



# “Smile with Tears”—— An Interpretation of O. Henry’s Short Stories

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**Abstract:** As one of the greatest short-story novelists in the world, O. Henry is a critical realistic author, also one of the world’s three major short masters, together with Chekov and Maupassant. His writing style is appreciated by numerous readers, especially for the twist plot and the surprising ending with the feature of “smile with tears”. In language, O. Henry uses many rhetoric tactics to achieve the effect of making the stories more vivid and humorous, such as exaggeration, metaphor, and simile and so on. His writing materials are from his own life experiences, that each story is a reflection of the society then, and he always sympathizes with the poor, criticizes and satirizes the capitalists even the common insignificant who have the valuable humanity. Through the analysis of O. Henry’s representative novels, it has expounded the humanistic spirit and optimistic expectation of human kindness contained in his works, which also shows love and kindness are the ultimate belief and the eternal chapter praised by all human beings. Therefore, it has become a major stylistic feature of O. Henry’s novels to show the characters’ psychology by depicting the emotional motivation, which is also the main line and key to our analysis of his works. Moreover, his unique writing styles influence following authors in the field of literature, therefore, his story is known as the “encyclopedia of American life”.

**Keywords:** O. Henry, Short Stories, Writing Skills

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## 1. Introduction

O. Henry is one of the most popular and widely known American short-story writers in the twentieth century, whose works are full of humorous literary language and unique writing styles. His works have reflected his own attitude on the natural, social contradictions, he writes birdie, ancient villages, praises rangers, chanting “a boy sing lullaby” through gloomy tone, criticizing the social phenomenon which seems not reasonable, but has little effect, because a little of numbers and achievements. In contrast, many of his correspondences are wonderful essays, he has discussed about life, creativity with editor, expression of the author’s attitude toward life and creative thinking. O. Henry’s representative works are *The Gift of the Magi*, *Cop and the Anthem* and *The Last Leaf*, besides, his famous novel *The Man Higher Up*, *A Municipal Report*, *The Furnished Room*, *A Double-dyed Deceiver* and so on, true and accurate description of details, vivid and concise language make a series of vivid artistic images appear in front of the readers, he plays an important role in the history of the

World Short Stories. Some people have likened him to Maupassant, this is justified. His novels depicted the society of America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and honored as the “humorous encyclopedia of American life”. Since 1918, the “O. Henry Memorial Award” had been established to be given annually to the best magazine stories, the winner and leading contenders’ works would be published in an annual volume.

Refer to one of the most typical features in traditions of Americans, humor plays an essential part in the writing styles, such as from Washington Irving, many writers are good at writing those lovely, funny and meaningful stories. Owens’ humor is well-intentioned, contains a touch of irony, while Mark twain’s humor is full of slang, funny, playful description and exaggerate images, revealing the truth of American life and society. Obviously, O. Henry has inherited this humor tradition, affected by the writers at that time, plus the ups and downs of life experience. Therefore, his humor in writing is quite different, for his works are full of bitter laughter in hyperbole, sarcasm, funny, and witty. Witty humor also contains a desolate mood of depression. For example, *The Gift*

of the *Magi* makes people laugh, *The Cop and the Anthem* makes people full of sad bitterness. The "smile with tears" deepens the social significance of the work, and has a long artistic charm. Description of the ordinary people is the most impressive of O. Henry's short stories, which contains a deep humanitarian spirit. His long life at the bottom of society, deeply understand the hardships of life of the lower classes, but also feel how ruthless the laws made by the ruling class to the poor. Therefore, he put his unlimited sympathy on the poor side. In his works, the poor have a pure and beautiful soul, character of kindness, a sincere and deep love. But they have rocky fates, weak pathetic, helpless, hungeriness, and the body without shelter, often ruthless abandon by the society. This unfairness form a distinctive contrast with the prosperity of the society at that time, it is particularly glaring, which implied the author's angry. O. Henry brings a new breath to the American short stories, and his works become famous for a long time and have world influence. The most important feature about the handling of art in his novels is that the works always have an "unexpected ending". The development of plot seems clearly moving in one direction, but the result is a surprise. This unexpected outcome generally reassuring, though it seems the sad ending, often includes some kind of light, which is called "smile with tears". Humor is a characteristic in O. Henry's works, whose language is full of exaggeration and humor, and humorous plays a role to weaken the tragic things in the novel, which can make the readers easier to accept.

