

IRONY IN CHARLES DICKENS' OLIVER

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the types of irony used by Charles Dickens in his notable early work, *Oliver Twist*, as well as the reasons the irony was chosen. As a figurative language, irony is utilized to express one's complex feelings without truly saying them. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens brought the readers some real social issues wrapped in dark, deep written expressions of irony uttered by the characters of his novel. Undoubtedly, the novel had left an impact to the British society at the time. The irony Dickens displayed here includes verbal, situational, and dramatic irony. His choice of irony made sense as he intended to criticize the English Poor Laws and to touch the public sentiment. He wanted to let the readers go beyond what was literally written and once they discovered what the truth was, they would eventually understand Dickens' purposes.

Keywords: *Oliver Twist; verbal irony; situational irony; dramatic irony*

INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been part of our life. We find literature in books, stories, poems, and other writings. In a broad sense, literature refers to any type of written works that expresses imagination, interests, or ideas with exquisite styles ("Literature", n.d.). To achieve the effect of rich and beautiful expressions, literature usually makes up the events and the crises. Nevertheless, literature still allows us to get the benefits of it. One way or another, it allows people to grow their personality and intellectuality. Also, it helps people to be more sensible and sympathetic towards one another,

and the other living things. Robert and Jacobs (1987, as cited in Marpaung, 2010, p. 1) defines literature as the "compositions that tell stories, dramatize situation, express emotion, and analyze and advocate ideas." Following the definitions of literature, its content mostly centers on the humans' life stories and feelings, and also nature. The form of literature chosen is different from one author to another since it reflects the way the author delivers the content in his/her literary style.

As literature aims at conveying people's thought or feelings, therefore it is common that authors use figurative language to deliberately stir the readers' emotions and thinking. The figurative language, more often than not, usually carries out ambiguity although sometimes this is also the intention of the authors (Roberts and Kreuz, 1994). Figurative language, or also known as figure of speeches, such as hyperbole, metaphor, irony, personification, and simile, among others is "the use of language ... in which words are used in other than their literal sense, or in other than their ordinary locutions, in order to suggest a picture or image or for other special effect" ("Figure of Speech", n.d.).

One type of figurative language that has the effect of contrasting the real meaning with what is said is irony. The use of irony in literature is often to provide the readers with moral lessons since irony lets the readers see "a disparity between what the characters think can, should, or will happen and what actually transpires" (Thompson, 2014). As Di Yanni (2002, p. 93) states that irony refers to any "contrast or discrepancy" that exists within a thing in relation with another. He also adds that the contrast may occur of "what is said and what is meant" or "what happens and what is expected to happen". This is another way of saying that irony can help create conflict, which is a key part of a written work. The emergence of conflict will lead to the climax, and this is the most important and the biggest feature in, for instance, a story. Another definition of irony by Wilson and Sperber (2007, as cited in Reyes, Rosso, & Buscaldi, 2012, p. 4) is "a communicative act that expresses the opposite of what is literally said."

Irony, however, is not an uncommon concept. It is, in actuality, always used by people as we humans, by nature, like to show the "ambiguities and complexities" of life. Irony expresses that life, in fact, does not follow one's expectations. It is inevi-

table that in life, even between loved people, there are anger and bitterness bound to happen in relationships. Hence, irony in life has always been involved in some human's feelings. It may not be easily understood, nevertheless (Di Yanni, 2002). In the case of a story, irony will touch upon almost all characters and situations of the plot. The authors may use this figurative language to let the readers get a better idea of why a speech is perceived as ironic.

There are two major kinds of irony, namely verbal and situational irony (Reyes, Rosso, & Buscaldi, 2012). In the verbal irony, according to Colston & Gibbs (2007, as cited in Reyes, Rosso, & Buscaldi, 2012), a speaker produces words that have the opposite meaning to what is actually said. For example, someone may say "What a beautiful day" when actually the weather is cloudy to express the contrast reality since he/she cannot go anywhere.

The situational irony refers to a great difference between the purpose of a particular action and result, or a contradiction between what one expects and what actually happens ("Situational Irony," n.d.). In "Harry Potter" by J.K. Rowling, the readers expect that the protagonist Harry Potter can defeat Voldemort, the villain, by killing him. However, contrary to the readers' belief, in order to kill Voldemort, Harry Potter must be killed first to make Voldemort a mortal and then eventually die ("Situational Irony," n.d.). This plot twist is an example of situational irony.

