

**FOREGROUNDING POVERTY THROUGH THE  
HETERODIEGETIC NARRATOR  
IN O. HENRY'S *THE GIFT OF THE MAGI***

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***Abstract:** This article analyses the contribution and effect of the heterodiegetic narrative style employed by O. Henry, as exemplified in his famous short story titled The Gift of the Magi. In it, while the significant conceptual conflict is created by juxtaposing poverty and generosity, the stylistic analysis highlights the importance of the devices used in the short story, such as capitalisation, situational irony, and repetition. It is concluded that the stylistic devices employed by O. Henry foreground the willingness and commitment of the impoverished family to maintain the tradition of exchanging gifts during Christmas.*

***Keywords:** heterodiegetic narrator, short story, situational irony, stylistics*

## **1. Introduction**

Traditionally, style was seen as a tool for convincing readers rather than a separate textual component used to examine a text (Burke 2014). Hence, it has been considered that style indicates how language is utilised “in a given context, by a given person, for a given reason, and so on” (Leech and Short 1981: 9). Apart from the discussion of style in general terms, the history of literary criticism shows that literary stylistics is “a form of structuralism that interprets a text on the basis of its style, that is diction, figurative language, syntax, vocabulary, sentence structure, and others” (Bressler 2007: 363). Literary stylistics has become an approach to literary texts in which meaning-making is investigated through a linguistic theoretical framework that prioritises understanding how meaning is constructed using the authors’ employment of specific literary and stylistic devices. According to Wales (1990: 400), stylistics aims to study the formal aspects of the text “to show their functional significance for the interpretation of the text; or in order to relate literary effects or themes to linguistic ‘triggers’ where these are felt to be relevant.”

A variety of approaches and methodologies have been employed in literary stylistics. Similar to the view that indicates “both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm” (Guba and Lincoln 1988: 195), literary stylisticians have employed both statistical and verbal analytical techniques to achieve their research-based aims. Unlike mathematical problems, such as equations, literary texts are almost always exclusive of numbers and formulae, but that does not mean that the textual elements cannot be studied in numerical terms. Just as quantitative methods gather numerical data to make

comparisons or to describe the data, they can be employed in the analysis of verbal texts to show the text's particularities in numerical terms. However, qualitative methods "require additional interpretive work from the researcher" (Gibbons and Whiteley 2018: 285). It must be, therefore, accepted a priori that all textual analyses, including literary stylistics, are qualitative endeavours by default. Accordingly, one or both of these methods might be employed for an in-depth analysis of a literary text, although literary stylisticians have tended to describe their textual data quantitatively, while interpreting the overall properties of the text studied qualitatively. Thus, literary stylistics has offered new possibilities to researchers, who can experiment with texts by assigning various meanings to their linguistic properties.

Stylistics is in close contact with different fields of inquiry, including narratology, "the science of narrative" whose "overriding concern is the narrative structure of the text" (Bressler 2007: 113). At the same time, narratologists have paid close attention to interrogating "how a story's meaning develops from its overall structure, its language, rather than from each individual story's isolated theme" (ibid.); they have been especially interested in the narrative voice, including the point of view, which speculates "who is accountable for narrating the content to the reader" (Diasamidze 2014: 160). Hence, narratologists and linguists have tried to understand the textual mechanism of particular texts in which linguistic properties are used to identify "the 'speaking' narrator or the 'perceiving' characters" (Zeman 2020: 6-7).

The narrator's identity has been a significant concern in many theoretical schools. Thus, various approaches have tried to highlight the relationship between the narrator and the whole text. For instance, Walsh (1997: 2) focuses on the distinction between the hierarchical structures of heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators as set by Genette and concludes that a difference must be made "between first and third-person narrators", which points to their "exact contrast between involvement and noninvolvement in the story." Although different types of narrators have been discussed in the related literature, the heterodiegetic narrator is the focus of this present article. However, such a narrator is not one of the characters in the text. As the "prefix 'hetero-' alludes to the 'different nature' of the narrator's world as compared to the world of the action" (Jahn 2021: 30), studying the presence of the narrator who does not appear in action is believed to reveal the relationship between the components of the text that is stripped from a narrator whose voice cannot affect the action that governs the text as a whole. Hence, while examining the narrative voice articulates the nature of the perspective withheld by the one who narrates the story, unearthing the features of the non-involved narrator is believed to reveal how the text is structured by a persona who does not appear in the narrative at all.

