

## O. HENRY: A WIZARD OF TWIST AND SURPRISE

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### **Abstract :**

*The present paper focuses on the splendid writing style of O. Henry. He entertains the readers by his unique and extraordinary writing style which holds the readers from beginning to the end. His has become popular as O. Henry twist. His has attracted not only the readers of America but also the readers of the whole world.*

**Key Words:** unique, splendid, extraordinary, holds, readers, beginning, end, writing style

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### **Introduction:**

Everyone loves a story. We must have listened to our grandmother's stories on cold wintry nights and felt happy or sad on hearing it. A story sometimes takes you to a world other than the one you are living in and you are left fascinated by it. A short story is perhaps easier to read and less time-consuming than a novel which takes a long time to finish reading. But a short story also is perhaps harder to write than a novel as it has to create its effect in a limited number of words. Let us see now what **H. G. Wells** has to say about a short story: "A short story is or should be a simple thing; aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gathers it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely, therefore, set a limit to it; it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or, fatigue sets in."<sup>1</sup>

William Sidney Porter was born on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro North Carolina. As a child, Porter was always reading, everything from classics to dime novels; his favorite works were Lane's translation of One Thousand and One Nights, and Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. Porter graduated from his Aunt Evelina Maria Porter's elementary school in 1876. **His job at the GLO was a political**

**1. appointment by Hall. Hall ran for governor in the election of 1890 but lost. Porter resigned in early 1891 when the new governor, Jim Hogg, was sworn in. The same year, Porter began working at the First National Bank of Austin as a teller and bookkeeper at the same salary he had made at the GLO. The bank was operated informally and Porter was apparently careless in keeping his books and may have embezzled funds.**

While in prison, Porter, as a licensed pharmacist, worked in the prison hospital as the night druggist. Porter was given his own room in the hospital wing, and there is no record that



he actually spent time in the cell block of the prison. He had fourteen stories published under various pseudonyms while he was in prison, but was becoming best known as "O. Henry", a pseudonym that first appeared over the story "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" in the December 1899 issue of McClure's Magazine. **Porter's most prolific writing period started in 1902 and lasted in 1920, till his death. In this span of which was just eight years he wrote more than 300 stories. He wrote a story a week for over a year for the New York World Sunday Magazine. His wit, characterization, and plot twists were adored by his readers, but often panned by critics.**

### **Contribution of O. Henry to English Story:**

O. Henry's stories frequently have surprise endings. In his day, he was called the American answer to Guy de Maupassant. While both authors wrote plot twist endings, O. Henry stories were considerably more playful. His stories are also known for witty narration. 'If the work of William Sydney porter, better known as O. Henry was the most noteworthy contribution made to American literature during the first decade of the twentieth century, the expanding vogue of that work has no less characterized the succeeding decade. He was hardly a national author at the time of his death in 1910, but in 1920 he seems securely national and international story writer. The largest class of midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy was recently asked to name in writing the author whose complete works, if placed in the library of every American battleship, would be most often called for. O. Henry led by two hundred votes, Mark Twain coming second.'<sup>2</sup>

2. O. Henry widened the range of the short story, finding material in almost every aspect of common life. His brilliant narrative skill, innocent humor, skillful depiction of city type and dexterous use of ironical made his stories very interesting. A special feature of his stories was their unexpected endings which came to be regarded as the O. Henry's Twist. Most of O. Henry's stories are set in his own time. Many take place in New York City and deal for most part with ordinary people: clerks, policemen, waitresses etc. O. Henry had an inimitable hand for isolating some elements of society and describing it with an incredible economy and grace of

language. His stories are known for their wit, wordplay, warm characterization and clever twist endings. O. Henry was called the American answer to Guy de Maupassant. Both the authors wrote with twist endings, but O. Henry's stories were much more playful and optimistic.

"A prolific writer, O. Henry turned out over 250 short stories between 1899 and 1910. These stories have been widely read and enjoyed throughout the world, and even though in the eyes of some they may not be considered first-rate literature, they have become a significant part of the short story genre. 'The Gift of the Magi,' collected in *The Four Million* (1906), stands as a clear example of O. Henry's mastery of the sentimental story with the surprise ending. <sup>3</sup>

**O. Henry almost wrote three hundred short stories. As I already told the setting or background of these stories are New York and Texas because O. Henry had passed his whole life in these two cities. These stories have been classified into different collections. His first famous collection of short stories is 'Cabbages and Kings which appeared in**

**1904. The year 1904 is very significant in O. Henry's literary career in view of the publication of his first book, Cabbages and Kings. The New York Sunday World Magazine plays a vital role in making O. Henry familiar to the millions of readers in America. The pseudonym, O. Henry was popularized among readers in that very year as all the stories written in 1904 were signed by the author as O. Henry. It is a series of stories which explore the various aspects of life in Central America town.**

### **Poor and Middle class Characters:**

In the works of O. Henry, the technique of characterization is one of the principal features contributing to the phenomenally meteoric rise to success of this "master of the short-story". The

3. principal characters of all of O. Henry's stories, with but a few exceptions are people of low, or the very lowest state of society. He has treated the shop-girls, poor clerks, hoboos, immigrants, and Negroes are treated with a profound depth of sympathy and understanding. O. Henry's canvas was broad His characters include representations of people whom he had met during his early life spent in North Carolina and later in Texas Louisiana Central America, and finally New York City. All of his characters are types. He makes romantic figures of them in his character portrayals, but in each case, the traits which identify a type predominate, and any individuality present is always only a peculiarity in O. Henry's character. The shop-girls, cowboys, clerks, and the starving artist, all dress, act and speak as would be expected of them, ordinarily. Even in the usual O. Henry-last-line denouement, where the cow- boy may prove to be a "female who marries the hero" not the one- you thought. The characters are often built up to represent one type; then a surprise-reversal at the very end only serves to emphasize the lack of individuality, because there is no further character delineation from that point.

