*Bloom’s Major Short Story Writers*

*O. Henry*

*Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*

Edited and With an Introduction By Harold Bloom

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**“Introduction”**

by Harold Bloom

William Sydney Porter is a central figure in American popular literature. He has a huge, permanent audience, and is all but identified with the short story as a genre, though he cannot be considered one of its inventors, or indeed one of its crucial innovators. His comic gifts are considerable though limited, and his careful naturalism is almost always shadowed by that of his precursor, Frank Norris. What matters most about O. Henry is the audience he has maintained for a century: ordinary readers who find themselves in his stories, not more truly and more strange, but rather as they were and are.

O. Henry's most famous tale, "The Gift of the Magi," always survives its palpable sentimentalities. The author, lovingly interested in characters founded upon his wife and himself, presents them with delicacy and compassion. Love, Dr. Samuel Johnson observed, was the wisdom of fools and the folly of the wise. That would be an admirable critical perception of Shakespeare's King Lear but is too grand and fierce for the gentle "Gift of the Magi," where at the story’s close the foolishness of love pragmatically manifests itself as a wisdom.

A more complete vision is manifested in "A Municipal Report," one of O. Henry's most complex stories: humorous, paradoxical, even a touch Borgesian in the personality of Azalea Adair, a survival of the Old South. Though the author attempts a dispassionate stance, he clearly is glad, as we are, when Azalea Adair's exploiter, the dreadful Major Wentworth Caswell, is discovered dead on a dark street:

The gentle citizens who had known him stood about and searched their vocabularies to find some good words, if it were possible, to speak of him. One kind ­ looking man said, after much thought: 'When "Cas" was about fo'teen he was one of the best spellers in school.'

"The Furnished Room," very late O. Henry, may be the darkest of all his stories. Coincidence, almost invariably overworked by the author, becomes something like a fatality here. The double suicide of lovers is made plausible by all the fetid atmosphere of the rooming­house, in which both lovers have died, or will die:

It seemed to have become vegetable, to have degenerated in that rank, sunless air to lush lichen or spreading moss that grew in patches to the staircase and was viscid under the foot like organic matter.

This stands between the luxuriant rankness of Tennyson's *Maud* and certain Tennysonian effects in early T.S. Eliot and in Faulkner. A populist in his art, O. Henry had a repressed Symbolist poet in his spirit, and this ghostly presence helps to temper the too­evident surprises of his work.

**Critical Views on "The Gift of the Magi”**

**“O. Henry's Conclusions**”

by Hyder E. Rollins [Hyder E. Rollins (1889 – 1958) was a professor at Harvard University and a contributor to many scholarly journals and research projects. He provided assistance to E. Hudson Long for his biography on O. Henry, entitled *O. Henry: The Man and His Work*. In this excerpt, Rollins discusses the "double ­ surprise" ending found in "The Gift of the Magi," claiming that O. Henry's continued use of this type of ending "grows tiresome."]

His conclusions—they are O. Henry's and no one else's. Children play "crack­the­whip," not for the fun of the long preliminary run, but for the excitement of the final sharp twist that throws them off their feet. So adults read O. Henry, impatiently wincing at the swiftly moving details in pleased expectancy of a surprising ending. The conclusion is an enigma: the author has your nerves all a­quiver until the last sentence. There are few explanations, the surprise comes quickly, and the story is finished. O. Henry is as much a master of the unexpected ending as Frank Stockton was of the insolvable ending, and one must admire his skill. For although these endings are unexpected, the author never makes any statement in the body that can be held against him. On the contrary, the body is a careful preparation for the dénouement, even if the most searching reader can seldom detect it. This is true even of the very poor story "Girl," in which O. Henry deliberately entraps the reader into believing that Hartley is imploring Vivienne to become his wife, when in reality, as we discover at the end of the story, he is imploring her to become his wife's cook. A few more stories like "Girl" would have ruined O. Henry's reputation. In "Thimble, Thimble" and several other stories he has adopted the conclusion made famous by ''The Lady or the Tiger?" In all the others, the unexpected dénouement occurs, and in many of them are two distinct surprises that will shock the most phlegmatic reader to laughter. The most popular of the double­surprise stories is "The Gift of the Magi." But the continued use of the unexpected ending grows tiresome, and when one sits down and reads all or the greater part of the two hundred and forty­eight short stories, he feels that the biggest surprise O. Henry could have given him would have been a natural, expected ending. But it should be added that his surprise endings have none of the brutal cynicism which distinguishes de Maupassant's "Necklace" and Mérimée’s "Mateo Falcone"; his endings, on the other hand, are genuinely humorous, genuinely sympathetic, and genuinely human.

