

RESEARCH ARTICLE



TEACHING IRONY: "THE GIFT OF THE MAGI" IN THE UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT



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This paper explores the teaching of irony through O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" (1905) to 5th Semester undergraduate students at Government Degree College, Bijbehara, J&K. Drawing on Wayne C. Booth's concept of stable irony and Louise Rosenblatt's transactional model of reading, the paper suggests that the story's compact structure and its effective use of situational, dramatic, and verbal irony make it particularly suitable for introducing irony as an analytical concept to students who are relatively new to literary-critical terminology. The discussion places classroom practice in relation to existing scholarship on the teaching of irony and considers the story's critical reception. It also proposes a teaching approach that combines prediction activities, close reading, and guided reconstruction of meaning. Particular attention is given to the challenges of teaching an ironic and culturally distant English text to second-language learners in a Kashmiri undergraduate classroom.

Keywords: *Irony, O. Henry, The Gift of the Magi, Reader-response Theory, Undergraduate pedagogy, Wayne Booth, Kashmir.*





INTRODUCTION

Irony is perhaps one of the most frequently used terms in the undergraduate literature classroom, yet it is also one of the most difficult for students to understand precisely. Most students come to class already familiar with the word in everyday conversation, where it is often used to describe something resembling coincidence, contradiction, or bad luck rather than the deliberate and structured gap between appearance and reality that literary criticism associates with irony. This difference between the everyday and literary meanings of the term presents a distinctive pedagogical challenge. The teacher is not introducing a completely unfamiliar concept but helping students rethink a word they believe they already understand, which can often be more difficult. The present paper examines and theorizes a classroom approach for teaching irony to 5th-semester undergraduate students of English Literature at Government Degree College, Bijbehara, an affiliated college of the University of Kashmir, using O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" as the principal teaching text.

The selection of this story is deliberate. "The Gift of the Magi" is brief enough to be read in a single sitting and accessible enough in its surface narrative to be followed by learners for whom English is a second or third language. At the same time, its carefully constructed ironic structure offers sufficient complexity to support the slow, guided rereading required in a theory-oriented literature class. In this sense, the story can be viewed as a threshold text: it occupies a space where students can move beyond simply responding to a story in terms of whether they like or dislike it and begin examining how the text

creates its particular effects. The paper, therefore, begins by introducing the theoretical vocabulary of irony that informs the classroom approach, followed by a close analysis of the story's ironic structure with direct reference to the text. It then considers the story's critical reception before turning to the classroom methodology used at Government Degree College Bijbehara and reflecting on its outcomes and challenges, particularly those involved in teaching a culturally American, century-old text of manners to students from the Kashmir Valley.

1. IRONY AS A LITERARY AND PEDAGOGICAL CATEGORY

Classroom discussions of irony usually begin with a familiar threefold classification: verbal irony, in which a speaker's words convey a meaning different from, and often contrary to, their literal sense; situational irony, in which an outcome differs significantly from what is expected; and dramatic irony, in which the reader or audience knows something that a character does not. Although this classification is useful as an introductory teaching tool, it remains theoretically limited. A more meaningful approach to teaching irony should therefore encourage students to move beyond simply identifying its different types.

One of the most influential theoretical discussions of irony is Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), in which he presents what he calls "stable irony" as a deliberate and reconstructible form of communication between author and reader rather than merely as a figure of speech. Booth identifies four general characteristics of stable irony: it is intentional, covert, "intended to be reconstructed with meaning different from those on the surface", and stable in that it produces a relatively fixed, local



meaning rather than an endless range of interpretations (Booth 6). Importantly, Booth does not regard the recognition of irony as an automatic response. Instead, he describes it as a process of reconstruction in which the reader first rejects the literal meaning, considers possible alternative meanings, tests them against the presumed intentions of the author or narrator, and finally arrives at an interpretation that is consistent with those intentions. For the literature classroom, the significance of Booth's approach lies precisely in this procedural dimension: "finding the irony" can be presented not as an intuitive discovery but as a process that can be demonstrated, practised, and taught.

