

Structuralism Analysis of Irony and Sacrifice in The Gift of The Magi

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Abstract

Short stories are one of the most accessible forms of literary work and are important to analyze through their intrinsic elements, as they reflect human life in both realistic and imaginative ways through concise narratives. In O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, the phenomena of irony and sacrifice are strongly portrayed through the characters' actions and the development of the plot, which contribute significantly to the meaning of the story. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how irony and sacrifice are represented through the intrinsic elements of the short story by applying a structuralist approach. This study uses a qualitative method with descriptive analysis. The findings show that irony and sacrifice are interconnected in constructing the story's meaning, particularly through characterization and plot development. These elements strengthen the emotional impact and moral message conveyed in the story. Thus, this study highlights that the relationship between intrinsic elements can provide a deeper understanding of the literary work.

Keyword: *Short Story, Intrinsic Elements, Structuralism, Irony, Sacrafice*

Introduction

Short story, as one of the most accessible forms of literary works, plays an important role in representing human life through concise and meaningful narratives (Khan & Bishobidyaloy, 2021). As part of literature, short stories portray human conflicts, interactions, and resolutions in a structured way, allowing readers to understand various aspects of life. According to (Wellek & Warren, 1949), literature reflects social conditions and human behavior while also functioning as an artistic structure formed through interconnected intrinsic elements. Intrinsic elements such as theme, character, plot, conflict, and setting

contribute to the construction of meaning within literary works. Literary works also present various themes and moral values, making literature not only an artistic expression but also a medium for understanding life. In addition, literature encourages empathy and critical thinking among readers (Freeman & Phillips, 2021).

One literary work that strongly reflects these aspects is *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry. The short story presents a simple yet meaningful narrative centered on a young married couple, Jim and Della, who live under modest economic conditions during Christmas Eve. Despite their financial limitations, both characters attempt to buy

meaningful gifts for each other, which leads them to sacrifice their most valuable possessions. Della sells her hair to buy a chain for Jim's watch, while Jim sells his watch to buy combs for Della's hair (Henry, 1905). These actions create a phenomenon in which sacrifice becomes closely connected to irony. The story ultimately presents an unexpected outcome where the gifts they purchase can no longer be used for their intended purposes. This contrast between intention and reality creates situational irony and becomes one of the central aspects that shapes the meaning of the story.

The phenomenon of sacrifice and irony in *The Gift of the Magi* is important to analyze because both elements are structurally connected throughout the narrative. Sacrifice functions as the driving force of the plot (Aisha & Hikmat, 2024), while irony emerges as the consequence of the characters' actions (Alkhidir, 2024). The relationship between these elements contributes significantly to the emotional impact and thematic meaning of the story. Through the interaction among intrinsic elements such as character, plot, conflict, and setting, the narrative presents a deeper understanding of sincere love, devotion, and selflessness. Therefore, analyzing how these elements interact within the narrative structure provides a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed in the story.

This study adopts a structuralism approach to analyze *The Gift of the Magi*. Structuralism views literary works as systems composed of interconnected intrinsic elements that function together to create

meaning (Abdulwahid et al., 2022). According to (Wellek & Warren, 1949), intrinsic elements including theme, character, plot, conflict, and setting form an integrated structure that shapes the meaning of literary works. Through this approach, the analysis focuses on the internal structure of the story rather than external aspects such as the author's background or social context. In this study, irony is analyzed through the development of the plot and the unexpected ending, while sacrifice is analyzed through the actions and decisions of the main characters. The interaction between these elements demonstrates that irony and sacrifice emerge from the internal structure of the narrative itself (H & S, 2025)

Previous studies on *The Gift of the Magi* have examined the story from various perspectives. Some studies focus on cultural phenomena and moral values reflected in the story (Kupang, 2022), while others analyze the theme of love without comprehensively relating it to intrinsic elements such as plot and characterization (Zala, 2017). In addition, several studies examine irony through textual expressions and evidence within the story (Girsang et al., 2025). However, these studies tend to discuss the elements separately without analyzing how intrinsic elements function collectively as an interconnected structure through a structuralism approach. In particular, limited attention has been given to how sacrifice and irony are simultaneously constructed through character, plot, and conflict. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing how intrinsic elements are presented and how their interaction constructs the meaning of irony and sacrifice within the narrative.

Based on this background, this study is guided by two research questions: (1) how are intrinsic elements presented in *The Gift of the Magi*, and (2) how do irony and sacrifice construct the meaning of the story through the interaction of intrinsic elements? Accordingly, the study aims to examine the intrinsic elements in the short story and analyze how their interaction develops irony and sacrifice in shaping meaning. This study contributes to literary studies by providing a structural analysis of how intrinsic elements function as an interconnected system in constructing meaning within a literary work (Mulawarman et al., 2021). In addition, the study provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between irony and sacrifice as mutually connected elements within the narrative structure.

