



**THE LANGUAGE OF SACRIFICE AND THE
DISCOURSE OF DEPRIVATION: A CRITICAL
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GENDER, CLASS, AND
ECONOMIC POWER IN O. HENRY’S “THE GIFT OF
THE MAGI” AND MAUPASSANT’S “THE NECKLACE”**

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the two short stories, O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” (1905) and Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” (1884). This study aims to explore how the lexical choices, the patterns of transitivity and the descriptions of domestic settings are intertwined to construct a specific ideological image of gender, class and economic power in the two stories. The study will employ the three-dimensional model of CDA proposed by Norman Fairclough, which involves the text itself, the process of text production and consumption and the social and cultural context in which the text is constructed and interpreted. In addition, Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar will be employed to underpin the micro analysis of language use. Through these analytical frameworks, this paper reveals that both stories frequently use the discourse of economic absence and the lack of money. Such discourse positions the female protagonists into a larger system in which women are produced as commodities and consumed in a gendered way. However, though both stories involve a female protagonist and an economic issue, they constitute very different ideological implications of the relationship between femininity and economic agency. In O. Henry’s story, the discourse of the story sentimentalizes and ennobles the idea of a woman’s economic self-sacrifice. Della’s action of selling her beautiful hair is constructed as a supreme sign of love for her husband. Linguistic representation endorses and glorifies the loss and poverty as something spiritually valuable and moral. On the other hand, in Maupassant’s “The Necklace,” a more critical attitude is adopted. The story reveals the social and economic structures that construct women’s class desire and later punishes them for the desire. Mathilde’s ten years of painful experience are not caused by her greediness and immorality but are rooted in the structural inequality of the economic system. Her suffering is constructed because of the social context in which women are lack of access to the economic capital, rather than a result of individual immorality.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender, Class, Economic Power, O. Henry, Maupassant, Lexical Choice, Transitivity, Domestic Space, Feminist Literary Linguistics*

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1. Introduction

O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* (1905) and Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace* (1884) are two of the famous stories in the Western literary canon. Traditionally, both stories are approached as moralistic allegories of human desire, sacrifice and unintended consequences. The standard interpretation of Henry's text is a conventional and heartwarming tribute to the selflessness of conjugal love. The standard interpretation of Maupassant's text is a cautionary tale about vanity and upward mobility. Both dominant thematic readings are accepted as virtually axiomatic. However, both approach the language of the stories as transparently transmitting the moral of the story. Neither does reading pay sufficient attention to how the authors' language, syntax, and narrative strategies are productive of the discursive ideologies of gender, class and economics which form the meanings of the texts. This paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine both texts closely. Its primary aim is to demonstrate how language does not merely reproduce ideologies of gender, class and economics, but is constitutive of them, within the stories themselves. Its primary argument is two-fold.

Firstly, both stories exhibit a preponderance of discourse relating to economic deficit and insufficiency. This discourse positions the female protagonists within gendered frameworks in which the women's bodies, goods and labor are commodified according to male or social economics of exchange.

Secondly, despite both stories concerning themselves with women and economic matters, the authors create divergent links between femininity and actual material agency (the ability to exert power and choice in economic life).

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

2.1. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of CDA

The theoretical framework of this paper is that of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis as described in his two books, *Discourse and Social Change* and *Analysing Discourse* (1992 and 2003 respectively). In this model, a communicative event is simultaneously a text (with its own formal structure, such as vocabulary, grammar and layout), a discursive practice (that is produced, circulated and consumed within certain social and institutional contexts) and a social practice (that is inextricably linked to power, ideology and dominance in society). According to Fairclough, it is essential to go beyond the text itself, to relate the micro analysis of the text to the analysis of discursive and social practice. (p. 2, 1992)

2.2.Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar: Transitivity and Nominalization

In order to further refine the qualitative analysis of the language, this study utilizes two of the concepts of M. A. K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (1994): the transitivity system and nominalization. Transitivity refers to how language construes human experience in terms of different types of processes: material (physical action), mental (feeling and thinking), relational (being and having), verbal (talking), behavioral (e.g. laughing, smiling, looking), and existential (existing). By examining the transitivity of a text, we can identify how each short story construes the female protagonist in terms of different grammatical roles: the Agent of a material process, the Senser of a mental process, the Carrier of a relational process, the Token of an identifying process, or the Goal of another's action. These grammatical roles are not ideologically neutral. A protagonist who is frequently the Agent of material processes, for example, is construed as having agency; one who is frequently the Goal or Carrier is construed as passive or defined by others. An examination of the language of the short stories will also note instances of nominalization, which is the grammatical process of converting verbs or adjectives into nouns (e.g., to decide becomes decision, poor becomes poverty). Nominalization obscures the doer of an action and construes social processes as natural and unalterable states rather than actions people do or conditions created by social systems. The presence of nominalization in literary discourse can reveal how texts naturalize power relations or, in some cases, denaturalize them as arbitrary and unjust (Fowler, 1991).