Booth's theory also helps explain why irony can be particularly challenging to teach. Its recognition often depends on cultural, social, and moral assumptions that are shared, but not necessarily stated, by the author and reader. When readers do not share the ironist's assumptions about what should be regarded as foolish, admirable, wise, or worthy of criticism, they may interpret an ironic statement as sincere. This issue becomes especially relevant in a Kashmiri undergraduate classroom, where students may encounter a text shaped by the cultural assumptions and domestic sentiment of early twentieth-century America.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading provides the second major theoretical foundation for the classroom approach used at Government Degree College Bijbehara. Rosenblatt distinguishes between an efferent stance, in which readers approach a text primarily to take away information, and an aesthetic stance, in which they

attend more closely to the lived and felt experience of reading. She argues that meaning emerges neither exclusively from the text nor exclusively from the reader but through the transaction between the two. From this perspective, irony is not simply a hidden meaning that exists independently within a story and waits to be discovered. Rather, it becomes fully meaningful through the reader's engagement with the text, particularly when an aesthetic mode of reading enables the reader to supply the evaluative framework that the narrator deliberately leaves unstated.

2. O. HENRY AND "THE GIFT OF THE MAGI": TEXT AND CONTEXT

"The Gift of the Magi" was first published in 1905 and was collected the following year in *The Four Million*, William Sydney Porter's (O. Henry's) collection of stories centered on the lives of ordinary working New Yorkers. The plot is deliberately simple: Della Young, having saved only one dollar and eighty-seven cents for her husband Jim's Christmas present, sells her most prized possession—her long hair—to purchase a platinum watch chain for Jim's heirloom pocket watch. On Christmas Eve, however, she discovers that Jim has sold the very watch to buy the jeweled combs she has long admired for her hair. The story establishes its economic and emotional stakes from its opening sentence: "One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all" (O. Henry 16). This opening reflects O. Henry's characteristic technique of placing a precise, almost account-like detail at the beginning of the narrative, only to reveal by the end that such calculations have little bearing on the real value of the gifts the couple exchange.



Structurally, the story belongs to the form for which O. Henry is best remembered, and sometimes dismissed: the short story organized around a surprise, or “trick,” ending. Despite its enormous popularity, the story “has mostly failed to attract serious critical analysis,” and many commentators have regarded it as “more of an anecdote, devoid of complex characters and themes” (*Short Story Criticism*). This critical judgment is particularly relevant to classroom discussion because it raises a genuine question rather than presenting students with an established consensus: should a story that relies so heavily on a single reversal be regarded as a significant literary achievement or merely as a skillfully constructed anecdote? Approaching the story in this way allows its most accessible features, such as its brevity, straightforward plot, and memorable reversal, to become subjects of critical inquiry rather than reasons for treating the text as less worthy of serious literary study.

3. READING THE IRONY OF THE TEXT:

3a. THE SITUATIONAL IRONY OF THE TWIN SACRIFICE:

The story's central irony is situational: each character's sacrifice unintentionally removes the very condition that would have made the other's gift useful. Once Della cuts her hair, it can no longer serve as the object for Jim's combs; consequently, the combs become, at least for a considerable period of time, ornaments without a practical purpose. Similarly, after Jim sells his watch, Della's chain has nothing to hold. From the opening of the story, the narrator draws attention to the couple's financial difficulties and their determination to give each other a meaningful gift despite their limited means. This

emotional tension reaches a turning point when Della “flop[s] down on the shabby little couch and howls” (O. Henry 16) before drying her eyes and turning to the window and standing looking out dully. Such seemingly ordinary domestic details do more than describe Della's surroundings and emotional state; they establish the material deprivation against which the story's irony unfolds. Thus, when the final reversal occurs, it does not appear merely as a clever plot device. Instead, it emerges as the natural and almost inevitable consequence of two people whose love for each other exceeds their ability to calculate the practical consequences of their sacrifices.

3b. DRAMATIC IRONY AND THE COMPLICITY OF THE READER:

O. Henry withholds Jim's parallel sacrifice from both Della and the reader until the story's final movement, but he also creates a subtler effect through the narrator's apparent foreknowledge. Throughout the story, the narrator offers gentle hints, often in a tone of knowing indulgence, that the two gifts are likely to be rendered useless, without explicitly revealing why. As a result, the reader occupies an uncertain position: unlike an omniscient audience, the reader is not fully aware of what is about to happen, yet is also not completely unaware, as Della is. This partial withholding creates suspense rather than simple anticipation. It demonstrates the narrator's careful control over the reader's access to information and illustrates the kind of knowledge manipulation that classroom approaches to irony need to identify and articulate.



