

A Stylistic Analysis on the Irony of Maggie in The Coming-out of Maggie

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Abstract

O' Henry is good at capturing the ironic and dramatic scenes of life, using comic strokes to sketch out the characteristics of the characters. His *The Coming-out of Maggie* is not an exception. The development of the plot is fast, leaving an unexpected ending at last, which dismays the reader. The lines in the story describes, creates and reproduces the atmosphere with accurate details. The stylistic techniques contributes to the irony on Maggie a lot. The satire has been settled down at the very beginning by using long and short sentences. More evidences can be found through the words and phrases in portraying the image of Maggie, different referents and pronouns for the same person used under different circumstances, deployment of rhetoric devices, and the happenings with O'Sullivan and Dempsey. The lexical and semantic evidences help to reveal the irony of Maggie, which strongly proves the unity of form and meaning. A detailed stylistic analysis of the story itself is essential to understand O' Henry's works. By stylistic analysis, an awareness of subtleties of language use can be developed to pave the way for literary appreciation.

Keywords

Stylistic Analysis, *The Coming-out of Maggie*, Irony.

1. Introduction

O. Henry's *The Coming-out of Maggie* tells a story about Maggie who never has a male dancing partner before and always goes to the hop with her chums. But one day she gets a male dancing partner who attends the hop with Maggie under his false name, which is seen through by Dempsey, the leader of Give and Take Athletic Association that holds the hop. The personation leads to almost a life and death plunder. Therefore, Maggie tells the truth and decides to leave the club. After hearing what Maggie claims, Dempsey invites her to dance with him next week. Maggie immediately changes her sorrow to joy and consents without much deliberation.

This story portrays a snobbish and peacockish character, Maggie. The satire on her is not only illustrated through the plot but also can be perceived from the stylistic point of view. Through the analysis on lexical and semantic level, subtle evidences of the satire on Maggie can be found, which strongly proves the unity of form and meaning. The detailed stylistic analysis enables us to pay special attention to the interaction between the form and content, and helps us to appreciate the stylistic effects and literary significance the various linguistic forms may produce. Since those lexical and semantic evidences in the story intersect with each other, this paper will not distinguish the two and will conduct the analysis chronologically.

2. Stylistic Analysis of the Irony

2.1. Settlement of Satire

In the first paragraph, O. Henry writes that "In order to attend one of these dances you must be a member of the Give and Take--or, if you belong to the division that starts off with the right foot in waltzing, you must work in Rhine gold's paper-box factory"[1]. The first paragraph has 110 words and four sentences altogether. Thus the average sentence length is 27.5 words. This sentence with 40 words is the longest one. Long sentences suggest either a complicated process or a causative progression. This long sentence includes 3 parts of information suggesting the difficulty to attend the hop. Anyone who satisfies either the two conditions, i.e. be a member of the association or work in the paper-box factory and belong to the division that starts off with the right foot in waltzing, can have the chance to dance in the hop. This indicates the seemingly high-level of the hop that not everyone can join in. Besides, the author uses a high value modal verb "must" instead of using could, can or shall, or omitting the modal verb here. He must have done this deliberately. The word "must" shows an air of arrogance of the hop. The arrogance of the hop is proved again by the words "privileged", "shaken a foot" and "boast". Because, apart from meeting with the listed conditions, anyone can take part in is privileged. "Shaken a foot" is a hyperbole here and the three words have formed a sharp contrast with the word "regular" in the last sentence. The dancing party is hold regularly but still few people could boast of having shaken a foot at the regular party. "Boast" suggests taking part in the dancing party is something that can be shown off. People who can attend the hop must meet with some conditions, which suggests somewhat high-level quality of the hop. However, the author uses a slang word "hop" instead of ball or some other elegant words to refer to the dancing party, which suggests a satire on the dancing party, and people who attend the so-called hop is also satirized by the author. Maggie who attends the hop every Saturday night inevitably falls to the group of people whom the author is laughing at. This has settled the keynote of irony for this character in the whole story.

