

Aspects of O. Henry's style in his short Stories

Like a meteor O. Henry appeared in the American Literary arena. He disappeared also like a meteor with the same suddenness as he had appeared. He got his ideas from the great, common, throbbing heart of humanity as he termed New York. Unfortunately he lived barely a decade after his arrival in New York; nevertheless, he wrote stories during that period at a very hectic pace. The enduring legacy he left came to be dissected rather abruptly in the wake of his death and he was duly revered as a true artist of international stature during the period from 1911 to 1918. Incidentally, although O. Henry's works did not attract much critical attention after the First World War, he continues to enjoy a wide readership throughout the world.

A variety of settings characterize O. Henry's stories. Most of them are either laid in New York City or Texas. One may encounter characters of different idiosyncrasies and a variety of people such as shop girls and millionaires, cowboys and tramps, policemen and burglars, confidence men and gentlemen in his stories. He feels quite at home while narrating tales in his distinctive, lucid, lively and glib style. He has a special fascination for the application of puns, malapropisms and big words in his stories for the purpose of humorous effect. Often literary allusions, examples, ornamentations, explanations become part and parcel of his style. Another striking characteristic of his stories is the use of coincidence

with surprise twists and endings. Sometimes unabashed sentiment, comedy and burlesque figure strikingly in his fiction.

In his days O.Henry was often obliged to cater to the needs of his editors and readers. This is why he had to write stories like "Blind Man's Holiday", "Georgia's Ruling", and "A Fog in Santone" to gratify the tastes of different readers. His distinctive literary talent is reflected in his parodic, comic and picturesque stories in which witty dialogue, irony and surprise ending abound. Besides, his effective use of language and structure is yet another notable aspect of these stories reminding one of Mark Twain's great narrative skill in his stories such as "A Dog's Tale", "A Curious Experience", "A Ghost Story", "My Watch", "A Curious Dream", "The Californian's Tale" and many others. Contextually like O.Henry Mark Twain also was keenly responsive to the social problems of his time. He was usually interested in using straight humour in his writings though O.Henry sometimes liked otherwise. He prefers the use of parody in his stories as a device commonly adopted in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

O.Henry often seems to have paid little attention to the selective use of words. Since he used to write stories in rapid succession in response to the growing demands of his editors, to him writing was an unpremeditated art. As soon as an idea occurred to him he started writing page after page without a break. And ideas like those of a born writer seemed to have come to him as naturally

and spontaneously as leaves to a tree as Keats suggests in his letters. In this context his letter written to John Taylor on 27th February, 1818 is worth remembering. Usually he avoided making preliminary drafts of his composition. Victoria Blake, a freelance writer of America, comments on O.Henry's style of writing : "Once he got his idea he would sit down immediately and write it out. To match the speed and efficiency of the composition, O.Henry developed a writing philosophy that was similarly streamlined, to say the least. "I'll give you the whole secret of short story writing", he told an interviewer. "Here it is Rule 1: Write short stories that please yourself. There is. No Rule 2."¹ According to Jennings, O.Henry's friend, the story, "The Halberdier of the Little Rheinschloss" was written within a whole night. Jennings writes about the experience: "At about 10 minutes after 12 he called me up. 'You're late. I am writing', he said. When I got to his room the big table where he did his writing was littered with sheets of paper. All over the floor were scraps of paper covered with writing in long hand."²

It is important to note that O.Henry's forte often lies in devising an excellent full-fledged story out of a very insignificant or trifling matter. He made this possible by virtue of his fecund imagination coupled with his remarkable descriptive

1. Victoria Blake, *Selected Stories of O.Henry* (George Stade, consulting Editorial Director, Barnes & Noble Classics, New York,2003), p. xxiii.

2. B. M. Ejxenbaum, *O. Henry and the Theory of Short Story* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1968), p. 13.

and narrative skill. In this connection one may note his extraordinarily innovative art to build a story on a flimsy or insufficient background hardly potentially resourceful for structuring the plot of a story. For instance "The Pint Flask" is a remarkable story of this sort. The principal theme of the story concerns a pint whisky flask that James, the Colonel, wanted to get rid of. One can hardly imagine how such a story can be structured on a mere flask.