## 2. O. Henry and His Literary Achievements

### 2.1. Life of O. Henry

O. Henry is the pseudonym of American writer William Sydney Porter, whose clever use of twist endings in his stories popularized the term "O. Henry's ending" [1]. William Sydney Porter was born in 1862 on a plantation "Worth Place" in Greensboro, North Carolina. His father, Algernon Sidney Porter, was a doctor, his mother died when he was three, then he was raised by his paternal grandmother and aunt. William is fond of reading, but at the age of fifteen he was forced to leave school, and then worked in a drug store. He moved to Houston, where he had large number of jobs, including draftsmen, cashier and pharmacist. After moving to Austin, Texas, in 1882, he married. In 1884 he started a humorous weekly *The Rolling Stone*. When the weekly failed, he joined the Houston Post as a reporter and columnist. In 1897 he was convicted of embezzling money, although there has been much debate over his actual guilt. In 1898 he entered a penitentiary at Columbus, Ohio. While in prison, O. Henry started to write short stories to earn money to support his daughter Margaret. His first work, *Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking* (1899), appeared in McClure's Magazine. After doing three years of the five years sentence, Porter emerged from the prison in 1901 and changed his name to O. Henry. After he moved to New York in 1902, he wrote a story for the *New York World* from December 1903

to January 1906, and also publishing in other magazines. Henry's first collection, *Cabbages and Kings* appeared in 1904. The second, *The Four Million* (1906), was published two years later and included his well-known stories *The Gift of the Magi* and *The Furnished Room*. *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907) included *The Last Leaf*. O. Henry's best known work is perhaps the much anthologized *The Ransom of Red Chief*, included in the collection *Whirligigs* (1910). *The Heart of The West* (1907) presented tales of the Texas range. He published 10 collections and over 600 short stories during his lifetime, for his last year, he was shadowed by alcoholism, ill healthy and financial problems, finally, he died of cirrhosis of the liver in New York.

### 2.2. His Literary Achievements

O. Henry's short stories of the creation over 300 articles, placed the collection of *Cabbage and King* (1904), *Four million* (1906), *Heart of the West* (1907), *City Sound* (1908), *The Rolling Stones* (1913), which is the most famous works to depict the life of the people of New York in Manhattan. He renders the atmosphere of streets, small restaurants, old apartments true to life, therefore, people called him the "poet of laurel of Manhattan" [2]. Moreover, he attempts to show that there are a lot of people who are the advanced liar, successful liar in high society, his observation and analysis of social life are profound, which he often through thick and thin with the people who frustrated in life on showing their complex feelings in genius artistic techniques. The ideas of his works are very fresh, language is humor, and the ending is often a surprising outcome, because of the description of the many characters, full of interests in life, known as the "humorous encyclopedia of American life". Therefore, his best famous short stories such as *A Service of Love*, *The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Furnished Room*, *The Gift of the Magi*, *The Last Leaf*, which can be included in the excellent short stories of the world. Besides these above, the works also including *Girl, Next To Reading Matter*, *What You Want*, *An Adjustment of Nature*, *After Twenty Years*, *An Afternoon Miracle*, *Best-Seller*, *The Caballero's Way*, *Mammon and the Archer*, *The Man Higher Up*, *A Municipal Report* and so on, which all bring us too much spiritual wealth. Through his works, we learn that his writing skills are very ingenious, his works are always full of surprise, and use many clever skills, which deeply attracted readers. Just because of this, he owns an important position in the literary world. So many years have passed, but we still remember him. I'm sure he'll be remembered forever, his articles give us too much aftertaste, so his works always obtain different praise.

## 3. Writing Skills in O. Henry's Works

O. Henry's writing skills mainly consist of two aspects, which is consisted in structural characteristics and linguistic features. Structural characteristics make the writing full of surprise and suspense, while adding to the atmosphere to the whole work and deeply attracted the readers. Linguistic features make the works filled with humor, but with irony.

Through these two sides, we can fully enjoy the art of the color of works, and understanding the theme of works better.

