

## **A Study of the Use of Irony Highlighted by Fictional Elements in the Short Story**

### **“The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze the use of ironic expressions used in O Henry's short story “The Gift of the Magi”. The data sources of this research are O Henry's “The Gift of the Magi”. The data of this research were some phrases and sentences written in the short story. The data were then analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method. It gives a sufficient description of the factual data of the phenomena based on relevant theories. In addition, it reveals how the use of irony is highlighted by fictional elements. The research findings show that there are thirteen ironic expressions categorized into three groups, situational irony, verbal irony and dramatic irony. Among three categories, situational irony ranks first.

**Keywords:** Situational irony, verbal irony, dramatic irony, fictional elements

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

O Henry, original name William Sidney Porter, American short-story writer whose tales romanticized the common place-in particular the life of ordinary people in New York City. His stories based on background from America and expressed the effect of coincidence on character through humor, irony, and often had surprise endings. “The Gift of Magi” is one of his well-known stories based on irony. The use of the types of irony in the short story is the focus in this paper. The categories of irony are identified and analyzed based on their types.

### **1.2 Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ironic expressions employed in the story “The Gift of Magi” and is also designed to achieve two objectives, they are:

- a. To collect the expressions that convey the sense of irony
- b. To categorize them in terms of Znamenskya (2004).
- c. To find out which type of irony is dominant.

## **2. Review of literature**

### **2.1. What is Irony?**

There are different definitions for “irony” and different scholars have worked on the concept of irony from different points of view over the years. Therefore, giving an exact and comprehensive definition of irony is not a straightforward activity. Muecke (1969, p.7) believes that the concept of irony is vague, unstable and multiform. Cutler (1974, p.117) considers that an ironic utterance expresses a conveyed meaning which is the opposite, converse, or reverse of its literal meaning. Based on the classical definition of irony, Cutler (1974, p.117), in her article “On Saying What You Mean without Meaning What You Say,”

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considers that an ironic utterance expresses a conveyed meaning which is the “opposite,” “converse” or “reverse” of its literal meaning. She also states that the speaker produces this kind of utterance “by superimposing a certain intonation contour which signals to his hearers that the utterance is intended to be ironic.”

Corbett & Connors (1999, p.379) categorizing irony as a trope means that irony is a form of figurative language that includes “a deviation from the ordinary and principal signification” of an utterance.

## 2.2 The elements of irony

In his entry on irony, Abrams (1985, pp.97-100) defines nine categories and subcategories of irony – verbal, structural, stable and unstable, dramatic, tragic, cosmic, and romantic – along with comments upon several related terms (sarcasm, invective, and so on).

Cutler (1974, p.119) makes a distinction between “spontaneous” and “provoked” irony. In the former, “the speaker is expressing ‘what he / she means’ with no reference to previous context or conversation”. The utterances belonging to the spontaneous category must be approbatory in the literal reading. On the other hand, in a “provoked irony”, the speaker “repeats back to his audience something which the audience has previously said or held, with the ironic intonation indicating that the previous claim has turned out to be wrong”. Cutler states that a “provoked irony” also meets the “approbation Condition.”

## 2.3 Three types of irony

To be specific, irony is a literary term underlying different definitions and various categories by scholar from Socrates era to nowadays. Among different theories proposed by different scholars, this paper will deal with the metaphor type postulated by Znamenskya (2004). According to Znamenskya (2004), there are three types of irony: situational irony, verbal irony and dramatic irony.

### (1) Situational irony:

Irony of situation is a discrepancy between the expected result and actual results. It deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. It is embedded in an environment where the universe seems to be against you, in other words, when the unexpected happens. (Abrams 1985, p.97)

### (2) Verbal irony:

Abrams (1985, p.97) argued that verbal irony is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed. The ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, but with indications in the overall speech-situation that the speaker intends a very different and opposite attitude.

