

**O'HENRY AS NEITHER A PREACHER NOR A REFORMER BUT AN ARTIST
ENDOWED WITH A COMPASSIONATE HEART TO HUMANIZE THE SHORT
STORY WORLD
: AN APPRAISAL**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to focus on the short story world of O' Henry, which projects the dark, mysterious and untrustworthy things happening in and around; he grows up making his short stories vivid by using irony, metaphor, metonymy and exaggeration to make the story full of fun. As an artist endowed with a compassionate heart, he tries to hook the attention of the readers by bringing a dramatical and unexpected changes. O ' Henry humanised the short story.

Keywords: Compassionate heart, adventure, Love, Sympathy, crime.

William Sidney Porter, who wrote under the pseudonym, was known as O'Henry. He was born on 11 Sep. 1862 in Greensboro, Guilford country, North Carolina. Like many a writer, O'Henry used the author's right to mystify his readers regarding his identity and facts of life. The first twenty years of his life spent at Greensboro were rather uneventful. He had his schooling at a primary school run by his aunt Miss. Lina, who was the one solely responsible for developing in the students the utmost and intense desire for creative activity by encouraging them to tell stories. The pupils' creative activity could grow freely in an atmosphere which was not found to be so stifling as in the classroom. O'Henry was one such a student who developed the desire for profound creative ability. In 1876, he was enrolled in the Public School of Greensboro.

Not Completing his education, he was apprenticed to his uncle and became an assistant in the drugstore of W.C. Porter and Co in Greensboro. Working in the congested store ruined his health and he went down with an attack of suspected consumption. Encouraged by his friends, he even bought a Press and ran a Magazine named *Rolling Stone*. He also served as a teller in an

Austin Bank that proved his undoing. Then, abroad, in Central and South America, he wandered around like a refugee for two years 'living among other refugees, fugitives, drifters and renegades. With a keen eye, he observed these strange places and foreigners and with a keen ear, he listened to their tales, of adventure, crime, and daring. His retentive memory kept them alive and his powerful imagination cast a veil of magic and mastery over them. His compassionate heart never allowed him to condemn their weakness and sins. He is of the opinion that sinner is always given a chance to reform. Arthur W. Page in his "Little Pictures of O' Henry" skips over some sections of the writer's life, and with good reason, he says:

"Following the political trouble and the other troubles (including the case of the Austin Bank) in which Porter became involved, he left the State. Some time was spent in Houston; the next stop was New Orleans; then he jumped to South America and only returned to Texas for a short period before leaving the State forever. His experiences on a west Texas ranch, in Texas Cities and in South America, however, gave him a thorough insight into the average run of people whom he pictured so vividly in his later work. He was a greater man than any of us knew when we were with him in the old days" (P 1321).

Actually, Page quotes from Dr. D. Daniel's who was Porter's partner in the printing house that brought out *Rolling Stone*, Porter's intention was to settle down in a Latin American country, buy a house and bring his wife from Texas to his home. He had been surreptitiously sending her money regularly. Suddenly he received news that his wife was seriously ill. He rushed back home, surrendered himself, was tried, on circumstantial evidence, found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to five years imprisonment. His poor wife had to witness all this humiliation heaped on her husband before she died of tuberculosis which ran in the family.

Even while he was serving his sentence in the prison, he wrote some stories and managed to smuggle them out and get them published. It was then that he thought of using the pen name O'Henry. When he was released and came out, he decided to earn his bread by writing stories for the Magazines. Soon he succeeded in attracting the attention of the editors of *Ainslee's* who were able to spot great promise in the new writer. They made an offer to O'Henry and asked him to go over to the city. He had already found his profession and had written stories based on his

experiences in South America and in the penitentiary. These stories were marked by originality and authenticity. Being his own critic, he knew the exact value and worth of his stories. Having had his finger on the pulse of the reader or listener and having listened to hundreds of stories and yarns, he knew exactly what would impress the reader, especially the average reader. O'Henry knew how to touch the hearts of human beings by writing stories. Richard O'Connor writes:

“His formal education was scant,
his literary apprenticeship haphazard,
his working habits irregular. His personal
life a shambles” (P 89).

On top of it all, his motivation was purely commercial. He said frankly that he wrote for money and “for no other reason or purpose” O'Connor puts it succinctly when he says, “His only real aim in coming to New York was not to find a new creative field but a more comfortable corner in the market place” (P 89). But all this is belied by what he achieved in the next few years. He not only made big money but established a big admiring audience and big fame. O'Henry like other writers with social concerns did wield the whip of the satirist. But he pleased ‘his readers "by looking on the city as a capital of fantasy, a modern revival of *Thousand and One Nights*, which he would variously call “Bagged on the Subway”, “Noisyville on the Hudson” and “City of Too Many Caliphs”:

“In his own off-hand manner, he was a more effective muckraker than Lincoln Steffens or Ida Tarbell. What the social reformer raged at with a shower of invective and a fusillade of statistics, O'Henry depicted in his own storyteller's voice... only rarely did O'Henry raise the the pitch of his storyteller's voice to the level of indignation, because he considered himself to be an entertainer, not a pamphleteer or social reformer. Yet on occasions, he could be seemingly effective in showing his readers what lay below the surface of metropolitan life” (P 90).

