

# On Different Types of Love Stories Written by O. Henry

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**Abstract**—O. Henry's Love stories constitute the most important part of O. Henry's short stories, and are of great significance for study. This essay categorizes his love stories into five types and analyzes the characteristics of each type. Through study, not only people's view of love of all kinds and sorts are reflected, also the unique characteristics of American society are mirrored lively.

**Index Terms**—O. Henry, short stories, love stories

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the three most famous short story writers, O. Henry enjoys equal status with Chekhov and Maupassant. His works are popular in America and some masterpieces are acquainted by people throughout the world, such as *The Gift of Magi*, *The Cop and the Anthem*, etc. Therefore, his short stories always remain the focus of critics' comments. Among those critics, no one attaches their attention to the different types of love stories and the unique characteristics of each type of love stories. The former critics always focuses their attentions on the literary work itself, such as the writing skill, structure, plot and character etc., neglecting the characteristics reflected through these short stories. The time of O. Henry is just the transitional period of America from capitalism to imperialism, during which American economy enjoys a rapid growth. O. Henry, who witnessed this turning period, is extolled as "mirror of American society" and his works reflect American culture of this special period faithfully (Current-Garcia, 1993).

O. Henry's short stories can be categorized into several types, namely, love stories, fraud stories, robber stories, etc. If these types of short stories are compared to the beautiful diamonds in a crown, love stories are definitely the brightest one. Love stories constitute the most important part of O. Henry's short stories, and are of great significance for study. Through these love stories, not only people's view of love of all kinds and sorts are reflected, also the unique characteristics of American society are mirrored lively. Therefore, this essay chooses O. Henry's love stories as the target, categorizing O. Henry's love stories into five types and summarizing the unique characteristics of each type.

## II. DIFFERENT TYPES OF LOVE STORIES

Among O. Henry's three hundreds short stories, love stories occupy a large amount. Many of them are world-famous, such as *The Gift of Magi*, *The Service of Love*, *The Romance of a Busy Broker*, and *The Furnished Room*, etc. Notwithstanding all belonging to love stories, they can be categorized into several types, some of which are pure love, some are fake love, some are love of money, and some are love of status. During the special period of American history, namely from the last phases of 19th century to the initial part of 20th century, American society undergoes profound and thorough changes. People's social status alters quickly and greatly. Many people become millionaires overnight, whereas many millionaires are reduced to street-beggars. Great changes occur in all walks of life. The flying development of American economy brings both spring and winter, the spring of rich capitalist and the winter of poor people. By the end of the 19th century, the United States finished its first industrial revolution and many big factories replaced the old handicraft workshops. America gradually became the leading economic and political force of the world.

In terms of the economic regulations, economic base decides upper buildings. The development of economy brings about the changes in the old social status and consequently, the social status changes people's mind. Therefore, with the fast economic development, love affairs also occur in different types. And based on the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism (Brannigan, 1998), history and culture are supposed to be reflected in contemporary literary works. As a great realistic writer, O. Henry experienced this special period and recorded these changes through his works. Some of these changes are mirrored in his short stories and people's different view of love is presented through different types of love stories.

### A. Pure Love Stories

Among all of O. Henry's love stories, pure love stories are the best and most well-known. People throughout the world read *The Gift of Magi*, the masterpiece of O. Henry's pure love stories and arguably his most famous. In some ways this story serves as a way of irony, but also indicates the sacrifices that people are willing to make for those whom they are in love with. It is a classic pure love story which reflects the pure and faithful love among young couples. Della and Jim are a poor young couple who merely own two precious possessions—Della's long, beautiful hair and Jim's fancy gold watch that used to belong to his father. It is Christmas time and Della does not have enough money to buy Jim a present, so she cuts and sells her hair, and then uses the money to buy Jim a nice watch chain. Jim comes home and is stunned to see Della's short hair, for his gift for her is a set of fancy combs she can use in her hair. She tries to reassure him that her hair will grow, and then gives him her gift. Once again, Jim acts a little surprised, because he sold the watch to buy her the combs. Then they should just forget about the presents altogether, because both of the gifts become useless now. O. Henry ends the story with the description that the Magi who gave baby Jesus wise in inventing the art of gift-giving, but says that Jim and Della are wiser because of the great sacrifices that they made, and because of their love for each other.

