

**THE FUNCTIONING OF IRONIES FOR AESTHETIC EFFECT IN ROALD DAHL'S
SHORT STORY *THE LANDLADY***

I Wayan Resen

e-mail: wendriresen@yahoo.com

**Study Program of Linguistics, School of Graduate Studies,
Udayana University**

Prof Dr. I Nyoman Kutha Ratna, S. U.

e-mail: nyomankutha_ratna@yahoo.com

**Study Program of Linguistics, School of Graduate Studies,
Udayana University**

Prof. Dr. Aron Meko Mbet

e-mail: aronmbete@yahoo.com

**Study Program of Linguistics, School of Graduate Studies,
Udayana University**

Abstrak

Artikel ini membicarakan tentang efek estetis yang dicapai melalui berfungsinya ironi yang hadir secara dominan pada cerita pendek *The Landlady* karya Roald Dahl. Ironi dalam berbagai tipe dan penggunaannya dalam cerita pendek ini berhasil membangun efek ketegangan yang intens pada pembaca sehingga pembaca menjadi penasaran mengenai apa yang akan terjadi selanjutnya. Ketegangan terjadi karena tatkala pembaca dengan jelas melihat keterancaman Billy Weaver sebagai calon korban pembunuhan oleh nyonya rumahnya, Billy Weaver sendiri yang langsung berhadapan dengan nyonya rumahnya justru tidak menyadari niat buruk di balik keramah-tamahan nyonya rumahnya itu. Dengan demikian, Billy Weaver pun tidak mengambil kesimpulan seperti yang diharapkan pembaca tentang niat negatif nyonya rumahnya walaupun sinyal-sinyal keterancamannya sudah semakin berakumulasi dari sikap dan perilaku nyonya rumahnya yang jelas terbaca dari balik sikap manis yang dihadirkan di permukaan.

Estetika ironi ini terbangun bukan saja melalui sikap dan perilaku serba ironis nyonya rumah tersebut, tetapi juga melalui kesenjangan kesadaran yang ada antara Billy Weaver dan pembaca. Kondisi ironis ini bersumber pada kehidupan bermuka dua nyonya rumah, yakni perilaku yang seolah-olah sangat baik di permukaan namun sesungguhnya sadistik di balik itu. Ketakterdugaan sikap dan perilaku nyonya rumah ini mengejutkan dan menegangkan pembaca. Sesungguhnya, ketegangan pembaca bertambah intens ketika mendapati Billy Weaver tetap lugu-lugu ('innocent') saja di hadapan nyonya rumahnya yang semakin mencengkeramkan muslihatnya. Pada keterkejutan dan ketegangan akibat perilaku serba ironis nyonya rumah ini dan pada ketidaksabaran pembaca terhadap kepolosan Billy Weaver inilah terletak estetika cerita pendek ini.

Kata Kunci: cerita pendek; estetika ironi; ketegangan; efek estetis.

I. Introduction

A short story, being a sub genre of literary prose, is commonly accepted as an art work and therefore characterized by some aesthetic value. However, one could also ask whether aesthetic value is the only value possible for the reader to reveal from such a work. To this question the ready answer that could be given is that whatever values the reader succeeds in revealing from a story, and into how many categories the reader feels those values could be put, any judgment would at last terminate in sets dichotomous pairs such as interesting or dull, inspiring or boring, good or bad, etc. The former in each pair could be taken as a testimony about the presence of some aesthetic value in the interaction between the work under concern with the reader, while the latter as that of the absence of such value.

Value judgment exercised over a work of literature has been practiced since the classical era when Horace proposed two main functions of literature, namely 'dulce' and 'utile', the former signifying pleasure or enjoyment and the latter usefulness (in Wellek and Warren, 1955:20; in Teeuw, 1984:8 & 51). Aristotle even regarded a work of art, not excepting literature, as potential for causing catharsis, that is, for experiencing purgation, the cleansing of the mind of any mental burden or guilt (in Teeuw, 1984:221-222; in Wellek & Warren, 1955:27; in Morner & Rausch, 1998:29). The effect of literature is not even limited to only affecting the reader's emotion, but is extendable to moving people to do things or take action. The terms used for labeling these two levels of artistic effect on the reader are 'delectare' and 'movere' (Horace in Teeuw, 1984:51). All of these categories of the art's effect on the reader could be taken as the diagnoses for the degrees of aesthetics evolving in the work-reader interaction in the process of reading a piece of literary work.