There is yet another group of his stories which further bear evidence to his marks of excellence as a gifted literary stylist. For example in "The prisoner of Zemla", "The Romance of a Busy Broker", "A Strange Story", "Lost on Dress Parade", "Pendulum", "After Twenty Years", "How She Got in the Swim", one is struck by his markedly characteristic brevity. The stories are terse but not trite in the least.

While considering the characteristic features of O. Henry's style it is worthwhile to take a look at his fondness for foreign words and phrases. Besides English O. Henry had a command over many other languages such as French, Latin, German, Spanish and so on. Often he showed an inclination to use foreign words in his stories, whenever possible. He attained such a remarkable proficiency in Spanish that he dared to use his knowledge of the said language in his stories of the Southwest and Latin America. He has used a great many foreign words in the stories such as "Lost on Dress Parade", "The Higher Abdication", "The Caballero's Way", "A Night in New Arabia", "A Ruler of Men" and

many others. His apt use of a number of foreign words like “bonvivants”, “habitués”, “tabled hotes”, “beaumonde” and so on is a distinctive feature of the story, “Lost on Dress Parade”. Had he acquired no linguistic mastery he could not have used so many foreign words in this story and elsewhere. This tends one to believe the rumour that he always carried a dictionary with him.

Sometimes O.Henry’s self-revelation becomes quite transparent through the speeches of his characters as glimpses of his own life occasionally get mingled with his fictional creations. In this connection one may refer to the following speech of Mr. Garvey in, “A Blackjack Bargainer” which seems to suggest that O. Henry himself is talking about the incident of his own life: “Is that him? Why that’s the man who sent me to the penitentiary once!”³ The very term, ‘penitentiary’ is reminiscent of O.Henry’s imprisonment in the penitentiary of Ohio. He had to undergo indescribable sufferings when he was behind bars for serving five years for his alleged embezzlement of funds. The similar instance of self-revelation is traceable in the story, “The Higher Pragmatism”. O.Henry was too shy to articulate his feelings to his sweetheart, Miss Coleman. Despite his intense passion for her, his quiet and bashful nature prevented him from being vocal even in her presence. What the lover says in the story seems to be O.Henry’s own words. The lover in the story pours out his feelings in the following manner : “I hadn’t the courage to speak to her of my worship ... that in her

3. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O.Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.112.

presence I could only blush and stammer and that she looked upon me with a wonderful maddening smile of amusement.”⁴ The story, “Blind Man’s Holiday” closely resembles O.Henry’s own circumstances while in New Orleans and gives some insight into his feelings. The central character, Lorrison, an embezzler, in flight from the law, sometimes “appeared to himself to be the feeblest of fools; at another he conceived that he followed ideals so fine that the world was not yet ready to accept them. During one mood he cursed his folly; possessed by the other, he bore himself with a serene grandeur akin to greatness.”⁵

It is in the last decade of his life in New York that O.Henry produced his finest stories. His excellent accomplishments performed in his inimitable and almost unsurpassable style may be traced in such volumes as *The Four Millions*, *The Trimmed Lamp* and *The Voice of the City*. With regard to O.Henry’s distinctive style of this period of consummation Stephen Leacock, the eminent Canadian humourist and critic, observes: “Marvellous indeed they are. Written offhand with the bold carelessness of the pen that only genius dares use, but revealing behind them such a glow of imagination and such a depth of understanding of the human heart as

4. E.S. Arnett, *O.Henry From Polecat Creek* (Greensboro, North Carolina, 1962), p.187.

5. Richard O’Connor, *O.Henry: The legendary life of William S. Porter* (Doubleday and company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1970), p.56.