3c. VERBAL IRONY AND THE NARRATOR'S VOICE:

The story's closing paragraph contains its most explicit use of verbal irony and provides both the basis for its title and the foundation of its moral argument. After describing Jim and Della as "two foolish children" because they have sacrificed their most valuable possessions for each other, the narrator ultimately reverses this judgment: "Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi" (O. Henry 25). Here, the word "foolish" is not merely replaced by "wisest"; its meaning itself is transformed. What appears foolish according to the values of the marketplace becomes wisdom when judged by the values of love and self-sacrifice. Verbal irony, therefore, operates here not simply through a sarcastic statement but through a redefinition of moral language. This dimension of the story is particularly relevant to Booth's account of reconstruction: the reader must question the narrator's earlier surface judgment of "foolish," measure it against the story's evident sympathy for the couple, and ultimately arrive at the deeper and more stable meaning that the narrator has been guiding the reader toward.

4. CRITICAL RECEPTION: ANECDOTE OR ART?

The scholarly neglect of "The Gift of the Magi" warrants brief consideration because it highlights a genuine and useful critical debate rather than a controversy created solely for the classroom. The story's enormous popularity, its frequent appearance in anthologies, and its growing association with children's and holiday reading have, somewhat ironically, worked against its standing among literary scholars. Its polished and accessible style has often

been taken as evidence of literary superficiality. One early assessment, collected in *Short Story Criticism*, acknowledges O. Henry's technical skill but argues that his "irony ... seems to stop short of a true criticism of life or even of human behaviour" (*Short Story Criticism*). Other readers, however, resist this judgment by drawing attention to the story's economic realism. In the essay, "Sacrificial Love: Analysis of The Gift of the Magi," for instance, the writer argues that O. Henry's ironic ending suggests "that money and materialistic possessions are valued less and provide less happiness than their love for each other." From this perspective, the irony is not simply a device for producing a sentimental surprise; it also serves a meaningful ethical purpose. Bringing this disagreement into the classroom—whether the story's irony is merely decorative or offers a genuine critique—gives students a reason to engage with the text beyond simply identifying its literary devices. It invites them to consider the larger question of what irony is meant to accomplish.

5. TEACHING THE STORY AT GOVERNMENT DEGREE COLLEGE, BIJBEHARA:

5a. THE UG 5TH SEMESTER CLASSROOM: PROFILE AND CONSTRAINTS:

The 5th semester undergraduate classroom at Government Degree College, Bijbehara, reflects a fairly common profile of a constituent college affiliated with the University of Kashmir. Students generally come to the classroom having studied English mainly as a subject of instruction rather than as a language used regularly in everyday communication. As a result, their reading fluency is often stronger than their confidence in speaking or analyzing texts in English. By the 5th semester, most



students have encountered basic literary terms such as plot, character, and theme in earlier courses. However, they have had relatively limited opportunities to apply specific rhetorical or narratological concepts, such as irony, systematically to an entire literary text. The 5th semester, therefore, provides a suitable stage for introducing irony more formally: students have sufficient familiarity with literary vocabulary to engage with the concept, while still having enough room to develop a more sustained understanding of it.

5b. WHY "THE GIFT OF THE MAGI" WORKS AS A TEACHING TEXT:

Three features make the story particularly effective for this classroom. First, its brevity makes it possible to read the complete text closely within a single extended session. This allows irony to be introduced inductively, beginning with the students' engagement with the text rather than with an abstract definition imposed upon selected passages. Second, the plot is built around a single, clearly defined reversal, making the central instance of situational irony relatively easy to identify without the complication of multiple subplots. Third, and most importantly for the present theory-building exercise, the story brings together all three conventional forms of irony—situational, dramatic, and verbal—within roughly two thousand words. A single reading can therefore provide sufficient material to explore the entire taxonomy, without requiring students to move among several texts to illustrate each type separately.

6. CLASSROOM METHODOLOGY:

6a. READER-RESPONSE AND THE AESTHETIC STANCE:

Following Rosenblatt, the first classroom session deliberately avoids introducing the term "irony" or any formal critical framework. Instead, students are asked to read the story first as readers, focusing on their immediate aesthetic responses: where they felt surprised, moved, or amused, and which sentence marked the point at which their expectations about the ending were overturned. This initial reading places students' responses before critical analysis, reflecting Rosenblatt's view that a genuine, personally experienced response to a textual reversal provides the starting point for understanding irony, rather than serving as a distraction from it.