Seeing the fact that a piece of literary work (a short story) is represented by the compounding of form and content, which are certainly in a mutual relation with each other, it is quite common to expect that its meaningfulness, that is, its value, its aesthetics, is potentially derivable from both aspects. Even a tongue twister, that form of language use which seems to be empty of communicative significance, but which challenges a certain degree of high-speed pronouncing skill on the part of the reciter, the one such as this: 'If a woodpecker would peck wood, how much wood would a woodpecker peck?' Such tongue twister still could be considered to carry some aesthetic sense with it, though in this case its aesthetic sense is limited only to the fun derived from witnessing how the reciter, in a speed tongue-twister reading contest for example, fails or succeeds with the maximum speed he has been able to practice it. Such tongue twister is, of course, quite potential for effecting pleasure ('dulce') on the part of the reciter and the audience. With a story, in this case the short story *The Landlady* by Roald Dahl, the aesthetics is much more than the one derived from the recital of such a tongue-twister because a short story is quite potential not only for 'dulce', for its pleasure value, but also for 'utile', for its value of usefulness. Following is presented the synopsis of the story *The Landlady* before more detailed observation and analysis are carried out over the functioning of various ironies within the story.

II. Synopsis of the Short Story *The Landlady*

This story begins with the business mission assumed by Billy Weaver, a quite prospective and energetic seventeen-year old business person, who was sent to Bath for some business matters by his superior in the company's central office in London. He was very happy

with this mission since he was so obsessed by the idea of promotion to a higher and higher position in the company. He dominates the beginning part of the narrative.

As soon as he got down from the train in Bath railway station, his mind was engaged by the idea of getting an accommodation for his stay during his business mission. While at the suggestion of the porter he met at the station he started to find the hotel 'the Bell and Dragon' about half a kilometer away from that station, he became much tempted on the way by a lodging house with its notice board announcing about the availability of room for anyone in need. Each word in the notice '**BED AND BREAKFAST**', all in small capitals, looked to his eyes as if they were alive, definitely inviting him to come and stay there.

Billy Weaver became much spelled. The logic he exercised before in comparing some types of accommodation prior to deciding which one to choose to stay in for better comfort abruptly came to a stop, not working any more. In fact, as soon as he touched the bell button in the front door of that lodging house, all of a sudden, not even having a second to draw back his finger from the button, the door threw wide open with the landlady standing looming large right in front of him, warmly welcoming and inviting him to come in in the most agreeable manner. She was a close-to-fifty-year-old unmarried lady showing all those personalities characteristic of a well-bred woman such as being graceful, motherly, loving, caring, and the like. What was more? Beyond Billy's expectation the room rate she let was so low, less than half of what actually Billy was ready to pay.

Only that, beyond normal expectation, there were several things which raised ever deeper curiosity on the part of Billy Weaver. First, the well- and so skillfully-preserved dead parrot and dog kept by the landlady in the house as if they were really alive. What was even more shocking to Billy was that that was all done by the landlady alone. The next strange thing learned by Billy was that within the last two or three years of the boarding house operation there had been only two other people coming to stay at this landlady's boarding house despite the fact that the landlady was very good and kind as described above and the room rate she offered was very low. Billy learned this number of the previous tenants and the dates of their coming to stay there from the guest book into which he was also supposed to enter his personal identities as requested by the landlady. He could not help wondering and kept asking questions in his mind about all such strange happenings though he was at last informed by the landlady that she was very selective in accepting the type of people coming to stay in her house. And what was more? These two previous tenants were still single, like him. And even more surprising to him was the fact that, as informed by the landlady, these two young gentlemen were actually still there under the same roof as him, but on the third floor, even after already passing two or three years of stay there. Stranger still was the fact no presence in person of these gentlemen was seen by Billy.