### 3.1. Surprising Ending

Generally speaking, the end of O. Henry's style of his works which has artistic "thought-provoking" reflected in his articles. The end of the O. Henry's style is suddenly let the character's psychological situations make unexpected changes, or make the hero's fate suddenly reversed, with unexpected results, but reasonable, accord with the reality of life, resulting in a unique artistic charm. He created three hundred short stories and a novel in his life totally, taking his novel *The Cop and the Anthem* as an example to analyze this writing feature. Looking at the full text, Soapy become as a troublemaker so that they can go to jail to survive, but he is always unlucky. When the Soapy influenced by anthems, want to away from crime, the police put him in prison with "Groundless". Every people think Soapy will have a safely lifetime, but the police appear and bring him to the court. This is a typical about the end of O. Henry's style, as if the people, who see the dawn but suddenly fall into the dark, make the readers' heart tremble unexpectedly, memorable, thought-provoking and lasting. O. Henry makes good use of this method, and to take this way to reflection the reality which can't distinguish the good and evil. The artistic effect of "the end of O. Henry's style" [3] is not only necessarily to appear at the end of the novel but also appear in the plot of the whole story. For example, the two plots in *The Cop and the Anthem*, once, Soapy want to dalliance a woman to achieve the purpose to go to the jail, but this seemingly gentle and refined woman in turn hooked up Soapy. On another occasion, Soapy take the umbrella of a "well-dressed" customer, but the umbrella is of questionable origin. "Simple and quite pleasing" woman, "well-dressed" customer give a dignified sense to people, but are the unlicensed prostitute and thief. The so-called noble members of the high society are well-dressed, elegant and noble? The truth is, they just hidden the despicable acts in the beautiful veil. It is because they have dirty inner, so they need to decorate the surface. Thus the duplicity is reasonable. The end of O. Henry's style profoundly expose the steadily deteriorate of the capitalist society.

The artistic effect of "The end of O. Henry's style" also interpreted penetrating in his another famous article *The Gift of the Magi*. Della and Jim, a couple deeply in love, the wife has sold her hair, the husband sold his golden watch in order to buy a bracelet of watch and a beautiful comb as each other's Christmas gifts. The love gives off the dazzling radiance when they take out their gifts, which makes the readers moving. The end of the article has got the description of "they unwisely sacrifice their greatest treasures for each other" [4]. However, let me say the last word to the wise man today, in which all who give gifts and receive gifts, the two of them is the most intelligent. No matter where they are, they can call the most intelligent people. Only a few of simple words but can points the true meaning of artistic effect of "the end of O. Henry's style", and guide the reader to think about the space out of the articles so as to draw the reader's own meaning of life.

### 3.2. Suspense

About the choice of narrative perspective, O. Henry is quite artistic ingenuity. One of his representative works, *The Last Leaf* has told the story about that an old painter save the life of a young female painter. Female painter, Johns, unfortunately suffer from pneumonia, poverty and ill health, she counts the leaves out of the windows to calculate his life, but poor painter, Behrman, laugh at her because of this "ridiculous behavior", and say he want to draw "a masterpiece". These two things form the knot of the plot, the writer do not split narrative, but keep in step with Johns to detailed write about the process of her psychological changes [5]. As for how Behrman's masterpiece is completed, we can know the result at the end of the novel. Obviously, Behrman is a man who embodies writer's aesthetic ideal, he completes a masterpiece with his own life to save the life of Johns. The writer does not narrate his behavior deliberately through positive portrayals, but rendering from the another side. This narrative perspective seems seeking care at the end, but in fact, contains the writer's artistic ingenuity. When O. Henry calmly sculptures the characters in his works, he always in general light, even in dim light, once get to success, he would publicize them, so that they looks brilliance and very lovely. Short stories' artistic design relies on the writer's rich imagination and association, while putting the pictures of life together we may learn the author's thoughts and feelings. This is the just cleverness of O. Henry to make the design.

For another example to analyze, *A finished story* can be clearly divided into three parts, which are the beginning, body and ending part. The beginning is a fantastic dreamland on the description of the plot for the narrator "I" am dragged by an angle to accept the end of the trial and see a group of "Ghosts" who are in good situation are trialed in there. The story is narrated the pure woman who earns only six dollars in one week, however she is forced into the quagmire of corruption due to the hardship and loneliness. The end back to the beginning of the dream, the angel ask me whether I am the one of them, I hurriedly swear that I am not one of them, and say my sin does not so heavy, I just set fire to the orphanage, and murder 10 blind people in order to get little money. Actually, the novel is less than ten pages, but the body part account for four-fifths, the beginning and the ending account for one-fifth. The beginning and the ending greatly enriched the body, make the ideological level get to a new state, directed at exploitation of capitalists, it is not only a necessary complement to the main text, but also reveals the key theme of the article. Without the imagination, the writer's thought will be ignited difficultly. Without the beginning and ending, the story of women workers will lose its color. It can be considered as the art of conception in this short story is showed by the unique design of the basic structure. Writer has used a large number of imaginations, associate reality with dream, so that the article can get the surprising effect, and create a new style with some kind of magic effect of art. The above has mainly analyzed the art conception of short stories in several major respects, which interpreting the general situation of his

creation briefly. Therefore, most of his works often make people in a special atmosphere of suspense, but also can make people feel spectacular. But how this wonderful artistic effect generated, we can say the secret of the artistic conception of O. Henry's short story is that the author's clever to use the suspense, coincidence, reversal and other means of artistic expression.

