

## Irony and Coincidence in the Selected Stories of O' Henry

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### Abstract

*O' Henry was a prolific writer of short story in the Nineteenth century. Worldly renowned for his surprise endings, O' Henry's stories have a variety of settings, most of them a truthful description of society laid in New York or Texas. Popular for his style of writing that puts the reader to ease, his talent reflected in his parodic, humorous and picturesque stories filled with wit, irony and surprise. A natural and soporific writer he uses lively dialogue, vivid and quickly drawn descriptions of humour, irony, chance happenings or coincidence, and surprise endings. The present paper discusses the irony in his short Stories- "The Gift of Magi" and "The Furnished Room" and the element of coincidence through the short stories "After Twenty Years," and "A Retrieved Reformation". It is O'Henry's gifted talent in surprising his readers with his trick ending or surprise twists.*

**Keywords:** O' Henry, Short Story, Surprise Ending, Coincidence, Humour

### Introduction

Short story was the most sought after literature of the nineteenth century. Though it began with Maupassant stories, it continued from Washington Irving to Edgar Allan Poe, to Nathaniel Hawthorne after them comes Bret Harte, Henry James and, later, Mark Twain, Jack London and, finally O' Henry.

O' Henry, known for his plot endings was accepted worldwide for his creative excellence and wit. He was a man of intellect, a craftsman of exquisite subtlety and an artist merely for the sake of his art. A prolific American short-story writer, a master of surprise endings, his stories revolved around the life of ordinary people in New York City. The uniqueness of O' Henry's stories is the twist of plot which turns on an ironic or coincidental circumstance.

O' Henry was among the first to perfect the technique of unexpected ending, coupled with vivid imagination and keen observation as characteristics of his style. He was an inventor of plots and fantastic situations in which characters capered rather than lived.

### Development of Short Story

Though short story began even before man could write, the early story teller relied on old narratives such as Babylonian tale the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Most major stories from middle east were in verse- *The War of Gods*,” “*The Story of Adapa*” (both Babylonian). During the second millennium BC “*The Heavenly Bow*” and “*The King Who Forgot*” were inscribed on clay in cuneiform.

Simple stories that date back to Egyptian writings that are 6,000 years old were composed on papyrus in prose. Fable was another early form of the sixth century BC by the Greeks. Aesop’s fables were famous for their morals and have been later translated into other languages. Popular Greek and Asian stories of magical transformations with moralistic, satirical, and pure entertainment aims was another form, that were gathered and retold by the Roman writers.

Tales in great variety flourished during the Middle Ages in Western Europe. Tales of romance in prose or verse were common in France. The best stories of the Middle Ages were preserved and refined in two fourteenth-century works, *The Decameron* by Italian prose writer Giovanni Boccaccio and *The Canterbury Tales* by English poet Geoffrey Chaucer.

Although such tales continued to appear in the following centuries, there was a slump in the number published. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked the temporary decline of short fiction, the causes being many. It could be because of emergence of novel, the failure of the Boccaccio tradition, a renaissance fascination for drama and poetry, growing preference for journalistic sketches etc. During the Middle Ages short fiction has become primarily an amusing and diverting medium. The Renaissance and Enlightenment saw the emergence of “modern short story”, a new stage in the evolution of short fiction, in which the short form undertook a new seriousness and gained a new vitality and respect. A few writers to mention are Anton Chekhov, Ron Carlson, Jorge Luis Borges, and O’ Henry. Authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were known for being both novel and short story writers.

### The Development of American Short Story

The period between the Civil War in America and the outbreak of the Great War in Europe in 1914 may be termed in the history of prose fiction the ‘Era of the Short Story’.

Formless at first, often overloaded with mawkishness, essay effects, moralizing purpose and dominating background, short story grew in proportion and restraint and artistic finish until it was hailed as a new

*genre*, easily adaptable to the American temperament and its culture. (The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes, <https://www.bartleby.com/226/2101.html>).

It begins with the eighteenth century tale of the Hannah More type, colourless, formless and undramatic. People were happy with this for about half century. Washington Irving brought the blending of moral tale with the Addisonian essay. He added characterization, humour, atmosphere, literary charm, but missed on constructive art. He lacked the dramatic and overloaded the tales with descriptions and essay material with a feeble end.

