


Irony in Roald Dahl's *The Umbrella Man* Using Booth's Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the use of irony in Roald Dahl's short story *The Umbrella Man* using Wayne C. Booth's theory of irony. It examines how stable and unstable irony function as narrative strategies to construct meaning and moral criticism. Previous studies have not sufficiently explored the operation of stable and unstable irony in *The Umbrella Man* through Booth's theoretical framework. Using a qualitative descriptive method and close reading, the analysis focuses on narrative events, character behavior, and dialogue that reveal ironic contrasts between appearance and reality. The findings show that the story predominantly employs stable irony to guide readers toward a clear moral judgment, particularly through the umbrella man's deceptive politeness and apparent helplessness. Moments of moral ambiguity do not destabilize meaning but instead reinforce social critique. This study contributes to literary and irony studies by clarifying how Booth's concept of stable irony functions rhetorically in shaping reader interpretation and moral evaluation in short fiction.

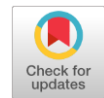
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INTRODUCTION

Irony is a central narrative device in short stories, particularly because of the genre's reliance on brevity, narrative compression, and indirect modes of meaning-making. Due to the limited space available for character development and plot elaboration, short stories often depend on irony to convey complex moral positions and social criticism efficiently. Through ironic contrasts between appearance and reality, expectation and outcome, and what is said and what is implied, short stories are able to communicate layered meanings without overt explanation. Rather than delivering messages explicitly, irony encourages readers to engage actively with the text, requiring them to recognize implicit cues and reconstruct meanings that are not directly stated. This interpretive process positions readers as active participants in meaning-making, inviting them to evaluate ethical positions embedded within the narrative structure (Hutcheon, 1994). For this reason, irony has long been regarded as a significant rhetorical strategy in literary studies, especially in the analysis of short fiction where subtlety and implication are central to narrative effectiveness.

Roald Dahl's short stories are widely recognized for their distinctive narrative style, which combines humor, moral tension, and ironic reversals. Although his stories are often presented in a light, entertaining tone, they frequently conceal darker ethical concerns beneath their seemingly simple surfaces. Dahl's narratives commonly depict ordinary social situations that gradually develop into unexpected and ethically unsettling conclusions, forcing readers to reassess initial assumptions about characters and events. Through this technique, Dahl exposes deception, social hypocrisy, and moral vulnerability, particularly within everyday interactions that appear harmless at first glance. Scholars have noted that Dahl's use of irony plays a crucial role in unsettling readers' moral comfort, as it challenges conventional distinctions between innocence and guilt, cleverness and dishonesty, and politeness and exploitation (Lurie, 1990; West, 2018). As a result, irony functions not merely as a stylistic

feature in Dahl's short fiction, but as a central narrative mechanism that shapes reader expectations and moral judgment.

One of Dahl's notable short stories that exemplifies this ironic narrative strategy is *The Umbrella Man*. The story is told from the perspective of a young girl who encounters an elderly man in London shortly after the end of the Second World War. The man presents himself as polite, well-dressed, and physically weak, claiming that he has lost his money and requesting assistance. Influenced by his respectable appearance and courteous manner, the girl and her mother agree to help him by giving him money that is intended for taxi fare. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that the man's display of politeness and helplessness is a calculated performance. Instead of using the money as promised, he spends it on alcohol and replaces the umbrella he has given away by stealing another one. This gradual revelation exposes a sharp contrast between surface appearance and underlying reality, politeness and manipulation, and trust and betrayal. Through this contrast, *The Umbrella Man* constructs a narrative in which moral certainty is initially encouraged and later destabilized, making the story particularly rich for an analysis of irony.