To understand the narrative voice in a text, a closer look at the opinions generated by the Russian formalists is beneficial. Such critics argue that the purpose of art and literature is to defamiliarize, that is, to make the familiar look or sound original and anew. To do that, the author makes it stand out from the norm so that it becomes foregrounded. Several pertinent issues emerge from such a perspective. In his "Art as Technique," Shklovsky (2017) exemplifies various defamiliarisations used in literary texts, by hypothesising their impact on the reader. Among them, foregrounding devices are of utmost importance, because authors benefit from them to draw the readers' attention to a text's particularities.

The notion of foregrounding stems from the Prague structuralists, such as Havránek and Mukařovský, for whom the goal of foregrounding was the use of language “against the ‘background’ of ‘standard’ usage” (Scott 2014: 430). Therefore, foregrounding “comes in two main guises: foregrounding as deviation from a norm and foregrounding as more of the same” (Simpson 2004: 50). According to McIntyre (2003: 2), “the important point here is that anything that is foregrounded is highly interpretable and arguably more memorable.” From the perspective of literary stylistics, foregrounding receives utmost importance in text design, and stylistic tools enable the selected features to stand out. It is highlighted that “foregrounded elements are systematically related to each other, their impact will be powerful enough to seriously constrain the number and kinds of interpretations” (Van Peer 1986: 15). Because literary language is different from daily language, “unlike everyday conversation or language, literary language shouts” (Bressler 2007: 342). Thus, the difference between the two can be seen in how particular authors “shout” in their texts, that is, how they use language to make it sound different (louder) from the one used in daily speech.

O. Henry’s short story “The Gift of the Magi” is about an underprivileged couple who sacrifices their most valuable possessions to afford the gifts to exchange on Christmas Day. In the story, O. Henry clearly experimented with the form by making use of terseness, a stylistic narrative choice that aims to increase the effect of the style and the content on the reader. By using brevity as the norm and by trying to find the right language to write about a poor couple struggling to make ends meet during the Christmas season, O. Henry foregrounds his protagonists’ psychology through stylistic devices, such as capitalisation, irony, metaphor, and other devices which stress the poverty and devotion of two people, who try to exchange gifts, thus practicing a Christian ritual. Despite these stylistic devices, one particular aspect of O. Henry’s style is the heterodiegetic narrative.

O. Henry’s short story is simple in plot structure. As a poor couple, Jim and Della live in a rented room, and they hardly have any money left. In these inconvenient conditions, Della wants to buy a chain for Jim’s gold watch as a Christmas present, since his watch is the only thing of which he is proud. However, Della does not have enough money for that present, so she sells her hair to afford the chain. Jim looks shocked when he sees Della’s short hair, as he has bought her a set of beautiful combs for her hair, which she had seen in a shop before, but could not afford. Then, Della gives Jim the gold chain and asks him to put it on his watch; Jim explains that he has sold the watch to buy her the combs. This short story ends with an epilogue evocation of “the Magi” who are the wise men presenting valuable gifts to “the Babe in the manger” (O. Henry 1905: 9).

When discussing the nature of O. Henry’s art, critics tend to concentrate on the effect created by O. Henry through brevity in writing, which is completed by a surprise ending. However, O. Henry’s treatment of his characters and the depth of the symbolic content of his stories are rarely discussed in the related literature. And yet, a closer look at the representation of ideas and concepts through which O. Henry prepares his readers for the explosive surprise ending demonstrates that his language is purposefully artful and symbolically rich. In this article, the literariness of O. Henry’s writing is interrogated through a stylistic reading of the ideas and concepts presented in the short story. Hence, while providing readers with a stylistic analysis of the story, this paper focuses on O. Henry’s heterodiegetic narrative style, to discuss the contradiction between a Christian couple’s poverty and the Christian tradition of exchanging gifts.