2.2. Depiction of Maggie

Words used in the second paragraph to describe the physical appearance of Maggie have shown an ugly picture from the head to feet, such as "dull eyes", "broad mouth" and "left-handed style of footwork". The ugly physical appearance indicates the ugly inner quality of Maggie. Since she is so ugly looking, no gentleman takes a fancy to her and she can only dance with women. The author uses "fellow" to refer to her dancing partner showing somewhat irony. The quotation marks of the word fellow in the text suggest an emphasize that only her greatest chum can act as her partner. Otherwise, she would dance alone in the party. Still, she insists on coming to the hop every week, which has portrayed a vainglorious Maggie.

In paragraph 4, Anna said to Maggie, as usual: "Be ready at seven, sharp, Mag; and Jimmy and me'll come by for you" [1]. From the perspective of mood, this imperative sentence here suggests a command that Maggie must implement. The word "sharp" seems to be a tip telling Maggie that she should not be late for even one minute. The inferior position of Maggie is fully shown here. However, when Maggie gets a male partner, things have all changed. In paragraph 5, "Instead of the customary humble and grateful thanks from the non-escorted one there was to be perceived a high-poised head, a prideful dimpling at the corners of a broad mouth, and almost a sparkle in a dull brown eye" [1]. The words "high-poised", "prideful dimpling", and "sparkle" suggest her arrogance and form a sharp contrast with her customary performance before. A capricious woman pops out vividly in the text. Besides, the sentence starts with "there was to be perceived" instead of "Maggie show what", the reader quickly have the picture of a proud Maggie. What's more, in paragraph 6, Maggie's words is full of arrogance, such as "needn't bother". Besides, she uses the word "gentleman" to modify the word friend. She also uses wordy sentence "coming round to escort me to the hop" rather than a simple sentence like "go together"

to express her idea. She is showing off before her friends that she has a male partner! But, what is this in her friends' eyes? "Maggie Toole catch a fellow!" The phrase "catch a fellow" shows the despise towards Maggie. Anna who is hurrying to confirm the matter, raises three questions at a breath. But Maggie does not answer her question directly. From the perspective of cooperative principle, she violates the principle of relation[2]. Instead of providing the information of when, who, and how, she says "You'll see to-night" perkily [1]." "You'll see to-night" indicates Anna to find the answers by herself. And Maggie says "He's swell all right. He's two inches taller than Jimmy, and an up-to-date dresser. I'll introduce him, Anna, just as soon as we get to the hall." This has no relation to what Anna wants to know. Instead of providing the basic information of her partner, such as name, age, and job, the information provided by Maggie are her new male partner's merits. It seems that Maggie introduces something she think others would envy rather than who her partner is. The phrase "as soon as" shows her impatience to show off her new male partner.

Paragraph 16 is a description of what Maggie used to be like when she has no male partner before. "She felt and showed so much gratitude whenever a self- sacrificing partner invited her to dance that his pleasure was cheapened and diminished. She had even grown used to noticing Anna joggle the reluctant Jimmy with her elbow as a signal for him to invite her chum to walk over his feet through a two-step." The description is hyperbolic and humorous. Anyone who invites Maggie to dance must cheapen and diminish his pleasure and is a self-sacrificing person. The words "self-sacrificing", "cheapen" and "diminish" are very ironic. At that time, Maggie always "kept a spot on the wall warm with her back", which shows her unpopularity. She would felt and showed so much gratitude towards the so-called self-sacrificing person and "had even grown used to noticing Anna joggle the reluctant Jimmy with her elbow as a signal for him to invite her chum to walk over his feet through a two-step." The flashback of the poor situation forms a distinct contrast with the present perky and shining Maggie. The contrast has mocked the arrogance of Maggie's success for a time.