From a theoretical perspective, Wayne C. Booth (1974) conceptualizes irony as a rhetorical form of communication that depends on cooperation between the implied author and the reader. According to Booth, irony operates through textual signals that indicate the literal meaning should not be accepted at face value. Readers are expected to notice these signals and infer an alternative, implied meaning that reflects the author's evaluative stance. Booth further distinguishes between two major types of irony: stable irony and unstable irony. Stable irony occurs when readers are able to reconstruct a relatively fixed intended meaning once ironic cues are recognized, often leading to a clear moral or evaluative judgment. In contrast, unstable irony resists definitive interpretation and continuously undermines any attempt to arrive at a single, coherent meaning. Rather than guiding readers toward a fixed conclusion, unstable irony generates interpretive uncertainty and ethical ambiguity, challenging the notion of stable authorial intention and encouraging readers to confront unresolved contradictions within the text (Booth, 1974; Sharp, 2004).

Previous studies on *The Umbrella Man* have predominantly employed pragmatic approaches, particularly speech act theory, to examine how meaning is conveyed through characters' utterances (Simangunsong et al., 2022). While such studies offer valuable insights into the functional aspects of language use and communicative intention, they tend to focus on isolated acts of speech rather than on how meaning is constructed and subverted across the narrative as a whole. As a result, these approaches often overlook the broader rhetorical role of irony in shaping reader interpretation and moral evaluation throughout the story. More general literary discussions of Dahl's short fiction have acknowledged the presence of irony and moral tension, yet these analyses frequently treat irony as a general stylistic effect without engaging in a systematic theoretical examination of its narrative and rhetorical functions.

Moreover, although Wayne C. Booth's theory of irony has been widely applied in literary analysis, limited attention has been given to his distinction between stable and unstable irony in the context of short fiction, particularly in Roald Dahl's *The Umbrella Man*. Existing studies that employ Booth's framework often address irony as a general process of meaning reconstruction, without examining how different ironic modes interact to shape moral judgment and guide reader interpretation within a single narrative. Consequently, there remains a research gap concerning the lack of a Boothian analysis that specifically investigates how stable and unstable irony function as narrative strategies in *The Umbrella Man*.

In response to this gap, this study aims to analyze the use of irony in *The Umbrella Man* using Wayne C. Booth's framework of stable and unstable irony. It examines how these two forms of irony operate within the narrative to construct meaning, guide reader interpretation, and generate moral critique. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to literary and irony studies by clarifying the rhetorical role of irony in shaping moral evaluation within short narrative texts, particularly in works that appear simple but carry complex ethical implications.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the use of irony in Roald Dahl's *The Umbrella Man*. A qualitative literary analysis was chosen because it allows an in-depth examination of narrative meaning and rhetorical strategies within a literary text. The primary data source of this study was the short story *The Umbrella Man* by Roald Dahl, taken from *The Umbrella Man and Other Stories* (2006).

The data consisted of selected narrative passages, character dialogues, and character actions that indicate ironic meaning, particularly those revealing contrasts between appearance and reality, expectation and outcome, and literal and implied meaning. These textual elements were treated as analytical units because they function as key narrative signals through which irony is constructed and communicated to the reader.

Data were collected through close reading of the text. During this process, relevant textual segments that contained potential ironic cues were identified and documented. The selected data were then analyzed using Wayne C. Booth's (1974) theoretical framework, with particular attention to his distinction between stable irony and unstable irony.

The analytical procedure was conducted in several systematic stages. First, the identified narrative passages, dialogues, and character actions were examined to locate ironic signals, such as contradictions between what is stated and what is implied, or between characters' appearances and their actual behavior. Second, each instance of irony was categorized as either stable or unstable based on Booth's criteria, focusing on whether the ironic meaning leads to a relatively fixed interpretation or produces interpretive uncertainty. Third, the categorized data were interpreted to explain how each type of irony functions as a narrative strategy in shaping moral judgment and guiding reader interpretation throughout the story. The findings were presented descriptively by relating textual evidence to Booth's theoretical concepts. This systematic procedure ensures analytical clarity and allows the study to be replicated or extended in future research on irony in literary texts.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the findings of the study regarding the use of irony in Roald Dahl's *The Umbrella Man*, drawing on Wayne C. Booth's theory of stable and unstable irony to explain how ironic meaning is constructed and experienced by the reader. The analysis demonstrates that Dahl's narrative relies heavily on irony not merely as a decorative stylistic feature, but as a central structural device that governs characterization, plot development, and moral interpretation. Through carefully controlled narrative description and strategically crafted dialogue, Dahl consistently manipulates the reader's expectations, leading them from a position of apparent clarity and moral confidence toward increasing doubt, ambiguity, and ethical unease.