## 2. Foregrounding poverty

In the “Gift of the Magi,” stylistic devices are used to foreground the main points the author argues. The narrator focuses on exchanging gifts during Christmas through a dedicated couple who tries to continue the religious tradition and display their love and compassion towards each other. Various stylistic devices strengthen the messages hidden in the narrative, including capitalisation, metaphors, metonymies, and allusions that foreground the economic situation of the characters by juxtaposing various realities set by the heterodiegetic narrator.

Capitalisation and carefully constructed metaphors are the major stylistic devices foregrounding poverty, so that the couple’s financial situation can be convincingly presented as a permanent condition. Jim’s watch and Della’s hair are pointed out via capitalisation as “The Watch,” and “The Combs”, to emphasise the importance of these items in the plot, although they are often read thematically. Capitalisation is also used to indicate the impact of poverty on the characters. The story begins with “ONE” to stress how poor Della is: “ONE dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all” (O. Henry 1905: 1). It continues with a metaphor to portray Della’s situation better: “Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one’s cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied” (O. Henry 1905: 3). The repetition of the word “one”, apart from the metaphor demonstrating the deteriorated financial situation of the couple, foregrounds singularity in a way to contradict the multiplicity of entities associated with richness.

Metonymy, while giving details on the letterbox, also clarifies the extent of the couple’s poverty: “Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name ‘Mr. James Dillingham Young.’ “The ‘Dillingham’ had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week” (ibid.). The use of metonymy is noticed when the surname “Dillingham” substitutes the word “card with the surname” and makes readers remember the couple’s poverty again. The narrator comments that “Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letters of ‘Dillingham’ looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D” (ibid.). Thus, the progression of the narrative shows that the heterodiegetic narrator’s reductionist attitude in moving the name “Dillingham” to the letter “D.” signifies their impoverished living conditions alluded to by the mentioned figures: the salary being reduced from 30 to 20 dollars.

Stylistic devices also reflect the characters’ moods. The heterodiegetic narrator’s numerous repetitions serve as a stylistic device foregrounding the emotional situation of the characters. For example, the narrator repeats certain colours in one single sentence to illustrate Della’s mood: “She stood by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard. Tomorrow would-be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present” (O. Henry 1905: 4). The adjective “grey” is repeated without any functional need only to illustrate how hopeless her situation is. The adjectival phrase that describes the gift is another repetition that signifies Della’s increasing tension and anxiety: “You don’t know what a nice - what a beautiful, nice gift I’ve got for you” (ibid.). Here, the repetition of the word “nice” fortifies Della’s increasing tension, since she cannot read Jim’s mind from his enigmatic look. She tries to convince him that her gift was worth cutting her hair. Additionally, a polysyndeton constructed by the narrator also reflects Della’s mood, as the

conjunction “nor” is repeated: “It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for” (idem: 7). Such repetitions foreground Della’s anxiety as she tries to understand how Jim feels about her short hair from the peculiar look on his face.

Certain repetitive actions mentioned by the heterodiegetic narrator foreground the thematic construction of poverty, as can be seen in calculating what is overtly and repetitively mentioned. The numbers or phrases involving calculations are inverted. It is all about doing maths to meet the ends and to afford a gift which embodies the couple’s sincere love and affection. The reader is repeatedly exposed to various numbers and different amounts of money. Worse, numbers are scattered throughout the statements, illustrating the characters’ continuous mental involvement with fiscal matters, making them stuck between loving generosity and agonising poverty. Readers are informed about the exact amount of money available: “(O)ne dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies ... Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents” (O. Henry 1905: 1). Similarly, the furnished flat in which the characters live costs 8 dollars per week under the circumstances presented above, of the recently reduced income.