The third strange thing that increased Billy's curiosity was the fact that when he was served late evening tea as a compliment by the landlady he smelled something like the aroma we generally smell when we make a visit to a hospital. This smell was emanating from the well-dressed and graceful person of the landlady, who was sitting close to him while serving him with the tea which in fact also smelled not in the usual aroma we generally feel when we are drinking tea. Meanwhile, the landlady, while sitting in good care of and kind accompaniment to Billy, kept making sure that Billy had put his name and signature in the guest book. This was required because from time to time when she needed to look at it when he (the tenant) 'no longer' stayed there, she would have easy access to that. She asked Billy to enter his name in the same way as she did to the two previous tenants, Christopher Mulholland and Gregory W. Temple. At this point deeper and deeper curiosity did creep into Billy's mind while he remained innocent as to

what would happen to his own person, only to the tense feeling of the readers whose enquiring minds clearly lead them to concluding that he was but the next victim after Mulholland and Temple because he would soon be killed by the sipping of that evening tea served by the landlady, and soon be preserved in the same way as done to the dog and the parrot and surely to Mr. Mulholland and Mr. Temple, so skillfully. At this point the story is ended. It is a horror story.

III. The Reader's Share in the Articulation of the Story

A story does have its structure built up by interrelation of various elements. However, until the functioning of these elements becomes observed by the reader the story remains dumb. Therefore, the role of the reader is essential in revealing the meaningfulness of a story (Selden & Widdowson, 1993:46). This is particularly true for the story *The Landlady*, which has been found to abound in various gaps which the reader alone has to fill in order to make fuller sense of the story.

Such gap-filling role of the reader is in conformity with Wolfgang Iser who according to Selden and Widdowson (1993:57) is in the opinion that 'By resolving the contradictions between the various viewpoints which emerge from the text or by filling the gaps between viewpoints in various ways, the readers take the text into their consciousness and make it their own experience'. However, with such gap filling task to his disposition the reader is not at will to do it. Again as understood by Selden and Widdowson (1993:57) Iser thinks that

The reader's existing consciousness will have to make certain internal adjustments in order to receive and process the alien viewpoints which the text presents as reading takes place. The situation produces the possibility that the reader's own world-view may be modified as a result of internalizing, negotiating and realizing the partially indeterminate elements of the text.

In other words, reading 'gives us a chance to formulate the unformulated' (Iser in Selden and Widdowson, 1993:57).

Such active involvement of the reader in actualizing the meaning of a story can of course put such a reader in a position to witness the working of various devices in the story that produce certain effects. This is quite true for the functioning of the device of irony in the story *The Landlady*. Before focusing the analysis on the functioning of ironies for aesthetic effect in this short story, it is necessary to present an overview of the device of irony itself first, its types as well as its functions as already conventionally accepted.

IV. Irony, Its Types and Functions

In general term irony can be taken to mean a condition, both verbal and situational, in which the opposite of what is expected is what actually happens or is practiced so that it happens or is practiced not to the fulfillment of what is expected by the reader or audience. Actually this simple definition of irony has already suggested its categorization into two categories, namely the verbal and the situational. This is quite in line with Morner and Rausch (1998:113-114) who define these two types of irony as follows

Verbal irony is a figure of speech in which there is a contrast between what is said and what is actually meant....Situational irony refers to the contrast between what is intended or expected and what actually occurs.

Sarcasm is also a type of verbal irony, only that it is 'harsh and heavy-handed rather than clever and incisive' (Ibid). Situational irony when employed in a drama is called dramatic irony, that is, a situation which, in Morner's and Rausch's own words, 'involves the audience's being aware of the character's real situation before the character is' (Ibid). In order to produce certain ironic effects, various devices can be employed by the author. Hyperbole, litotes, sarcasm, and satire are among the most common.

The employment of irony as a device has been practiced since the classical era. One is called Socratic irony because this type of irony is known to have been employed in the Platonic dialogue. According to Morner and Rausch (Ibid), this type of irony is generally represented by one's 'feigned ignorance of another's point of view in order to draw that person out and refute his or her arguments'. For example, when one wants to expose the errors of his or her opponent, he or she could pretend to be willing to learn from that person. Only after a lot of talk or action has been given by that person in the context of that 'learning' are then his mistakes pointed out to the maximum, all for downgrading that person's incompetence. Clearly, there is a factor of bad intention exercised to such a person due, indeed, to his being treated as an opponent.