only genius can make manifest".⁶

Unexpected ending is one of the most striking features of O. Henry's stories. Sometimes readers can understand how certain details in a particular story act as a hint of the probable ending. While reading a story thoroughly a reader may guess its expected dénouement. Sometimes the reader is finally befooled with regard to the ending of the story. The ring in "Mammon and the Archer", the button in "A Municipal Report", the half of a silver dime in "No Story" are hardly any conspicuous details but they become highly suggestive and significant so far as the endings of these stories are concerned. In "The Gift of the Magi", to take yet another example, one can hardly have any anticipation about the conclusion of the story. Even after the knowledge of the disposal of Della's beautiful hair and purchase of a fob chain as a suitable Christmas gift for Jim, her husband one can hardly guess that the gifts meant for both Jim and Della would become useless for the Christmas festival. Cited below is the last part of Jim's speech, conveyed in a superb style, which ultimately unravels the mystery underlying the story: "Dell" said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs".⁷ In the story, "The Last Leaf", Behrman's death is also quite unexpected because the course of the story pre-eminently underlines Johnsy's

6. Stephen Leacock, "The Amazing Genius of O. Henry", *Essays and Literary Studies* (New York: John Lane, 1916), pp. 233-266.

7. See next page

imminent death, not Behrman's. Similarly in "A Service of Love" Joe and Delia had a genuinely sacrificing attitude to each other but till the end of the story it could not be guessed how each of them sacrificed for the other. Though O.Henry is not the first author to use surprise endings he used such endings very effectively and made his stories highly interesting and fascinating to his readers. While evaluating O.Henry's handling of surprise endings Eugene Current Garcia remarks: "One way to account for this mysterious afflatus is to recognize that at the core of O.Henry's being lies an element of surprise or wonder, as though everything his eye lighted on were sufficient cause for startled pleasure. Van Wyck Brooks has noted that New York City seemed to belong to O.Henry because of "the fresh curiosity with which he approached it, his feeling of wonder about it ... which made for a literary virtue transcending his occasional cheapness and coarseness, his sometimes unbearable jocularity and meretricious effects." No shrewder observation of O.Henry's art has been made, but it might also be extended to cover not only his New York stories but his entire approach to the problem of fiction. For the element of surprise is the key note of his technique aswell"⁸

7. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O.Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.763.

8. Eugene Current Garcia, *O.Henry (William Sydney Porter)* (Twayne Publishers, Inc., New Haven, Conn, USA, 1965), p.137.

O. Henry often resorts to punning and word-mutilation humorously in his stories. Keenly interested in mutilation of words, he distorts "Lotus" into "Lettuce", "Mount Olympus" into "Mount Catawampus", "Croesus" into "Greasers", "Scylla" and "Charybdis" into "Squills" and "Chalybeates" and many others. He also takes interest in reproducing the version of original speeches as uttered by people in real life in his stories. Such speeches replete with unsophisticated and ungrammatical expressions can be seen in his stories such as "Round the Circle", "Blackjack Bargainer", "Afternoon Miracle", "The Whirligig of Life", "Witches' Loaves" and so on. In these stories O. Henry makes the characters often speak their own crude language as they are usually accustomed to in their practical life. His dexterous treatment of original speeches lends a realistic appeal and humorous flavour to his stories. A great many contemporary authors like Hamlin Garland, Maurice Thompson, G.W. Cable and others followed the same device in their stories. Like O. Henry a keen sense of realism is often reflected in their stories. While going through O. Henry's story, "Round the Circle" one can understand his interest in using the unpolished language of common people in his stories. In the aforesaid story in reply to the query of Mrs. Webber, his wife Sam says in his exclusive manner: "At first I was about ter be a little reckless and kick 'cause ther buttons was all off, but since I diskiver that the button holes is all busted out, why I wouldn't go so fur as to say the buttons is any loss to speak of." ⁹ Mrs. Webber has a good sense of humour. Taking a

9. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.199.

look at her husband with his dress on, she comments humorously, "You look jest like one of them hayseeds in the picture papers' 'stead of a free and independent sheepman of ther state of Texas." ¹⁰