At the beginning of the story, Dahl establishes a framework of stable irony by presenting a sharp contrast between appearance and reality. The old man's outward demeanor—his polite manners, refined speech, and seemingly respectable appearance—invites both the characters within the story and the readers themselves to trust him. This carefully constructed image functions as the surface meaning that Booth describes as essential to stable irony: readers are gradually led to perceive a hidden meaning beneath the literal presentation. Through subtle narrative cues and hints embedded in the dialogue, Dahl encourages the reader to recognize that the old man's performance of gentility is deliberately calculated to conceal deceptive intentions. In this phase, irony operates in a stable form because the reader can identify a relatively clear and unified ironic meaning: the old man is not what he appears to be, and his apparent helplessness is a strategic manipulation rather than a genuine condition.

As the plot progresses, Dahl intensifies this stable ironic pattern by repeatedly juxtaposing expectation and outcome. Each interaction between the old man and his unsuspecting victims reinforces the gap between what seems to be happening and what is actually occurring. The predictable politeness of the man contrasts sharply with the repeated

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losses experienced by those who attempt to help him. These ironic reversals guide the reader toward a firm moral judgment: the old man is a deceiver who exploits social conventions of kindness and respectability. In this way, stable irony functions to align the reader's ethical stance with that of the implied author, fostering a sense of superiority and moral clarity regarding the old man's actions.

Therefore, Dahl complicates this clarity through the introduction of narrative elements that suggest the presence – or at least the appearance – of unstable irony. When the narrator's mother confronts the old man and later becomes the one who is subtly unsettled by his confident denials, the reader's moral certainty begins to erode. The old man's unwavering composure and refusal to acknowledge wrongdoing destabilize the seemingly fixed ironic meaning. Although the reader has strong reasons to believe in his guilt, the story offers no explicit confirmation or resolution that definitively exposes him. This narrative strategy produces a moment of ethical hesitation in which readers must reconsider the reliability of their judgments and the sufficiency of their evidence.

In Booth's terms, this movement suggests a shift from stable irony – where meaning appears securely anchored – to a condition resembling unstable irony, where interpretive certainty is weakened and multiple possible readings seem to coexist. The old man's final appearance, walking confidently with his umbrella despite his earlier claims of poverty and helplessness, reinforces this tension. On one level, the image functions as stable irony by confirming the reader's suspicions. On another level, the absence of direct narrative condemnation or punishment introduces a lingering uncertainty about justice, accountability, and the possibility of error in moral perception. This unresolved tension compels readers to engage in self-reflection, questioning not only the old man's deception but also their own readiness to judge and categorize moral behavior.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that Dahl masterfully balances stable and unstable irony to sustain a coherent satirical framework while simultaneously unsettling the reader's moral confidence. The story initially guides readers toward a shared ironic understanding that appears stable and conclusive, but it then introduces elements that undermine complete interpretive closure. This dynamic interaction between stable irony and the appearance of unstable irony ensures that *The Umbrella Man* remains ethically provocative rather than morally simplistic. Irony thus emerges as the narrative engine of the story: it structures the reader's interpretive journey, shapes their emotional and ethical responses, and reinforces Dahl's broader critique of social trust, politeness, and the vulnerability of moral judgment in everyday life.

Stable Irony: Narrative Clarity and Reader Superiority

The story opens with the sentence, *"I'm going to tell you about a funny thing that happened to my mother and me"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 3). This opening immediately shapes the reader's expectations. The word funny suggests that the narrative will be light-hearted, humorous, and possibly harmless. As a result, readers are prepared for an amusing anecdote rather than a troubling or morally complex situation. Dahl deliberately uses this casual and cheerful tone to draw readers in and lower their emotional guard.