This is a typical pure love story of O. Henry. Despite the young couple's poor economic situation, they are rich in the spiritual world since both of them are willing to sacrifice their treasures for the happiness of their lover. People who read this short story are touched by their pure and selfless love. While the entire world is becoming realistic and materialistic, still there is simple and true love remaining in the young poor couple.

In O. Henry's pure love stories, people see the selfless and great spirit—selfless sacrifice, which is the top realm of love, the most moving spirit among lovers. The young couples, Jim and Della, are truly in love with each other. It is for this love, they sacrifice their most valuable possessions and their life dream. Although their sacrifice proves to be worthless, they harvest love which is more valuable than anything else. Both of these couples are really poor and both of them are truly in love. So, through O. Henry's pure love stories, people recognize that although it is a fast changing period in a fast changing society, there is still true love among poor people. Their true love has defeated poverty and they still enjoy their happiness in spite of poverty. These indicate that from the last phase of 19th century to the initial stage of 20th century, many people lived a penniless life, they were happier, however, than those wealthy people for they possessed the most precious fortune in the world—the true love, as a saying goes “There is no pure love in the world of money while there is no money in the world of love.”

On the other hand, O. Henry's love stories are greatly influenced by his own love experience that could be the most romantic and appealing. His wife Athol Estes is regarded as the original model of Della in *The Gift of Magi*. Athol Estes is the symbol of pure love and service for love. She dedicates her entire life to O. Henry's writing career.

When O. Henry first met Athol Estes, he was a young guy who was full of energy and enthusiasm. He was attracted by Athol's good looking and quiet temperament. He fell in love with her at the first sight. Athol responded his love and married him regardless of the opposition of her family. Athol was by all means a qualified wife who showed a full support on her husband's career. She even borrowed money from her step father to help her husband run a magazine. Although this magazine was not quite successful, she encouraged her husband not to give up his dream. So their life was not rich but very happy. And those were the happiest days in the writer's life.

God, however, always plays tricks with happy couples. When O. Henry worked for a bank as an accountant, he was accused of being involving in a bank crime. O. Henry had to leave his home to exile in order to escape from being captured. He left his beloved wife and a lovely daughter and fled to New Orleans then to Honduras. During this period, O. Henry experienced many things. He had been a robber, a swindler, vagrant, etc. And these experiences became his priceless treasure for his short story writing. His wife stuck to do some embroidery to earn money to raise her daughter. Unfortunately, she got lung disease and was about to die. O. Henry heard of this and he went back to see his wife under the risk of being captured. However, fate is always merciless. He did not get the chance to see his beloved wife for the last time. Athol died just before O. Henry reached home. After Athol's death, O. Henry was captured and was sentenced into prison for two years (Langford, 1957).

People may sense how sorrowful the writer was when he missed the last sight of his wife. And people may sense how painful the writer was when he yearned for his beautiful and kind wife. For this reason, O. Henry writes many pure love stories. Youngsters sacrifice themselves for happiness of their lover without a complaint. It is the writer's own beautiful and moving love experience that renders his firm belief: although it is a time of money talking loud, there is still pure love among ordinary people (Stuart, 1990).

#### B. Fake Love Stories—Lust for Money and Status

In this type of love stories, the heroes and heroines are also poor people, like the poor that we just mentioned. The difference, however, is the love among these people is by no means of purity, which combines love for money, love for status, love for oneself and love for vanity. In the world of money talks, people are easily to fall in this trap. The typical example of this kind is *Transients in Arcadia*.