### (3) Dramatic irony:

In Abrams’ (1985, p.99) view dramatic irony involves a situation in which the audience or readers shares with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the character unknowingly acts in a way we recognize to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or expects the opposite of what we know that fates hold in store.

## 2.4. Fictional Elements

The elements of literature are important in understanding a story. The elements that are used to understand the ironic expressions are plot, character, setting, point of view, symbol and allegory, and theme.

### 2.5 Message in "The Gift of the Magi"

The Gift of the Magi tells about a life one couple of married in poverty but they love each other. It can be seen from Della's sacrifice that she sold her beautiful hair, to buy her husband Christmas gift. Her husband is also willing to sell his gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's, to buy her wife a Christmas gift. It proves that they love each other. From this story we can learn about how we love someone. The message conveyed is moral message, because this story tells the readers about a relationship between two people that loves and they are willing to sacrifice to their valued possessions in a display of love. Thus, the author teaches that love is the wisest gift that may be given.

### 2.6 The Previous Study

There are some related studies for this reference to this study "A Study of Irony in some O. Henry's Short Stories" by Hoang Anh Tuan. In his research it obtains learner's awareness of the wide use of irony. It focuses on analyzing the irony used in some O. Henry's short stories. Basically, those previous studies are essentially included within the review of the theories that contribute a sort of understanding.

## 3. Research methodology

This study used descriptive qualitative design because it focuses on the analysis of ironic expressions in the story. In doing so, four steps are involved: ironic expressions are collected first. Secondly, they are categorized in terms of irony types suggested by Znamenskya (2004). Next fictional elements which highlight the use of irony are explored using elements of fiction by Pickering and Hooper (1985). Then, the frequency of them is calculated and shown in the table and pie chart. Finally, it states which type of irony is most dominant.

## 4. Data analysis

In analyzing the data, the ironic expressions collected from the story are described as follow:

### 1. "A furnished flat at \$8 per week ... lookout for the mendicancy squad"

In this statement, the writer describes that once upon a time, the life of Della and Jim is in the breeze, but their life standard had declined and now they are so poor that can be vividly seen in their living room. But the writer uses the phrases "A furnished flat" and "\$8 per week". It deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. (setting, plot-exposition)

### 2. "Was a card bearing the name Mr. James Dillingham Young?"

The statement mentions that since the house was full of facilities; door bell, letter box and the name card "Mr. James Dillingham young", but they are unattractive now, the card is not harmonious with their current life as they cannot afford to buy the Christmas gift. The card is a symbol that has an opposite attitude and appears as verbal. (setting, symbol, plot)

**3. "Now, when the income was shrunk so \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming"**

The statement refers to the young couple life at that time, when the home's standard gradually declined, the income was \$20, and their life styles are specifically different that the writer uses the irony in the phrase "seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming." The ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, but with indications in the overall speech-situation that the speaker intends a very different and opposite attitude. The speaker intends a very different and opposite attitude. It is verbal irony. (Setting, plot. Limited omniscient point of view)

**4. "Grand as the watch was, he sometime looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain (character, symbol, plot- rising action)**

In this statement, the writer uses the irony and describes the symbol as Jim's precious watch. Della knows that Jim sometime looks out of his watch and he was proud of his gold watch," the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain" because it was beautiful, valuable, and handed down to him from his father, who inherited it from his grandfather, mention "Grand as the watch was, he sometime looked at it. The speaker intends a very different and opposite attitude. It is verbal irony. (character, symbol, plot)

**5. "..he was only twenty -two and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves."**

In this statement, the use of metaphor and irony can be seen. The author describes the poverty of Jim's life that "to be burdened with a family" He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves, he also appears to be very serious, despite his relatively young age. He does not have new coat and new gloves. It is situational irony as it deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. (character, plot- exposition)