In the following speech of Mr. Garvey quoted from the story, "A Blackjack Bargainer" O. Henry uses the same language as Garvey would have spoken in the usual course of his domestic life. O. Henry shows how words are distorted in Garvey's speech: "The Rogerses, the Hopgoods, the Pratts, and the Troys hev been to see Missis Garvey, and she hev et meals to most of thar houses. The best folks hev axed her to differ'nt kinds of doin's. I cyan't say Mr. Goree, that sech things suits me fur me, give me them thar". ¹¹

There is hardly any room for doubt in O .Henry's success in blending romanticism with the modern, hectic urban life quite compatibly. Unlike Poe and Hawthorne he brings romanticism squarely into the twentieth century. The components of modern life—automobiles, commerce, industry—shape the fabric of his fiction. He thrusts the romantic ethos into the hurry-scurry of the big city, into the sordid state of the tenements, the squalid apartments of poor shop girls, into the meanness of urban life. Notwithstanding the negative aspects, the excitement and endless varieties of complex urban life provided him with a plenty of material for literary treatment.

O. Henry's elaborate word-play contrived by means of his ingenuity made his tales quite interesting and afforded

10. Ibid., p.199.

11. Ibid., p.111.

pleasure to his readers. Like Shakespeare and Sheridan O. Henry relished tampering with English and foreign words. Hence he was keenly interested in producing delightful malapropisms, word mutilations and distortions and misquotations in his stories. The following samples will demonstrate O. Henry's ingenuity in the unique use of language:

- 1) "Now, there was a woman that would have tempted an anchovy to forget his vows. A kind of welcome seemed to mitigate her vicinity". ("Telemachus, Friend")
- 2) "Our friend, Lee Andrews will again swim the Hell's point to-night." ("Hearts and crosses")
- 3) "He got three or four bullets planted in various parts of his autonomy." ("The Moment of Victory")
- 4) "I reckon in New York you get to be a Conniseer; and when you go around with the demi-tasse", you are naturally bound to buy'em stylish grub." ("Hostages to Momus")
- 5) "He was traveling impromptu like kings, I guess." ("The Halberdier of the Little Rheinschloss")¹²

That O. Henry was a prolific author can hardly be denied. Of course, there are traces of roughness in his stories that could be avoided had he cared to make proper revision. Incidentally, he wrung every phrase, paragraph and page from his very soul of an artist. Once finalized he had little time to look back and handed his product of art to the busy publisher with utmost promptitude.

12. E.C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (Twayne Publishers Inc., New York, 1965), pp. 145-146.

Contextually one may guess that he might have attempted to rewrite the pretty lengthy sentences in the stories like “A Departmental Case”, “Madame Bo-peep, of the Ranches” and some others had he made use of his scope for further revision. Like a romanticist he laid greater emphasis on content, rather than on form, in his stories. This explains his occasional roughness in the stories he wrote.

Of O.Henry’s short stories another distinctive feature is his thematic variety. Drawn on his varied experiences, his stories embody excellently the diverse issues concerning human life. Contextually Martin Scofield, a celebrated scholar and critic of American Literature makes the following estimate as to O.Henry’s treatment of diverse subject-matters: “The subject-matter of O.Henry’s stories, which the varieties of rhetoric serve to present and explore, covers a wide area: city life (shop girls, cops, vaudeville artistes, hobos, bank clerks and managers), South-American political shenanigans, the wild west, the Deep South.”¹³

Literary allusions culled from the works of classical writers adorn O.Henry’s short stories quite often and also form a significant component of his literary style. For example a very well-known source he was indebted to for his literary purpose was *Arabian Nights*. The literary references frequently used in his stories occasionally add to humorous effect. Incidentally, one of the

13. Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 2011), p. 117.

prominent features that have earned him fame as a popular short story writer is his excellent sense of humour. In this regard let us refer to F. L. Pattee's estimate of O. Henry as a humorist. Mr. Pattee says, "O. Henry stands first of all for manner, and the chief ingredient of this manner is humor. He should be rated first of all as a humorist, as much so as even Artemus Ward or Mark Twain. He was a born humorist: his biography is larded with Eugene Field like practical jokes, with cartoons and caricatures and outrageous drolleries."¹⁴ A few examples cited below show O. Henry's sense of humour:

