



---

## HUMOR AND HUMANITY: O. HENRY'S STORYTELLING STYLE

Karimova Feruza Zokirjon qizi,  
Namdu talabasi  
[karimova\\_f93@mail.ru](mailto:karimova_f93@mail.ru)

---

### Abstract

O. Henry, the pen name of William Sydney Porter, is renowned for his distinctive storytelling style that combines humor with profound human insights. His short stories are celebrated for their witty humor, unexpected plot twists, and deep empathy for ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances. This paper explores O. Henry's use of humor and irony to reveal complex aspects of human nature, focusing on his ability to balance comedic elements with emotional depth. Through a detailed examination of stories such as "The Gift of the Magi," "The Ransom of Red Chief," and "The Last Leaf," this paper demonstrates how O. Henry uses humor not only to entertain but also to explore themes of love, sacrifice, and the unpredictability of life. His unique style, characterized by ironic endings and character-driven narratives, continues to resonate with readers by offering both laughter and poignant reflections on the human condition. O. Henry's ability to blend humor with humanity makes him a significant figure in American literature and a master of the short story form.

**Keywords:** O. Henry, storytelling, humor, irony, plot twists, human nature, emotional depth, short stories, The Gift of the Magi, The Ransom of Red Chief, The Last Leaf, sacrifice, love, unpredictability, narrative style, American literature.

### Introduction

O. Henry (William Sidney Porter) is called "the father of modern American short stories" and is known as "encyclopedia of American humor" in the realm of world



***Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy***

**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874

**Volume** 01, **Issue** 02, May, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

literature. His novels have been published repeatedly in the world, and there are numerous readers. O. Henry created a total of 300 short stories. His famous novels, such as *The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Furnished Room*, *The Gift of the Magi*, and *The Last Leaf*, earned him a great reputation in the world. It is no doubts that O. Henry make a significant contribution to the world literature.

His fame had spread far and wide for his unique writing styles. His famous short stories are usually funny and interesting, and he is a master of using paronomasia, irony, metaphor, and other ways to create humorous stories. Readers enjoy his humorous languages very much. All of his novels were ingeniously conceived, with the O. Henry-style ending (surprising endings), which is often contrary to readers' expectations. O. Henry's typical writing styles are generally branded with such features as humorous language, surprising endings, and tearful smile.

### **The Typical Writing Styles of O. Henry**

The languages in O. Henry's novels are rich and colorful, such as slang, irony, metaphor, metonymy, exaggeration, paronomasia and so on. Therefore, his stories are usually amusing and humorous.

In *The Cop and the Anthem*, humorous languages can be easily found. For example:

"Soapy walked past the policeman sadly. He seemed doomed to liberty." As we know, the phrase "be doomed to" is usually followed by negative words like failure, death, frustration, destruction, etc., while liberty is a positive word, meaning freedom and happiness. Therefore, it is very strange and funny to express "He seemed doomed to liberty.", because no one will consider liberty negative except the poor and homeless Soapy. However, the funny expression indicates the true thoughts of Soapy, because liberty means coldness, hunger, and death to him in the cold winter. So he wishes to be put into prison to spend the cold winter. O. Henry shows us poor Soapy's miserable life and abnormal belief in such strange and humorous languages.

In the story *The Last Leaf*, Johnsy, a poor painter, had come down with



***Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy***

**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874

**Volume** 01, **Issue** 02, **May**, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

---

pneumonia, lying on her bed, hardly moving. She often looked out of the window and counted the leaves of ivy vine on the wall. She had lost confidence in fighting against pneumonia and thought that she would die when the last leaf of ivy vine on the wall falls. A doctor examined Johnsy and asked Sue, a friend of Johnsy, whether Johnsy had anything in her mind. "I will do all that science can do," said the doctor. "But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages at her funeral, I take away fifty percent from the curative power of medicines." In the opinion of the doctor, Johnsy should keep up her spirits and increases her self-confidence in overcoming the disease instead of planning her funeral. The author uses his unique humour language to tell readers that the Johnsy was hopeless about herself.