**6. "His eyes were fixed upon Della there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her"**

The narrator expresses that Jim is the first to recognize Jim's behavior, when Jim returned from work, he immediately notices that Della has cut her hair, he simply stared at her fixedly with the peculiar expression on his face. Typically, he also sells his watch for buying Christmas present for Della's beautiful hair, but Della has already sold out her long hair, the audience or readers shares with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation. (character, plot, climax)

**7. "Jim darling," she cried, don't look at me that way I had my hair cut off and sold because I could not have lived through Christmas without giving you present."**

In this statement, the writer mentions a situational irony that Della is worry Jim's looks and she does not tolerable Jim looks at her, she thinks Jim seems to be expected a long hair until she belongs to it, the phrase "I had my hair cut off". She explains Jim that her hair has cut and already sold out for buying Christmas' present. The speaker intends a very different and opposite attitude. It is verbal irony. (Della's character, allegorary – Christmas, traditions for

family- having fun by giving presents and having family dinner together while praising God, plot- falling action)

**8. ".. you won't mind, will you? I just do it. My hair is awfully fast"**

The irony can be used in this statement. Della explains Jim about her hair. Once she belongs to a beautiful hair but now, she has cut and sold out for buying a Christmas present for Jim so, she quickly explains that her hair will be fast grown up and don't to be worry about that, "You won't mind" "My hair is awfully fast". It is situational irony as it deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. (Della's character, plot- falling action)

**9. "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chop on, Jim?"**

In this statement, it can be seen the uses of ironically and the author mentions that Della said her husband about her hair, it is not important her hair and she was happy to sacrifice it for her husband and buy an especially expensive watch band for Jim. This was because they believed express their love for each other. It is situational irony as it deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. (Della's character, plot- falling action)

**10. "Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said about me .... But if you will unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while a first"**

In this statement, the author uses irony. The utterance is that Jim says to Della, Jim explains Della that firstly he misunderstands his wife so, Della is very sad and why Jim acts like that Jim also bought the beautiful combs for Della. It is situational irony as it deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. (Della's character, plot- falling action)

**11. ".. with jeweled rims just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair."**

In this statement, the author mentions the beautiful combs that Jim bought which are worthy with Della's beautiful hair. But Della has cut her hair. The speaker intends a situation in which the audience or readers shares with the author's knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the character unknowingly acts in a way we recognize to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances in dramatic point of view. (Character, theme)

**12. "And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornment were gone."**

In this statement describes that Della's a beautiful long hair. When Della saw that Jim has bought her the expensive and beautiful combs. She coveted immediately after she has just cut off and sold all of her hair, now, she has no more hair, "now, they were hers, but the tresses", "the coveted adornment were gone.", these are irony coveted adornment were gone." The speaker intends a situation in which the audience or readers shares with the author's knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the character unknowingly acts in a way we recognize to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances. (dramatic point of view)

### 13. "their gifts were no doubt wise one"

In this statement, the writer references to the Biblical-Magi by using irony. He contrasts the magi with Della and Jim, whose gifts are not wise, they sell the most valuable things they own to buy gifts for each other but they do not use them the current time, it is irony. Actually, they are wise men because they can sacrifice their own valuable things for their lovers with Biblical testament, it is imagery It is situational irony as it deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. (Omniscient point of view, theme, plot, - surprising denouement)

The use of irony in "The Gift of Magi" can be analyzed in the following table.

No	Type of Irony	Elements of Fiction Highlighting Irony					
		Plot	Character	Setting	Point of View	Symbol and Allegory	Theme
1	Situational	✓		✓			
2	Verbal	✓		✓		✓	
3	Verbal	✓		✓	✓		
4	Verbal	✓				✓	
5	Situational	✓	✓				
6	Situational	✓	✓				
7	Verbal	✓	✓			✓	
8	Situational	✓	✓				
9	Situational	✓	✓				
10	Situational	✓	✓				
11	Dramatic		✓				✓
12	Dramatic				✓		
13	Situational	✓			✓		✓

## 5. Findings and Discussion

Within a very short story. The author portrays the story vividly using sarcasm in an attractive way. The end of the story is also a good example of situational irony in which character is faced with the circumstance that is the opposite of what they expected. The narrator of "The Gift of the Magi" intrudes upon the story multiple times using ironic expressions. O. Henry uses irony ironic expressions to develop the theme of the story. It is found that the situational irony is dominant as the ironic statements usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, and they indicate in the overall speech-situations that the speaker intends a very different and unexpected situations.

