

O. HENRY: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE URBAN ROMANTICIST

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O. Henry's career is so much like one of his incredible stories that its mere recitation quickly escalates into O. Henry-like hyperbole. Born in 1862, O. Henry spent his early years in Greensboro, North Carolina. Though something of a local character, there was nothing to distinguish him from dozens of other young men with talent for satire and a gift of drawing. Like many young men seeking fortunes, he went out west to Texas. Once again, though he worked for newspapers and there was no doubt he had a genuine flair for writing humorous sketches, his life was not especially noteworthy. Then like a good O. Henry story, the plot thickened; a series of incredible but utterly logical events occurred which completely changed O. Henry's life. As a bank clerk he found himself accused of embezzlement. In a moment of weakness which he often compared to Conrad's *Lord Jim*, O. Henry fled beyond the reach of American law, to Honduras. Homesick, despairing, he returned to stand trial. The evidence of his guilt or innocence remains clouded to this day, and the truth, at this late date, is unlikely to ever be ascertained. O. Henry, however, maintained his innocence to the very end — long after it had ceased to matter. As far as the jury was concerned, O. Henry's flight to Central America was enough to convict him. He served three years in prison in Columbus, Ohio. From a commonplace life to adventure to despair, O. Henry's life was one like one of his stories, and like one of his stories it was not going to end yet. What remained would be even more incredible. Soon O. Henry turned adversity into good fortune, and it was while in prison that he seriously began to pursue the craft and art of writing of short stories. It was within those walls he achieved his first and earliest national success with magazines, though he had far to go to gain the fame that would eventually be his. Getting out of prison in 1901, O. Henry travelled to New York, where he began his illustrious and prolific career as a writer of short stories. The man who had once been a convict became a world renowned repre-

sentative of an age and a people. His name became a household word. He was sought by leading magazines. And while he did not quite live happily ever after, all the ingredients of an O. Henry story are present, and surely the master himself would have been satisfied.

Like a meteor his career flashed across the literary firmament. For the brief span of roughly a decade he wrote at a fevered, hectic pace. For instance, in one two year period he wrote more than 110 stories. Perhaps, like Schubert, he realised he had not long to live — that his work, if he were to accomplish much, had to be done quickly. And like Schubert, his work was interrupted by death. Surely he would have produced more of significance had he continued to live; nevertheless, it is doubtful that he would have produced anything of greater quality than that which he did manage to finish.

At any rate the debate is academic. He burned himself out by 1910. Nothing of any real significance appeared after his death. He had published his stories as fast as he wrote them. Like a meteor he disappeared with the same suddenness as he had appeared. He was gone. But O. Henry left behind an enduring legacy.

THE ROMANTIC LEGACY

One would not know it, of course, by reading the critical studies of the period from today's point of view. Critics tend to be rather abrupt with O. Henry because he represents a viewpoint so alien to their own. One must search long to find a lengthy evaluation. The field of O. Henry criticism is not a crowded one. For the most part, critical studies of O. Henry are, with a few rare exceptions, confined to that narrow period of time immediately following his death. After World War I, Hemingway-like fiction began to gain ascendancy, until by the 1930s the laconic, hard-boiled school of fiction had pretty much swept all competitors from the field. About the only time that O. Henry was revered as a genuine artist of towering, international stature was during the period from 1911-1918, before the American Dream was tattered by the winds of the Great War. Since then a pervasive critical silence has been the fate of O. Henry's fiction. To read modern critical studies you would think that he might not have lived at all. You might look in that time before 1918 to realize in what high esteem his colleagues held O. Henry. Despite neglect from the critical establishment, O. Henry's *Complete Works* has never gone out of print. Nearly 70 years, now, after his death, his work continues to be enthusiastically embraced by an appreciative and wide audience. Each generation continues to cherish his work.

For the legacy O. Henry left behind is in the 200-some stories he wrote. Therein O. Henry portrayed a magical kingdom by the sea. He called it, among other things, Bagdad-on-the-Subway. Others, more prosaic, simply called it New York. It was an enchanted place where any thing could happen, where beggars could become princes and poor girls, princesses. A charm lay over this fairy kingdom; it was a spell cast by the master magician O. Henry.

Whether the New York O. Henry created was real or fabricated, whether it had any bearing on the actual city, is

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ultimately irrelevant, immaterial. Like most Romanticists, O. Henry was not nearly as concerned with re-creating the world as it was, as he was in creating the world as it should be. Put differently, O. Henry's interest was in reality as he perceived it, not necessarily as it existed.

This is, of course, a common characteristic of Romanticism, and not meant to be a criticism at all. O. Henry realised that art, by its very nature, is an artifice; it is patently unreal. Furthermore, by the selectivity that is one of the hallmarks of art, art cannot possibly hope to re-create all of reality. To try to do so is futile. The most noble pursuit of art, then, is not to be a representation of what is real, but to be true to what is.