2.3.CDA and Literary Texts

To use CDA with literary fiction requires some elaboration. CDA is typically applied to discourse such as political rhetoric, news discourse, or policy documents. Literary discourse, however, has multiple mediations between the author's intended meaning and the language of the text itself. There is the voice of the narrator, the perspective of the characters, the constraints of the short story genre, and literarily artistic

devices such as irony, metaphor, and free indirect discourse. Because of these mediations, the ideological meanings identified in a literary text cannot be reduced to the author's intended meaning. Instead, they are meanings discursively constructed by the text itself.

2.4. Critical Discourse Analysis of "The Gift of the Magi"

2.4.1. The Lexicon of Sacred Poverty

To begin with, in the very first line of O. Henry's tale, the reader is informed that Della only has one dollar and eighty-seven cents. This small amount of money she has managed to save by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such a procedure made them feel. The first paragraph sets up the condition of economic scarcity that pervades the entire tale. However, the way in which the narrator describes this scarcity is oscillating between the concrete and the sentimental. The exact amount of money she has, one dollar and eighty-seven cents, is repeated throughout the paragraph almost as a sort of chant or mantra. The narrator informs the reader that Della counted it three times. This repetition of a purely material fact (that is, the fact that she does not have enough money) and its transformation into a sort of ritual takes the basis of the material reality of the characters and transforms it into something spiritually meaningful in the readers' eyes. This prepares the reader for the rest of the ideological work that the tale will perform; that is, for the transformation of material deprivation into something spiritually significant and even noble. Throughout the tale, the narrator describes the poverty of the Dillinghams not as something that is due to the organization of the social system but as something that provides a special context for the expression of the spiritual value of love. The narrator describes Jim's gold watch and Della's hair as treasures that would have made King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba feel poor by comparison. This hyperbolic comparison of the couple's possessions to those of figures out of the Bible and royal monarchs employs Biblical and regal language to describe things from the mundane sphere of everyday life. In so doing, the narrator lifts the everyday objects of the couple out of the realm of the mundane and into the realm of the spiritually significant. The poverty of the Dillinghams is ideologically transformed into something spiritually noble rather than something to be remedied because it signals material deprivation or social injustice. This language use is crucially important to the ideological effect of the tale because, by employing language that describes material scarcity in terms of royalty and Biblical figures, the narrator naturalizes economic inequality and renders it spiritually beautiful. Economic inequality provides the context for acts of spiritual heroism rather than something to be overcome because it is spiritually ugly.

2.4.2. Transitivity Patterns: Della as Agent of Self-Sacrifice

There is a clear and interesting pattern that emerges in the transitivity analysis of the processes in which Della is involved. In the central section of the story where Della decides to sell her hair, in the material processes in which she is involved, Della is always constructed as the Agent. She pulled down her hair, let it fall to its full length, went out, ranged the stores, and bought the chain. In other words, all the material processes are processes in which she is the Agent; she does the acting. However, while the grammatical structure marks Della as having agency, the content of these material processes is the opposite of the way in which agency is commonly understood. Each of the material processes in which Della is an Agent involves an act of self-sacrifice. In these material processes, she uses her agency to divest herself from that which is most valuable to her (her beautiful hair) for the benefit of her husband. Her agency is thus self-canceling; although she is marked as performing material processes, the nature of these processes involves the diminution of her own interests. This pattern of transitivity is ideologically significant because it constructs a notion of female agency as something whose most significant function is self-renunciation. Della's hair is ideologically invested with meanings related to her beauty, her sense of self, and her femininity; she commodifies her hair and then exchanges the commodity for a gift for her husband. Because the transitivity pattern represents Della as the Agent of these processes, her self-renunciation appears to be voluntary and noble. The language obscures the fact that, from a more materialist perspective, Della's sales of her hair appear to be necessitated by her economic circumstances. Her self-renunciation is a function not of the transformative power of love but of her structurally limited access to the money economy as a wife.