In the short story *Transients in Arcadia*, there are two main characters, Madame Beaumont and Mr. Harold Farrington. Madame Beaumont lives in the luxury hotel “The Lotus” to spend her vacation. She lives a luxury life there and everybody in the hotel regards her as a rich and elegant lady. All people like to talk to her and do anything for her, and she is welcome even by the slaves because of her sweet smile. One day, she encounters Mr. Harold Farrington in the hotel, and the later one is also a new resident of “The Lotus”. Mr. Harold Farrington is a good-looking gentleman

and always helpful for woman. They get along very well with each other and fall in love immediately. However, in the last day of Madame Beaumont staying in "The Lotus", she tells Mr. Harold Farrington the truth. She is a store worker, instead of a rich lady. She saves all her money and just wants to spend her vacation in the luxury hotel "The Lotus" to pretend to be an upper class lady which is her dream for many years. Now her dream comes true and her vacation is over. She has to go back to the store and back to her real life. After her confession, Mr. Harold Farrington gives reader a more surprising story. He is by no means a gentleman either. He is a collector of a clothes store and he lives in the hotel for the same reason with Madame Beaumont. So they depart from then on and never see each other again.

In this story, both of the characters lust greatly for vanity. They are poor but they want to be rich and live the way rich people do. They enjoy the feeling of being rich people and being admired by others. So they save money to live as the rich for a few days to satisfy their vanity and when their money is spent out, they have to come back to the common life. They fall in love with the premise they believe their partner is rich. And money and status are the premise of their love. When all of these are blown like a colorful and charming bubble, they are embarrassed to wake up from their dream and face the reality, with the final ending of breaking up with each other. This kind of love is not true love according to the common sense and should be called the fake love. Instead of loving for their partner, they show more love on money and status.

During the period from the last phases of 19th century to the initial part of 20th century, people's fortune structure and social status undergoes great changes. Many penniless nobody becomes wealthy by grasping a lucky opportunity. They get not only money in a moment but also remarkable social status. Therefore, these people's success arouses others' complicated feelings. Some admire them; some envy them; some hate them. Social psychologist considers, when a society experiences a thorough change, it would be accompanied with a revolution of people's social notion. There is the certain relation between economic revolution and spiritual revolution. Therefore, many poor people are willing to follow the rich and imitate them. That is the so-called mammonism (money worship). Money talks everywhere. Money is the criterion of assessing everything. To have money means to have social status, people's admiration, happiness and everything. This is a vivid characteristic of American society at that time.

### C. *Love Stories that Violates Humanity*

Humanity is an important concept in western society. In many literary works, humanity is the regular and unique topic. Some of them sing high praise for humanity, and others show satire for anti-humanity. O. Henry, as a representative of realism, also criticizes the phenomenon of violating humanity in his love stories. The representative works of this type are *Witches' Loaves*, *Vanity and Some Sables*, *Hearts and Crosses*, *A Fog in Santone*, etc. The Best known of them is *Witches' Loaves*.

In *Witches' Loaves*, the author depicts and criticizes the selfish love which violates humanity. The heroine of this short story is Miss Martha Meacham, who has a bakery and enjoys a comparatively well-to-do life. She remains single when she is 40 years old until she begins an unrequited affection with one of her customers, a middle-aged man who comes to buy two loaves of stale bread two or three times a week. He is elegant and obviously a gentleman. The bakery owner believes that he must be a poor artist since he never buys new breads and this provokes her sympathetic heart. One day she puts some butter in the stale bread secretly. However, after she sells the two stale breads with butter to her secret lover without letting him notice this, the middle-aged man rushes into the bakery and shouts at Miss Martha Meacham with great anger, which makes her so surprised and sad. In the end, one of the friends of the man tells her that this man is an architecture designer who uses the stale breads to clean his designing paper but not to eat, since he believes the stale breads are much good at erasing pencil works than common eraser. Unfortunately Miss Martha puts some butter into the bread to show her love which he does not know about. While he uses the bread to clean his designing paper and the result, as you can imagine, is terrible. That is why he is so mad at her.