Certainly O. Henry would have never put it that way. He steadfastly refused to discuss the principles of art at all. He looked upon himself as a technician, not a theoretician, of art. And so he was. He had little time to ponder the principles of fiction. He was too busy writing stories. This reluctance to engage in intellectual discussions concerning the nature of fiction has led to some common misconceptions of O. Henry as an artist.

In some cases, the O. Henry myth itself looms larger than the one he created on paper, but it was just as surely his own creation. Like many a *persona* created by authors for themselves (Hemingway and Mailer are two obvious examples), while the myths continue to persist, such facades do not hold up under critical scrutiny. The actual facts, of O. Henry's life, regardless of what he said, do not substantiate the myth he created with which to cloak the real O. Henry.

THE MYTH OF THE HACK

One of the most common myths about O. Henry — and one he worked very hard to perpetuate — was that he was a hack, a writer who worked for nothing but money and cared very little for art. This myth has several aspects with a few of which I will deal here.

Was O. Henry really a hack? Several illustrations suggest otherwise.

For instance, O. Henry's first truly accomplished short stories were written and submitted while he was in prison. Obviously, although he did have a daughter for whose welfare he had to provide, there was not a great need for him to have money there. No, he wrote for other reasons. He was motivated by that need that compels all artists: the urge to create — an urge he would have been too embarrassed to mention.

Did he write just for money? There is a famous anecdote about O. Henry, narrated by Clarence L. Cullen, that is very illuminating in this regard:

"I was with him one afternoon when a batch of mail was brought to him. One of the envelopes caught his eye. On the envelope was printed the name of one of the leading fiction publications in all the world ... Many times during the years when he had been struggling for a foothold as a writer of short stories he had submitted his tales, including the best of them, to the editor of this publication. Always they had come back with the conventional printed slip ...

"He ripped open this envelope which attracted his eye. There was a note and a check for \$1,000. The note asked him briefly for something from his pen — anything ... cheque for which was therewith enclosed. If the thousand dollars were not deemed sufficient, the note went on, he only had to name what sum he considered fair and the additional amount would be remitted to him.

"Porter ... smiled a sort of cherubic smile as he passed the note over to me. When I had finished reading it, without comment, he, saying never a word, addressed an envelope, stamped the envelope and went out into the hall and deposited it in the drop. Not a word passed between us about the offer."

Now here was a man who chronically, desperately needed money turning down a cheque for a thousand dollars. Further, remember that a thousand dollars loomed *much* larger in those days; many people didn't earn that much in a *year*. And as if that were not enough, the letter contains a *carte blanche* for as much more as he wants. Whatever you might think of O. Henry's reason for turning down the money, the fact remains that it is hardly the picture of a man interested merely in earning as much money as possible and not concerned with art!

A few words, incidentally, should be mentioned about the \$100 a week O. Henry received from the *New York World* for a short story a week. Today, even at debased rates, that seems like a lot of money. How many of us would like to receive that kind of money for our fiction!? Think what a marvelous living that would have provided in 1905. But that was not an especially noteworthy amount in those days. Remember, that this was the hey-day of short stories. Newspapers fought circulation battles with their short story writers. Dozens of magazines devoted exclusively to short fiction appeared every month. The market was insatiable. Consequently, it wasn't at all unusual for a well known writer like for instance, Richard Harding Davis to receive \$1,000 for a single short story in, say, *Saturday Evening Post*. So O. Henry was neither the best nor the worst paid writer of short stories in his day. He was somewhere in the quite comfortable middle.

THE ISSUE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

A *propos* to the conception of O. Henry as a hack is the idea that stories flowed, literally poured out of him without a thought. The image of the financially-pressed hack churning out work for so-many cents a word comes readily to mind. But once again, it is not an accurate picture.

No doubt O. Henry was prolific, but that was the result of hard work. While it is true that there are traces in O. Henry's short stories of roughness, that could have done with some re-touching, had he had the time to do a proper amount of revision; on the whole he gave a great deal of thought to anything he committed to paper. There are numerous descriptions by editors eagerly awaiting copy, literally standing beside O. Henry as he wrote and snatching the completed pages. One and all, they described him as a man not casual with words, but one who wrung each phrase, paragraph and page from his very soul with all the agony and sweat of any artist. Words were torn out of him with a groan.

Once he had committed a word, phrase, or story to paper, though, it was finished as far as O. Henry was concerned. As far as we know he never went back and revised a story prior to publication, for example. Once finished, a story held little further interest for him. He was probably too busy looking ahead to what he was going to write to be bothered by what was already done.