However, as the story develops, it becomes clear that the event being described is not genuinely amusing. Instead, it involves deliberate lying, manipulation, and deception, with the mother becoming the target of a trick. The consequences of this trick are not merely playful; they involve embarrassment, exploitation, and a loss of trust. This sharp contrast between the cheerful promise of the opening and the actual nature of the event creates a strong sense of irony. The word funny therefore becomes ironic because it disguises the seriousness of what actually occurs. Rather than describing something truly humorous, it minimizes and masks the ethical implications of the characters' actions. Dahl uses this ironic framing to make readers reflect on how easily harmful behavior can be excused or trivialized when it is presented as a joke.

The narrator initially presents her mother as a cautious and perceptive person by stating, *"She is a suspicious person, my mother"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 3). This description immediately establishes the mother as someone who prides herself on being alert to danger and difficult to

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deceive. Her self-image as a careful judge of character is reinforced by her firm rule regarding strangers: *"The nicer the man seems to be, the more suspicious you must become"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 4). This advice suggests that she believes appearances are often misleading and that charm can be a tool used for manipulation. Together, these statements construct the mother as someone who assumes she is wiser and more experienced than most people when it comes to recognizing dishonesty. Ironically, this sense of confidence is later undermined when she is deceived by a man who fits precisely the type she claims to distrust—someone polite, charming, and seemingly harmless. Despite her warnings and stated beliefs, she fails to apply her own rule in practice. This contradiction between what she believes about herself and what actually happens to her creates a strong sense of irony. The reader recognizes that the mother's confidence in her judgment is misplaced, making her eventual deception both surprising and telling.

The umbrella man is first shown in a positive way. He is described as *"polite," "well-spoken," "well-dressed,"* and *"a real gentleman"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 4). These details make him appear trustworthy and respectable. However, this image becomes ironic when he is revealed to be a trickster who lies to people for money. This contrast is a form of stable irony because readers can clearly see the difference between his appearance and his real behavior.

The umbrella man also pretends to be weak and helpless. He says, *"Old people like me often become terribly forgetful"* and *"I don't think I could manage it on these silly old legs of mine"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 5). These statements are meant to make others feel sorry for him. Later, however, he is seen moving quickly and confidently. This shows that he is not actually weak. The clear difference between his words and his actions is another example of stable irony.

The umbrella man further strengthens his image as a trustworthy and generous stranger by emphasizing the supposed value of his umbrella, stating, *"It cost me over twenty pounds"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 6). By highlighting its high price, he presents the umbrella as a costly and meaningful personal possession. This claim encourages both the mother and the reader to view his offer as a sincere sacrifice, making his request for a small amount of money appear reasonable and even sympathetic. The statement is carefully chosen to create the impression that he is giving up something valuable for the sake of kindness. However, this description becomes deeply ironic when the reader later discovers that the man replaces the umbrella effortlessly by stealing another one from the pub. What initially appears to be a generous loss is revealed to be entirely insignificant to him. The umbrella is not a meaningful possession at all but merely a tool in his repeated pattern of deception. This revelation exposes the man's earlier claim as deliberately misleading and manipulative.

After giving the umbrella man money, the mother expresses a strong sense of confidence and moral satisfaction by declaring, *"I'm very pleased I was able to help him,"* and later adding, *"A real gentleman... This will be a very good lesson to you"* (Dahl, 2006, p. 7). These remarks show that she believes she has performed a genuinely kind and morally commendable act. She views herself as compassionate, responsible, and wise, and she assumes that her decision reflects good judgment. By presenting the incident as a *"lesson,"* she positions herself as morally superior and treats the experience as something that has reinforced her values and her ability to recognize a *"real gentleman."* However, this self-satisfaction becomes sharply ironic when it is later revealed that she has, in fact, been deliberately deceived and financially exploited by the man. Rather than helping someone in genuine need, she has unknowingly supported his scheme. The supposed *"lesson"* she proudly passes on to her child is therefore based on a misunderstanding of the situation.