Literary works highlight universal values such as empathy, love, and sacrifice, contributing to moral and emotional development. Literature serves as both entertainment and an educational medium that fosters critical thinking, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding. This aligns with SDG 4: Quality Education, which emphasizes the development of essential life skills such as social awareness and empathy. Reading literature also enhances emotional intelligence and character building, as readers learn to understand characters' perspectives. Studies show that literary fiction improves theory of mind and social awareness, helping individuals become more empathetic and socially responsible (Shigaeff, 2023).

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a structuralist framework. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on the analysis of intrinsic elements in literary works, such as theme, character, and plot. The study specifically examines how irony and sacrifice are represented through these elements and how they are interconnected in constructing the meaning of the story. Through the structuralist approach, literary works are understood as a system composed of interconnected elements that work together to produce meaning (Wellek & Warren, 1949). The data source of this study is O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi*. The data consist of words, sentences, narrations, and dialogues found in the short story that reflect intrinsic elements, particularly characterization, plot development, irony, and sacrifice. The data collection techniques used in this study were documentation and library research. The documentation technique involved reading the short story repeatedly, identifying relevant passages, and classifying data related to intrinsic elements, irony, and sacrifice. Meanwhile, library research was conducted to support the understanding of structuralism and literary analysis (Creswell, 2014).

The data analysis technique in this study applied the Interactive Model of Analysis proposed by (Miles et al., 2014), which consists of four stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data collection stage, relevant passages related to irony, sacrifice, characterization, and plot were identified from the short story. The collected data were then condensed by selecting and focusing on passages that strongly represent the research focus. Afterward, the data were displayed in the form of descriptive analysis

and textual interpretation to explain the relationship between intrinsic elements in constructing the story's meaning. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying the findings to ensure consistency between the analysis and the research objectives. In addition, the analysis process included organizing the data, coding important findings, developing themes, and interpreting the meaning of the story through a structuralist perspective (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2010, 2018). These analysis techniques were applied to examine how the intrinsic elements in the short story are interconnected in representing irony and sacrifice as the central focus of the study.

Result and Discussions

The analysis of O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi* identifies several intrinsic elements that contribute to the representation of sacrifice and irony within the narrative. Through a structuralist approach, the study examines how character, plot, conflict, setting, and theme are interconnected in constructing the overall meaning of the story. The data were analyzed through coding techniques by classifying quotations, narrations, and dialogues into categories related to sacrifice and irony. The coding process was conducted to identify phrases and sentences that reflect the characters' actions, emotional conditions, and the development of the narrative structure.

1. Sacrifice

(Data S1) "Cut it off and sold it," said Della.

This quotation represents sacrifice because the word "it" refers to Della's hair, which

symbolizes her beauty and most treasured possession. Della willingly sacrifices her hair in order to buy a meaningful Christmas gift for Jim. This action shows that the character prioritizes love and emotional sincerity over material value.

(Data S2) "I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs."

This quotation reflects Jim's sacrifice because he gives up his gold watch, which is described as his most valuable possession. Jim's action demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice something meaningful in order to make Della happy. Similar to Della, Jim is characterized as sincere and devoted, emphasizing mutual sacrifice between both characters.

(Data S3) "I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present."

This quotation reflects emotional sacrifice because it reveals the character's strong desire to give a meaningful gift despite financial hardship. The statement indicates that the act of giving is emotionally important for the characters, even if it requires personal loss.

2. Irony

(Data I1) "I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs."

This quotation represents situational irony because Jim sells his watch to buy combs for Della's hair, while Della has

already sold her hair to buy a chain for Jim’s watch. As a result, both gifts lose their practical function. The contrast between expectation and reality creates the ironic effect within the story.

(Data I2) Both characters secretly sacrifice their most valuable possessions to buy gifts for each other.

This situation reflects irony because the characters’ sincere intentions unexpectedly lead to useless gifts. Instead of achieving their expectations, their sacrifices create an outcome opposite to what they intended.

(Data I3) The gifts become symbols of love rather than useful objects.

This finding reflects irony because the gifts fail to function materially, yet they succeed emotionally. Although the gifts cannot be used, they strengthen the meaning of love and sincerity between the characters.

