



O' HENRY'S PREOCCUPATION WITH MONEY: A STUDY OF HIS SELECTED STORIES

SURESH KUMAR

Associate Prof of English
Govt College Hisar, Haryana

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.6219.70>

ABSTRACT



Not only in his personal life but in fictional world also O' Henry was plainly precise in handling of money. His short stories categorically bear the stamp of specific money directly or indirectly. Through the inference of money, he exposes human sentiments which convey and transport various themes or commentary on human psychology. A dissectual study of some of his stories gives such a marvelous financial detail that the reader spontaneously becomes conscious of his bank balance. In O' Henry's stories, money is not presented as a source of luxury but an inevitable realization of necessity stressing the bondage of human relationships. This recurrent accentuation on money attains the pivotal position of issue in his stories. A brand syntactic design dealing with money evolves even at the opening of the story.

The paper aims at analysing O' Henry's selected stories where even the diction of the stories is embedded within the mechanism of human reactions in relation to money. He explores how the characters situate themselves firmly within the periphery of love and sacrifice their endearing possessions for the sake of true love. Besides, O' Henry transferences concrete amount into abstract connotations. Through the worth of money, he conveys the value of mutual understanding. The characters in his stories do not highlight easy and free flow of money rather they pay a lot to earn it. He portrays how the inner human characteristics contrast with monetary possessions. This underlines the worth of his character juxtaposition to the worth of money. Usually, O' Henry's stories revolve around this conflict of funds devoid and fund possession. The enduring struggle for managing the requisite funds for the sake of shielding mutual sentiments plays a key role in his love stories.

Keywords: Money, dollar, bill, account, bank, gift, worth, necessity.

O' Henry or William Sydney Porter once worked as a bank teller and subsequently indicted for alleged embezzlement by the bank. He spent three years in the federal penitentiary which made him permanently conscious of money and that too with specific amounts. This practice in his life continued till his last breath on this earth. Even while his request for advances from the editors of his books was equally explicit as George MacAdam asserts, "the exactness of the amount and of the time... specifying sums to the penny (usually 14) and the hour of need to the minute were two habits of O. Henry" ("O. Henry's Only" 5).

Not only in his personal life but in fictional world also O' Henry was plainly precise in handling of money. His short stories categorically bear the stamp of specific money directly or indirectly. Through the inference of money, he exposes human sentiments which convey and transport various themes or commentary on human psychology. A dissection study of some of his stories gives such a marvelous financial detail that the reader spontaneously becomes conscious of his bank balance. In O' Henry's stories, money is not presented as a source of luxury but an inevitable realization of necessity stressing the bondage of human relationships. This recurrent accentuation on money attains the pivotal position of issue in his stories. A brand syntactic design dealing with money evolves even at the opening of the story.

The stories like, "*The Tale of a Tainted Tenner*," "*The Gifts of the Magi*," and "*One Thousand Dollars*" make their beginning with mentioning "money" or a specific dollar amount. Hence, the first impression of the story captivates the reader as Edgar Allen Poe explains in his "*Review of Twice-Told Tales*," short story writers must create "a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out..." (61). The focus of the story must be on achieving this effect, and "if his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing [sic] of this effect, then he has failed in his first step" (61). Moreover, the titles of these stories too overtly convey the impression of money. With the progress of action, the importance of referred money becomes phenomenal and spatial. Georg Simmel highlights this fact when he explains "money brings about a continually increasing number of effects while it remains itself immobile," for example, "the powerful effects that money produces through the hope and fear, the desire and anxiety that are associated with it" (*Philosophy* 171). Therefore, it is not only money's power to circulate in society that makes it significant, but also its power to "move," or have an effect on the emotions of the people handling it.