6b. BOOTH'S FOUR STEPS AS A CLASSROOM HEURISTIC:

The second session turns Booth's account of reconstructing stable irony into a clear four-step classroom procedure. The procedure is applied to the narrator's closing description of Jim and Della as "foolish children." Students are first asked to explain the surface meaning of the line, then to identify what in the story makes that meaning inadequate or difficult to sustain. They next propose an alternative interpretation and finally test it against the sympathies and values evident throughout the story. Making Booth's procedure explicit, rather than simply asking students to identify irony, helps present it as a method of reading that can be learned and practiced. It also reduces the extent to which successful interpretation depends on students' prior and unevenly distributed cultural or literary knowledge.



6c. ACTIVITIES: PREDICTION, ROLE-PLAY, AND CLOSE READING:

Three additional activities reinforce this approach in the classroom. In the prediction exercise, reading is paused immediately after Della sells her hair, and students are asked to write briefly about what they expect Jim's gift to be and the reasons for their prediction. When the revelation about the sold watch follows, students can compare the outcome directly with their earlier expectations, making situational irony something they have personally experienced rather than merely an abstract literary definition. A short role-play or paired dramatic reading of the moment when Jim first sees Della's shorn hair can similarly support students who are more confident in spoken than written English. By performing the scene, they can experience its dramatic irony, since they know, unlike Della at that moment, what Jim is about to reveal. Finally, a close-reading worksheet highlights brief passages, including the opening reference to "one dollar and eighty-seven cents" and the concluding "magi" passage. Students are asked to mark the gap between the literal statement and the intended meaning, thereby reinforcing the vocabulary and interpretive distinctions.

7. OBSERVATIONS FROM THE CLASSROOM:

Two broad patterns emerged repeatedly across the sessions in which this methodology was used. First, students were generally able to identify the situational irony of the twin sacrifice with little difficulty, as the reversal is made clear by the plot events. The more difficult task was helping them move beyond simply recognizing that a reversal had occurred to explaining how the narrator's language anticipates and shapes that reversal. Second, the

verbal irony of the concluding "magi" passage proved to be the stage at which the four-step reconstruction procedure was most useful. Students who initially accepted the narrator's description of Jim and Della as "foolish" in a literal sense were, by the end of the guided exercise, able to explain why the label is subsequently qualified and what alternative standard of value the story establishes in its place. This movement from an initial literal reading to a reconstructed interpretation through a sequence of explicit steps provides the clearest evidence from ordinary classroom practice that Booth's model of stable irony can function as a teachable procedure rather than merely as a description of expert reading.

8. CHALLENGES IN A MULTILINGUAL, SECOND-LANGUAGE SETTING:

Teaching irony in a classroom where English is generally a second or third language, learned alongside Kashmiri and Urdu, presents difficulties that theoretical discussions of irony, developed largely with first-language classrooms in mind, do not always address. Verbal irony is particularly demanding because it requires students to notice a difference between what is said and the tone or context in which it is said. This distinction can easily be missed by learners who are still developing confidence in sentence-level comprehension and who may understandably interpret each statement at the same literal level. The story's early-twentieth-century American setting also creates a degree of cultural distance. References to a walk-up flat, the exchange of store-bought Christmas gifts, and a household economy measured in dollars and cents require some contextual explanation before students can fully understand the circumstances that make the



story's irony meaningful rather than simply unfortunate. The methodology described above addresses these difficulties in two ways: it begins with an aesthetic, personally felt response before introducing technical terminology, and it uses prediction and role-play activities to make the central reversal concrete and experienceable, rather than leaving students to accept its significance as an abstract critical claim.

CONCLUSION

"The Gift of the Magi" holds a somewhat unusual place in the undergraduate curriculum. Although some critics have regarded it as too slight to merit sustained scholarly attention, its very simplicity makes it particularly useful for teaching irony as a concept rather than merely presenting it as a literary device. Read through Wayne Booth's account of stable irony and Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, the story becomes, for a 5th semester classroom at Government Degree College, Bijbehara, a compact yet genuinely layered text for analysis: its plot depends on situational irony, its narration creates dramatic irony, and its closing moral vocabulary introduces a form of verbal irony. Teaching the story in this context also highlights the limitations of irony pedagogy, largely developed with first-language readers in mind. The classroom experience suggests that a method which begins with students' aesthetic responses and gradually moves towards the technical reconstruction of irony may be more effective in a multilingual undergraduate setting than an approach that introduces theoretical terminology before engaging students with the text itself. Further classroom-based research, particularly through systematic analysis of student writing across

different cohorts, would help test these qualitative observations more rigorously and provide a stronger basis for comparing the teaching of irony in other short stories included in the 5th semester syllabus.

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