The numbers appear in the text so frequently that, even though the amount is repeated as a phrase twice, the same amount recurs twice again, with different graphology, represented in numbers - “\$1.87” (4). The recurrent references to numbers, which suggest that the lack of money is a constant worry for the character, are foregrounded in different syntactic structures, which also contribute to the semantic aspects of the narrative. The use of particular verbs also strengthens the emphasis on computation. Della explains her feelings through the verbs “to number” and “to count”: “Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered... but nobody could ever count my love for you” (7). This diction implies how money and its calculation burden these characters’ thoughts.

The descriptions of Della’s hair and Jim’s watch have a thematic function, since the heterodiegetic narrator employs them to make the reader sympathise with the characters. Della’s hair is crucial in emphasising her devotion and determination to sacrifice one’s valuable possessions while offering gifts. The narrator observes: “Della’s beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters” (3). This simile increases the reader’s sensitivity to Della’s sacrifice. Moreover, the narrator uses biblical references to emphasise the significance of these two objects to the characters. The narrator explains how Della’s hair would trivialise the treasures of the Queen of Sheba, Makeda, who went to “Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones” (King James Bible, 1 Kings 10.2). For Jim’s watch, the narrator continues with a connected biblical allusion, stating that the watch would make the wealthy King Solomon jealous. These allusions highlight the subjective value of the two objects in the couple’s possession. More than the characters’ devotion to religious practices, they highlight their devotion to each other and their readiness to make a substantial sacrifice.

The situational irony that escalates the effect of the climax appears when Jim presents the set of combs to Della; the readers already have the information about her hair being cut. Jim is also appalled by Della’s gift, as he no longer has his watch. The situational irony highlights the couple’s poverty, while also stimulating the readers’ pity and admiration for their effort to maintain the Christian ritual of Christmas Day, despite their poverty. The narrator makes the reader think of the hardships Della and Jim face in order to be able to continue the tradition initiated

by the Magi. Besides, at one point, before presenting the situational irony to the reader, the narrator states: “The Magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on” (O. Henry 1905: 8). By doing so, the narrator uses narrative ellipsis to arouse the readers’ interest and attention. In the end, he presents his embedded story of the Magi to juxtapose the gifts exchanged by the poor couple.

Allusion is a fundamental stylistic device used by the heterodiegetic narrator in the story. “The Magi” are the wise men from the East who brought valuable gifts to baby Jesus, as described in the Bible: “When they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (King James Bible, Matthew 2.11). The prosperity is evident in the biblical context; in contrast, O. Henry’s couple contradicts the bountiful appearance of the Magi. Their extreme attempts to show their love and affection indicate how unwise and impulsive their behaviour is, while they also hint at the motif of sacrificial love.

The narrator ends by calling the story of Jim and Della “the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house” (O. Henry 1905: 9). This is contrasted with the evocation of the biblical ritual of the magi: “The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them” (idem: 7-8). As Della and Jim are compared to the Magi by the narrator in a jocular manner, the gifts of the poor couple are at odds with the valuable gifts of the Magi. What Della and Jim feel for each other is beyond material possession and earthly prosperity, but they cannot grasp how invaluable their devotion is. Besides, as Della and Jim are compared to the Magi, their impractical gifts are in opposition to the valuable gifts of the Magi, which shows how the religious tradition does not match reality. By juxtaposing the biblical narrative of richness with the daily reality of two Christians struck by poverty during Christmas, O. Henry’s heterodiegetic narrator points at the unmatching nature of their beliefs, characterised by the season’s joy that is in stark contrast with their financial situation.

### 3. The role of the heterodiegetic narrator

The narrator explains the importance of giving a gift at Christmas through the story of a dedicated couple. At the same time, the heterodiegetic narrator focuses on the characters’ sense of despair who perform a ritual that does not overlap with their reality. He also allows creating a contradiction between a couple who tries to continue the tradition of exchanging gifts at Christmas and their present economic state. The heterodiegetic narrator further dramatizes the story by placing the biblical episode of the magi in the background, as an example of precious gifts offered to the baby Christ, which contradicts the low-priced offerings of the couple and their commitment to buy these gifts.

