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## THE ROLE OF METONYMY IN CRAFTING FICTIONAL REALITIES (ON THE MATERIAL OF O'HENRY'S SHORT STORIES)

### Abstract

Among the numerous literary devices that contribute to the intricacies of storytelling, metonymy, often overlooked, plays a significant role in creating evocative narratives. This paper examines the role of metonymy in fiction, particularly focusing on the works of the renowned American writer O. Henry.

To comprehend the concept of metonymy, the paper considers its nuances, emphasizing its impact on character development, setting establishment, tone creation, foreshadowing, and symbolism in fiction. O. Henry's masterful use of metonymy is examined through examples from his notable works. The study also considers various purposes of metonymy in fiction.

**Keywords:** *metonymy, fiction, symbolism, O. Henry's short stories*

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## Bədii reallıqların yaradılmasında metonimiyanın rolu (O. Henrynin qısa hekayələri məzmununda)

### Xülasə

Bir çox ədəbi alətlərin müzakirənin mürəkkəblərini təmin etməyə yardım etdiyi, çox vaxt gözərdi edilən metonimiyanın, təsirli narativlərin yaradılmasında əhəmiyyətli rol oynadığı qeyd olunur. Bu məqalə, xüsusilə məşhur Amerika yazıçısı O. Henrynin əsərləri əsasında, metonimiyanın ədəbiyyatda rolunu araşdırır.

Metonimiyanın konsepsiyasını başa düşmək üçün, məqalə onun nüanslarını nəzərə alır və onun şəxsiyyət inkişafı, mühit qurma, ton yaratma, qabaqcıl işarələr və simvolizmə təsirini vurğulayır. O. Henrynin metonimiyanın qeyri-adi istifadəsi onun əsərlərindən verilən nümunələr əsasında araşdırılır. Tədqiqat, ədəbiyyatda metonimiyanın müxtəlif məqsədlərinin də nəzərdə tutulduğunu göstərir.

**Açar sözlər:** *metonimiya, bədii ədəbiyyat, simvolizm, O. Henrynin qısa hekayələri*

### Introduction

Fictional literature, in all its forms, serves as a portal into the imagination, allowing readers to transgress the frames of reality and immerse themselves in alternate worlds. The artistry of storytelling employs a toolbox of literary devices and techniques that authors use to craft compelling narratives. In fiction, every word is a brushstroke on the canvas of imagination, and

every figure of speech acts as a prism that refracts the light of meaning. Among these literary tools that often goes unnoticed but plays a significant role in creating evocative prose is metonymy. “Despite metonymy’s capacity to create aesthetically impressive and structurally important effects, it has hitherto received so little attention in literary stylistics and rhetorical tropology – especially in comparison that has been lavished on metaphor – that it may be called the “forgotten trope”” (Matzner, 2016: 4).

From the ancient epics to modern literature, metonymy has always been an important component of the fabric of storytelling that creates layers of depth and evokes emotions beyond the mere arrangement of words. Exploring the intricate role of metonymy in fiction discovers the hidden mechanisms that breathe life into the narrative tapestry. The artistic talent of outstanding American writer O’Henry has always fascinated readers and attracted researchers’ attention.

Before delving into the analysis of metonymy in O. Henry's works, it's essential to understand the concept of metonymy. At its core, metonymy is a rhetorical device that substitutes one word or phrase with another closely related word or phrase. If in colloquial speech, metonymic transfers ensure a significant reduction in the speech chain and save speech efforts, which is very important for informal communication (Deryugina, Ilyukhina, 2023: 179), in fiction it often adds depth and complexity to a writer's work. It implies symbolic references, and contextual associations. Unlike metaphor, which relies on a direct comparison between two dissimilar things, metonymy relies on an indirect, contextual relationship. It operates on the principle that words or phrases are often interconnected by shared experiences, cultural references, or geographical proximity. According to N.A. Ippolitova, this trope is based on the relationships of spatial, temporal, and logical coherence between the compared phenomena (Ippolitova, 2020: 274). In the hands of a skilled writer, metonymy becomes the bridge that seamlessly connects the tangible with the intangible, the specific with the abstract, allowing readers to navigate the intricate layers of meaning effortlessly.

According to Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden “Metonymy is a cognitive phenomenon that may be even more fundamental than metaphor. We believe that the contributions give a fair view of the state of the art in metonymic research, although we are also aware of the fact that a great many questions about metonymy still remain unanswered” (Panther, Radden, 1999: 1).

Let us consider the classic example of using a physical object to represent a character's identity. For instance, a worn-out jacket, a yellowed with age photograph, or a cherished childhood toy can reflect the character's past, desires, or inner turmoil, serving as a metonymic extension of their emotional landscape. Through this complex interplay, readers can understand the character's motivations, fears, and aspirations, fostering a deeper connection with the narrative.