The umbrella man's physical behavior later in the narrative directly contradicts his earlier claims of physical weakness when he is described as moving quickly, *"scuttling along like a rabbit"* (Dahl, 1980, p. 8). This vivid simile emphasizes speed, agility, and alertness—qualities that stand in sharp opposition to his earlier assertion that he was too exhausted to continue walking. By presenting such an abrupt shift in physical capability, the text exposes the performative nature of the umbrella man's earlier display of fatigue, suggesting that his weakness was exaggerated or entirely fabricated to manipulate sympathy. For readers, this

contradiction is immediately legible: the character's words and actions cannot both be true at the same time.

This moment exemplifies stable irony because the ironic meaning is clearly recoverable and leaves little room for interpretive uncertainty. Readers are guided toward a shared understanding that the umbrella man has been deliberately deceptive, and the text provides sufficient cues to reconstruct the implied authorial judgment behind this revelation. In Booth's terms, the irony stabilizes once the contradiction is revealed, allowing readers to confidently infer the moral and narrative implication – that the umbrella man's earlier claim was false and strategically constructed. Rather than generating ambiguity, the irony resolves itself by confirming a coherent interpretive conclusion.

The ironic reversal becomes fully explicit in the whisky scene when the mother finally recognizes the deception and exclaims, "*That's my pound!*" while observing that the umbrella man has ordered "*neat whisky*" (Dahl, 2006, p. 9). At this moment, the truth of the man's scheme is revealed not only to the reader but also to the mother herself. The pound that was originally given to him under the belief that it would be used for taxi fare is instead spent on alcohol. This revelation exposes the complete falsehood of his earlier story and confirms that his request was based on deliberate manipulation rather than genuine need.

The emotional impact of this moment is heightened by the sharp contrast between the mother's earlier confidence and her sudden realization of betrayal. What she once viewed as a charitable act is now unmistakably revealed as a mistake. The whisky functions symbolically as evidence of the man's dishonesty and of the mother's misjudgment, turning her moral "*lesson*" into an embarrassing and painful reversal.

The extent of the umbrella man's deception becomes further evident when it is revealed that he replaces the umbrella he has given away by stealing another one. He is observed as "*lifting from the coat-rack one of the many wet umbrellas hanging there*" (Dahl, 2006, p. 10). This action proves that the umbrella he previously claimed to sacrifice was never a real loss, but merely a temporary tool in his scheme. The ease with which he replaces the umbrella exposes the falseness of his earlier generosity and constitutes stable irony, as readers can clearly recognize the contradiction between his claimed sacrifice and his actual behavior.

Beyond these situational contrasts, the stable irony of the story also works at a rhetorical level by placing readers in a position of interpretive superiority. Booth (1974) explains that stable irony depends on cooperation between the implied author and the reader, allowing readers to look beyond the literal surface of the narrative and recognize deeper meanings. In *The Umbrella Man*, readers are gradually guided to notice repeated patterns of inconsistency between what the umbrella man says and what he actually does. These patterns slowly reveal his manipulation, often even before the mother herself becomes fully aware of it.

This positioning makes the irony stable because readers are not left confused about how to judge the situation. Instead, the story offers clear signals – such as the umbrella man's exaggerated politeness, his repeated emphasis on being a "gentleman," and his sudden physical energy – that guide readers toward a consistent moral evaluation. Through this process, stable irony does not only shape the plot, but also gently directs readers to question surface appearances and become more critical of misplaced trust in everyday encounters.

These findings support Booth's (1974) argument that stable irony relies on the reader's ability to reconstruct a coherent alternative meaning once ironic signals are recognized. In *The Umbrella Man*, Dahl consistently provides clear narrative cues – such as exaggerated politeness, repeated claims of gentility, and contradictory physical behavior – that allow readers to confidently infer the umbrella man's deceptive intentions. This pattern aligns with previous studies that emphasize irony as a rhetorical device guiding reader evaluation rather than creating interpretive confusion (Hutcheon, 1994; Muecke, 1982). Unlike pragmatic analyses that focus on illocutionary force in character dialogue (Simangunsong et al., 2022), this study demonstrates that irony operates at the narrative level to shape moral judgment across the entire plot structure.