Besides, O' Henry transports concrete amount into abstract connotations. Through the worth of money, he conveys the value of mutual understanding. The characters in his stories do not highlight easy and free flow of money rather they pay a lot to earn it. He portrays how the inner human characteristics contrast with monetary possessions. This underlines the worth of his character juxtaposition to the worth of money. Usually, O' Henry's stories revolve around this conflict of funds devoid and fund possession. The enduring struggle for managing the requisite funds for the sake of shielding mutual sentiments plays a key role in his love stories as, for example, in "*A Service of Love*" and "*The Gifts of the Magi*." The central protagonists in these stories essentially decide how to obtain funds. In some cases, they must decide whether or not to make a monetary sacrifice for the one they love. In order to establish the conflict of money, these stories must first begin with an emphasis on money and its importance to the development and movement of the plot. O' Henry deftly begins the story with money which creates an effect. However, the implication of money diminishes paving way to higher philanthropical values.

The story "*The Tale of a Tainted Tenner*" (1905) opens with a dual-word sentence: "Money talks" (Henry, "Tale" 14). The opening appears to be quite enchanting and effective for a materialist modern mind. On surface level, the story seems a commentary on the significance of money but it delves deep to convey socio-economic scenario of human beings. O' Henry personifies the voice of coinage according to its value such as, "...the conversation of a little old ten-dollar bill...would be nothing more than a whisper". (189) He asserts that the worth of money imbibes the dignity of its handler. However, at times, small change can have a larger significance.

O' Henry's epoch-making story, *The Gift of the Magi* also revolves around financial crisis for purchasing gifts. The story opens with, "ONE DOLLAR AND EIGHTY-SEVEN CENTS" (1). The amount referred to in words with capitalized syntax highlights its effect and worth. It compels the reader to go through each word with full attention. Moreover, the specific amount delivers the desired impact expected from Della. O' Henry in a hierarchical order develops the story with proper selection of sentences. The amount was counted thrice by Della but every time it was the same which emphasises the necessity. The writer gives the minute detail of money with purpose in pennies- the little coins which was saved one and two with hard efforts:

That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas. (1)

Similarly, "*One Thousand Dollar*" also begins with the direct reference of money in capitalized text- 'ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS' (614). The central character Gillian wrestles a lot how to spend the money instead of earning it. Contrary to Della, he is not aware about the purpose of the money which he gets after the demise of his uncle. He explores the opinion of others and recurrently inquires, "What a fellow can do with a thousand dollars?" His extends his own planning of spending the money. However, Gillian is not interested rather clarifies, "I asked you to tell me what I could do with a thousand dollars" (4). What anyone can do with the money and what Gillian can do with it appear to be two different things. Gillian wants things made simple. This time his friend suggests him, "can go buy Miss Lotta Lauriere a diamond pendant with the money, and then take yourself off to Idaho and inflict your presence upon a ranch" (616). When Gillian visits Lotta, presumably his mistress, he asks "what do you say to a little thing in the pendant line. I can stand three ciphers with a figure in front of 'em'" (617). In all of his interactions with men, Gillian specifically tells them he has \$1,000 to spend. With Lotta, however, he does not specifically state the amount of money he has; he just states that he has a couple of thousand dollars. Perhaps this omission of specific detail suggests that Gillian doesn't want to spend this money on Lotta.

However, Gillian is not satisfied and asks his cab driver "what would you do with a thousand dollars if you had it?" (617). The cab driver has a quick and ready answer. He has a dream to "open a s'loon". This time too, Gillian is not interested and gets out of the cab to ask a blind man what he would do with the money (617). He soon learns that the blind man is not really blind; he has over a thousand dollars in the bank (617). Yet another practical thing to do with the money would be to save it, put it in the bank for a rainy day.

As we consider the list of people involved in Gillian's quest for what to do with this money, which includes a friend at the club of equal social stature, an actress (Lotta), a cab driver who needs a sponsor for his dreams, and a "blind" man. He is struck by their differences. The more Gillian goes to, much trouble he invites. The view point of many people, each within a different socioeconomic status concerning what to do with the money suggests that though he clearly has no idea what to do with it, he is genuinely trying to figure out the right solution. The acquisition of this money has forced a new responsibility on him, something for which he is not prepared, yet nevertheless recognizes as important. Gillian values this money and his persistent questions concerning what to do with it make this evident, as in the case of Della and the counting of her pennies. Gillian learns what is *right*—not necessarily what is right for him, but the right thing in general. This thought process takes matters to a different level, a humanitarian one that is an attempt to call our attention to social issues of the importance of money and how we choose to spend it.