The twenties and the thirties were dominated by the magazine '*The Sketch Book*' and '*The Annual*' ruled the world of Americans for two decades from the twenties. Hawthorne was the first to add soul to the short story. His form was taken seriously even by those who had contended that it was inferior to the larger form of fiction. He developed a story around a single situation and gave the work unity of impression.

For the first time the science of short story with its own rules and fields was developed by Poe in the forties. He insisted on curt, condensed, the well digested in place of the voluminous. The fifties and the sixties stand for the dawning of definiteness, of localized reality, of a feeling left on the reader of actuality and truthfulness to human life. Rose Tarry Cookery, Fitz James O' Brien and Edward Everett Hale and few others belonged to this transition period.

Henry James put an end to the transition period. He rejected all allegory and mystery and vague impressionism as unscientific. According to James a story was an analysis of a situation, the psychological phenomena of a group of men and women at an interesting moment. He was followed by Bret Harte, who introduced the local colour.

A transition in the form was seen in seventies with contributions from writers like Constance Fenimore Woolson, Sarah Orne Jewett and Cable. Two distinct schools ruled the short fiction of this period - the school of unlocalised art, timeless and placeless and the new "local colour" school. The short story came to its full form in the eighties where realism, or more exactly, perhaps naturalism, ruled the decade. Writers like Charles Egbert Cradock Johnston and Garland, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman contributed to short story during this period.

Short story attained full perfection in the nineties. Beginning about 1898 with the early work of O' Henry and Jack London, there has come the last period of the short story-the work of the present day. The demand for the decade has been for "stories with a punch."

The period closes with the work of William Sydney porter, better known as O' Henry, whose sudden rise and enormous popularity are one of the romances of the history of the short story. O' Henry is unique, the soul of his art is unexpectedness. Humour, sentiment and philosophy and surprise. The end is always a sensation. O' Henry was a master of plot and diction, a genuine humorist, and a philosopher, his weakness lay in the very nature of his art. He was an entertainer bent only on entertaining and amusing.

### O' Henry's Stories - Story Structure

Specifying about the story structure, Porter's biographer, C. Alphoso Smith, pointed out in O' Henry's Biography (1916) that O' Henry's stories had four stages, in the first stage, O' Henry gets the reader's attention with a striking opening situation, called "the arresting beginning. Exposition takes place at this stage. In the second stage, the rising action, the reader begins to guess the story ending. In the third stage, the climax, the reader learns that he or she was wrong about the ending, in the fourth stage, the falling action, the story concludes. The ending is triumphant with a surprise involving sudden suspense. This is the story's resolution.

### Story Elements

O' Henry's chief motto in writing short stories was to entertain people. He started entertaining people from when he was working in his uncle's drug store. In his stories he uses lively dialogue, vivid and quickly drawn descriptions, humour, irony, chance happenings, and surprise endings. In 1908 critic Henry James Forman wrote

"No talent could be more original or more delightful. The combination of technical excellence with whimsical, sparkling wit, abundant humour and a fertile invention is so rare that the reader is content without comparisons". (Henry James Forman, "O. Henry's Short Stories," in Waifs and Strays: Twelve Stories, by O. Henry (copyright © 1917 by Doubleday, Page & Company; reprinted by permission of Doubleday & co., Inc.), Doubleday, Page, 1917, p-280)

### Element of Irony

O' Henry has a good sense of humour and liked to depict ironic situations. Most of his stories have subtle irony combined with humour. Sometimes, a whole situation was ironic. The author sets up a scene one way, and then the opposite of what you might expect actually happens. Classic examples of irony are "The Gift of Magi" and "The Furnished Room."

**The Gift of Magi-** Della and Jim Young is a young married couple in "The Gift of the Magi," with very little money. Just before Christmas, a thirty-percent pay cut forces him to think that the couple must scrimp for everything. Della counts the money she has saved for months, a day before Christmas. She is dismayed to find that she has one dollar and eighty seven cents, hardly enough to buy anything. Della determines to find a way to buy Jim a present that he deserves. She sells her beautiful hair to buy Jim a platinum watch chain, and Jim sells his precious heirloom watch to buy Della some tortoise shell hair combs. These gifts turn out to be useless, in a sense as Della cannot wear her combs without her hair, and Jim, without his watch, cannot use his watch chain.