— Hyder E. Rollins, "O. Henry," in *Sewanee Review* 22 (1914): pp. 225 – 26

**“Writers from Twain to James”**

by Willis Wager [Willis Wager has been a professor at New York University, Boston University, and King College in Bristol Tennessee. His publications include American Literature: A World View and From the hand of Man: A History of the Arts. In this excerpt, Wager comments on O. Henry's style of writing, seen in its essence in "The Gift of the Magi."]

A special development of the southern or southwestern oral tale or local color story, grafted onto traditions deriving from Irving and Poe, is the work of William Sydney Porter ("O. Henry"), born in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1862. At the age of twenty, he went to Texas, became a bank teller, and conducted a humorous weekly, *The Rolling Stone*. Sentenced to five years in an Ohio federal penitentiary for embezzlement, he wrote more than a dozen stories that appeared in national magazines; and after his release in 1901 until his death in 1910 he lived in New York City, writing under his pseudonym some three hundred stories, ultimately collected and brought out in thirteen volumes, of which the earliest are *Cabbages and Kings* (1904) and *The Four Million* (1906). About half of his stories deal with incidents in New York, and practically all of them avoid disturbingly problematical aspects of human experience. He did not appreciate his admirers' calling him the "American Maupassant," for he said he had never tried to write anything dirty.

During the first quarter of the present century his popularity skyrocketed: by 1920 nearly five million copies of his books had been sold in the United States, and deluxe editions of his complete works were being issued and eagerly bought. An annual volume of the best current short fiction has been named in his honor, the "O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories"; and many of his works have been adapted for stage, movies, radio, and TV (where the "O. Henry Television Playhouse" had a long run). The French particularly have prized O. Henry's stories for their compactness, "exactness of measures and proportions" (as Raoul Narcy has phrased it), and avoidance of heavy-handed moralizing. Despite their complete innocence of Marxism, they have reached a wide audience in Russia, where stories with the "O. Henry twist" were being as assiduously cultivated by short story writers as, at the same time, in America were stories in the Chekhov manner. Between 1940 and 1955, reprinting rights were granted in twenty different countries. Enthusiasts for O. Henry have pointed out that his contribution—like Poe's—concerns technique as well as content, and that the trick ending, the informal tone, and the calculated use of telling phrases constitutes an "O. Henry style.''

—Willis Wager, *American Literature: A World View* (New York: New York University Press, 1968): pp. 164–65.

**“The American Short Story”**

by Philip Stevnick [Philip Stevnick became a full professor at Temple University in 1967. His publications include Alternative Pleasures: Post Realist Fiction and the Tradition. He was also the editor for the publication Anti ­ Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction. In this excerpt, Stevnick talks of the "antireal" notion of plot, noting "The Gift of the Magi" specifically.]

For another viewpoint, there is Leo Marx's brilliant *The Machine in the Garden*, which traces the permutations, through the nineteenth century, of the tension between a bucolic, idyllic, pastoral ideal and the intrusion of the culture of the machine, variously embraced and deplored. It is a tension by no means resolved by the twentieth century, and it suggests the dialectical pattern I have been attempting to describe. Short fiction had had, for a hundred years, a special affinity for the portrayal of a place that is at once the landscape of the mind and the landscape of fact. But in that body of fiction I have sought to portray as counterrealistic, the idyllic is embraced, with sentiment and without reservation. And in that body of fiction we call realistic, the bucolic place is understood, perhaps even loved — frontier farm, wilderness, midwestern town — but not embraced, because no one, writing realistically in the twentieth century, can imagine the happy village, circumscribed, devoid of railroad tracks, factories, and the intrusion of an often meretricious technology.