It is true, as I said earlier, that some of his stories would have benefited from some minor revision. (On the other hand, most of the criticism tends to be more petty than significant — the one about Della's change in *The Gift of The Magi* being one that is repeated *ad nauseam* by smirking 'teachers' of literature.) The fact that circumstances did not allow him to revise sufficiently is unfortunate, for given enough time, O. Henry was a consummate craftsman. The stories he wrote and submitted in prison bear ample evidence of this. They display a polish, control and craftsmanship of a very high caliber, indeed. With the stories he wrote in prison, of course, he was not pressed to complete a work. He could revise it until he was satisfied. As a result, the prison stories (scattered throughout several collections) are among the most artistically satisfying of any he wrote. Certainly they are among the most favoured by readers. True, since he was usually under financial pressure, he did not revise as much as he should have, but he *did* set down each word with infinite care — which surely must be one of the hallmarks of a genuine artist.

FORM AND CONTENT

One further point should be made regarding O. Henry's seemingly lackadaisical attitude towards form, the occasional roughness. O. Henry was a Romanticist, and it was part of the Romantic aesthetic that emphasized content over form. It was not at all uncommon. If what one had to say sprawled at times over strict boundaries of form, so what? The same criticism can be made of virtually every great Romantic artist. There are times when content plays a more important part in a story than form, and even though the critics might not appreciate it, the general public was little disturbed by O. Henry's minor lapses.

O. Henry's attitude towards buying plots provides another striking rebuttal to the claim that he was a hack. In the early part of the century buying plots from unknowns, which more famous writers then fleshed out into stories, was a common practice. The very best of writers did it - Jack London, for one. But for O. Henry this would never work, and he grew downright indignant at the mere suggestion. "Don't you know better", he would say "than to offer me a plot?" It was O. Henry's artistic integrity peeping through. His material came from within or it did not come at all. He could no more manufacture a story than a rock could.

The evidence, I think, is incontestable. Indeed, O. Henry was — as much as he disliked admitting it — a genuine artist.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

I have dwelt upon this point for two reasons. First, I think the hack image has done much damage to O. Henry's standing in the eyes of the critics. I think he needs to be drastically reappraised. But also, I find it in-

triguing to speculate about the roots of O. Henry's compulsion to present to the world the image of the hack — an image that was patently false. It is, I believe, more than idle speculation, for I suspect the reasons for O. Henry's obsession strike at the very core of his psychology.

The answer to why O. Henry insisted upon the image of a hack for himself is a complex one.

First, O. Henry was uncomfortable with intellectuals and in intellectual discussion, and by taking willingly the threadbare mantle of hack upon his shoulders, O. Henry could avoid being taken seriously, having to defend himself in an arena he was not accustomed to.

Another reason for O. Henry's hiding behind the hack image was his deep sensitivity. O. Henry was mortified by what he regarded as his dark past: his years in prison. Plagued by the shame of those years, he was obsessed with keeping them a secret. Only a very few of his closest associates knew of his prison record. That very pain he undoubtedly felt became one of his greatest assets as he projected it through his fiction. He often poked good natured fun at human follies, but there was no malice in his humor. An irony pervades his work, it is true; but it is a gentle irony born out of affection, out of love for the human race. His humor is that of love; it is not corrosive. O. Henry's hypersensitive nature used the appellation hack as a shield. In that way he managed to avoid the worst, the sharpest criticism dealt to artists.

By the way, it is interesting to note that it is more than merely coincidental that just as O. Henry kept his past hidden or secret, so too his stories often revolve around a secret of some kind, a bit of information kept secret to the end, a hidden identity. And is not the essence of the hidden past contained in the surprise ending?

THE SPIRIT OF AMERICA

Essentially, what O. Henry left us in his stories is the imprint of his magnificent spirit. O. Henry was an American Innocent, and as an innocent, he had a difficult time conceiving evil. Rarely is there ever an actively malevolent presence in any of O. Henry's stories; rarely, too, is there ever a villain. The few he did create were not his most convincing characters. Generally (although there are some notable exceptions), conflict revolves around the overcoming of circumstance.

His was essentially the innocence of a bygone age of America — so very difficult to comprehend today. Crime, devastating wars, a feeling of impotence grips our country, and a helpless rage permeates much of our modern art, expressing profound (though not necessarily fatal) ills. But O. Henry's fiction is a reminder that it was not always like that. There was a time when we were optimistic, when we felt capable of grappling with life and its problems, when we were confident. Although O. Henry's time is only 70 years ago, in a social and moral sense — and aesthetic sense for that matter — it seems like ages ago. O. Henry and his fiction is a personification of that age of innocence, age of optimism. His stories are an expression of our strong faith in the American Dream before it became a nightmare.

The American Dream was the beckoning vision of many an immigrant, the hope of the poor in the early part of the century, and O. Henry, with it firmly rooted in his psychological make-up, used it as a basis for much of his fiction - indeed, of his very life. Was he not ample evidence that the maxim was true, that the American Dream was real and vital?