Another type of irony whose occurrence is beyond human power to control is the one called irony of fate. This type of irony belongs to the situational category. In Morner's and Rausch's words this kind of irony is explained as stemming from 'the view that fate, destiny, or God, seeking diversion or amusement, manipulates human beings like puppets and thwarts their plans' (Ibid). As an example, a reference could be made to a situation or an incident in which the lost thing is found back only when it is no longer needed.

The description of irony provided in a dictionary such as *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, for example, is in principle the same as that reviewed from Morner's and Rausch's above. To select just the most relevant definitions from this dictionary can be presented here definition 1) which goes this way: 'a pretense of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the other's false conceptions conspicuous by adroit questioning -- called also Socratic irony; definition 2a) stating about irony as 'the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning; definition 3a) (1) stating that irony is effected from 'incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result; and definition 3b) which states about irony as 'incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play - called also dramatic irony, tragic irony (1974:611).

Daiches et al. (1968:822) define irony as 'the effect of implying a meaning quite different from the apparent or surface meaning'. While with this definition Daiches et al. can be understood as making a statement on verbal irony, they also make a mention of the existence of situational irony. Understatement and paradox are according to them among the devices potential for ironical effect.

Holman and Harmon (1992:254) say that 'The effectiveness of irony is the impression it gives of restraint'. This can be taken as one main function of irony. A sense of restraint seems to be the logical consequence of the fact that irony is constantly characterized by the opposition between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. There is, in other words, no fulfillment of expectation. When irony is functioning to this end, it could be that the reader or the audience becomes impatient, shocked, regretful, or hateful, or just the opposite, that is, they get some happy escape or, using Aristotle's term, a catharsis, a mental purgation, a cleansing of the

mind from mental burden. Whatever emotional effect an irony exercises on the reader or the audience, this is an effect occurring due to their involvement in a tension between expectation and a condition contrary to the expectation, which tends to add in an enriching manner to the inventory of experiences already in the possession of the reader or the audience. This is the aesthetics which is potential to be achieved with the functioning of irony in a literary work, not excepting a short story, and indeed in the story *The Landlady*.

V. The Ironies and their Functioning in the Short Story *The Landlady*

After participating intensively into the progress of the narrative in the short story *The Landlady*, activating the relevant aspects of the general knowledge available with us (readers), and making use of all the clues provided by the narrative in the story, and then allowing our general knowledge to interact with such clues from the story, we (the readers) can fill the gaps left open in the story as part of its narrative technique with information appropriate to our consumption of the story. The feeling raised on our part by this ability to succeed in filling such open gaps as signaled by such clues is the feeling of superiority as readers. Why superiority? This is because we become confident that we have resolved the suspension caused on our part by such technique, namely by those gap puzzles, integrated as devices into the story. This tends to bring a degree of relief or even a happy shock of finding that we have the capability to resolve the problem that causes tension on our part. This certainly contributes to the attractiveness of the story or, otherwise, to our enjoyment of the story due to our meaningful interaction with it.

Now, to start with the biggest irony in the story *The Landlady* (TLL), we can present our conclusion after reading that whole story that Billy Weaver, the young energetic and optimistic business gentleman who always saw the great prospect of his future enterprise turned out to become one of the three victims, or the fifth if we count the two slaughtered and skillfully-preserved animals, of the graceful cold-blooded landlady, the murderer. It is, indeed, these skillfully-slaughtered and well-preserved dog and parrot that serve as one of the strong clues of the kind of tendency (Killing as hobby? Killing as expression of hate and love of gentlemen of Billy type, young and handsome?) developed and committed by the landlady at this point of her life. This irony, being the biggest in the story can be taken as becoming the organizing force for all the other ironies, both the verbal and the situational, which occur along the narrative and which in turn help shape that biggest irony. To list a number of these other ironies identified in the story, both verbal and situational, we can see among others the ones presented and analyzed below.