The findings reveal that characterization plays an important role in representing sacrifice. Jim and Della are portrayed as loving and selfless characters who are willing to sacrifice their valuable belongings for each other. In terms of plot, the story develops through parallel actions in which both characters secretly sell their prized possessions to buy meaningful gifts. This sequence of events gradually builds emotional tension and leads to the climax of the story, where the ironic situation is revealed. Furthermore, the conflict of financial limitation strengthens the emotional tension and motivates the characters’

decisions. Their modest living condition, reflected through details such as “\$1.87” and the description of their furnished flat, strengthens the portrayal of economic hardship.

Table 1. Findings of Intrinsic Elements, Sacrifice, and Irony

Intrinsic Elements	Code	Text Evidence	Findings
Theme	S3	“I couldn’t have lived through Christmas without giving you a present.”	The theme reflects sincere love expressed through sacrifice rather than material value.
Character	S1	“Cut it off and sold it.”	Della is portrayed as selfless and willing to sacrifice her most treasured possession for love.
Character	S2	“I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs.”	Jim demonstrates sincerity and devotion through sacrifice.
Plot	I2	Both characters secretly sacrifice their valuable possessions to buy gifts.	The plot develops through parallel actions that lead to an unexpected ending.
Conflict	S3	Financial limitation in buying Christmas gifts.	Economic hardship motivates the characters to make sacrifices.
Setting	-	Christmas Eve; modest living condition (“\$1.87”, furnished flat).	The setting strengthens the emotional atmosphere and reflects the characters’ struggles.
Irony	I1	“I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs.”	Situational irony appears when both gifts lose

			their practical function.
Meaning	13	The gifts become symbols of love rather than useful objects.	The story emphasizes sincerity and emotional value over material possessions.

The findings demonstrate that sacrifice and irony are structurally interconnected in *The Gift of the Magi*. Through a structuralist perspective, these elements function together in developing the meaning of the story. Sacrifice becomes the foundation of the narrative because the characters' actions drive the progression of the plot. Della's decision to cut and sell her hair and Jim's decision to sell his watch represent conscious acts motivated by love and devotion. These sacrifices reveal the emotional sincerity of the characters and establish the emotional depth of the story.

Moreover, the emergence of irony is directly connected to the sacrifices made by both characters. Situational irony appears because the characters' expectations differ from the final outcome. Jim expects the combs to make Della happy, while Della expects the chain to complete Jim's watch. However, their sacrifices make the gifts unusable. This unexpected outcome creates irony and strengthens the emotional impact of the ending. Therefore, irony functions as the result of sacrifice, while sacrifice serves as the cause that shapes the narrative structure.

The plot structure also contributes significantly to the development of irony and sacrifice. The story develops through parallel actions in which both characters secretly attempt to give meaningful gifts to one another. This sequence gradually builds tension until the climax reveals the ironic situation. In addition, the financial conflict

influences the characters' decisions because their limited economic condition forces them to sacrifice valuable possessions. The setting of Christmas Eve further strengthens the emotional atmosphere of the story, as Christmas symbolizes love and togetherness.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the meaning of the story is constructed through the interaction among intrinsic elements. Characterization, plot, conflict, setting, sacrifice, and irony work together to emphasize the idea that genuine love is not measured by material wealth, but by sincerity and willingness to sacrifice. Although the gifts lose their practical function, the emotional value behind them remains meaningful. Therefore, the structuralist approach helps reveal how sacrifice and irony collectively shape the emotional and thematic meaning of *The Gift of the Magi*.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the significance of *The Gift of the Magi* is shaped by the strong relationships between its intrinsic elements, particularly plot, character, and conflict, which together reveal the connection between irony and sacrifice. By using a structuralism perspective, the analysis shows that these elements do not function independently; instead, they create an interconnected system that conveys the overall meaning of the narrative. The results indicate that sacrifice is the central driving force of the story, as evidenced by Jim and Della's decisions to give up their most cherished possessions. These decisions, motivated by profound love and influenced by limited finances, lead to a clear instance of situational irony at the story's end, where the gifts they have prepared cannot be used as

intended, highlighting the gap between intention and outcome.

The study illustrates that while sacrifice highlights intentional acts driven by love; irony draws attention to the unforeseen results of those acts. Despite these differences, both elements work together to support the central theme that true love is characterized not by material items but by authenticity and selflessness. The ironic conclusion does not diminish the narrative's meaning; instead, it deepens the emotional impact and reinforces its moral message. Theoretically, this research upholds the structuralist view that meaning in literature emerges from the interplay of intrinsic elements, while practically offering a more systematic approach for readers and students to analyze literature by focusing on how elements are connected rather than treating them as separate entities. This study affirms that the enduring significance of the story lies in its portrayal of genuine love through sacrifice, with irony serving to highlight the importance of that love.

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