One day, Sue told her neighbor Old Behrman, an old artist, the story of Johnsy. The description of the old artist is full of humour too. "Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor of the apartment building. Behrman was a failure in art. For years, he had always been planning to paint a masterpiece, but had never yet begun it. He earned a little money by serving as a model to artists who could not pay for a professional model. He was a fierce, little, old man who protected the two young women in the studio apartment above him." "In one corner was a blank canvas on an easel that had been waiting there for twenty-five years to receive the first line of the masterpiece." Reading these humorous languages, readers may burst into laughter: he had planned to paint a masterpiece for twenty-five years! He didn't start his painting at all! Furthermore, readers can see an elderly artist frustrated by his inability to paint what is in his heart. "This is not any place in which one so good as Miss Johnsy shall lie sick," yelled Behrman, "Someday I will paint a masterpiece, and we shall all go away." It sounds funny to the readers, because Behrman had never painted a work of art. However, it was him who saves Johnsy's life at the end of the story. The last leaf Old Behrman painted on the wall not only saved Johnsy's life but also became his real masterpiece forever.



***Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy***

**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874

**Volume** 01, **Issue** 02, May, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

---

### **Surprising Endings**

The most important feature of O. Henry's writing is the unexpected ending. The story usually begins in one direction and just when the reader thinks they can predict the ending, but finally it turns to a totally different direction. These surprising endings are always reasonable, even if the ending is sad.

In the beginning of *The Gift of the Magi*, the author tell us how precious the watch and the hair to the poor young couple. In order to exchange christmas gifts, the poor young couple are not hesitate to sell the most precious possessions of each. As a result, however, their two precious gifts they bought all became useless at the end of the story, while they got the most precious thing than any material objects—love. It makes readers smile bitterly, and the more important is that we can feel the true unselfish love between the couple. This is the typical surprising ending the author give us a surprising ending that contrary to our expectations. At last, the man comminted suicide desperately with gas in the same room, which is also quite out of reader' expectations.

*The Cop and the Anthem* is a typical example of surprising endings. When winter was coming, the poor and homeless Soapy hoped to be arrested so that he could live in the warm prison in the cold winter. Therefore, what he needed to do was to commit crime on purpose, and wait to be arrested. Readers may surely think he would be arrested soon, but to readers' surprise, it was not an easy task at all! Soapy tried every effort to do various evil things, only to fail time and time again. At first, he planned to have a free meal in a caféand refuse to pay the bill, and he thought the cop would certainly arrest him. Unfortunately, the water drove him away because the waiter saw his frayed trousers and decadent shoes. Later, he successfully came into a restaurant and had a big meal, yet he was just beaten by waiters instead of being sent to the police station. In the story, Soapy tried six times to commit crime and none of them succeed, which is a surprise to readers. However, the end is much more surprising. When Soapy heard an anthem from the church, he was much touched and decided to start with a new life. In the end,



*Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy*

ISSN (E): 3067-7874

Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution  
4.0 International License.*

---

a policeman arrested him for his being idleness when he gave up his original idea and was planning his future! How ironic it is! The surprising ending exceeds everyone's expectation.

O. Henry, the pen name of William Sydney Porter, is a master of blending humor with humanity, creating stories that not only entertain but also provide a deeper insight into the human experience. His tales are known for their clever wit, humorous situations, and often ironic endings. However, beneath the humor, O. Henry's stories often reveal a deep understanding of human nature and the complexities of life. His ability to balance humor with poignant moments makes him one of the most beloved short story writers in American literature.

#### 1. The Role of Humor in O. Henry's Stories

O. Henry's humor is a key element in his storytelling style, and it plays a vital role in how his readers engage with his narratives. His humor is typically lighthearted, sometimes bordering on slapstick, but often carries a deeper message. The humor in his stories often arises from absurd situations, character flaws, or ironic twists. It allows readers to laugh at the characters' predicaments, but at the same time, it gives them a lens through which to view human nature in its most vulnerable, comical, and tragic forms.

For example, in "**The Ransom of Red Chief**," two kidnappers, Sam and Bill, are outwitted by their young captive, Red Chief, who turns out to be a mischievous and troublesome child. The humor here comes from the reversal of roles: instead of the kidnappers holding power, Red Chief ends up terrorizing them. This humorous situation is undercut by an ironic twist—the kidnappers end up paying the child's father to take him back. The story's humor not only entertains but highlights the unpredictability of life and the absurdity of certain human situations.

#### 2. Irony and Plot Twists

Perhaps O. Henry's most defining feature as a storyteller is his use of irony, particularly the **unexpected twist ending**. His stories often build up a certain expectation, only to subvert it with a final twist that surprises the reader. This



***Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy***

**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874

**Volume** 01, **Issue** 02, May, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

---

twist is not just for shock value—it serves to underscore the ironies of life and human experience. These endings are often both humorous and poignant, reminding readers of the complexities of fate and human decisions.