We can adduce the following purposes of metonymy in fiction:

**Eliciting emotions.** Authors can use metonymy as a powerful tool to elicit strong emotions in readers. By mentioning a symbol or object closely tied to a particular emotion, writers can evoke the reader's senses and feelings and make the emotional impact more profound (e.g. describing "a pair of empty boots" to convey loss taps into readers' shared experiences and associations.) Moreover, metonymy plays a pivotal role in fostering an intimate connection between the reader and the text, facilitating a shared experience that transcends the boundaries of language. Through the evocative power of metonymy, readers are invited to partake in the emotional journey of the characters, empathizing with their struggles, aspirations, and triumphs. This intimate bond, forged through the subtle nuances of metonymic associations, engenders a profound sense of empathy and understanding, underscoring the timeless universality of human experiences depicted in literature. Metonymy underlie human thoughts and language (Burke, 2023: 144).

**Character development.** Sometimes the writers use metonymy to disclose character traits and enhance the reader's understanding of the characters. Moreover, through metonymy authors provide a subtle insight into their personality, history or motivations, connecting characters to certain objects, actions, or locations. For example, a character who read books may be associated with knowledge and curiosity, even without explicitly stating those attributes.

**Setting the tone.** Metonymy can help to create the atmosphere of a story. By selecting words and phrases that carry connotations and cultural weight, authors can inconspicuously convey the mood they want to create (e.g. describing a gloomy, rain-soaked street can invoke a sense of melancholy or foreboding, setting the stage for a darker narrative).

**Foreshadowing and Symbolism.** Metonymy is used as an adept way to foreshadow events and reveal hidden symbolism in a story. Objects or elements closely connected to future plot developments can be subtly introduced through metonymy. It helps to create anticipation and intrigue. A seemingly neutral object, when employed as a metonym, can later reveal its deeper significance in the story.

Metonymy's influence extends beyond the microcosm of characters and settings, permeating the macro structure of the narrative itself. Through the skillful use of metonymic motifs, authors can weave intricate thematic threads, creating a cohesive rows of symbols and motifs that underscore the deeper philosophical or societal undercurrents. In his thesis "The Urban Web: Metonymic Representation in the Work of Charles Dickens and George Gissing" Michael Lesiuk claims that "representations of pollution, filth and excrement in Victorian realist fiction are more than abstract symbols or conceptual metaphors for understanding a "diseased" or "constipated" body politic. When they are read metonymically, signs of pollution, filth, and waste also serve as indices that point towards innumerable other aspects of the actual Victorian city, and in the right narrative context they can metonymically point towards those other aspects of the city to which they are indexically connected" (Lesiuk, 2012: 2).

**Providing capacity and brevity.** Metonymy is widely used not only in fiction, but also in everyday speech. It makes the expression shorter and more practical (e.g., we can substitute the expression "the students of the class" with one word – "class"). "The traditional definitions of metonymy are carried out under the assumption that metonymy is a figurative device to provide some charm and grandeur to the style, and, the researchers are all defined to the lexical level yet without treating it as a phenomenon in everyday language and normal modes of thinking" (Guan, 2009: 179).

We can provide multiple examples that illustrate the imagery of metonymy in fiction. For instance, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," the use of "East Egg" and "West Egg" as metonyms for the social classes in the novel not only delineates geographical locations but also symbolizes the stark contrast between the wealthy elite and the nouveau riche; in J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series, the "wand" is a metonym for magical ability. A character's wand often reflects their identity, personality, and abilities, contributing to the rich world-building in the series, in George Orwell's "1984," "Big Brother" serves as a metonym for the oppressive regime and surveillance state, embodying the omnipresent control and fear that permeates the dystopian society.

However, metonymy, while a potent tool in literature, can at times prove to be a double-edged sword, confounding readers and challenging their understanding. This linguistic device often relies on subtle associations that, when misinterpreted, may lead to confusion. "Despite being an efficient communicative device, has the potential to cause serious misunderstandings if shared knowledge and expectations on which it relies are not perfectly matched" (Littlemore, 2015: 7).

In the expression "The perfect set of wheels for the young racer", "set of wheels" mean the vehicle, but not the part of the car. Such metonymy is used because the wheels are considered the key part of the car.

Another example, the expression "The pen is mightier than the sword" uses "pen" and "sword" metonymically to represent the power of written communication and physical force, respectively. Taken literally, one could envision a fierce duel between a pen and a sword, a scenario that hardly makes sense. Hence, metonymy's potential for ambiguity necessitates a keen understanding of context and cultural references to grasp its intended meaning in various literary works.