1. 'Twill serve	'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so
'tis not so deep	wide as a church-door, but
as a lobster a'la Newburgh,	'tis enough-'twill serve
nor so wide as a	<i>(Romeo and Juliet,</i>
church festival dough	<i>III :I)</i>
nut; but 'twill serve.	
("The Third Ingredient")	

2. "I've noticed you,	Seeking, the bubble reputation. Sam",
says I "seeking	Even in the Cannon's mouth.
the bubble notoriety	<i>(As You Like It II : VII)</i>
in the Cannon's	
larynx a number of times"	
("The Moment of Victory")	

14. F.L. Pattee, *The Development of The American Short Story* (Biblo and Tannen, New York, 1970), p.360.

3. As for Tonia, though
 she sends description to
 the poor- house, let her
 make a millionaire of
 your fancy.
 ("The Caballero's Way")

For her own person, It
 beggard'd all description.
 (*Antony and Cleopatra*
 II : I)

4. Far better to linger
 there... than sit upon
 the horse hair sofa...
 and ... drivell in the ears
 of gaping neighbors sad
 stories of the death of
 colonial governors.
 ("The Head-Hunter")

For God's sake, let us sit upon
 the ground. And tell sad stories
 of kings. (*Richard II,II:ii*)¹⁵

Apart from ludicrous use of classical references, O. Henry uses them occasionally for serious purposes also. Of course, one should have adequate knowledge concerning the classical allusions incorporated in his stories so as to grasp the meaning of the context. The allusions are often used for the purpose of naming persons, places and institutions or symbolizing something. A few phrases and sentences quoted from his stories can hardly illustrate the depth of his humour. His humour is not like the boisterous sort of comic wit creating a guffaw and disappearing.

15. E.C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (Twayne publishers, Inc., New York, 1965), pp. 146-147.

Rather, his humour is positively characteristic of a smile at life itself mingling our laughter with our tears, sometimes reminiscent of the mode of Charles Lamb.

O. Henry is often estimated as a supreme storyteller gifted with the qualities of a master of tragedy as well as comedy. He is also adept at dealing with the themes of love, romance and the daily struggle of common people. A skilful artist in narrating mystery tale and the stories of the supernatural, he has a deep insight into the problems of common people and particularly the struggling women of his time. Significantly, the incidents, scenes and characters depicted in his stories concern basically the multihued experiences of his adventurous life. In this connection it is worth quoting the words of A. St. John Adock, a contemporary critic who evaluates O. Henry's style in the following manner: "The life he lived was the life that was best for him. Every phase of it had its share in making him the prose troubadour that he became. Half his books are filled with stories that are shaped and coloured by his roamings and the other half with stories that he gathered in the busy ways and, particularly in the by ways of 'Little Old New York'".¹⁶

O. Henry's experience as a druggist provided him with local colour and knowledge for some of his stories. Hence it was possible for him to describe the preparation of pills as precisely as possible though he cared not the least for technical accuracy. Here it

16. A. St. John Adock, "*O. Henry: An English View*" (Waifs and Strays, Garden City, New York, Double day, Page, 1917), pp. 196-204.

will not be out of context to quote the following lines from his story, "The Love- Philtre of Ikey Schoenstein" to show how his technical knowledge enriched his literary style. O.Henry describes: "To this day pills are made behind its tall prescription desk—pills rolled out on its own pill-tile, divided with spatula, rolled with the figure and thumb, dusted with calcined magnesia and delivered in little round pasteboard pill-boxes."¹⁷ As a literary artist it was never his objective to make a parade of his pedantry. Naturally readers should not necessarily examine how far the technical terms used in his literary product are correct. O.Henry's use of technical terms was meant for artistic effect in his stories. This is exactly what he aimed at. If this was achieved he would consider his purpose served.