But finally to return to literary conventions, it is plot, more than anything else, that came to seem antireal. Anderson says it best, and once he has said it and acted upon it, it does not need to be said again, even though there is no writer of significance after him who does not feel it. No segment of life can be said to begin, or end, or resolve itself. Life does not contain plots.

The history of short fiction in the first half of the century can be traced, as I have suggested, as a revolt against certain prohibitions and vacuous values; but most of all, it can be traced as a revolt against plot. For the writer seeking to be a realist, the primary imperative, for fifty years, was to avoid making a story look like Maupassant's "The Necklace" or O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." For plot, more than anything else, was antireal. It should be said, of course, that we have come to understand plot in a more fluid and comprehensive way, and those stories that must have seemed devoid of plot when they appeared — Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" for example — seem now to be flawlessly plotted in an unobtrusive and subtle way. Still, it is easy enough to understand what the early writers of the century mean by plot. It is linear and overt, with a crisp beginning, middle, and end, and we recognize the end because it contains an element of surprise.

— Philip Stevnick, *The American Short Story 1900 – 1945: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984): pp. 14 –.

“**On O. Henry's Plot Patterns”**

By Karen Charmaine Blansfield [Karen Charmaine Blansfield did an intensive study of the formula contained in O. Henry's stories, which she published in her book entitled *Cheap Rooms and Restless Hearts*. In this excerpt, Blansfield categorizes the plot pattern found in "The Gift of the Magi."]

The plot pattern which Porter employs most frequently, and the one most discussed and referred to by critics, is what can be called the cross pattern. This pattern is characterized by certain specific elements, but because of variations in these elements, it will be further divided into three sub-patterns: cross-purposes, crossed-paths, and cross-identity.

In the cross pattern, the surprise ending occurs at the point where two paths travelled by characters in the story intersect, seemingly unexpectedly; however, closer examination reveals that usually this crossing was on the map all along, though so small and remote as to be easily overlooked. This intersection is the significant element in the cross formula, and Porter maneuvers his characters toward it via three separate routes.

The first route is the widely known and discussed pattern of cross-purposes. Here a central problem which induces the entire action of the plot presents itself at the outset. Generally the dilemma is financial, demanding action by one or both of the characters involved, who are united at the story's opening, split to pursue independent paths, and reunite at the close. The core of the plot is this: two characters are simultaneously working to solve some problem, each one unaware of the other's efforts; however, when they unite at the end and discover one another's strategies, it turns out that one individual's actions have in some way affected the other's, with the result usually being that both actions are cancelled out so that the characters have unwittingly been working against, or at cross-purposes to, one another. There are exceptions, though, and the outcome isn't necessarily futile, for the irony of the situation can serve to reinforce the relationship between the two characters.

The story which most vividly illustrates this pattern is also the most well-known of all Porter's tales, "The Gift of the Magi," which James Douglas considers "perhaps the finest tabloid story in literature." Set in an eight-dollar-a-week New York City furnished flat on Christmas Eve day, the story centers around an impoverished young couple surviving on little more than love. Each of these "children," as Porter calls them, has one prize possession which both cherish: Della's long, lustrous hair, and Jim's heirloom gold watch. At the opening, Della is lamenting the insufficiency of the $1.87 she has managed to scrape together for Jim's Christmas present. Struck by sudden inspiration, she rushes out and sells her hair for $20; with the money, she buys Jim a handsome watch fob, then returns home to nervously await his arrival. When he comes and beholds Della's close-cropped curls, he reacts with a kind of shock, the result, one would assume, of his wife's transformation. But the real reason for his astonishment soon becomes apparent; he has bought Della the set of beautiful combs which she had for so long admired in a Broadway window. Della, eagerly insisting that her hair will soon grow back, then presents him with the watch chain, whereupon Jim informs her that he has sold the watch in order to buy the combs.

— Karen Charmaine Blansfield, *Cheap Rooms and Restless Hearts: A Study of Formula in the Urban Tales of William Sydney Porter* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1988): pp. 39 ­40.