Apparent Moral Ambiguity within a Stable Ironic Framework

At this point, the ironic pattern in the story appears to shift from stable to unstable irony. While earlier instances allow readers to clearly identify deception and reconstruct a fixed moral meaning, the following moments introduce apparent moral ambiguity. However, in Booth's rhetorical sense, these moments do not dissolve meaning; instead, they intensify the satirical force of the stable ironic framework by momentarily suspending moral certainty. This temporary suspension encourages readers to reconsider how moral judgment operates in everyday social situations, especially when cleverness and success are admired more than honesty and fairness. By making moral boundaries seem less clear, Dahl creates a more complex exploration of human behavior, social interaction, and ethical responsibility in modern urban life.

This apparent instability first appears in the child narrator's reaction to the umbrella man's deception when she says, "*Neat. Super.*" (Dahl, 2006, p. 11). Instead of condemning the dishonest act, the narrator expresses admiration, treating the scam as something clever and impressive. This reaction disrupts conventional moral expectations and places readers in an emotionally mixed position, where they may feel both amused by the cleverness of the trick and uncomfortable because the act is clearly unethical. As a result, the ironic meaning appears to become unstable because the narrative temporarily suspends direct moral instruction, although the implied author continues to guide readers toward a critical evaluative stance.

The child's response is particularly important because it shows how moral judgment can be influenced by admiration for intelligence and efficiency. The words "*neat*" and "*super*" are normally associated with positive achievements, not with acts of deception and theft. This choice of language suggests that the narrator evaluates the act based on how well it was performed rather than on whether it was morally right or wrong. In this way, the child's perspective reflects a broader social tendency to admire success and cleverness even when they are achieved through questionable means. This moment therefore invites readers to reflect on their own reactions and to question why they might also feel tempted to admire the umbrella man's skill rather than immediately condemn his dishonesty.

This reaction can also be connected to what Booth (1974) calls the "*innocent eye*" narrative perspective. The child reports what she sees in a straightforward manner, without openly judging the moral implications of the action. However, Dahl complicates this technique because the narrator is not entirely unaware of what has happened. She understands that deception has taken place and that her mother has been tricked, yet she still responds with praise. This combination of understanding and admiration deepens the ironic effect and increases the sense of moral discomfort, as readers are forced to confront the gap between knowing that something is wrong and still finding it impressive.

The appearance of instability is further reinforced when the umbrella man is shown repeating the same trick on another victim: "*We watched him as he proceeded... to exchange his new umbrella for another pound note*" (Dahl, 2006, p. 11). This repetition reveals that the deception is not accidental or desperate but systematic and carefully practiced. His cleverness and success are highlighted, while moral consequences remain absent, making it seem as though the narrative temporarily privileges cleverness over morality. This impression creates the appearance of unstable irony because readers are left to negotiate their own responses rather than being given immediate moral closure.

At the same time, the repetition strengthens the satirical critique of the story. By showing that the umbrella man's trick can be performed again and again, Dahl suggests that the deception depends on predictable social behavior, such as politeness, sympathy, and the reluctance to refuse requests from seemingly vulnerable people. These social habits, which are normally seen as positive, become structural weaknesses that can be exploited. In this way, the story shifts from focusing only on individual moral failure to criticizing broader social vulnerability and the hidden risks of everyday politeness.

Another source of apparent moral ambiguity appears in the reversal of expected moral outcomes. The mother believes that she is cautious, principled, and capable of judging people accurately. However, she becomes the victim of deception, while the umbrella man escapes and continues his scheme, as shown in the statement "*He never goes to the same pub twice*" (Dahl,

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2006, p. 10). This reversal contradicts the common narrative expectation that wrongdoing should be punished and that moral behavior should be rewarded. As a result, readers may feel unsettled and uncertain about how justice operates within the story.

The absence of corrective punishment does not remove moral meaning, but rather intensifies the satirical message. Dahl presents a version of social reality in which manipulation can succeed and ethical behavior does not always protect individuals from harm. By doing so, he forces readers to confront an uncomfortable truth about everyday life: moral correctness does not guarantee safety, and social appearances can be powerful tools of deception that often go unquestioned.