2.3. Adoption of Pronouns

The different adoptions of personal pronouns for the same person have presented the irony of Maggie. In paragraph 10, "Miss Toole" refers to Maggie. The referent "Miss Toole" shows somewhat respect and improved social status of Maggie, while in paragraph 5, she is referred as "the non-escorted one" . The sharp contrast shows the author's mock on her vanity. The referent "Miss Toole" well fits the psychology of Maggie who is as proud as a peacock when she gets a new male partner. The word "escort" in paragraph 10 instead of "fellow" in the second paragraph to refer to her dancing partner elaborates an air of proud. While in Anna's eyes, she uses "First fellow she ever had" to refer to Maggie's male partner. The word "first" indicates that poor Maggie is always unpopular, and it is capitalized in the text which again emphasizes her unpopularity. In paragraph 16, " 'Maggie Toole's got a fellow at last,' was the word that went round among the paper-box girls." "Got a fellow" represents the act of finding a dancing partner. The expression of "Maggie Toole's got a fellow at last," has shown the despise from the surroundings. In the same paragraph, " 'Pipe Mag's floor-walker'--thus the Give and Takes expressed their indifferent contempt". The words "Pipe Mag's floor-walker" instead of "partner" or "friend" are used to refer to her dancing partner, which have shown disrespect and sniff on her partner. What Maggie is so proud of turns out to be something drawing the scorn from the crowd. The distinct contrast is a mock on pompous Maggie.

2.4. Deployment of Rhetorical Devices

Simile and metaphor can tie a concrete image to an identifiable abstract [3]. In paragraph 14, "Across the floor Maggie sailed like a coquettish yacht convoyed by a stately cruiser." Maggie is compared to "a coquettish yacht". The author does not use other images but chooses the image of yacht. There must be some similarities between the the two. Yacht is controlled by the cruiser.

Maggie is controlled by her vanity. The eager for a male dancing partner controls her. Under this control, she can do anything in order to realize this. Once it is achieved, she would feel very happy like a coquettish yacht. In paragraph 15, "Almost was she pretty now, with the unique luminosity in her eyes that comes to a girl with her first suitor and a kitten with its first mouse." The words "pretty", "unique luminosity" mock her elation of her male dancing partner. Here, a metaphor is used here. The joy to her is compared as "a kitten with its first mouse". The male dancing partner to Maggie is what a kitten's first mouse to the kitten. To Maggie, her partner is more like war trophies or a kind of property that she possesses and something she can show off. In paragraph 18, "But to-night the pumpkin had turned to a coach and six. Terry O'Sullivan was a victorious Prince Charming, and Maggie Toole winged her first butterfly flight." The change of Maggie's situation is compared as "the pumpkin had turned to a coach and six". The metaphorical object is a mock of the once poor and obscure Maggie. Terry O'Sullivan is compared as a charming prince. Maggie Toole is compared as a butterfly. The metaphorical objects "prince", "butterfly" are seemingly beautiful and bright, but actually, they mock the arrogance of Maggie when she has finally achieved her vanity in the dancing hall. The author considers fair to describe her scornful joy like this, whose evidence can be found in the next sentence. "And though our tropes of fairyland be mixed with those of entomology they shall not spill one drop of ambrosia from the rose-crowned melody of Maggie's one perfect night." Although the similes and metaphors are mixed with fairy tales and entomology, they are not exaggerate at all to describe that perfect night of Maggie. The words "one drop of", "ambrosia", "rose-crowned", and "perfect" sufficiently satirize the happiness of Maggie when her false pride is acquired. "One drop of" indicates her huge capacity of her scornful joy. "Ambrosia" and "perfect" show the large degree of her scornful joy. The word "crown" is always connected with queen. "Rose-crowned" has shown that she can be as joyful as a queen as long as she can acquire her vanity. Through those similes and metaphors, the once abstract pompous and hypocritic Maggie becomes vivid.

2.5. Stories with O'Sullivan and Dempsey

In paragraph 15, " 'A friend of mine, Mr. Terry O'Sullivan,' was Maggie's formula of introduction. She led him around the room, presenting him to each new-arriving Clover Leaf." The word "formula" shows the frequency of Maggie's introduction which is indeed a show-off. Besides, Maggie's formula of introduction is an elliptical sentence. Elliptical sentences always suggest urgency or avoiding verbosity[4]. Maggie is so hurry to let everyone in the hall know her new male partner that she refuses to spend a little more time on giving polite greetings and finishing complete sentence structures. The simple and formulated sentence structure also fully shows Maggie's arrogance in getting a new male partner. Moreover her arrogance and pomposity is proved again by the words like "led around", "presenting", and "each new-arriving". These words reveal Maggie's worry that there may still be someone in the hall who has not yet known the great news of her, even though she has done so many times of introduction. Besides, elliptical sentences also suggest mocking or ridiculing falsehood or pretentious style[5]. Maggie is so perky and spits the words presumingly to everyone. However, the name she uses here turns out to be a false name in the end, which she strives to reveal the truth at last in order to save the crisis. The elliptical sentence suggests a mocking towards the falsehood. Thus, a hypocritic and shabby-genteel Maggie is characterized.