2.4.3. The Narratorial Voice: Sentimentality as Ideological Strategy

The narratorial voice plays a crucial role in the ideological construction of the text. The narrator takes on an important role of guiding the interpretation of the story through direct address to the reader, moral commentary, and evaluation of the events of the tale. The most striking example of the way in which the narratorial voice ideologically guides the interpretation of the reader occurs at the end of the story. The narrator compares the gifts of Della and Jim to those brought by the Magi to the Christ child and then tells the reader that of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. This narratorial move functions as what Fairclough (2003) calls an evaluative statement in that it instructs the reader how to evaluate and make sense of the events of the story. The comparison of Jim and Della's gifts to those of the Magi and the evaluation of them as the wisest of all who give and receive gifts interpolates the economic sacrifice of the couple into a religiously significant and wise act. The narratorial voice thus frames the story ideologically and

determines in advance how the reader should evaluate its events. The reader cannot question whether the poverty of the couple is something beautiful that should be celebrated or something ugly that should be eradicated. The reader cannot examine how the cloying sentimentality of the tale is functioning to naturalize and render beautiful economic inequality. In this way, the intrusive narrator is not merely a matter of style; rather it is an ideologically motivated choice that functions to constrain the interpretation of the reader and delimit a reading of the tale that might examine more critical questions about the social structures that the text is raising.

2.4.4. Domestic Space as the Theater of Feminine Worth

The description of the domestic sphere in *The Gift of the Magi* further reinforces the story's gendered discourse. Dillingham's modest flat is described at length as a place of shortcomings and difficulties: the mailbox was broken and the doorbell did not ring; the flat was a furnished flat at 8 per week. This is a space of scarcity and of limited means. Della inhabits this space and maintains it. Almost all the action of the story takes place within the domestic sphere. It is here that Della makes her major decision to sell her hair, prepares the gift for Jim and anxiously waits for him to come home. The flat is a kind of a stage where Della's femininity is performed and evaluated- through her cooking of the meal, through her preparations for Jim's arrival, through her anxieties about Jim's response to her new hair. The domestic sphere is not merely a passive backdrop. It is a gendered institution that assigns Della her role in life: the one who maintains the home, cooks the food and waits for her husband. The terms employed to describe the flat naturalize this gendered arrangement. The poverty of the flat is represented as something to be pitied rather than condemned- it is modest, humble, lovingly tended. Della's place within it is naturalized. There is never any suggestion that Della might perhaps desire otherwise, that she might desire a space of her own, a career outside the home or a mode of happiness not completely predicated on her relationship with Jim. The domestic sphere is constructed through language as the natural and proper domain for feminine love and sacrifice. It keeps Della enclosed within a discourse which says that to be a woman is to be domestic, to make sacrifices.

2.5. Critical Discourse Analysis of The Necklace

2.5.1. The Lexicon of Class Aspiration and Deprivation

Maupassant's story begins on a very different note from the warmth and sentimentality of O. Henry. Mathilde Loisel, the narrator begins, suffered ceaselessly, feeling herself born for all the delicacies and all the luxuries. The vocabulary in the first paragraph is organized around the contrast between what Mathilde is and what she feels

she ought to be. She has no dowry, no expectations, no means of being known, understood, loved, wedded by any rich and distinguished man. The normalized vocabulary- dowry, expectations, means- obscures the social processes by which women are reduced to depending on marriage as their chief means of subsistence. They give Mathilde's circumstances the status of bad luck rather than structural misfortune. Simultaneously however, Maupassant's text works to denaturalize the class system. The vocabulary of birth, rank and station draws attention to the arbitrariness and injustices of the class system, whereby comfort and wealth are conferred by birth rather than merit. Thus, the vocabulary in the first paragraph performs a dual function. On the surface, it articulates Mathilde's misery. Beneath the surface, it points to the broader social structures- class, gender and the economics of marriage- that produce that misery. Unlike O. Henry's narrator who aestheticizes poverty, Maupassant's narrator represents deprivation as a brute social fact with structural explanations, rather than something beautiful and spiritual.

2.5.2. Transitivity Patterns: Mathilde Between Agency and Subjection

The transitivity patterns in the representation of Mathilde are far more complex than Della's. In the first section of the story- prior to the ball- Mathilde is predominantly represented through mental processes (she suffered, dreamed, thought of, wept) and relational processes (she was unhappy, she had no fine dresses). These processes position Mathilde as a Senser (she who feels and thinks) and a Carrier (she who is). She is represented in terms of her mental state and in terms of what she lacks rather than what she does. This linguistic representation complements her social positioning as a lower middle-class woman in nineteenth century. she has very little scope for material action and is defined largely through her lacks. The ball marks a significant shift in transitivity. At the ball, Mathilde is suddenly represented as the Agent of material processes: she danced with intoxication, was the prettiest of all, and drew the attention of important men. For one evening, she has agency- she acts, moves, makes an impression on others. But this agency is illusory and short lived. It is conferred entirely by means of the borrowed necklace and the assumed identity. As soon as the necklace is lost, this moment of agency ends abruptly.