In this symmetrical construction allows the theme of love, poverty and selflessness to be unified within the narrow compass of a story in less than three thousand words. This is a story of a couple Jim Della who want to give presents to each other on the occasion of Christmas. But because of the grinding poverty they have to face lots of problems. O. Henry has described the dilemma and the poverty of Della who tried hard to save each cent. But the poor girl couldn't save much. In this connection **Martin Scofield** comments: "It is characteristic of him that most of his stories of poverty and urban distress focus on women, and bring out in him a kind of chivalrous sentimental romanticism which, despite elements of shrewdness, leads him to pity working women."<sup>4</sup>

### **Twist and Surprise in all His Stories:**

The special trait or characteristic of O. Henry stories is its unexpected and surprising and twisty ending. He creates suspense mystery surprise and twist till the end of his story and that's why the reader sticks to his story till its end. He has the wonderful ability to increase the reader's curiosity. It is true that O. Henry's stories earned immense popularity on account of their surprise endings. Yet no one has drawn attention to the technical excellence of O. Henry's trick beginnings. O. Henry rarely fumbles the beginning. From the view point of structure the opening of a story is worthy of considerable attention. As *Otto Penzler* mentioned O. Henry in



his comments, "For me, it has always been the short story. It started when I was just a kid and loved the surprise endings of O. Henry, the bizarre situations of a Sherlock Holmes adventure, and the deliciously creepy nightmares of Edgar Allen Poe." 5

The most obvious technical manifestation of O. Henry's delight in the unexpected is, of course, in his famous surprise endings, for scarcely a single story among his nearly three hundred fails to meet his specifications for a conclusion other than the one the reader is apparently being prepared for. In sheer quantity his surprise endings are therefore impressive, though qualitatively too, too many of them are so patently contrived that the sophisticated reader soon tires of the guessing contest which then anticipated discovery interposes between himself and the author.

Though the element of surprise ending entered the short story with the emergence of the form itself, in its various forms, the surprise ending included the hoax and the practical joke, the anti-conventional or distorted revelation of events, the paradoxical or antithetical disclosure, the manipulation of psychological concepts, the double reversal, the problem close all of which had been worked with varying success by O. Henry's predecessors and contemporaries but he used the surprise ending until it became familiarly associated with his name. And the surprise ending achieved by O. Henry is no trick. It is the valid and inevitable finish that the reader should have expected all along. In some of his stories, O. Henry stretches the notion of things not being what they appear by turning traditional expectations of the mystery and detective genre upside down and writing spoofs. He satirizes François-Eugène Vidocq, the French criminal who started the first modern detective agency and whose reputation as a master of disguise had an immense influence on the writers of crime fiction.

As **William Peden** has pointed out, "... O. Henry brought verve, excitement due to mystery and suspense and humor to the genre. Enormously interested in people, he is capable of swift and compassionate insights into the average person, and his sympathy for the underdog, the little man or woman dwarfed in the maze of contemporary life, to a degree accounted for his enormous popularity..."6. If we scan the famous stories of O. Henry we will find that they all are having twist and surprising endings. *The Gift of Magi, The Last Leaf, After Twenty Years, The Romance of a Busy Broker, A Retrieved Reformation, A Strange Story, No Story, The Furnished Room, and The Witches Loaves* are full of twist, unexpected and surprising endings. All these stories never fail to entertain the readers. Once a reader begins to read it and he doesn't leave it until he or she finishes it.

As observed by **Van Wyck Brooks (1886–1963)**, "He never ceased to be surprised by the wonders of a city where something was always happening round the corner. A piano-player in a cheap café might have shot lions in Africa, a bell-boy might have fought with the British against the Zulus, and O. Henry knew of an express man who had been rescued from a cannibal feast when his arm was crushed for the stew-pot like the claw of a lobster. For the rest, in O. Henry's vision, the city was a quicksand. It shifted its particles constantly; it had no foundation. Its upper granules of today were buried tomorrow in ooze and slime, and mysteries followed one another closely in a town where men vanished like the flame of a candle that has been blown out."7



### Conclusion:

There is no one in the world who does not love a short story. In this speedy life it is the only means of entertainment and knowledge. Now short story has become prevalent in the world. Stories have been a part and parcel of the human being lives for thousands of years. O. Henry is regarded the master of the twist and the unexpected and surprise ending. His each story is full of suspense and mystery. His stories are full of humor and pathos. He compels the readers to smile with tears. His characters are chiefly from New York and Texas. They are chiefly from poor and middle classes. He observed the life of poor people in New York and penned them with his brilliant skill. Even after one hundred and seven years his stories are read with great charm and interest. The unique way of ending his stories known as O. Henry's twist. His contribution to the development of the short story can never be forgotten today and even in future. Coincidence plays a key role in most of O. Henry's stories. The odd coincidences that the characters experience add another element of humor to the story. For example, in "After Twenty Years," two old friends have plans to meet. But one has just learned something different 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 Jimmy save a little girl.

O. Henry collected raw material for his stores from his surrounding world. His observation was very keen. He was a versatile writer to understand the secrets of human nature and bring out them so surprisingly which stunned the readers. O. Henry also had the deep study of the people of New York City and to entertain them was his chief aim.

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