The ironical effect of these ironies are all seen and understood from the viewpoint of Billy Weaver or from the viewpoint of the narrator in the story, from whom we (the readers) become informed and, therefore, knowledgeable about the hostess-tenant relationship, which finally and ironically turned into killer-killed relation between the landlady, the graceful but cold-blooded, and Billy Weaver, the energetic but innocent. The sequence in the presentation of the ironies below does not show the sequence as they occur in the progress of the narrative. In fact they are randomly extracted from the story, each with its contribution to the shaping of that biggest or central irony in the story as already presented above. In other words, their presentation one after another in the analysis is in accordance with how we feel each of them helps shape and intensify the sense of tragedy (the biggest irony) that finalizes the coherent tragic sense in the story.

Irony 1: situational irony

For irony 1 it is interesting to present here the decision Billy made concerning the accommodation he at last chose to stay in. While his reasoning and experience already informed him about the better quality of staying in a pub due to the better facilities as well as better accompaniment available in such a place, Billy, quite against this informed reasoning chose to stay at the landlady's lodging house only to be shocked by a series of mysterious happenings he found there. The decision made by Billy was even one taken more under the force of the charm of unexplainable nature, that is, under the spell of the seemingly blinking letters of the words that represented the notice in the notice board of the landlady's boarding house. In this case Billy abandoned his common sense reasoning for the unexplainable mystery (mysticism). This is, indeed, something quite ironical. The following quotation shows this.

After dithering about like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at the 'Bell and Dragon' (that is, the cheap hotel he was informed about by the porter in the station, my notes) before making up his mind. He turned to go.

And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window (of the landlady's boarding house, my notes) when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most particular manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, it said, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell.

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 (TLL, pp.3-4).

Witnessing such an irony as presented in the quotation above we, the readers, tend to feel even a sort of double ironies, one from inside the story, and the other from outside the story, which is developed by the readers themselves based on their experience of life. This irony from outside the story is one derived from our common expectation in living in this modern world, namely a world no longer easily subjected to the dictate of irrationalism, that is, no longer under the dictate of mysticism. With this fact in mind the power of irony we feel when reading the story becomes much more intensified.

Irony 2: situational irony

This irony is represented by our conclusion after reading the story that the landlady is a graceful but cold-blooded killer as already hinted above. Seeing her gracefulness we do not in the least expect there was a tendency of becoming a cold-blooded murderer in her own person. However, beyond our expectation she did kill not only the dog and the parrot, but also Mr. Mulholland, Mr. Temple, and at last Mr. Weaver, and preserved the dead bodies. Was it for hobbies, for a revenge of her rejected love, or as an expression of another kind of revenge for something she hated because of the deep disappointment caused on her part earlier in her life? We do not know for certain. However, it is, indeed, this multi interpretations in the behavior of the landlady which increase the tension on our part as readers and, therefore, the sense of aesthetics in reading the story.

Irony 3: situational irony

As another highly significant irony that much contributes to the aesthetics of the story can be presented here the high selectiveness of the landlady in allowing and accepting the kind of people to come and stay at her lodging house. Look at the following dialogue between Billy and the landlady about the attitude of the latter in accepting the kind of people to come and stay at her lodging house.

‘I should have thought you’d be simply swamped with applicants,’ he (Billy, my notes) said politely.

‘Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course, I am. But the trouble is that I’m inclined to be just a teeny weeny bitty choosy and particular – if you see what I mean.’

‘Ah, yes.’ (TLL, p.5).

Why this attitude of the landlady is ironical is because it is quite contradictory to the commonly accepted motive in running a lodging house as a form of business, which is but an economic motive, that is, one for money. In fact this was not the true motive of the landlady, her economic motive being only a disguise for her much deeper and, therefore, her truer motive, which is to trap only cute young gentlemen agreeable to her to be her victims as already pictured above. To discover the disguised behind the disguising can really serve as a device for creating tension, curiosity, suspension, on the part of the readers. The effect is the fostering of ever inquiring mind on the part of the readers as to the deepest motive, and this can bring a degree of aesthetic sense to such knowing readers.