As what has been mentioned in the first objective of this research, this paper specifies its study by analyzing the types of irony. In this section, it is found that there are thirteen ironic expressions that convey the sense of irony appearing in the story. Seven expressions of situational irony, four expressions of verbal irony and two expressions of dramatic irony are

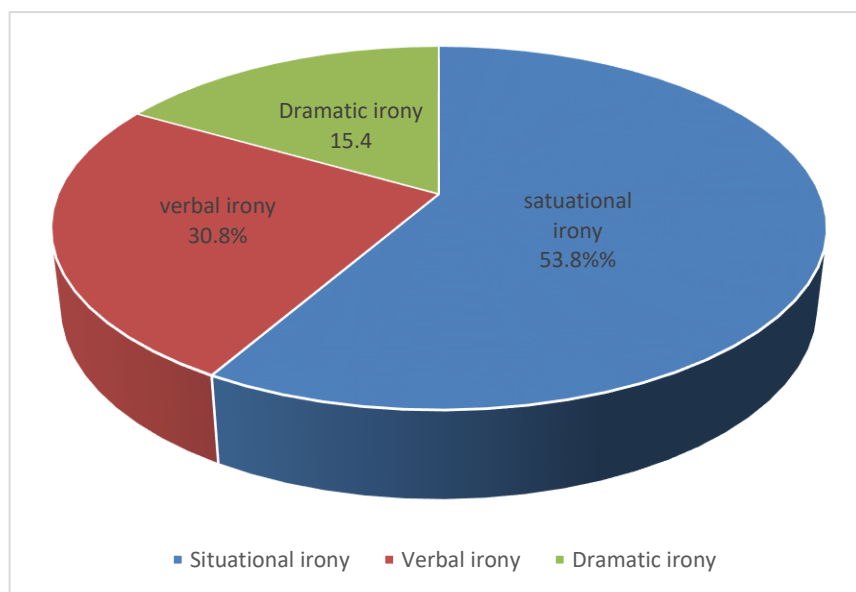
categorized according to their expressions that convey the sense of irony. And as what mentioned in the second objective of this paper, situational irony is dominantly used in the short story.

The frequency of the use of irony in "The Gift of Magi" can be seen in the following table.

**Table 1 Frequency of the Use of Irony in "The Gift of Magi"**

No.	Types of Irony	Total	Percentage
1	Situational irony	7	53.8%
2	Verbal irony	4	30.8%
3	Dramatic irony	2	15.4%
<b>Total</b>		<b>13</b>	<b>100%</b>

For clarity, the percentages of the results are shown in the following pie chart.



**Figure 1. Average Percentages of the Use of Three Types of Irony in the "The Gift of Magi" are shown in the pie chart.**

## 5. Conclusion

This paper investigates the types of irony occurred in O Henry's short story. Based on the findings and discussion, some conclusions can be drawn related to the objectives of the study.

1. There are 14 ironic expressions found in the story, categorized as situational irony, verbal irony and dramatic irony.
2. Verbal irony is the most dominant among the three types.

Based on the conclusion, for the students and the readers who are interested in analyzing rhetorical devices about short story, it is suggested to understand the figurative language contained in the short story before they understand the whole short story. By understanding the figurative languages it can help them easier to catch the real meaning and message in the short story. For further researcher, it is hoped this paper can be used as a reference to conduct another research on categories of irony in different short story.

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