*The Gift of the Magi*, as one of his representative works, create suspense and relieve suspense emerging repeatedly. At the beginning of the novel, the author writes that "she could only take eighty-seven cent to buy a gift for Jim" [6], however, she wants to buy an exquisite, rare and valuable gift. In this way, at the beginning of article, writer take us into a psychological realm in a hurry, which makes us want to know the result of the plot, with the development of the plot, our interest does not recession, but become stronger. He seizes the opportunity to explore and create new suspense; the release of old suspense and the emergence of new suspense also constitute a causal relationship. For example, the plot of de la sell her hair, and purchase a bracelet, just release the two suspense above, but also become the reason of next suspense's germination. Why De la combs her beautiful hair with tears? What gift she wants to give her husband? We can find the answer later. However, what attitude Jim has? A new suspense came into our mind. O. Henry creates suspense at the conceptual level to make a normal event bewildering in the process of explore the fate of the characters and the outcome of the event. O. Henry always takes a magic towel using in his article skillfully, to the heroes, the writer always generous, let them know the truth through the magic towel, but to readers, he shows his meanness from the title to character's language, action. In the key plot, readers always do not know how the novels will develop. At the same time, it can make the plot and picture seems simple and focused, and can enhance the writing techniques, so that increase the charm of articles.

## 4. Features of O. Henry's Writing Style

### 4.1. Humor

In O. Henry's works, humor exist all the time, and some specifically for humor to use humor, for he apparently sees himself as a humorist, wrote in his confessions of the humorist "the nature of my jokes is good and gracious, never satire, and made people angry" [7]. His satire and humor usually is well-intentioned, sometimes alarmingly reveal the true meaning of the life, such as the *gyro* and *The Pendulum of Life*, they reflect his ability to perspective the life. Moreover, his language itself is also full of exaggeration and humor, and humor can be play down the tragic things, so that a variety of readers can accept. O. Henry's work has been named as the "the encyclopedia of American life of humor" [8], which is easy to find this feature in *The Cop and the Anthem*, as one of the representative works of O. Henry's. Humorous, spicy ironically, the strange ideas, and twist plot are the artistic features of this novel. The novel depicts a poor who is unemployed, he becomes him as a troublemaker so that they

can go to jail to survive, he tries several times but do not achieve his goal, later, he want to repent, but the police arrests him. Therefore, also in *The Cop and the Anthem*, many descriptions reflect this style. However, no matter what the choices of words, sentences, characters or ideas choose, his sense of humor firmly grasp the main point, and he uses witty words to explain his ideas. Throughout the full text, the manifestations of O. Henry's humor are diverse. One of the clever uses is "unreasonable" in the process of development of events. In the process of development of events, the "unreasonable" is often ingenious use to reflect the humor, O. Henry make good use of this method to deeply reflect the reality of the society, which is the effect of black humor. In addition, the contradiction between the unreasonable behavior of Soapy and the reasonable behavior of police is one of the reasons of Soapy's unlucky. Such as, Soapy smash glasses and wait to be arrested, but police believe that a people who do the bad things will not wait for the snare, so exclude him. He also would like to use the straw which called "disturbing the peace" to achieve his goal, but the police think that only the college students can make such big noise to celebrate the victory of soccer match in the street. Soapy's abnormal behavior determined by his unusual psychology. Such abnormal psychology and behavior reflect the pain of the life and the people's spirit in the middle and lower classes of capitalist society. The last, Soapy inspired by religious and want to be a good man, but the police think that a bum could never have links with quiet environment around the church, soft lighting, and beautiful music, so Soapy is caught accidentally. This "accident" [9] reflects the reality which can not distinguish the nature of good and evil. Absolutely, there are many ways of humor in the text, but all have one thing in common, that is, where there is humor, where there is the author's meaning. If the author's writing style is understandable and harmony, the revelations of society is profound, deeply reflect the heavy mood in the lower people's lives and mental distress. The use of the Hyperbole, metaphor, mocking is also the novel's feature. Another example is that Soapy have meals in a restaurant but fail to pay, he want to go to the jail but brutally beat by the boss, the description is: two waiters drag Soapy out of the restaurant, make him fall down to the sidewalk, he stands up toughly, like a carpenter is opening a folding ruler. Here, the author seems laugh the embarrassed image, in fact, the author use the metaphor to reflect the tragic of the little guy, make people feel bitterness.

