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Research Question: “What are the functions of three main types of irony in generating the fiction of the short stories “The Landlady” and “Lamb to the Slaughter” written by Roald Dahl?”

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Abstract:

Roald Dahl is one of the well-known authors who use irony as a literary device in his works. His short stories are still popular in 21st century that he is a real master of using literary elements even in short stories which makes them different from the other short stories because they never appear to be ordinary stories in which there is always tension and suspense that starts from the first sentence and ends in the final sentence. Most of his short stories turn out to be unexpected stories with the help of strong ironies in his two well-known short stories “Lamb to the Slaughter” and “The Landlady”, Dahl enables the reader to observe the three main types of irony which are situational, dramatic and verbal irony.

The reason for analyzing those three types of irony in generating the fiction of these two stories is to find an answer for the question what makes those two short stories of Dahl different from the other short stories regarding the function of irony since they both appear to be the ones where irony is the main literary device in creating the fiction. Apart from that, although Dahl’s works are very popular both among children and adults, not many studies have been done in a detailed way regarding his use of irony in the short stories. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to demonstrate the power of irony in creating the fiction of the short stories of Dahl.

(250 words)

Introduction:

Roald Dahl is a well-known British writer both for his books for adults and for children. His books for adults mostly consist of short stories that do not resemble each other in content but in writing style. In fact, the most outstanding reason that made Dahl different from the other short story writers is his use of literary techniques while creating the fiction in the stories. In one of his interviews he stated that *“The main thing that ties all my work together is a terrible fear of boring the reader. I always feel compelled to hold the reader, get him by the throat and never let go until the last page.”*(West 65) From his own words, it is clearly understood that he never wants the attention of the reader to flow away. In order to catch the attention of the reader on every sentence, he uses strong literary devices to make the reader feel interested in and engage to the story. The most common literary technique that is used to create tension and suspense in Dahl’s works is irony. Irony is a literary device which presents a conflict between appearance and reality. It is the contrast between what is expected or what appears to be and what actually is. The other literary techniques could be classified as the subcategories of irony since they are used in order to strengthen the function of irony while creating the fiction of the story. Several kinds of irony are acknowledged in literature however, it is accepted that there are three main types of irony which are situational irony, dramatic irony and verbal irony. Those three types are supported with other literary devices such as foreshadowing, figurative language...etc. in order to create an extraordinary fiction in Dahl’s short stories that turns the flow of the stories from the expected to the unexpected. The function of those three main types of irony could clearly be observed in his two famous short stories which are “The Landlady” and “Lamb to the Slaughter”.

1. Situational Irony

In situational irony, there occurs a disparity between what happens and what was expected. Since it derives from the circumstances and the events happening, it makes the story more impressive than it was in the beginning. In order to generate the situational irony, Dahl uses figurative language to animate the events and give a detailed description of the setting and the characters to the reader that leads the reader imagine the “expected” ending of the story in an easier way. Although the reader expects the story to end in the way that is created in their minds, Dahl surprises his readers with his unexpected and unpredictable twisted endings. One of the best known Dahl stories that is based on situational irony is “The Landlady”. In “The Landlady” there is a detailed description of the old lady that the reader never expects her to harm anyone. *“Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker didn’t worry Billy in the least. After all, she not only was harmless—there was no question about that—but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul.”*(Dahl, 179) From this description, Dahl forces the reader not to think badly about the landlady since he uses the phrase “there was no question about that” which makes the reader think there is no doubt about her being generous and kind. Also in the story “Lamb to the Slaughter”, Dahl describes the character Mary Maloney as an ordinary wife who is totally in love with her husband. The following detailed description of her feelings for her husband removes the possibility of doing harm to him. *“She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel-almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides.”*(Dahl, 22)

Although these sentences demonstrate as if Mary Maloney is a dependent woman who is nothing without her husband, in the end the reader sees the evil side of her who does not become sorry for murdering the man she adores that she kills her husband with a lamb which is the most unexpected possibility that the reader could ever think of.

Indeed, in Dahl's short stories, in order to create a situational irony, he separates appearance from reality and good sign from bad sign that at the end the reader realizes that the reality does not suit appearance and the symbols that are used to reflect things as good alters to be bad signs and form a situational irony.