"The Gift of the Magi" is a perfect example in which a poor, loving young husband and wife sell the only valuable things they own to give each other special Christmas gifts. But O ' Henry surprises the reader with his subtle humour and suspense by giving an unexpected twist at the end. All through the reader is anxious to know how the couple surprise each other only to show the irony in the end where the gifts that were bought for each other become useless. However, the writer convinces the reader and gives him the satisfaction of having read a good story with the love and generosity that the couple has for each other.

Whatever his subjects are, O' Henry has good control over his narration throughout the story without boring his reader. He is successful in sustaining interest in the reader's mind from the beginning till the surprise ends. Actually the interest is heightened as the reader comes to the end of the story. Reading an unexpected end, the reader puts down the book with a smile on his face complimenting the author for the trick ending given to the story.

Through the wilderness of apartments on the lower West Side a man trails a woman in **The Furnished Room**. Chance leads a young man to the very room in which the woman ended her life the week before. Between him and the truth the avarice of a sordid landlady interposes the curtain of a lie. In the bed in which the girl slept and died, the man sleeps and dies, and the entrance of the deadly fumes into his nostrils shuts the sinister and mournful coincidence forever from the knowledge of mankind.

A young man prowled for a room in the population of the Red Brick district. He was knocking every door, if there was a room vacant. At the twelfth door, he rested weak and feeble, waited for the housekeeper to come. The housekeeper made him think of

“An unwholesome, surfeited worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers”. (Horowitz, Paul J., pp. 526)

He inquired if there was any vacancy; the housekeeper guided him to the third floor. She boasted of the room that it was never vacant and had the most elegant people occupying it. People had made it big or they were successful in whatever they did from that room. The young man asked if there were any theatre people who lived here. She said, people came and went and she did not have any track of them. He asked her if she had come across a young girl- Miss. Vashner- Miss. Eloise Vashner an upcoming singer on stage, a fair, medium height and slender, with reddish gold hair and a dark mole near her left eyebrow.

She said people change their names when they want to make it big and she has not come across anyone with that name. He has been trying to find her for five months now; he questioned the managers, agents, schools and choruses but in vain. It is only the hope; he had with him that one fine day he would find her.

As he rested, suddenly he felt the sweet odour of mignonette. He felt somebody calling him out, he felt, she was here in this room, he could not feel, sense and recognize every small thing she had touched. He could find traces of her presence in the room but no proof or identity could be retrieved to call it her possession.

He rushed to the housekeeper to find out who was the tenant who lived prior to him, she said those people worked for theatre, a bachelor, one Mrs. Crowder and her two children and then Mr. Doyle and so on, the list went on but he could not get the address of his girl.

When he returned to his room he could feel the coldness, the perfume of mignonette was no more felt and lost all hope of finding her. He tore the bed and stuck pieces of cloth into every crevice around windows and door and then he turned the light off and turned the gas full on.

All through the reader is kept engrossed to know at every turn in the story if the writer would come up with the address of the girl that the young man was looking out for. Every time the young man tries to find out about the girl, there has always been a suspense which the writer wouldn't reveal till the end of the story. The best part of this story is the element of irony of how the man comes to the same room that

the girl lived in and has his intuition of her presence in the room and the similar way that he too ends his life like that of the girl he loved.

### Element of Coincidence

O' Henry's plots often involve coincidence. Coincidence (chance or luck) also play a key role in most of O' Henry's stories. Very often, the strange coincidences that the characters experience add another element of humour to the story. For example, in "After Twenty Years," two old friends make plans to meet. But one has just learned something about the other, and this leads to an unexpected event. In "A Retrieved Reformation," it is a coincidence that Ben Price happens to be watching at the exact moment that Jimmy decides to save the little girl. In these stories and others, the coincidence acts as a kind of warm-up to the story's surprise ending.

**A Retrieved Reformation** is possibly the most profitable of all O' Henry tales so far as monetary returns are concerned. A slight piece of romantic fiction, the story possesses two sure-fire qualities that give it a dramatic punch: O' Henry's vividly gives a realistic representation of the burglar's professional equipment, methods, attitudes, and milieu: and the breathless scene of the reformed Jimmy Valentine's cracking open the bank vault in time to rescue the trapped child and thus secure pardon from the detective who has been tailing him. The detective in his right mind would ever behave as Ben Price does in this story is of no consequence to the myriad readers.