In this story, the innocent woman falls in love with a man without his knowing. She tries to love him in her own way with her kind and sympathetic heart and she tries her best to help him since she grants him as a poor gentleman. Nevertheless, her love does not get the same return. On the contrary, her behavior enrages her lover and her secret love is not only exposed and embarrassed but also ended. Seemingly, the architect is innocent for he breaks the woman's heart unconsciously. However, as a gentleman with common sense of love, he should have sensed the love involved in butter although it ruins his work. His anger and censure about his admirer is a kind of violating humanity. Normally, people's love should get the same response and at least respect. In this story, however, love does not arouse love but hatred. It is not only a humor that the author entertains us, also a criticism of violating humanity. In the capitalistic society, secret love is hard to succeed. Some people, whose humanity has been "corroded" by the general mood of the money worship society, merely attach their attention to their own affairs all the time, like how to make more money and how to get promoted. And they seldom value the purest emotion of others even when they realize the existence of it, which results in the happening of this love tragedy.

The story that we mentioned just now is the example of O. Henry's stories that violates humanity. Humanity, as an important concept, is discussed by many western writers, but O. Henry talks about it in his special way. Humanity is not described and criticized directly as in other literary works, but is showed and commented in common love stories which seem to be the stories happen around us in daily life. Although these are common stories, they condense the author's profound meaning and purpose. O. Henry is definitely not merely telling us a love story. He buries his satire and anger about violating humanity behavior between lines. As the new historicist and cultural materialist consider, history and

culture shapes and is shaped by literature. From O. Henry's love stories, people of today may picture the humanity situation of the author's time.

#### D. Humanitarian Love Stories

Contrary to the violating humanity love stories, humanitarian love stories shine the brilliance of humanity. Everyone's heart lusts for humanity and so does O. Henry. He writes many Humanitarian love stories to tell his readers the importance of humanity. The masterpieces of humanitarian love stories are *The Purple Dress*, *The Third Ingredient*, *The Ransom of Mack*, etc.

*The Purple Dress* talks about two girls falling in love with a man at the same time. Maida and Grace work in the same store. They are good friends and interestingly both of them fall in love with Mr. Ramsay, the head clerk of the store. Once they overhear that Mr. Ramsay likes red and purple. It is just before Thanksgiving, their store keeps the tradition of having a Thanksgiving dinner in Thanksgiving eve. Therefore, both of the girls decide to make a new dress to attend this dinner in order to please Mr. Ramsay and attract his attention. Maida wants to make a purple dress and Grace wants to make a red one. If it can make him fall in love with one of them, it would be most wonderful. It is, however, by no means an easy task to make a new dress, for they only get a very shabby salary. So, they have to save money from the day they made the decision on. Quickly comes the Thanksgiving eve. Before they go to the celebrating dinner, Grace finds she lost the key of her apartment and the landlady would not open the door for her if she can not pay this month's rent for this apartment. She comes to ask for help of Maida, and Maida is so kind that she give the last four dollars to Grace, which is the money she has to pay for the tailor to get the purple dress. Then Grace gets into her apartment and put on her beautiful red dress. When she asks Maida to go to the dinner, Maida refuses her since she cannot get the purple dress which makes her very sad. Maida stays at home when Grace goes to the dinner to attract the guy both of them love. After a while, Maida wants to have a walk to release her sadness. When she passes through the tailor's house, the tailor asks why she does not come to get the dress. After hearing her explanation, the kind tailor gives her the purple dress and tells her she can pay him later. Tailor's kindness brings vitality and hope back to young Maida. She puts on the most beautiful purple dress and runs to the dinner. It is raining and Maida neglects it. She runs in the rain with the happiest and loveliest smile on her face. At the corner of the street, she punches into a man who is the very Mr. Ramsay. He tells her:

Why Miss Maida, you look simply magnificent in your new dress. I was greatly disappointed not to see you at our dinner. And of all the girls I ever knew, you show the greatest sense and intelligence. There is nothing more healthful and invigorating than braving the weather as you are doing. May I walk with you? (O. Henry, 2004, p. 219)

The glory of humanity glitters in the young girl's kind heart. Though the opportunity of Thanksgiving dinner is really important, when her friend is in trouble, Maida gives up her rare opportunity and helps Grace. The result of helping Grace not only would result in her missing the opportunity, also gives Grace the only chance of getting Mr. Ramsay's heart. For most girls, love is the only thing they really care. For Maida, however, friendship is more important than love. This is where humanity lies. Maida is the representative of O. Henry's humanitarian figures. O. Henry sings high praise to people like Maida. He describes these humanitarian figures to show readers his aspiration of humanity. Here, the writer is by no means merely writing a kind girl. His purpose is to advocate and extol humanitarian deeds among people. In his age, when everybody is yearning for money, humanity is forgotten by most people. O. Henry uses his own way to wake up people's humanitarian consciousness. Therefore, the writer gives the kind-hearted girl a happy ending. She finally wins the heart of the man she loves, which informs readers, kind heart will harvest good pay back.