O. Henry, the pen name of William Sydney Porter, was a master of this literary technique. The sophisticated language of O. Henry's short stories was formed under the influence of the peculiar language of American magazine stories; dual orientation towards mass and elite readers; a sense of

language, developed by many years of reading, and an understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of life. O. Henry chooses the path of complicating the language: ridding the plot of extra-fabular elements as much as possible, he generously strings stylistic devices onto it. One of the most important features of the is his specific way of thinking and forming thoughts. In his urge to update the language, O. Henry aims not at simplicity, but at complexity. Trying to convey in his short stories his specific perception of life, in which everything is possible, in which chance decides the fate of a person, he develops an exquisite, stylistically sophisticated language, not just saturated with all sorts of tropes, figures of speech and other linguistic devices, but in fact entirely consisting of them. O. Henry uses almost all the achievements of mankind in this area - in any case, we counted about 80 varieties of them in his stories. His language is concentrated, "dense" and not so easy to understand and especially translate. The vast majority of language techniques and lexical devices in his works are untranslatable in principle, and it leads to the fact that most of the author's original technics disappear in translation (Jdanova, 2012: 115).

His short stories, renowned for their wit and surprise endings, are replete with examples of metonymy that enrich the narrative and engage readers in a delightful dance of language and meaning. In this article, we will explore O. Henry's adept use of metonymy through a careful analysis of several examples from his works, showcasing how this technique contributes to the overall effectiveness of his storytelling. O. Henry's ability to utilize metonymy is a testament to his mastery of language and storytelling.

One of the primary ways O. Henry employs metonymy is in character development. By using metonyms, he allows readers to gain insight into the inner workings of his characters. O. Henry's use of metonymy extends to the settings of his stories, allowing readers to connect with the environment on a deeper level.

In "The Cop and the Anthem," (O'Henry, 1977: 37) New York City itself becomes a metonym for the harsh realities of urban life. The city is depicted as a cold and unforgiving place, where the protagonist, Soapy, struggles to find warmth and shelter. The phrase "the city" represents not just a geographical location but also the challenges and opportunities it presents. The term "cop" in this story is used as a metonym for law enforcement and the societal constraints that prevent the character Soapy from finding refuge during the harsh winter months, highlighting the challenges faced by the homeless in the city.

One more example of metonymy in the same story can be observed in the following passage: "Up Broadway he turned, and halted at a glittering café, where are gathered together nightly the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm" (O'Henry, 1977: 39) The author uses metonyms the grape, the silkworm, the protoplasm to create the atmosphere of luxury café. We can infer that the grape refers to the wine, the silkworm refers to fancy clothes, and the protoplasm refers to the rich man. The use of metonymy makes these sentences much funny. The humorous languages bring great enjoyment to readers (Tong, 2016: 205).

In "Four Million," (O'Henry, 2014) O. Henry uses metonymy to add depth to the narrative and to convey complex ideas in a sophisticated manner. In the story, "brownstone fronts" are used as a metonym for wealth and social status, representing the luxurious lifestyle of the affluent upper class in New York City. This phrase implies not just the physical appearance of the buildings, but the entire social milieu and lifestyle associated with them.

In one more short story of the author "The Hand That Riles the Word" (O'Henry, 1977: 95) metonymy is read in the title. The word "hand" symbolizes a woman who managed to wrap around her little finger two stagers. We can also observe the association with the well-known cliché "to rule the world", that discloses the philosophy of the short story.

O. Henry's dialogue is replete with metonymy, enhancing the wit and humor in his stories. Perhaps the most famous element of O. Henry's storytelling is his use of dramatic irony, often achieved through metonymy.

For instance, in the outstanding story of the author "The Gift of the Magi," (O'Henry, 1977: 31) the titular gifts – Della's hair combs and Jim's watch chain – become metonyms for the sacrifices

made by the characters. The irony lies in the fact that they each give up their most treasured possession to buy a gift for the other, only to find that the gifts are now useless without the items they sold. Here, metonymy intensifies the impact of the story's central irony and at the same time adds dramatic effect to the plot.

### Conclusion

Metonymy, with its subtle and indirect associations, is a literary device that enriches the fabric of fiction. It allows authors to convey emotions, develop characters, set tones, and weave intricate narratives with finesse. As readers, understanding the role of metonymy enhances our appreciation of the craft that goes into creating compelling stories.

O. Henry's mastery of metonymy is evident in the way he weaves this rhetorical device into his storytelling. Through character development, setting, symbolism, dialogue, and irony, he uses metonymy to enhance the richness and depth of his narratives. As readers, we are drawn into the intricate tapestry of O. Henry's world, where words become more than mere words; they become powerful tools for conveying meaning and emotion. O. Henry's works remind us that, in the hands of a skilled writer, metonymy can elevate storytelling to an art form, leaving a lasting impression on readers long after the final page is turned.

The next time you immerse yourself in a work of fiction, pay attention to the metonyms woven into the narrative, and you'll discover the power of suggestion in shaping the worlds within books.

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