The story's playful and humorous tone further contributes to the appearance of unstable irony. While the narrative invites laughter, the consequences of the umbrella man's actions are clearly harmful: the mother loses her money, other people are deceived, and the umbrella man openly plans to continue his crime, as suggested by the statement "*He could go on doing this all night*" (Dahl, 2006, p. 12). The contrast between the light tone and the serious harm creates emotional tension for readers, who may find themselves laughing while also recognizing that genuine exploitation is taking place.

This tension strengthens the appearance of unstable irony, but it also reinforces the stable ironic framework of the story. By making readers feel morally uncomfortable, Dahl activates their ethical awareness and encourages them to question the social values that allow such deception to succeed. In Booth's rhetorical sense, this discomfort is not a sign of moral confusion but a deliberate strategy that deepens the story's satirical critique of trust, respectability, and social vulnerability in modern society.

Although the narrative appears to introduce moral ambiguity through the child narrator's admiration and the absence of corrective punishment, these elements do not fully destabilize ironic meaning. In Booth's rhetorical framework, such moments function to deepen reader engagement rather than to dissolve authorial intention. This finding extends Booth's notion of stable irony by showing that moral discomfort and interpretive hesitation can coexist with a fundamentally stable evaluative framework. Similar observations have been made in studies of irony in contemporary fiction, where unresolved ethical tension encourages reflective reading without eliminating moral direction (Sharp, 2004; West, 2018). In this sense, Dahl's use of irony does not celebrate deception but exposes the vulnerability of social trust and the fragility of moral judgment in everyday interactions.

From Stability to Apparent Ambiguity

Although stable irony and apparent moral ambiguity are discussed separately for analytical purposes, they work together in the reading experience. Stable irony helps readers recognize deception through clear contrasts between appearance and reality, allowing them to form an initial moral judgment. At the same time, moments such as the child narrator's admiration, the umbrella man's continued success, and the lack of punishment complicate this judgment by creating emotional discomfort and ethical uncertainty.

This interaction reflects Booth's view of irony as a rhetorical process that depends on reader participation. Readers are guided to feel confident in identifying deception, but this confidence is challenged when the story offers no clear moral closure. As a result, readers become aware not only of the characters' vulnerability to manipulation but also of their own tendency to trust polite behavior and respectable appearances.

The absence of narrative punishment strengthens the story's social critique rather than weakening it. By showing how social habits like politeness and sympathy can be repeatedly exploited, *The Umbrella Man* moves beyond a simple moral lesson and encourages readers to reflect on trust, vulnerability, and moral judgment in everyday life.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that irony in Roald Dahl's *The Umbrella Man* operates primarily through a stable ironic framework that systematically contrasts appearance and reality to guide reader interpretation and moral evaluation. Rather than functioning merely as

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a stylistic ornament, irony serves as a central narrative strategy that structures the reader's ethical response to deception, politeness, and social trust within the story. By applying Wayne C. Booth's distinction between stable and unstable irony, this study shows that moments of apparent moral ambiguity—such as the absence of explicit punishment and the child narrator's admiring response to deception—do not destabilize meaning in a rhetorical sense. Instead, these moments intensify the satirical force of the narrative by unsettling moral comfort while maintaining a coherent evaluative framework. This finding extends Booth's concept of stable irony by demonstrating that ethical discomfort and interpretive hesitation can coexist with stable authorial guidance in short fiction. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its application of Booth's irony framework to a short story that has previously been examined primarily through pragmatic approaches. By shifting the focus from isolated speech acts to irony as a narrative-level rhetorical strategy, this research clarifies how stable and unstable ironic modes interact to shape moral judgment across an entire plot. In doing so, the study contributes to irony studies by illustrating the continued relevance of Booth's theory for analyzing short fiction and by offering a refined understanding of how irony functions to produce social critique within seemingly simple narratives. Finally, this study suggests that *The Umbrella Man* exemplifies how irony can expose the fragility of moral judgment and social trust in everyday interactions. Future research may extend this Boothian approach to other short stories by Roald Dahl or to contemporary short fiction in order to further explore how ironic strategies operate across different narrative contexts and cultural settings.

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