" 'Gone to fight with Dempsey!' she said, breathlessly. 'They've got to be stopped. Dempsey Donovan can't fight him. Why, he'll--he'll kill him!' " [1]. When Maggie gets the information that her escort is fighting with Dempsey, the leader of the association, she is very nervous and she worries about the safety of her escort. By observing it closely, she is actually worrying more about loosing such honor of having a male dance partner in her later life than the safety of that man. Imagining if that man is not her escort or if she has somebody else acting as her dance partner, would she be so much nervous? Of course, not. Without considering the physical injury

and the spiritual hurt on her O'Sullivan, she would return quickly to great joy as long as she can have a decent dancing partner. And this is proved at the end of the story. Elliptical sentence usually suggests urgency. "Gone to fight with Dempsey!" is an elliptical sentence which suggests the urgency and danger of losing the flaunt-deserving dance partner of Maggie. The exclamation mark here strengthens the nervous effect. When Maggie is imagining the fight between O'Sullivan and Dempsey, she bursts the five words breathlessly. The word "breathlessly" indicates the supposition in Maggie that if her dance partner vanished, she even can not have breath. "They've got to be stopped. Dempsey Donovan can't fight him." The next two sentences said by Maggie are imperative sentences, which show the strong wish of stopping the fight between them in order to save her dance partner. The word "why" is usually used as an interrogative pronoun, but here it also acts as an interjection. This also helps to reveal her anxiety. The repetition of "he'll" shows the on and off of her voice due to her worry that the joy and proudness of tonight would never come back again. The exclamation mark is a plus of the tension. The trembling of her voice shows her fear and submission to the vicious power, which forms a sharp contrast with the perky and shining Maggie several hours ago. This helps to present a snobbish and capricious Maggie.

Paragraph 45 describes Maggie's coming to the rescue of O'Sullivan. Even though she knows and is told again by Rosa that the fight almost happens on every hop in paragraph 44, she still hurries to rescue her escort. The words "darting", "zig-zag", "maze" characterize a brave Maggie. However, where does her courage come from? It's the strong wish to redeem the honor she has already possessed that night. The vanish of the honor would be a crisis for her. "She burst through the rear door into the dark hall and then threw her solid shoulder against the door of the room of single combat." The verbs "burst through" and "threw" fully present Maggie's courage in protecting her dance partner whom she can show off. "And without slacking the speed of her entrance she leaped forward with a scream--leaped in time to catch and hang upon the arm of O'Sullivan that was suddenly uplifted, and to whisk from it the long, bright stiletto that he had drawn from his bosom." "Without slacking the speed" shows her hurry in rescuing her possession. The application of the verb "leap" instead of "move" or "step" shows her quick speed in action which forms a distinct contrast with her clumsy movements in the twostep in paragraph 2. The word "leaped" is repeated twice to draw reader's attention. The author uses two sentences to describe her leap in detail. The first sentence containing "leaped" shows that she is screaming, which shows her hurry from the audible perspective. The second sentence containing "leaped" shows she is so swift that she just catches the flashing stiletto in time. The hurrying rescue of her escort also illustrates a vainglorious Maggie in the story.