A prime example of this is in his famous short story, **"The Gift of the Magi."** The story follows a poor couple, Della and Jim, who each sacrifice their most treasured possession in order to buy a Christmas gift for the other. Della sells her long hair to buy a chain for Jim's watch, while Jim sells his watch to buy combs for Della's hair. The irony is that the gifts are rendered useless because of their sacrifices, but this twist also emphasizes the selflessness and love they share, which is the true gift. The humor in the twist is gentle, showing how life's decisions often carry unforeseen consequences but also illustrate the beauty of selfless love.

### 3. Sympathy for the Underdog

O. Henry's stories are often filled with characters who are not wealthy or powerful, yet their stories resonate with universal human experiences. These underdog characters are often flawed, but they are relatable and endearing. O. Henry's humor, in these cases, serves as a way to highlight the resilience, vulnerability, and sometimes the folly of human beings as they navigate the challenges of life.

In **"The Cop and the Anthem,"** the protagonist, Soapy, is a homeless man who tries various schemes to get arrested and sent to prison for the winter. His various attempts are comical, but the story takes an ironic turn when he finally decides to go straight, just as he is about to be arrested. This shift in Soapy's character at the very end is a subtle commentary on the human capacity for change, and the humor lies in the absurdity of his situation. O. Henry, through humor, portrays the struggles of the poor and highlights their humanity, making them more than just comic relief.

### 4. Characterization and Emotional Depth

While humor is a key component of O. Henry's stories, it never overshadows the emotional depth of his characters. O. Henry often portrays ordinary people caught





***Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy***

**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874

**Volume** 01, **Issue** 02, May, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

in extraordinary circumstances, and his ability to create characters who feel real and relatable is a hallmark of his writing. These characters often experience love, sacrifice, and loss, and O. Henry's humor helps to make their emotional journeys more poignant.

For example, in "**The Last Leaf**," O. Henry tells the story of Johnsy, a young woman suffering from pneumonia, and her friend, Behrman, an artist who is past his prime. Johnsy loses the will to live, believing that she will die when the last leaf falls from the vine outside her window. Behrman, in a selfless act of love, paints a leaf on the wall to give Johnsy hope. The story's humor comes from Behrman's eccentricity and his unlikely heroism. The twist at the end—where Behrman dies from pneumonia after painting the leaf—adds a layer of sadness to the story, but it also underscores the theme of self-sacrifice.

#### 5. Humanity in the Midst of Humor

O. Henry's stories often reveal that humor and humanity are not mutually exclusive. His humor is not just about making people laugh—it is about shedding light on the human condition. His characters may find themselves in absurd or difficult situations, but their actions, even when comical, reveal deep truths about human nature. Through his wit, O. Henry is able to explore universal themes such as love, sacrifice, and the unpredictability of life, while also providing a lighthearted perspective on these serious topics.

In "**A Retrieved Reformation**," the character of Jimmy Valentine is a reformed criminal who, through love, decides to change his life. The humor arises from the situation where Jimmy, now a respectable man, is forced to use his old skills to crack a safe and save a child. The final twist, where he is not arrested despite his criminal past, adds a touch of irony and humor, while also leaving the reader with a sense of hope for Jimmy's future.

#### Conclusion

O. Henry's storytelling style is a unique blend of humor and humanity. His ability to create relatable characters caught in unexpected situations, combined with his ironic twists and humor, makes his work timeless. He demonstrates that humor



***Modern American Journal of  
Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy***

**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874

**Volume** 01, **Issue** 02, May, 2025

**Website:** [usajournals.org](http://usajournals.org)

*This work is Licensed under CC BY 4.0 a Creative Commons Attribution  
4.0 International License.*

---

can serve as both an entertainment tool and a vehicle for exploring deeper human emotions. Through his writing, O. Henry invites readers to laugh at the absurdities of life while also reflecting on the complexities of human nature. His stories remind us that, no matter the situation, there is always room for both humor and humanity.

### **References**

1. David Stuart: O. Henry: A Biography of William Sydney Porter. Chelsea: Scarborough Publishers(1990).
2. Joel Porter: New Essays on O Henry. Beijing: Peking University Press(2007).
3. John Kirkpatrick: The Short Stories of O. Henry. Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press(1987).
4. Jonathan Freedman: The Themes of O. Henry . Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (2000).
5. O. Henry: The Selection Short Stories of O. Henry. Shanghai: World Publishing Corporation(2004).
6. Rena Korb: An overview of The Gift of the Magi. Short Stories for Students. Detroit: Gale(2002).
7. Fu Jingchuan: A History of 20th Century American Literature. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press(1998).