In these humanitarian short stories, O. Henry depicts several humanitarian figures and shows his respect for humanity through praising these figures. For O. Henry, humanity should not be abandoned at any time, no matter what society it is and how rich people become. Humanity, as a fine tradition of ancestors, is about to be inhabited and carried on. However, his good wish faces a fierce challenge in the process of capitalism development. O. Henry senses these changes and worries about the loss of this tradition. Therefore, he portrays these humanitarian figures to wake people up and summon them to catch up this fine tradition. These humanitarian love stories combine the author's good wish of arousing everyone's humanity consciousness in a decaying society. This proves the correctness of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. According to the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, literature can also shape the culture. Here, O. Henry's humanitarian love stories depict and also arouse people's humanity consciousness. Literature shapes the society and culture in this way.

#### E. Love Stories of Twisted Marriages

Some love leads to happy marriages, but some do not. The reasons are many, but all the unhappy marriages are called twisted marriages. O. Henry does not only talk about young people's love stories. Another type of love stories he writes can be classified as twisted marriage love stories. In this type of short stories, all kinds of twisted marriages are presented which provide readers another angle to know American society. The masterpieces of the twisted marriage love stories are *An Omen of Spring*, *A Comedy in Rubber*, etc.

In *A Comedy in Rubber*, the word "Rubber" means the habit of watching the scene of bustle especially when an accident happens. A Rubberer refers to people who crave at Rubber. In this short story, there is an excellent description of the Rubbers in New York City which is vivid and exact. It goes as following:

These devotees of curiosity swarm, like flies, in a moment in a struggling, breathless circle about the scene of an unusual occurrence. If a workman opens a manhole, if a street car runs over a man from North Tarrytown, if a little boy drops an egg on his way home from the grocery, if a casual house or two drops into the subway, if a lady loses a nickel through a hole in the lisle thread, if the police drag a telephone and a racing chart forth from an Ibsen Society reading-room, if Senator Depew or Mr. Chuck Connors walks out to take the air-if any of these incidents or accidents takes place, you will see the mad, irresistible rush of the "rubber" tribe to the spot. (O. Henry, 2004, p. 239)

The hero and heroine, William Pry and Violet Seymour, are members of the "rubber" tribe. They first meet each other in a street accident when a man was run over by a brewery wagon. Both of them come to watch. And identically, they are the two who leave last. It is at this occasion that they notice each other and fall in love at the first sight. However, both of them are too shy to express love, so they part finally. A few days later, they meet again in another incident and this time they catch the opportunity to know each other and William gently brings Violet to another accident spot which makes Violet very happy. From then on, they act as rubbers together. The same interest brings the young people together and they decide to get married. In their wedding, however, people can not find the bride and bridegroom, because "William Pry and Violet Seymour, creatures of habit, had joined in the seething game of the spectators, unable to resist the overwhelming desire to gaze upon themselves entering, as bride and bridegroom, the rose-decked church." (O. Henry, 2004, p. 240)

This is a funny story which seems quite uncommon in common sense. William and Violet's union and marriage are interesting and unusual. They get married just for they both are "rubber" tribe member. The same interest in bustle brings them together and leads them to fall in love. That is why this marriage is called twisted marriage. They love each other but their love is caused by strange habits which makes this comedy more interesting. It is also a strong satire of the "rubber" tribe of New York City. As the upper quotation describes, where there is an accident or incident, there will be a group of people standing around the spot gazing, talking and mocking. This is a special phenomenon of New York City at that time which means that people are getting sophisticated. Why it is people of New York City but not people of other place are most willing to watch bustle? As people know, New York is one of the most developed, most representative and biggest cities of America. The fast developing economy does not bring about the spiritual civilization. On the contrary, people of developed areas are becoming more and more sophisticated. They pay much attention to other's affairs not to help them but to be the be-standers. They know how to extract full enjoyment from every accident. This is another characteristic of American society during the last phases of 19th century and the initial part of 20th century. The fast developing economic situation and the lower spiritual civilization level form a sharp contrast in O. Henry's twisted marriage love stories.