What filled him with deep sorrow and righteous indignation was the treatment meted out to the working girls by society. In what is correctly called sweatshops the girls are made to sweat through hard-work and are paid such low wages that they are compelled to think of eking out their livelihood by other means. The good-looking smart girls become mistresses of rich men. Many of them take to the streets and end up as prostitutes, controlled by a pimp or Madama. At

times, young innocent girls are drugged, abused and beaten before they are enlisted as regular prostitutes. Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* was based on what the author actually saw happening in the streets of the city. The respectable reading public reacted with outrage to the realistic novel. Attracted by the American Dream of success, the immigrants come in hordes only to find the Dream a nightmare, a bare-faced lie. And the poor girls are picked up by procurers and introduced into the 'slave-system' supported by the police which got a cut out of every dollar earned by the girl-turned-prostitute. While 'moralists' condemned the immoral lives lived by these girls, O'Henry is heart bled for a miserable lot of these hapless creatures.

It is generally believed that O'Henry's career as a story-teller began after his arrival in New York, at the invitation of the editors of *Ainslee's*. Even though he had been using several pen names, he felt sure that he did adopt O'Henry as a permanent pseudonym. The year 1904 can be called O'Henry's *Annus Mirabilis* as it saw the publication of six-six new O'Henry stories and the first of his collected stories in book form – *Cabbages and Kings*. Encouraged by the reception given to this collection, O'Henry brought out the second book, *The Four Million* (1906), *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907) and *Heart of the West* (1907). And all the while he continued to write fresh new stories for the Magazines. The next year 1908 saw the publication of two more collections, *The Voice of the city* and *The Gentle Grafter* followed by *the Roads of Destiny and Options* in 1909 and *Strictly Business and Whirligigs* in 1910. In 1910, he suffered an attack of influenza, was hospitalized and died on the 5th of June, 1910. Thus, a brilliant career was cut off at the prime of its glory and activity.

Being an incredibly prolific writer, O'Henry is said to have produced altogether more than six hundred short stories. The everyday scene in the city furnished him with the subject - matter – the people and their daily struggle for existence. The material was often drab, but by a judicious mixture of romance and realism, he could present authentic pictures which touch the heart but fill it with hope. It was not just the city of New York and its citizens: "by way of good measure, he added tales of other sections; his stories of the Southwest, the old South, and Creole New Orleans are amongst his most successful narratives" (Long 2). Of these stories, thrown in "by way of good measure", many belong to the pictures he formed of human life, of men and women and children, in his childhood, as a pupil in Miss Lina's primary school, where he first comes across story-books and tales told by pupils and teacher. His sympathetic understanding and love of human beings must have begun to stir in his heart even then children's books of stories, do not avoid the sordid side of life, but by throwing the veil of romance and fairy-tale magic the ugly things are made interesting and tolerable.

The stories like "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Last Leaf" involving love that sacrifices itself for others are sanctified by the words of Jesus Christ who said, "Greater love hath no man than

this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Indeed, with a single commandment, Christ replaced the whole moral code known as the Mosaic Decalogue.

Love, compassion, passion, sympathy – these are the recurrent themes of O’Henry’s stories. The poverty and misery that he saw around him in his wanderings through Central and South America and in his ramblings through almost all the States, except perhaps New England, meted his heart. He recognized the dignity of man as man to whatever depth he may sink. The miserable creatures deserved, not his contempt but his sympathy. O’Henry could never bring himself to condemn men, cheats, thieves and other bad men. Stephen Leacock has something quite relevant to say about it:

“Greatest of all O’Henry’s characteristics is the power of bringing good out of evil, of finding a place for love and laughter, where all around seems misery and sins.

He has the same power known best to Charles Dickens of turning a crook into a sort of genial soul, an embezzler into an admired companion. He makes a kind of Robin Hood world in which the social values are reversed and the outlaw becomes the a real man, and the sheriff and the bishop the villains of the piece” (Leacock 199).

In other words, his vision of human life as it is and it can be has undergone a complete change. The change began when he moved with drifters and desperadoes in Central and South America and was completed during his stay in the penitentiary where he lived in contact with criminals of all kinds. His compassionate heart became strengthened by his experiences of these years. *The Road to Destiny* (1909) portrays the lives and actions of villainous outlaws, drifters, braggarts con men and the dregs of the underworld, many of whom he had met in his wanderings and in prison. The compassionate heart of O’Henry was truly catholic capable of embracing an army of undesirables.

O’Henry is not a preacher or reformer. He is an artist endowed with a compassionate heart. Like his predecessor, Hawthorne, he uses a blend of realism and romance. He romanticizes the poor and the rich, the laborer and the capitalist, the crook and the law-abiding citizen. That is really the secret of his abiding appeal. To conclude, Poe standardized the short story, Hawthorne made it a vehicle of symbolism, Bret Harte, localized the American Story and O’Henry humanized the short story.

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