Jimmy Valentine was pardoned by the governor after he had served nearly ten months of a four year sentence. As he set out, Jim took to his old ways of earning, initially it started with petty amounts but later the amount started drawing the attention of Ben Price, the detective.

Meanwhile Jim fell in love with Miss Annabel Adams, the daughter of a Bank owner. He changes his name to Mr. Ralph Spencer and poses himself as an entrepreneur. He opened a shoe store and prospered in the trade. At the end of the year he grew to be a respectable man, won the heart of Annabel, gained the good will of Mr. Adams and what more he was to be engaged to Ms. Annabel in two weeks.

Before getting married, he wanted to get rid of his past totally and made arrangements to give his 'Burglars Tools' to his friend on the day of the engagement. Celebrating the same occasion with his family and friends the banker was showing the new vault, to be introduced in the bank to all his family members. This kindled the interest of two children May and Agatha. The nine-year-old girl, May has shut Agatha in the vault by mistake and it could not be opened. There was panic and confusion there about

rescuing the girl. It was then that Mr. Spencer intervenes and rescues the girl only to fall into the eyes of Ben Price and get arrested.

In **After twenty Years** two friends meet exactly at the same time and at the same place as they have promised each other twenty years ago. But alas! They are exactly in opposite situations. When Jimmy meets Bob at midnight, he realizes that it is the face of the man wanted in Chicago. As he has no courage to handcuff him as a police officer, he sends a plain clothes man to arrest him.

All activities of the day come to an end by night, all shops and business spots were closed by then, but for a cigar store here and there and an all night lunch counter.

A policeman suddenly notices a person near a hardware store waiting for a friend, the man is waiting for it is an appointment made twenty years ago. Talking about his friend he lighted his cigar, the light showed a pale, square jawed face with keen eyes, and a little white scar near his right eye brow.

The two friends had dinner together twenty years ago and promised to meet after twenty years same place and at the same time. Jimmy Wells his best friend was twenty and he was eighteen when they parted. They parted their ways to make their fortunes twenty years ago same day with a promise made to meet after twenty years irrespective of what they will be after twenty years.

The waiting man had travelled thousand miles to meet his friend and feels it's worth if his partner turns up. As he keeps waiting the policeman leaves and hopes the stranger meets his friend. Sometime later a tall man in a long over coat hurried from the opposite side went straight to the man and asked if he was Bob.

He was very excited about his friend and glad that he has not forgotten his promise to meet. They shared their experiences of how they made it big in these twenty years. As they reached the drug store, the man from the west realizes that the person in the long over coat is not Jimmy Wells. The man agrees that he is not Jimmy wells and says Billy bob is under arrest for the past ten minutes. But before he takes him to the station he hands him a note – the man from the west unfolded the little piece of paper handed over to him. His hands were steady when he began to read, but they trembled a little by the time he had finished reading. It said, he was Bob who had actually come to meet his friend but upon seeing him, he saw the face of the most wanted man in Chicago and so sent a plain clothes man to arrest him instead of arresting his friend himself.

Both the stories are examples of pure coincidence with a twist to the story in the end. In 'Retrieved Reformation' Jimmy Valentine changes his conduct and becomes Ralph Spencer, an entrepreneur and earns name and fame before falling in love with Miss Annabel Adams. Life takes an ugly turn when he tries to help rescue a girl who got locked in the vault on the same day that he tries to get rid of his past by giving away his burglar's tools to his friend. It is a matter of coincidence that he wanted to get rid of his past and he gets arrested for his past record. Another story 'The Cop and the Anthem' is also on the same lines of coincidence.

In 'After Twenty Years' Bob ends up getting his friend arrested after twenty years. Both friends part with a promise to meet after twenty years, in fact they meet and share their journey. Bob leaves wishing his friend good luck in meeting his friend. It is pure coincidence that when they meet one had to be a policeman and the other a wanted criminal and ends the story with surprise element that is the note through which the identity of Bob is disclosed.

### Conclusion

Best known for their surprise ending, O' Henry has mastered the key to a surprise ending early by making his stories believable. These endings were not predictable, that is one of the reasons why readers loved and enjoyed his writings. His stories revolved around the common people and incidents that happen around making it believable and reasonable. In other words, you can accept the ending of the stories as a mark of a good writer and know that O' Henry has tricked you once again whether the story has an element of sacrifice, coincidence or irony.

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