In *An Omen of Spring* happens another interesting and twisted marriage love story. Peters is a vagrant who does not find a job for five years. He lives with his wife Clara. Clara works as a floor-washer or a laundry woman to earn a little money to support the family. However, Peters is not willing to become a responsible husband. He plays with his other two vagrant friends all the time. One day, he gets to know that Clara has a dollar with which they, he and his two vagrant friends, can use to buy some drink, so they talk about how to get this dollar in the garden. Finally, Peters decides to use violence to get it. So he comes home, but when he sees his two hundreds pounds wife, he has to change his plan. Then he tells lies, willing to get the one dollar in this way. He fails. So he recalls another method. He becomes very kind and gentle and tells Clara he still loves her very much. Clara is cheated this time, and she hugs Peters delighted. But her hug makes Peters faint. Then she goes and buys some medicine for Peters with this one dollar.

Of course, at the end of this story, the vagrant does not achieve his goal. The only one dollar becomes medicine and he can not use it to buy a drink any more. Here, a strong satire is presented in this short story. First, in Peters and Clara's family, wife works and husband does not. Second, Peters, in order to get one dollar to buy a drink, spares nothing to get it even by violence, lies and tricks. Third, when Peters' conspiracy is going to be gained, the author makes another surprise ending which destroys Peters plan finally. *An Omen of Spring* is one of the classic twisted marriage stories written by O. Henry. It shows readers the unusual relationship of a married couple and bad marriage situations in some couples of American society. When people become poorer and poorer, some of them choose another way of living which causes all kinds of twisted marriages. Different with Della and Jim's marriage and Delia and Joe's marriage, the twisted marriages are the mirror of the dark side of American society. The twisted marriages present the view of love of some people who get twisted mental condition. When a society is experiencing great changes, it is easy to lead to some mental problems of some people, which is a regular rule in history. When American economy flies with an amazing speed, the development is accompanied with various problems and the mental problems occupy a large part. O. Henry records these mental problems in marriages in his love shorts and criticizes these twisted and unhappy marriages. At the same time, he criticizes the twisted society which is the deep reason for the unhappiness and twisted condition of these marriages.

### III. CONCLUSION

Love, as a unique subject, sheds light everywhere and nobody, no matter before or future, can escape from the influence of its magic power, including O. Henry. Love stories occupy one of the main portions of O. Henry's works. In these famous stories, love of all forms and people of every description are presented. Limited by the capacity of this paper, it is not possible to cover all of short stories of O. Henry and as an ideal platform to display the characteristics of

this special period vividly, the love stories are chosen to be the target for analysis. No critics before have focused their attention mainly on O. Henry' love stories, this essay takes the lead and discusses the characteristics "refracted" through them, which contributes to readers' better understanding of both the stories and the culture.

The time that O. Henry experiences covers from the last phases of 19th century to the initial stage of 20th century which is a special period in American history. During this period, the first industrial revolution took place and American society experienced a profound and thorough reformation. A large number of wealthy people appeared overnight and became richer and richer. On the contrary to the bustling and flourishing surface, poor people who lived in the low stratum of society became much poorer. A sharp gap between the rich and the poor became more and more evident and ruthless. And the whole society experienced great changes with all kinds of fierce contradictions occurring everyday. This period is also a period of rapid development of economy in American history. The U.S. became one of the leading forces of the world during this period. According to historians, this is a crucial turning point of American history. Therefore, to analyze the characteristics of this special period is of great importance, which would be beneficial for people to have a better understanding of the American culture of that period and even nowadays.

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