2.6.The Narratorial Voice: Ironic Distance as Ideological Critique

2.6.1. Contrasting Narrative Approaches

In contrast to O. Henry, Maupassant uses the narrator in an altogether different fashion. While O. Henry's narrator inserts himself constantly, sentimentalizes and tells the reader what to feel, Maupassant's narrator keeps an ironic distance. Mathilde is given a situation, with little to no direct commentary by the narrator, and the facts are allowed to speak for themselves. The reader is expected to make her own conclusion. This ironic

distance operates as an altogether different ideological strategy. In contrast, by declining to judge Mathilde's wishes, the narrator of *The Necklace* allows the reader to see the broader structural problems surrounding Mathilde. The effect of the narrative distance is not that the text is less ideological. Instead, it is that the narrator will not collapse a complex social problem into a personal failing. While O. Henry's narrator dictates the reader's feelings and closes critical analysis in favor of sentimental approbation, Maupassant's invites analysis. It asks the reader to look beyond the individual woman and see the social system which has produced her unhappiness.

2.6.2. Domestic Space as the Site of Class Discipline

The depiction of domestic space in *The Necklace* functions in a radically different ideological context than it did in *The Gift of the Magi*. Mathilde's home is described in terms which emphasize the gulf between her circumstances and her aspirations: the dull walls, the worn furniture, the ugly curtains. Unlike Della's flat, which feels humble but loving and decorated, Mathilde's home feels like a source of unremitting misery. It is a material environment which reminds her every day of her exclusion from the life and class to which she aspires. The home is not a haven or a sign of good domesticity. It is a prison and a constant reminder of her class failure. Once the necklace is lost, the domestic space shifts again.

3. Comparative Analysis: Two Discourses of Feminine Deprivation

3.1. Sentimentalization Versus Denaturalization of Poverty

Perhaps the most fundamental ideological difference between the two texts is their attitude toward economic poverty. O. Henry's text sentimentalizes poverty. Poverty becomes the lovely backdrop against which the spiritual wealth of love can be displayed. The language -- the Biblical allusions, the grandiose comparisons, the holy rhetoric of sacrifice -- transmutes real material deprivation into a moral test which the Dillinghams pass with flying colors. The text's ideology is one of comfort and solace: poverty does not diminish the Dillinghams; it ennobles them. Their sacrifice reveals a wisdom greater than money. This discourse naturalizes class inequality. It implies that the poor are already in possession of something greater than wealth, so there is no need to question or dismantle the system. Maupassant's text functions precisely the opposite way. It denaturalizes class inequality by exposing its mechanisms and effects. The precise language about material conditions, the ironic contrast between aspiration and actuality, the graphic depiction of manual labor -- all these gestures make poverty into a social fact, rather than a spiritual one. The text does not comfort. It reveals and exposes.

3.2.Feminine Self-Sacrifice Versus Feminine Class Aspiration

These two portrayals of female desire led to two contrasting representations of women and female behavior. Della's desire is completely selfless. She is willing to give up her most prized possession and, in the process, a piece of herself, to make sure that Jim has a chain for the watch he has given her. Della's cutting and selling of her hair represents the ultimate example of female altruism. There is no dissonance between what Della desires and her role as a loving wife. Her subjectivity is full and complete within the realm of loving wife. She needs nothing outside of this. This is the ideological work that *The Gift of the Magi* performs: womanhood is equated with self-denial. Self-denial is not only morally good, but it is the essence of what it is to be a good woman. Mathilde's desire is the opposite. It is a desire for material possessions, wealth, beauty, high social standing, and the pleasures that her class and marriage status have denied her. There is a great disparity between what Mathilde desires and her socially defined place. This disparity, this refusal to stay within her defined space is what leads the story to unfold as it does. Mathilde's desire is commonly characterized as vanity, but CDA reveals that it is the social context that creates her desire. The discourse within which Mathilde lives has set up material wealth as what makes a woman valuable, yet simultaneously it limits access to this wealth according to class and gender. Mathilde desires wealth, not because she is inherently a bad person, but because she has been shaped within a discourse that has taught her that the only way to be recognized as good is through wealth.