Eventually, Gillian gives his inheritance to someone he values more than the money-Miss Hayden. His gift is anonymous, however. Gillian explains that upon his uncle's death "Miss Hayden, a ward of my uncle, who lived in his house" only received "a seal ring and \$10..." (617). For Gillian, Miss Hayden is "worth" more than the one thousand dollars. Money in this case is now a metaphor for worth, and how a character spends his or her money is an expression of what (or whom) they find to be worthy. Perhaps giving away his inheritance to someone he values more than money even increases Gillian's value as a person. O. Henry preformed selfless acts himself quite frequently, and he did not like to be thanked for the money he gave away (Williams 214-215). To O. Henry, it was the act of giving and helping to others that mattered, not the acknowledgement for what he gave.

Words referring to money, monetary details, turn up everywhere in Gillian's statements. There is also the use of the word "account" (617). The word "account" also brings money to mind because it often refers to a bank account. This sentence, coupled with the questions about the one thousand dollars serves to remind that the story is about finances. Monetary details are consistently used to reinforce this throughout, and readers are constantly reminded of issues of value and worth as they pertain to money.

The story *A Night in New Arabia* is replete with the details of money and the terms associated with finance. Some of them even refers to specific amount. This obviously conveys the fact that money occupies central position in the story. The central characters Jacob and Celia directly or indirectly mention money.

The story *Mammon and the Archer* opens with a reference to business or business class, "OLD "ANTHONY ROCKWELL, retired manufacturer and proprietor of Rockwall's Eureka Soap, looked out the library window of his Fifth Avenue mansion and grinned". (46) When Richard Rockwall craves for the company of his beloved Miss Lantry who in turn excuses herself on busy schedule. Anthony Rockwall suggests him to apply money. For him money can solve any problem, "I bet my money on money every time. I've been through the encyclopedia down to Y looking for something you can't buy with it; and I expect to have to take up the appendix next week. I'm for money against the field. Tell me something money won't buy." (Henry 47)

O. Henry uses money as his "voice" for social commentary, an important choice. This is because, as Simmel explains, "money...makes comprehensible the most abstract concept; it is an individual thing whose essential significance is to reach beyond individualities. Thus, money is the adequate expression of the relationship of man to the world..." (*Philosophy* 129). As a concrete thing, money can help us understand our place in the world. In *The Gift of Magi* and *A Service of Love*, O' Henry highlights the importance of money. However, the young couple Jim and Della as well as Joe and Delia win over money by their grand actions underlying the fact that love is more important and sacred than money.

Thus, O' Henry's stories explore a paradigmatic structure of money involving human beings with their repercussions and sentiments. Thomas Wiseman explains, "money, it is said, is a measure of value, a medium of exchange, and a store of wealth" (3). In all of these stories we have seen money treated as one, and sometimes two or three, of these definitions. Though money matters in all of these stories, O. Henry clarifies that what matters more than money is the characters and their bonds with each other. Some of O. Henry's most powerful stories are of poor characters who either make a great sacrifice in order to purchase something that will make their beloved happy, or who work hard in order to provide for their family. However, on surface level, money appears pivotal in his stories.

WORKS CITED

Henry, O. *100 Selected Stories*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1995. Print.

MacAdam, George. "'O. Henry' On Himself, Life, and Other Things." *The New York Times*, 4 April 1909, p. 9. Print.

Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. 1900. Trans by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, Routledge, 1978. Print

Williams, William Wash. *The Quiet Lodger of Irving Place*. E. P. Dutton, 1936.

Wiseman, Thomas. *The Money Motive*. Random House, 1974. Print.