1.1. The Conflict Between Appearance and Reality

In most of Dahl's stories there is always the conflict of appearance versus reality. Dahl thinks that all human beings are two-faced; every soul includes an evil side which is greedy, deceitful and dishonest but it is hardly possible to realize the evil side of people from their appearance. Thus, in most of his stories there is a strong connection with human nature that the evil side of the characters turns out to be the reason of the twisted endings that surprise the readers. Although Dahl ends the stories with twisted endings, he gives some clues in order to make the reader figure out the reality through appearance. The technique he uses to evoke the surprising ending is foreshadowing that he manages to warn the reader that the events will not continue in an ordinary way as it seems. Therefore, it could be claimed that there is a slight difference between reality and appearance and Dahl wants the reader to be aware of that through making foreshadowing. For instance, in the short story "The Landlady", Dahl talks about the moment of just a bell ring on the door for nearly a paragraph because he wants to show that it is not usual and something strange is going on. "*He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then at once—it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell button—the door swung open and a*

woman was standing there. Normally you ring the bell and you have at least a half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame was like a jack-in-the-box. He pressed the bell—and out she popped! It made him jump.” (Dahl, 175) Dahl draws a scene like the landlady has already been waiting for Billy to come that his arrival is not a coincidence for the landlady at all. In addition to this, there are some specific sentences of the landlady that she was not just an old lady who only shows hospitality to her guests but does more than that: *There wasn't a blemish on his body.*” “*A what?*” *Billy said. “His skin was just like a baby's.”*(Dahl, 183) From this sentence on, the reader starts to question how the landlady could know that much about the whole body of her guest. The reason that lies beneath this disparity between reality and appearance is Dahl's thought about human nature. Also in the short story “Lamb to the Slaughter”, there is a conflict between appearance and reality considering the main character Mary Maloney. Although Mary Maloney seemed to be an ordinary wife who is in love with her husband and has the happiness of expecting a baby regarding her appearance, in her real character she has the potential to be a murderer because she kills her husband carelessly and in a cold-blooded way that the reader never expects her to do so when her husband tells her that he wants a divorce Dahl explains this conflict by stating that “*adherence to daily routines can give one the false appearance of psychological stability.*”(West, 38) Therefore, it could be claimed that Dahl creates a conflict between appearance and reality with the aim of demonstrating to the reader that people should not trust anybody by only looking at how they look since appearance does not comply with reality.

1.2. Symbolism: The Conflict Between Good Sign and Bad Sign

Symbol is a person, place, thing or event that has meaning in itself and also stands for something more than itself that the writer uses in order to intensify the reader to a specific subject. In the short stories of Dahl, there are key symbols to create situational irony from the

beginning to the end since the symbols which are thought to be good and positive turn out to be the creator of the situational irony at the end of the story. In the short story “Lamb to the Slaughter”, the main symbol is lamb which also gives the name to the story. Typically, lamb is a symbol of gentleness and innocence in religion however in the story lamb alters to be the murder weapon that Mrs. Maloney kills her husband with the leg of a lamb. Therefore in the story, lamb was considered as a good sign as usual, whereas in the end it becomes a bad sign that creates the situational irony because the reader never expects the lamb to be a mortal device. Also in the short story, “The Landlady”, there is the symbol of parrot which was acknowledged to be a good sign for Billy at first: (...) *and in one corner he spotted a large parrot in a cage. Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself; and all in all, it looked to him as though it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. (Dahl, 175)* Unfortunately, Billy is not aware of the fact that the parrot was actually killed and then stuffed by the landlady as he will be later on. Therefore, parrot was used as a good sign in the beginning of the story, whereas it is actually a bad sign that demonstrates the evil side of the landlady and also it is a kind of a warning which gives the message to the reader that Billy might also be killed and then stuffed by that old lady. From the examples given, it could obviously be seen that Dahl uses some specific symbols in order to create an atmosphere that is good and pleasant, however at the end, there is an alteration of those “good” symbols into “bad” ones that generates the situational irony and surprises the reader.

