man. Now that's irony.

The sales reps for one of my clients earned an incentive trip to Kona, on the big island of Hawaii. One told the travel agent that they'd rather drive across to the outlying island than to fly. This idea wouldn't float. Another, when asked if they'd like to visit any of the other Hawaiian islands during their stay, said, "Yes, Cancun." The agent gently pointed out that Cancun is in Mexi-

co, on land, and on a different ocean. Irony: they have no idea where they're going, but huge amounts of money are spent to reward them with great privilege, while funds are removed from education so that the school system will turn out more people who don't know where they are when they are on an American island.

Irony is depriving PBS and NPR of funding, saying they are of no consequence to the Nation, while the BBC and CBC (Canada) stand as monuments to the societal value of government-subsidized broadcasting systems. Irony is decrying—justifiably—the deleterious effects of the popular media on our taste, on our lust for violence, on our lust for lust, on our safety—and then quashing funds for the public alternative, a model for the role media might play in the maintenance of civil society.

I bought the video of *East of Eden* so I could be conscientiously accurate in the preparation of this article. It turns out that Piltz was wrong: Dean's mother calls the situation "funny," not "ironic." Still, if you don't think this is all ironic, you might want to consider an alternative to college. Ironically enough, the most lucrative and most highly-valued jobs—movie and TV star, sports star, rock star—don't require degrees anyway.

I live with the hope that it's possible to have a good hair day, wear a great shirt, and retain the capacity to appreciate irony. The value of irony-appreciation is that it requires us to look directly at the paradoxes that surround us, to admit the contradictions of our lives and our way of life, to slip the noose off certainty, to expand our palette of black/white, either/or beliefs into the multiple grays of reality.

Let your gaze rest squarely and directly on those muted, subtle grays and you will see spontaneous flashes of color. They will begin to stabilize, then to spread, and create the multi-hued canvas of compassion. ■