The heterodiegetic narrator first presents Della’s state and mood in the bargaining scene. She does not have enough money to buy a gift for her husband, so she negotiates a discount. The dominance of the external narrator can be observed here. Instead of Della’s probable sentence, “You are charging too much. Please offer a discount,” her line becomes “Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one’s cheeks burned” (O. Henry 1905: 1). While the diction stresses the characters’ status with the help of idioms, metaphors, and emotive words, the narrative is interrupted by a direct address to the readers, to introduce them to the atmosphere, as Della is making an effort to prepare dinner for her husband: “dear friends” (idem: 6). The

achieved effect is that the narrator manipulates the narratee's perspective more efficiently.

The heterodiegetic narrator places himself at the same level as the characters. Sometimes, it is hard to distinguish between the narrator's and the character's point of view: "The door opened, and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two" (ibid.: 6). The sympathetic comment may equally belong to Della or the narrator. However, "poor fellow" is reminiscent of the narrator's already known idiosyncrasies, related to his effort to persuade his readers of Della and Jim's poverty. These reminders are reiterated throughout the story. Emotive language is also employed to enhance the readers' perception of the couple's financial situation, such as the exclamation "alas!" (8). The heterodiegetic narrator sometimes interrupts the narration to describe the setting or the characters. When Della crashes down on the couch to cry, the narrator exclaims: "While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home" (3). Here, it is not through the character's, but through the narrator's eyes that the readers look at the couple's apartment. In theory, such interruptions are generally provided by characters who have time and a reason to look at an object (Bal 1997: 37). Here, it can be argued that the narrator is closer to the narrated when he describes the house as if he were inside that specific setting.

Interestingly, the narrator's location is presented in a scenic narrative rather than a panoramic one. It becomes a close-up standpoint when he zooms to the name on the card from the vestibule, to the letterbox, and lastly, to the card. These details foreground the lonely misery of the couple, which the heterodiegetic narrator summarises: "No letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring" (O. Henry 1905: 3). However, it must also be noted that, because heterodiegetic narrators are not always reliable (Zipfel 2011: 117), such possibility of misreporting may affect the tension that brings readers the surprise ending O. Henry set for them.

#### 4. Conclusion

As the stylistic analysis of O. Henry's story shows, the narrator is primarily heterodiegetic, perceptible, and overt. In that sense, the heterodiegetic narration has a combination of features stemming from the omniscient narration that has access to the characters' thoughts and inner struggles. Such a narrator can explain the characters' anxieties, despairs, and astonishments, while juxtaposing the everyday reality of the couple's poverty and the biblical re-narrativisation of the Magi's prosperity.

As Della and Jim are compared to the Magi by the heterodiegetic narrator, the poor couple's gifts contradict the Magi's valuable gifts. This juxtaposition shows how the truly Christian reality, as reflected in the Bible, does not match the characters' everyday reality. Similarly, the stylistic devices used by O. Henry through the heterodiegetic narrator enable him to stress poverty, which contrasts the festive mood of Christmas.

The heterodiegetic narrator of "The Gift of the Magi" tells his story overtly. The narrator's way of explaining the story reflects the situation of the impoverished and devoted couple, who tries to apply well-known rituals, while showing how the expectations of exchanging gifts do not match their reality. The heterodiegetic narrator always remains between the lines, using the story of the Magi as an embedded narrative to create a contrast in the plot. Although Della and Jim are

named “Magi” by the author, the gifts of the poor couple are at odds with the valuable gifts of the biblical Magi. Their attitudes imply that their religious tradition contradicts their reality, but they still want to display extravagance to express their feelings for each other.

According to Kafalenos (2011: 254), heterodiegetic narrators in fiction have “authority” simply because “the fictional world is what the heterodiegetic narrator says it is.” Thus, by using a heterodiegetic narrator who becomes an intruder, moving in and out of the plot structure and giving information whenever he wishes, O. Henry’s narrator becomes an essential stylistic feature of the story without which the climax cannot be reached.

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