In addition to above types of irony, there is dramatic irony, which is commonly found in a situation ("Dramatic Irony", n.d.). This type of irony is also usually used in a drama. This irony makes readers realize the character's action or expectation is inappropriate to the actuality of the story. For example, in Shakespeare's play, Romeo and Juliet, when Romeo finds Juliet in a drugged death like sleep, he assumes that she passed away and kills himself. Then, Juliet is awake and finds her love dies beside her, so that she kills herself with his knife. Both of the characters do not know the reality, but the audience does. Both Juliet and Romeo assume that their lover passed away although actually they do not. They lack of knowledge of the reality while the audience do not show this situation as dramatic irony ("Irony", n.d.).

In this present paper, we would like to focus on the irony utilized by Charles Dickens in his famous novel, *Oliver Twist*, and the reasons for the choice of irony.

Oliver Twist was selected due to Dickens' heavy use of irony throughout the novel. It is clear that Dickens had wanted to let the readers find out the hidden intention of his in the novel. Not surprisingly, the setting of the novel also plays a role in that Dickens strongly criticized the laws established within the British society at the time, the Poor Laws.

This paper used descriptive analysis method to study the sentences and events in order to figure out the irony in Oliver Twist. The purpose was to make a clear and systematic description about the irony used in the story.

However, we only selected some of the chapters in the novel as the sample. The purposive sampling technique was utilized to choose the chapters considering the main concern of the study, the three types of irony: verbal, situational, and dramatic. The selected chapters were Chapters 2, 3, 6, 13, 16, and 37. Several examples of irony within the chapters are displayed below, by mentioning the facts such as the dialogues, actions and the statements of the characters. Content analysis method was also used to analyze the sentences. The method comprised several steps such as reading the sentences first, then summarizing the story, explaining the extrinsic and intrinsic elements, identifying and categorizing the types of irony set in the novel by underlying the sentences, and then finally analyzing and explaining the meaning of each irony found in the novel.

DISCUSSION

Some examples of verbal, situational, and dramatic irony in select chapters of Oliver Twist are presented below (as cited from Rahmi, 2015).

1. Verbal Irony

Chapter II

'You've had a long walk, you know, or I wouldn't mention it. Now, will you take a little drop of something, Mr. Bumble?'

'**Not a drop. Not a drop,**' said Mr. Bumble, waving his right hand in a dignified, but placid manner. (p. 6)

The irony here is that Mr. Bumble actually wanted to drink some water but said not to; however, he eventually drank after Mrs. Mann offered gin to him, as described below:

'...You are a humane woman, Mrs. Mann.' (Here she set down the glass.) 'I shall take a early opportunity of mentioning it to the board, Mrs. Mann.' (He drew it towards him.) 'You feel as a mother, Mrs. Mann.' (He stirred the gin-and-water.) 'I—I drink your health with cheerfulness, Mrs. Mann'; and he swallowed half of it. (p. 6)

What a novel illustration of **the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!** (p. 9)

Above sentences are the cynicism expressed by Dickens towards the Poor Laws, which in fact were very harsh for the paupers.

Chapter XIII

'What are you up to? Ill-treating the boys, you covetous, avaricious, in-sa-ti-a-ble old fence?' said the man, seating himself deliberately. 'I wonder they don't murder you! **I would if I was them. If I'd been your 'prentice, I'd have done it long ago...** (p. 73)

Here, the man seemed to be able to do something bad to the old man; however, in fact, he could not do anything.

Chapter XVI

'**Delighted to see you looking so well, my dear,**' said the Jew, **bowing with mock humility.** 'The Artful shall give you another suit, my dear, for fear you should spoil that Sunday one. Why didn't you write, my dear, and say you were coming? We'd have got something warm for supper.' (p. 95)

The irony here can be understood from the Jew's expression in which the Jew said he was happy that Oliver seemed very well, yet the Jew mocked him while bowing.

Chapter XXXVII

'My dear,' said Mr. Bumble, '**I didn't know you were here.**'

'Didn't know I was here!' repeated Mrs. Bumble. 'What do you do here?' (p. 27)

Mr. Bumble stated he did not know that his wife was there, yet in fact, he knew it. It is another verbal irony.

Verbal irony is divided into two types: understatement and overstatement.

a). *Understatement*

In understatement or litotes, the utterance does not fully show the importance of a situation, which is done by the speaker on purpose ("Understatement", 2017). The examples are below (as cited from Rahmi, 2015):

Chapter II

'Now don't you be offended at what I'm a going to say,' observed Mrs. Mann, with captivating sweetness. 'You've had a long walk, you know, or I wouldn't mention it. Now, will you take **a little drop of something**, Mr. Bumble?' (p. 6)

Above sentences illustrate that Mrs. Mann offered some water to Mr. Bumble; however, she said "a little drop of something" to indicate her intent. Her choice of "a little drop of something" is an understatement of a glass of water.

Chapter III

'Yes, Oliver,' said Mr. Bumble. 'The kind and blessed gentleman which is so many parents to you, Oliver, when you have none of your own: ... and all for **a naughty orphan which nobody can't love.**' (p. 29)

The use of "a naughty orphan which nobody can't love" by Mr. Bumble is an understatement of the real value of Oliver as a child worthy of love.