2. Dramatic Irony

In dramatic irony, the reader has the information about something that the character in the story is not aware of; the behaviour of the character is absolutely normal and sensible according to him/her, whereas according to the reader, those behaviours are totally ludicrous since the reader knows the truth but the character does not. Dahl uses dramatic irony in order

to create tension and create a sense of black humour. The most significant example of dramatic irony in Dahl's short stories could clearly be observed in "Lamb to the Slaughter" and "The Landlady". In "Lamb to the Slaughter", after killing her husband with the leg of a lamb, Mary Maloney cooks the lamb for dinner and serves the detectives the lamb which is the murder weapon. Although the detectives thought that they were only eating meat, actually they were eliminating the only evidence-the murder weapon- of the crime. The phrase "*probably right under our very noses.*"(Dahl, 33) said about the murder weapon by one of the detectives makes the situation both tragic and humorous at the same time because the murder weapon is really under their noses however, they are unfortunately not aware of that. In the short story "The Landlady", one of the main character who is unaware of the real intension of the landlady is Billy since he does not question any strange behaviour of his landlady. When the landlady tells him that the parrot is dead and she stuffed it, Billy does not become worried about anything and he does not start to question that this hobby of the landlady is weird; he continues to consider her as a nice and hospitable old lady whereas the reader starts to figure out her bad intensions on Billy from the way of her talking. Macabre endings and third person narration stand out to be the main supportive elements of Dahl in generating dramatic irony in the short stories "The Landlady" and "Lamb to the Slaughter".

2.1. The Use of Macabre

Macabre endings are Dahl's favourite type of twisted endings in order to create dramatic irony that a character is not aware of a future death or a sardonic action. In order to create a striking ending, he constitutes a series of events that lead to a death of someone or an unsettling event at the end which surprises the reader at most since the reader observes a shuddering horror and black humour at the same time. Dahl both uses implicit and explicit macabre in his works but in the short stories "The Landlady" and "Lamb to the Slaughter"

there is explicit macabre that the reason of a character's death (who is unaware of the situation) is caused by another main character in the story that death does not occur by itself. The reason of Dahl's choice of macabre approach to the story is his absolute will to make the reader get shocked at the end that in most of his stories he used sardonic humour, implied violence and even created an unexpected death. In the short story "Lamb to the Slaughter", the oddity is caused by neither Mary Maloney's being angry when she hears that her husband wants to get divorced nor the feeling of revenge, but the way in which she expresses it. Unexpectedly, she easily switches from an ordinary housewife to a cold-blooded murderer who cleverly averts the suspicion and disposes the murder weapon. Similarly in the short story "The Landlady", it is not surprising that the landlady is actually a murderer who kills young boys by poisoning and then stuffs them since she can be in a psychopathic mental state. The macabre in the story is that the landlady is described as being so kind and behaves really in a gentle way to Billy that excludes the possibility of her being a murderer. Dahl does not directly explain the state of mind of the landlady to the reader; he wants the reader to discover the mystery of that landlady and creates masters the macabre that scares the reader step by step. Therefore, it is obviously seen that the reason of Dahl's using macabre is keeping the tension and suspense in the story from the beginning to the very ending that never bores the reader yet he enables the reader to feel appalled.

2.2. The Importance of Third Person Narrative

In order to create dramatic irony, there must be a third person narrative in order to leave the character as uninformed about the situation. As it is mentioned, in dramatic irony, the reader has some important knowledge about the events happening but the character knows nothing at all about that situation. Therefore, the writer is obliged to inform the reader about the situation without including that uninformed character which forms the reason of third

person narrative. By telling the story from a third person voice, Dahl makes the reader realize the truth without engaging the characters and creates an atmosphere where the reader is totally free to criticize the events happening and the characters. Third person narrative is generally referred as “bird’s eye” since the story is told in an objective way that there is not any engagement of the characters that affects the perspective of the reader. Thus, it will not be wrong to claim that the third person narration separates the reader from the characters. In “The Landlady”, third person narration provides the reader to observe the evil side of the landlady who is a murderer whereas the uninformed character Billy still thinks that the old landlady is kind and generous because he does not have equal level of knowledge with the reader. Similarly in the short story “Lamb to the Slaughter”, the detectives who come to investigate the murder weapon are also unaware of the tragic situation that they are actually eating the murder weapon which is the leg of the lamb that Mary Maloney hits her husband with. In the story, since the third person narration tells how Patrick Maloney is murdered by his wife Mary Maloney, the reader obviously knows that the murder weapon is the leg of the lamb. Therefore, in both stories Dahl makes those characters that are unaware of the things going on become ridiculous from the point of the reader’s however, he does not make any comments of that humorous situation since there is a third person narrator who is completely excluded from any subjective intervention. If there would be first person narrative instead of a third person, then there would not be any use of a dramatic irony in creating the fiction since both the characters and the reader would know everything and nothing would create any tension or suspense.