3.3.The Gendered Economics of the Body

The treatment of the female body in the two stories reveals a common theme: the female body as a source of value that can be commodified and squandered. Again, however, the two stories do this in different ways. In *The Gift of the Magi*, Della's hair is the commodity. Her hair is described in terms that correlate it to her beauty, her femininity, and her worth as a woman. By cutting and selling her hair, Della is simultaneously giving up the one valuable thing she has, as well as the means through which she is represented as feminine. This is constructed as a positive gesture, an act of love. The economy is unmistakable, however. Della's body is her capital. It is the only way she has of participating in the economy of gift giving. In *The Necklace*, Mathilde's body undergoes a transformation of a different sort. At the beginning of the story, Mathilde's beauty is her only source of social capital; it allows her to garner attention and mimic the behavior of higher classes. After the loss of the necklace, Mathilde's body becomes her source of productive capital. For ten years, Mathilde engages in manual labor that destroys her beauty. This is a literal transformation: her body has been transformed from that which is the site of display to that which is the site of production. What Maupassant makes explicit

in his text, what O. Henry's sentimental story masks, is the fundamental fact of women's economic existence. The female body is already an economic commodity, something that is invested with value and something that is squandered according to the rules of the economy.

3.4.Narratorial Ideology: Managing Versus Opening

The two modes of narratorial presence in the two stories are indicative of two distinct ideological stances toward the reader. O. Henry's intrusive, intervening narrator carefully manages the interpretation of the reader. The reader is directed to consider the sentimental and moral dimensions of the story, while attention is diverted from the underlying issues of economics and gender. The interpretive commentary of the narrator, such as the comparing of the two characters to the Magi and their calling them the wisest, function as an ideological border. They prescribe to the reader how the text should be interpreted and foreclose alternative possibilities. This is akin to what Fairclough (2003) has called the creation of a cooperative reader. The reader is positioned as one who will accept and not challenge the preferred reading of the text. Maupassant's laconic, distanced narrator does the reverse. The reader is given interpretive space by the refusal of the narrator to judge the characters and tell the reader how to feel. The great reveal at the end of the story, the fact that the necklace is imitation, is given with no commentary. The reader is left to consider the implications for herself. This strategy calls upon what Fairclough would term critical readers. The reader is no longer simply a passive recipient of the text's preferred reading. Rather, the reader is called upon to be an active interpreter, to consider what the story really reveals about reality.

4.Conclusion

O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* and Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace* are among the most famous and widely read and taught short stories in the Western canon. They are commonly understood as didactic tales. *The Gift of the Magi* is a story about love and selflessness, whereas *The Necklace* is a story about vanity, ambition, and the rewards and punishments that befall the characters. However, when CDA is employed to more closely consider the linguistic mechanisms of the texts, such as the lexical choices, the grammatical structure, the tone and presence of the narrator, and the description of the domestic sphere, it becomes apparent that there is much more at play. Beneath the commonly accepted themes of love and vanity, sacrifice and retribution, wisdom and folly, both stories engage in ideological work to constitute particular discourses about gender, class, and economics. What is traditionally accepted as straightforward, ideologically innocent moralizing is the product of the discursive ideological work that is occurring at

the level of language. In O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, the discourse is one of sacred poverty. Female self-denial is valued as the ultimate gesture of love. Poverty is valued as spiritually enriching and good. The female body, in particular the hair of the protagonist, Della, is figured as capital that can be commodified and exchanged. This commodification is constructed as an act of love, rather than a sign of the economic conditions that force her to sell the only capital she has. The story naturalizes these elements. This serves to mask the broader social problems of inequality and lack of agency. In Maupassant's *The Necklace*, the discourse is one of class unmasking. Mathilde's aspiration to climb the class hierarchy is portrayed not as personal failing of vanity, but rather as discourse produced by the social and economic conditions themselves. Poverty is portrayed as a social fact with material causes, of class distinction, of gender, of marriage as an economic arrangement. The female body is constructed in the same manner as any other capital within a class-based economy: it has the potential for fleeting value, but it simultaneously subjects to erosion and depreciation over time. Maupassant's story does not glorify suffering. Rather, it lays bare the structures that impose suffering upon the woman. The purpose of this analysis has been to show how useful CDA can be in the analysis of literary texts. When attention is paid to the linguistic tools such as lexical choice, transitivity, the tone and presence of the narrator, and the depiction of domestic space, CDA can reveal a richness to the texts that traditional thematic analysis (that might consider irony, plot twist, and moral lesson) overlook. The results here suggest that a productive methodology for re-reading canonical texts is to combine CDA with feminist literary analysis. This approach enables readers to uncover the ideological work that is occurring in the text, sometimes quietly, beneath the surface of the text's moral messages and beautiful prose. In doing so, readers can gain a deeper understanding of not only what the texts say, but how the language constructs discourses about women, class, money, and power that endure today.

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