Chapter XXXVII

He was degraded in their eyes; he had lost caste and station before the very paupers; he had fallen from all the height and pomp of beadleship, to **the lowest depth of the most snubbed hen-peckery.** (p. 424)

Here, “he” refers to Mr. Bumble, who had lost his power and thus, lived as if his soul had had gone. His condition is described in an understatement: “the lowest depth of the most snubbed hen-peckery”.

b). *Overstatement*

Overstatement or hyperbole refers to “the meaning that ordinarily attaches to what is said is an exaggeration of what the speaker uses it to mean” (“Critical Concepts: Verbal Irony”, n.d.).

Chapter II

'Goodness gracious! Is that you, Mr. Bumble, sir?' said Mrs. Mann, thrusting her head out of the window in well-affected ecstasies of joy. '(Susan, take Oliver and them two brats upstairs, and wash 'em directly.)—**My heart alive!** Mr. Bumble, how glad I am to see you, sure-ly!' (p. 5)

The expression of Mrs. Mann’s “My heart alive” is an overstatement since she overreacted her feelings verbally.

Chapter III

“Well! Of all **the artful and designing orphans** that ever I see, Oliver, you are one **the most bare-facedest.**” (p. 18)

The sentence means that Mr. Bumble overreacted toward Oliver. The phrase “the artful and designing orphans” is called overstatement as if orphans could be very deceitful persons. To make it more of overstatement, Mr. Bumble even exclaimed that Oliver’s condition was very much clear in doing so.

Chapter VI

'**Oh, you little wretch!**' screamed Charlotte: seizing Oliver with her utmost force, which was about equal to that of a moderately strong man in particularly good training. '**Oh, you little un-grate-ful, mur-de-rous, hor-rid villain!**' And between every syllable, Charlotte gave Oliver a blow with all her might: accompanying it with a scream, for the benefit of society. (p. 36)

Here, Charlotte's expressions towards Oliver are very exaggerated in that her utterances of "Oh, you little wretch!" and "Oh, you little un-grate-ful, mur-de-rous, hor-rid villain!" show that she made Oliver as if he were a very despicable boy.

Chapter XVI

'Fair, or not fair,' retorted Sikes, 'hand over, I tell you! Do you think Nancy and me has got nothing else to do with our precious time but to spend it in scouting arter, and kidnaping, every young boy as gets grabbed through you? Give it here, **you avaricious old skeleton**, give it here!' (p. 95)

The phrase "avaricious old skeleton" shows that Sikes expressed that the old man was an extremely greedy person.

2. Situational Irony

Chapter II

'Will you go along with me, Oliver?' said Mr. Bumble, in a majestic voice.

Oliver **was about to say that he would go along with anybody with great readiness, when, glancing upward, he caught sight of Mrs. Mann, who had got behind the beadle's chair, and was shaking her fist at him with a furious countenance.** He took the hint at once, for the fist had been too often impressed upon his body not to be deeply impressed upon his recollection.

'**Will she go with me?**' inquired poor Oliver.

'No, she can't,' replied Mr. Bumble. 'But she'll come and see you sometimes.' (p. 7)

The situational irony in this case is the discrepancy between Oliver's wish and Mrs. Mann's expectations. It can be seen from Oliver's expressions of wanting to say his going along with Mr. Bumble; however, he instead asking whether Mrs. Mann could go as well, realizing that she did not allow Oliver to go.

'I hope you say your prayers every night,' said another gentleman in a gruff voice; 'and **pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you—like a Christian.**'

'Yes, sir,' stammered the boy. The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It would have been very like a Christian, and a marvellously good Christian too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of *him*. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him. (p. 9)

The irony can be seen here from the gentleman's understanding of "taking care" Oliver. He was very sure that Oliver had lived well in his previous place, yet, in truth, Oliver had not received a good life.

'Well! **You have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade,**' said the red-faced gentleman in the high chair.

'So **you'll begin to pick oakum to-morrow morning at six o'clock,**' added the surly one in the white waistcoat. (p. 9)

What can be ironic here is that the gentleman ensured Oliver that he would get proper education while actually Oliver would not, and he would begin to work since early morning.

The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men; and when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered—**the poor people liked it!** It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a **tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work.** 'Oho!' said the board, looking very knowing; 'we are the fellows to set this to rights; we'll stop it all, in no time.' **So, they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.** With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll of Sundays. (p. 9-10)

The irony being shown here reflects the discrepancy of the rule for the poor to choose between gradual and quick starvation. Yet, it did not have very much difference: the poor must accept the rule with the same outcomes.

Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger,... **The evening arrived; the boys took their places.** The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; **the gruel was served out;** and a long grace was said over the short commons. **The gruel disappeared;** the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbors nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.' (p. 11)

Here, the situation of being starved for three months had caused Oliver and other kids to hope for a lot of meal. However, the irony is that in reality, they only received one time serving of meal, which was not adequate for their hunger to disappear, and therefore they wanted to ask for more meal.

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.'

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arm; and shrieked aloud for the beadle. (p. 11)

The irony here is the discordance between the reality and Oliver's wish. He asked for more meal but was not granted. Instead, he received a blow from the master.

Chapter VI

Charlotte treated him ill, because Noah did; and **Mrs. Sowerberry was his decided enemy, because Mr. Sowerberry was disposed to be his friend;** so, between these three on one side, and a glut of funerals on the other, Oliver was not alto-

gether as comfortable as the hungry pig was, when he was shut up, by mistake, in the grain department of a brewery. (p. 34)

The irony occurs due to the difference between Mrs. Sowerberry's and Mr. Sowerberry's likeness on Oliver.

This was rather too violent exercise to last long. When they were all wearied out, and could tear and beat no longer, they dragged Oliver, struggling and shouting, but nothing daunted, into the dust-cellar, and there locked him up. **This being done, Mrs. Sowerberry sunk into a chair, and burst into tears.** (p. 36)

It can be understood here that it is a situational irony in which Mrs. Sowerberry's attitude had been very sorry towards Oliver after abusing him.

Chapter XVI

'They belong to the old gentleman,' said Oliver, wringing his hands; 'to the good, kind, old gentleman who took me into his house, and had me nursed, when I was near dying of the fever. Oh, pray send them back; send him back the books and money. Keep me here all my life long; but pray, pray send them back. **He'll think I stole them;** the old lady: all of them who were so kind to me: **will think I stole them.** Oh, do have mercy upon me, and send them back!'

With these words, which were uttered with all the energy of passionate grief, Oliver fell upon his knees at the Jew's feet; and beat his hands together, in perfect desperation. (p. 96)

The irony here is reflected in Oliver's statements that people would think he stole things although in fact Oliver had been innocent.

Chapter XXXVII

'Have the goodness to look at me,' said Mr. Bumble, fixing his eyes upon her. (If she stands such a eye as that,' said Mr. Bumble to himself, 'she can stand anything. **It is a eye I never knew to fail with paupers. If it fails with her, my power is gone.**')

Whether an exceedingly small expansion of eye be sufficient to quell paupers, who, being lightly fed, are in no very high condition; or whether the late Mrs. Corney

was particularly proof against eagle glances; are matters of opinion. **The matter of fact, is, that the matron was in no way overpowered by Mr. Bumble's scowl,** but, on the contrary, treated it with great disdain, and even raised a laugh thereat, which sounded as though it were genuine. (p. 419)

The discordance here is that Mr. Bumble expected the matron to feel intimidated, yet, instead the matron was not scared at all and even belittled him. It is also a situational irony.

3. Dramatic Irony

Chapter VI

'Ah! mercy indeed, ma'am,' was the reply. I only hope this'll teach master not to have any more of these dreadful creatures, that are born to be murderers and robbers from their very cradle. Poor Noah! **He was all but killed,** ma'am, when I come in.'

'Poor fellow!' said Mrs. Sowerberry: looking piteously on the charity-boy. (p. 36)

The characters above assumed they had beaten Oliver hard enough that he should have been dead already. However, it was not so. The readers here know that Oliver had not died yet. The characters' lack of knowledge and the readers' understanding of the reality is an example of dramatic irony.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, Dickens often used irony to state the characters' intents implicitly. It is clear from the beginning that Dickens preferred irony to emphasize the difference in treatment for the poor and the rich by the British society during the period. Further, related to the novel settings, Dickens also exerted his thought on the English Poor Laws by explicitly describing Oliver's and the poor's condition in the workhouse.

Analyzing the irony employed by Dickens should also consider the development of plots, characters, settings, and other elements of the novel, *Oliver Twist*. As Dickens wanted to draw the readers' attention to the state of the lower classes in

general, he was very generous in expressing his social criticism. In this regard, irony helped him achieve the goals.

It is interesting to note that the biggest irony in the novel is the characteristics of Oliver. As the story narrates until the end, Oliver remains an innocent figure. Here, Dickens intended to show the readers that Oliver, as the poor struggling with hardships and faced with the Poor Laws, in actuality, was the one who stayed uncorrupted. In addition, Dickens' portraying of Oliver stands as a central issue in the novel since he meant to illustrate that the treatment for the poor during the time had been worthy of criticism as well as the establishment of the Poor Laws. Irony, for Dickens' purposes, is the figurative language that allows him to give satirical expressions towards the social life.

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