" 'I knew it, Dempsey,' she said, as her eyes grew dull even in their tears." When the eyes have tears inside, they are usually wet and bright. But why does the author use "dull" to describe her eyes? Because Maggie is going to reveal the real identification of her partner. " 'I knew he was a Guinea. His name's Tony Spinelli.'" That's how the matter stands. Her dance partner has no right to attend the hop and she asks him to use a false name. Nothing proud to show off. Then her eyes turn dull when she is saying that. Dempsey commands Maggie and her dancing partner to go back stairs. Right after the command is the three simple sentences from Maggie. " 'I knew it, Dempsey,' she said, as her eyes grew dull even in their tears. 'I knew he was a Guinea. His name's Tony Spinelli.'" The three simple sentences have nothing to do with her response to Dempsey's command, which violates the principle of relation according to the theory of cooperative principle. The violation shows the contrast of her attitude before and after. The three simple sentences provides the name and nationality of her dance partner. At first, she refuses to tell anything about this man's identification, even though her greatest chum bombards three question to her. But, at this time, with no one asking, she directly reveals his identification instead of transmitting the information that he is tall or making her formula introduction. The sharp contrast satirizes a capricious Maggie.

"I never had a fellow in my life. I got tired of comin' with Anna and Jimmy every night"[1]. That's Maggie's claim of why she asks the man to use a false name to escort her to the party. The words "never", "in my life", "tired", and "every night" used by Maggie have shown her complaint and dissatisfaction. Since she is so vainglorious, how can she stand that she has no male partner? "Chuck that cheese slicer out of the window," this is Dempsey's final declare towards the matter. Dempsey uses the word "cheese slicer" to refer to the stiletto, which shows this matter constitutes no threat at all, while it is regarded as a big crisis for Maggie. The distinct attitude of the two people mocks Maggie's previous braveness in saving her partner.

In the end of the story, Dempsey makes his dance invitation to Maggie very respectfully. "It was remarkable how quickly Maggie's eyes could change from dull to a shining brown"[1]. The author uses a pair of antonymic words, "dull" and "shining" to describe the change of Maggie's eyes. Besides, her change is modified by the words "remarkable" and "quickly". The description of her quick change characterizes a snobbish Maggie who totally soon recovers from the previous life and death plunder. "'With you, Dempsey?' she stammered. 'Say--will a duck swim?'" "With you, Dempsey?" is a loaded question. Unlike a general question, a loaded question does not demand a yes or no answer. Similarly, it does not require a specific answer either when it takes the form of a special question. A loaded question is rather intended to suggest a mental state of certainty, sureness or surprise of the speaker. She asks this deliberately even though she knows the answer by herself. Vainglorious Maggie is too happy to believe what she has heard. So, she asks again to make sure that the joyful news is true. What's more, it is also an elliptical sentence, which betrays her impatience to accept the invitation. Maggie is ecstatic, but instead of saying yes immediately, she pretends to ask a question first. The contradiction between her inner thought and her action betrays her hypocrisy. The last sentence violates the principle of relation [2]. This violation in fact confirms her sureness and agreement for the invitation. Because her answer to whether or not to go to dance with Dempsey is as the same as whether a duck will or will not swim. And the degree of will is as the same as the duck will swim. Instead of using "can" or "does" to constitute the rhetoric question, Maggie chooses the modal verb "will" to emphasize her subjective willingness. Those stylistic evidences reveal her strong will to accept the invitation from Dempsey, the leader of the association, which sufficiently characterize a tuft-hunting and vainglorious Maggie.

3. Conclusion

The stylistic techniques contributes to the profoundness of this short story a lot. Many efforts in shaping the snobbish and hypocritic Maggie have been made. Through a stylistic analysis on the characterization, we can perceive the irony on Maggie much more vividly. The keynote has been settled down at the very beginning by arranging different lengths of the sentences. On lexical terms, words and phrases in depicting the image of Maggie are so obvious in revealing her characters. Besides, different referents and pronouns for the same person used under different circumstances are strong evidences for the irony towards Maggie. What's more, deployment of rhetoric devices satirizes the happiness of Maggie when her false pride is acquired. In addition, the advancement of the happenings with O'Sullivan and Dempsey demonstrates the figure of Maggie vividly. The lexical and semantic evidences help to reveal the irony of Maggie, which has firmly proved the unity of form and meaning. A detailed stylistic analysis of the story itself is essential to understand O' Henry's works. By stylistic analysis, an awareness of subtleties of language use can be gained to pave the way for literary appreciation.

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