What was this American Dream? It was nebulous, true, but simply put: if one lived a virtuous, moral life, worked hard, and did not lose confidence in the future, one would receive one's just reward. Somehow, regardless of how dark things looked sometimes, everything would work out for the best. Justice would prevail and injustice be thwarted. Fate or circumstance, which was O. Henry's chief antagonist, might indeed separate lovers, but if the lovers remained faithful (and that was the key), then fate, through coincidence, would reunite them again.

Life was not so much evil as it was merely blind. So those looking to struggle their way out of grinding poverty, those filling this Bagdad-on-the-Subway, looked upon life, not as a travail of misery, but as a road of hope. The eternal American optimist thought that, in the end, if one persevered with integrity intact (and even the con men of O. Henry have their own brand of integrity), if one were constant then one would emerge victorious eventually. Not that the life did not have its share of tears and sorrow, it certainly did. But that was not the essence of life. It was joy, happiness and success.

THE ROMANTIC ETHOS AND THE CITY

One of O. Henry's most remarkable achievements was his successful blending of Romanticism and the modern, industrial, urban city. He showed that they are not incompatible. Although not exclusively, perhaps (elements of Victor Hugo's works come to mind), for the most part Romanticists tended to focus either on the past for their inspiration, as did Poe and Hawthorne, or on remote places, as did Harte and Melville. But O. Henry brought Romanticism squarely into the 20th century. The fabric of modern life - automobiles, industry, commercialism — form the fabric of his fiction. He thrust this seemingly fragile and delicate school of art into the hustle and bustle, the shoving and pushing of the big city, into the squalor of the tenements, the dingy apartments of shop girls, into the meanness of urban life; and low and behold, Romanticism not only survived but it prospered!

For besides the negative aspects, the city also represented much of what was positive about American life: the excitement and endless variety of urban living - which was in itself, indicative of a crucial element of O. Henry's thinking.

Central to O. Henry's conception of life is the question, "What's around the corner?" This is of course a child's question. It was an American style of thinking at the turn of the century. It was O. Henry's way of looking at life. For O. Henry, perhaps our most childlike of writers, the future represented, as it did for millions of Americans, a challenge. It was unknown, and for precisely that reason it was magical, brimming with excitement, with the unexpected, with surprises around every corner. This was, re-

member, the country where supposedly anything could happen — where a beggar could become a millionaire over night, where a shop girl could fall in love and marry a wealthy young gentleman before one could say "I do". This was the Land of Opportunity, and Americans had great faith in that ideal. Social mobility was easily attained; wealth, fame could be achieved by anybody with the talent, ability, and perseverance.

If New York was a favoured locale for O. Henry, it certainly could not lay exclusive claim to his glowing vision. Many of his stories focus on other areas as well — Texas and the West, Central America, the South, the Midwest. As O. Henry makes clear in his short story *A Municipal Report*, "it is a rash one who will lay his finger on the map and say: 'In this town there can be no romance — what could happen here?'" And he proceeds to build a marvelous, Romantic story in Nashville. Corners are everywhere, O. Henry reminds us. Romance is everywhere — New Orleans, Central America, Wyoming, Texas, Nashville, as well as New York. For O. Henry realized that romance is not inherent anywhere. Rather, it is within ourselves. It is our spirit that is Romantic or not. It is how we view life, which determines Romance: not the life itself. The one peeping around the next corner — he is the true Romanticist.

In *The Roads We Take*, one of the characters speculates, "I've often wondered if I wouldn't have turned out different if I'd took the other road." to which his companion replies, "Oh, I reckon you'd have ended up about the same" cheerfully philosophical, as O. Henry puts it, "It ain't the roads we take it's what's inside us that makes us turn out the way we do." Perhaps that is not quite the way Shakespeare would put it, but the sentiment expressed is remarkably similar to Brutus's observation that the fault is not in the stars but in ourselves.

The surprise ending itself is, in fact, a manifestation of that "Guess what's around the corner?" attitude. The sheer ingenuity of O. Henry's imagination is astonishing, not only within each given story, but also the immense variety of his work. There is, about his fiction, a sense of gaiety and lightness, comparable to a Viennese waltz. In such a world nothing is truly evil, not when such benevolence exists.

Like champagne, O. Henry's short stories should not be gulped, rather they should be sipped, sampled, and savored for their delightful, evanescent quality.

Will O. Henry live? The question is foregone now. He does. And he will continue to as long as there are lovers separated by chance and reunited by circumstance, as long as there are fortunes to be won and lost, as long as the human heart can delight in its own follies, as long as humankind can laugh.

Nevertheless, much work remains to be done to restore O. Henry to a more fitting place in American literature. Much remains to be done before we truly understand this master. As C. Alphonso Smith, one of O. Henry's earliest biographers points out in his book, the real biography of O. Henry remains to be written, the biography of his mind.