Irony 4: verbal irony

The story *The Landlady* is much richer in situational than in verbal ironies. It is, indeed, this fact which allows the readers a chance to get into deeper involvement in their participation to solving the puzzling situation and attitude shown by the landlady’s behavior. However, one verbal irony which is of much contribution to creating tension on the part of the readers can be obtained from the story as presented in the following quotation.

Once more, Billy glanced down at the book (the guest book, my notes). ‘Look here,’ he said, noticing the dates. ‘This last entry is over two years old.’

‘It is?’

‘Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland’s is a year before that – more than *three years ago*.’

‘Dear me,’ she said, shaking her head and heaving a dainty little sigh. ‘I would never have thought it. How time does fly away from us all, doesn’t it, Mr Wilkins?’

‘It’s Weaver,’ Billy said, ‘W-e-a-v-e-r.’

‘Oh, of course it is!’ she cried sitting down on the sofa. ‘How silly of me. I do apologise. In one ear and out the other, that’s me, Mr Weaver.’

‘You know something?’ Billy said. ‘Something that’s really quite extraordinary about all this?’

‘No, dear, I don’t.’ (TLL, p.8).

The verbal status of the irony in the quotation above is of some types. First, to his inquiring mind about the date of the last entry found in the guest book Billy expected (as we the readers do too)

that the landlady would give an answer which confirmed what Billy learned from that book because he had restated the information as he really found there in the book about the length of stay of the previous two tenants to her lodging house. However, quite contrary to his expectation, and to the expectation of the readers too, the landlady intensified Billy's curiosity and tension by her sharing in the inquiry about that. In other words, she, too, pretended to need to know about the previous tenants' length of stay and, therefore, pretended to indulge in the same question as asked by Billy rather than providing the explanation which we (the readers) know she actually knew very well, all things being under her own plan. Ironical! At the end of the dialogue quoted above the landlady even so assertively stated that she did not know anything about those tenants in her lodging house under Billy's enquiry. For Billy those two previous tenants had come to have an extraordinary case value. Why? Because he immediately recalled to his mind the news he still vaguely remembered about the mysterious loss of two young people bearing the same names as those two tenants, namely Christopher Mulholland and Gregory M. Temple about the same years as the years they respectively entered their names in the landlady's guest book. In fact the landlady knew about this, and through the conclusion made by the readers it was she herself who was the actor for the disappearance of these two gentlemen from their families, from their communities. The clue for this role of the landlady is suggested by her own statement that it was she herself who skillfully preserved the dead bodies of the dog and parrot (and of course after she herself had slaughtered them) as clear from the following quotation.

‘That parrot,’ he said at last. ‘You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window from the street. I could have sworn it was alive.’

‘Alas, no longer.’

‘It's most terribly clever the way it's been done,’ he said. ‘It doesn't look in the least bit dead. Who did it?’

‘I did.’

‘*You* did?’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘And have you met my little Basil (the landlady's well-preserved dead body of the dog, my notes) as well?’ She nodded towards the dachshund curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realized that this animal had all the time just been as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of his back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved (TLL, p.11).

If we observe Billy's constantly innocent behavior in such situation, that is, in his being totally under the control of the seemingly graceful, motherly and caring but in fact victimizing landlady, we the readers really feel a great tension within ourselves because we know through our inquiring and analyzing mind that the true person of the landlady was that of the victimizing, not really of the caring, personality. This tension, of course, is an aesthetic tension on the part of the readers whose reading of the story, therefore, guarantees the achievement of that benefit of ‘dulce’ and ‘utile’ and ‘catharsis’.

VI. Conclusion

Based on the reading and analysis of the short story *The Landlady* above it can be concluded that ironies, in their variations, both situational and verbal, and in their levels of

functioning, can really create tension upon tension on the part of the readers. The intensity of the tensions is caused by the fact that the story is dominated by situational ironies, that is, the type of irony that asserts a greater challenge to the readers to draw their own conclusion about a lot of things or incidents not explicitly narrated in the story, which, therefore, serve as open information gaps for the readers to fill in. The task of filling the challenging gaps with information based on the readers' competence tends to bring the readers to intensive mental involvement in following the incidents narrated in the story and, therefore, become fully engaged in reading the story. Such involvement and engagement are potential to cause certain aesthetic sense on the part of the readers.

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