3. Verbal Irony

Verbal irony occurs when characters say something but actually mean another thing that is completely different from what they say, mostly the opposite meaning. The difference of

verbal irony from situational and dramatic irony is that verbal irony must be used through characters' voice which means that the author cannot use verbal irony in third person narration. Dahl mostly uses verbal irony in order to create sarcasm in a humorous way to give the message not through a direct way but an indirect way and in order to create tension. In addition to this, verbal irony forces the reader to concentrate on the story and the dialogues between the characters. Therefore, it provides the reader to not only "read" but also manage to "understand" the meaning of the story. In the short stories "Lamb to the Slaughter" and "The Landlady", Dahl uses verbal irony in order to make the reader observe the mystery of the events and characters. He relates verbal irony to dramatic irony because generally the dialogue that includes verbal irony exists between the characters who are unaware of the main event of the story that gives shape to the plot and the characters who are the concealed murderer. The most outstanding verbal irony in "The Landlady" is when the landlady shows the room to Billy she tells that, "*It's all ready for you, my dear.*"(Dahl, 176) which indirectly makes the reader realize that she does not only mean bed and breakfast for a couple of days, indeed she tries to give the message to the reader that the stay of Billy will last longer than he actually thinks. Also, Dahl has written the word "all" in italics in order to provide the reader to question that something strange is going to happen in the rest of the story. Thus, in this dialogue Dahl uses verbal irony in order to create tension since this dialogue shows the mysterious future events which will be caused by the landlady. In "Lamb to the Slaughter" there is also a striking verbal irony in the dialogue between Mary Maloney and the detectives who come to investigate the murder of Mary Maloney's husband Patrick. "*Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick's too, and helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be terrible hungry by now because it's long past your suppertime, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, if I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality.*"(Dahl, 32) In this dialogue it is obvious that Mary Maloney

of course does not offer them to stay for dinner and eat meat in order to salve her conscience for the death of his husband or to show hospitality to her husband's friends. She actually tries to eliminate the evidence which is the murder weapon since she has just murdered her husband by hitting his head with the leg of a lamb. Therefore, she does not mean what she says which makes the dialogue a verbal irony. Since the reader knows the reason why she insists on making them stay for the dinner, the dialogue turns out to be humorous for the reader while the detectives were unaware of that reason. Therefore, verbal irony appears to be a type of irony that creates little ironies in the dialogues between the characters and leads the plot to generate both situational and dramatic irony in which the reader observes the irony as a whole regarding verbal ironies that are strewn to the parts of the story.

Conclusion

All in all, it could be claimed that Dahl was an unusual short story writer that his writing style makes him differ from the other writers of his time. He always manages to engage the reader into his stories in order to not bore but to catch the attention of the reader in each word from the beginning to the very end. The most outstanding technique he masters in his short stories is irony since he aims to create a paradox between the events that happen throughout the story where ironies offer hint to the reader. However, irony would be meaningless if it is not supported by other literary elements so that is why he strengthens the three main types of irony with other literary elements. It would be difficult to apprehend the function of situational irony without analyzing the conflict between appearance and reality and the conflict between the signs, dramatic irony without analyzing macabre and the third person narrative. On the other hand, verbal irony is not supported with other literary elements since it is only composed of basic phrases in the dialogues that there is no necessity to observe the function irony by considering other literary elements. By using those three main types of

irony, Dahl generated an extraordinary fiction of unexpected stories where the reader has the chance to both feel humour and fear together since he mixes up the exact opposites to formalize a surprising ending in his short stories.

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