Another remarkable characteristic of O. Henry's style is that many of his stories begin with preambles, sometimes lengthy ones. The preamble acts as his explanatory remarks with which he seeks to share his point of view with his readers. The preambles often seem to give a hint about the author's purpose behind a story. "Elsie in New York", "An Unfinished Story", "A Service of Love", "The Trimmed Lamp", "The Purple Dress", "Plutonian Fire", "A Night in Arabia" are some of O. Henry's well-known stories noted for preambles. For example in "The Trimmed Lamp" he does not support that the occupation of shopgirls should be treated as an adjective. In the preamble of "A Service of Love" O. Henry tends to show that the premise, "when one loves one's Art no service seems too hard" is incorrect. Similarly in many other stories O. Henry puts

17. P.J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.546.

forward some proposition or other, either to plead for or against. Thus preambles have a definite role to play in O. Henry's stories so far as his literary style is concerned.

O. Henry's narrative and descriptive commentary is terse. The characters portrayed in his stories display their dynamism and concreteness in their expressions. The lively conversations put into the mouths of characters are rich in intonations. The use of incomplete utterance as in "The Third Ingredient" is a notable aspect of his style. In the following conversation quoted from the same story O. Henry uses incomplete utterance: "Give me the onion", she said. The young man set his jaw a trifle harder. "Give me the onion", she repeated. He grinned, and laid it in her hand.¹⁸ In "The Ransom of Mack" it appears to Mack's friend from Mack's words that he (Mack) is going to get married. But Mack actually meant to say that due to non-availability of a suitable person Mack was going to perform the marriage rites himself. This is how O. Henry often plays a verbal trickery in his stories. His use of irony and metaphor is also a noteworthy feature of his style. Often he uses metaphors in his writings for the purpose of amusing his readers with unusual comparisons. In the stories like "Compliments of the Season" and "The Plutonian Fire" ironical language has been adroitly used. Nevertheless, sometimes O. Henry is serious, sentimental and emotional as in the stories like "The Duplicity of Hargraves", "Roads of Destiny" and the stories incorporated in *The Four Million* (1906) written between 1903 and

18. Ibid., p. 954.

1905. Marks of transition, vacillation and evolution are strikingly discernible in his stories particularly written immediately after his imprisonment. A pronounced note of sentimentalism is evidenced in many of his stories that describe the shop girls of New York. There is an excellent blend of comic, satiric and sentimental aspects in his writings reminding one of that in Sterne, Dickens and Gogol.

With the advent of Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner in the literary arena of America to cater to the changing tastes of the new readers O. Henry type writings tended to become rather out of fashion. To certain readers his plot constructions seemed forced. But whatever fault there might be with his style or his language he was able to make up the deficiency with his extraordinary descriptive and narrative skill. One feels amazed at his excellent musical quality, romantic touch in his description of "the little voices of the night—the owl's recitative, the capriccio of the crickets, the concerto of the frogs in the grass" in the story, "The Renaissance at Charleroi".¹⁹

He knew very well the art of handling minute details in his stories. This would not have been possible, had he not possessed the power of keen observation and an amazing descriptive skill. But for his magnificent descriptive faculty he could hardly write in the following superb style in his well-known story, "Sisters of the Golden Circle": "The scent of the flowers, the booty of the bee, the primal drip of spring waters, the overture of the lark, the twist of the

19. Ibid., p. 184.

lemon peel on the cocktail of creation—such is the bride”²⁰

There is no denying the fact that O. Henry occupies a permanent and unique position in American Literature. His use of language is skilful and often gorgeous. He is a master of character and dialogue. Even the speech of his street people is romantic, witty and humorous. Nevertheless, he is often grossly underrated as a stylist. His intention has been subjected to adverse criticism, irrespective of his great achievement. But no hasty and ill-considered dismissal of his talent can be justified. His total literary accomplishment should be taken into account for an unbiased evaluation of his talent.

20. Ibid., p. 677.