O. Henry's humor is that to use humor to reflect the meaning of reality. From this point of view, *The Cop and the Anthem* not only reflects the style of humor, but also lets us know what the real humor is. The author uses a great quantity of humor in this story, comparing in order to show the miserable life of the hero, Soapy. May be you feel this style is ridiculous, but you can deeply perspective the cruel of capitalist society [10]. So humor is the most important feature in this short story. Humor is a tone of relaxed, but it contains a profound sense of irony, it is different from the general words which sound pretty and cute, and serve the content, it is the performance of the character's emotional tendencies and the

attitude of the author. O. Henry's works often apply different figures of speech such as exaggeration, metaphor, personification, irony and other rhetorical devices in order to achieve the humor artistic effect. Some humorous language seems relaxed, but you can feel heavy actually.

Such as "for the past many years, the hospitable Bligh Kiwi Island prison has been his home in the winter" [11], the Irony "hospitable", "dwelling of winter", sound humor and relaxed, actually, reveals the tragic situation of the people who are the lower labor, and contains the infinite bitterness of the homeless. Citing many similar examples in the above when talk about the abnormal psychology of Soapy. Humorous language satirizes reality directly, for example, in the expression of "Every night, there are many exquisite products in here, contain grape, the natural silk and the protoplasm" [12]. The author does not tell us the identity of the characters directly, but use the rhetorical devices of irony and metonymy, to spicy satirize the decadent and dissolute life of rich and powerful people, contrast with the difficult life of working people sharply, highlights the gap between the rich and the poor of the capitalist society, also reveals the social roots of hard life of the working people such as Soapy, and through that to enhance the social significance of the novel.

#### 4.2. Irony

O. Henry is a kind of expression of something which is contrary to intended meaning, for the part of the word say one thing but meaning another, while he prefers to use rhetorical irony to emphasize some special features of characters. To disclose some serious social problems and to show his feelings by somebody or something, we can through reading the whole article to understand his real meaning. O. Henry's rhetorical irony can make the story more humors and meaningful, so it is also the typical writing skill of his stories. Let's take the *Whirligig of Life* for an example, the story telling about the divorce and the resumption of a married couple, Ransie Bilbro and his wife, Ariela Bilbro. One day, they went to the Justice of the Peace Benaja Widdup's Office to sue for divorce, they dissatisfactory and complained each other for many reasons, the justice of the Peace handed their divorce according to the "equity and the constitution and golden rule" [13]. The irony here discusses the essential of the laws in capital society. The laws are tools for the capitalists to make more money. The following plots tell us the irony really meaning. The husband brought, which was heisted from the "Justice of the Peace" the day before, to the office to continue the matter in this description "And then with his (Benaja Widdup's) next words he achieved rank (as his thoughts ran) with either the great crowd of the world's sympathizers or the little crowd of his great financiers" [14]. This quotation is to analyze the purpose of the officers' following words, which are the turning point of the whole story. The author uses irony to satirize the officer that he wanted is just money. Finally, the couple finds they still love each other, so they remarried and give five dollars to officer for the poundage. The ending of the story is quite satisfactory for the three people because the couple does not divorce finally and the Justice of the Peace gets his five dollars,

this is an artful ending, and the irony in the story really makes a great effort to satirize the character the society and the capitalism. Have cited similar examples in the *The Cop and the Anthem* when talk about the abnormal psychology of Soapy. The language use satirizes reality directly, for the author does not tell us the identity of the characters directly, but uses the rhetorical devices of irony and metonymy, to spicy satirizes the decadent and dissolute life of rich and powerful people, contrast with the difficult life of the working people sharply, highlighting the gap between the rich and the poor of the capitalist society, also reveals the social roots of hard life of the working people, thereby, outstanding the social significance of his works.

## 5. Conclusion

As one of the most famous American novelists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, O. Henry's short stories is the typical form of literary, not only the accumulation of facts, but need the skillful handle of writer, including the processing of language skills, imaginative plots and so on. These artistic elements and reality are blending. He writes about the life of ordinary people in New York City, his works have a twist plot, which turns on an ironic or coincidental circumstance. His work is famous for his writing style of "surprising endings" [15]. O. Henry always sympathizes with the poor, criticizes and satirizes the capitalists. The characters in his short stories are often the common insignificant people who have the valuable humanity. For the analysis of representative on O. Henry's short stories above, it would be explored the typical writing skills in his writings, which are mainly consisted of two aspects, which is consisted in structural characteristics and linguistic features. Structural characteristics make the writing full of surprise and suspense, while adding to the atmosphere to the whole work and deeply attracted the readers. Linguistic features make the works filled with humor, but with irony. Through these two sides, we can fully enjoy the art of the color of works, and understanding the theme of his works better.

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