

The Dream

William Sidney Porter

Author's biography:

William Sidney Porter, this master of short stories is much better known under his pen name "*O. Henry*." He was born September 11, 1862 in North Carolina, where he spent his childhood. His only formal education was received at the school of his Aunt Lina, where he developed a lifelong love of books. He became a licensed pharmacist, in his uncle's pharmacy and was also known for his sketches and cartoons of the townspeople of Greensboro.

Porter came to Texas primarily for health reasons, and worked on a sheep ranch and lived with the family of Richard M. Hall, whose family had close ties with the Porter family back in North Carolina. It was here that Porter gained a knowledge for ranch life that he later described in many of his short stories.

In 1884, Porter moved to Austin. It was during this time that Porter first used his pen name, O. Henry, said to be derived from his frequent calling of "*Oh, 'Henry'*"¹⁰³ the family cat of Joseph Harrell.

By 1887, Porter began working as a draftsman in the General Land Office, then headed by his old family friend, Richard Hall. In 1891 at the end of Hall's term at the Land Office, Porter resigned and became a teller with the First National Bank in Austin. After a few years, however, he left the bank and founded the '*Rolling Stone*', an unsuccessful humour weekly. Starting in 1895 he wrote a column for the *Houston Daily Post*.

Meanwhile, Porter was accused of embezzling funds dating back to his employment at the First National Bank. Leaving his wife and young daughter in Austin, Porter fled to New Orleans, then to Honduras, but soon returned due to his wife's deteriorating health. She died soon afterward, and in early 1898 Porter was found guilty of the banking charges and sentenced to five years in an Ohio prison.

From this low point in Porter's life, he began a remarkable comeback. Three years and about a dozen short stories later, he emerged from prison as "*O. Henry*" to help shield his true identity. He moved to New York City, where over the next ten years before his death in 1910, he published over 300 stories and gained worldwide acclaim as America's favourite short story writer.

O. Henry wrote with realistic detail based on his first hand experiences both in Texas and in New York City. In 1907, he published many of his Texas stories in '*The Heart of the West*', a volume that includes "*The Reformation of Calliope*," "*The Caballero's Way*," and "*The*

Hiding of Black Bill." Another highly acclaimed Texas writer, J. Frank Dobie, later referred to O. Henry's "*Last of the Troubadours*" as "*the best range story in American fiction.*"¹⁰⁴

Porter died on June 5, 1910 in New York City at the age of forty seven. He died virtually penniless due to alcohol.

O' Henry's stories are famous for their surprise endings, to the point that such an ending is often referred to as an "*O. Henry ending.*"¹⁰⁵ He was called the American answer to Guy de Maupassant. Both authors wrote twist endings, but O' Henry stories were much more playful. His stories are also well known for witty narration. Most of O' Henry's stories are set in his own time, the early years of the 20th century. Many take place in New York City and deal for the most part with ordinary people: clerks, policemen, waitresses.

O. Henry's work is wide-ranging, and his characters can be found roaming the cattle-lands of Texas, exploring the art of the "*gentle grafter,*"¹¹⁰ or investigating the tensions of class and wealth in turn-of-the-century New York. O. Henry had an inimitable hand for isolating some element of society and describing it with an incredible economy and grace of language. Some of his best and least-known work resides in the collection '*Cabbages and Kings*', a series of stories which each explore some individual aspect of life in a paralytically sleepy Central American town while each advancing some aspect of the larger plot and relating

back one to another in a complex structure which slowly explicates its own background. O' Henry's work is fundamentally a product of his time, and contains examples of casual racism.

'*Cabbages and Kings*' was his first collection of stories, followed by '*The Four Million*'. The second collection opens with a reference to Ward McAllister's:

*Assertion that there were only 'Four Hundred' people in New York City who were really worth noticing. But a wiser man has arisen—the census taker—and his larger estimate of human interest has been preferred in marking out the field of these little stories of the 'Four Million.'*¹⁰⁶

To O' Henry, everyone in New York counted. He had an obvious affection for the city, which he called "*Bagdad-on-the-Subway*,"¹⁰⁷ and many of his stories are set there—but others are set in small towns and in other cities.

Among his most famous stories are: "*The Gift of the Magi*" "*The Ransom of Red Chief*", "*The Cop and the Anthem*" "*A Retrieved Reformation*" and many more.

Pathology of Pen Name

Porter gave various explanations for the origin of his pen name. In 1909 he gave an interview to 'The New York Times', in which he gave an account of it:

It was during these New Orleans days that I adopted my pen name of O. Henry. I said to a friend: "I'm going to send out some stuff. I don't know if it amounts to much, so I want to get a literary alias. Help me pick out a good one." He suggested that we get a newspaper and pick a name from the first list of notables that we found in it. In the society columns we found the account of a fashionable ball. "Here we have our notables," said he. We looked down the list and my eye lighted on the name Henry, "That'll do for a last name," said I. "Now for a first name. I want something short. None of your three-syllable names for me." "Why don't you use a plain initial letter, then?" asked my friend. "Good," said I, "O is about the easiest letter written, and O it is."

A newspaper once wrote and asked me what the O stands for. I replied, "O stands for Olivier, the French for Oliver." And several of my stories accordingly appeared in that paper under the name Olivier Henry.¹⁰⁸

In the introduction to '*The World of O. Henry: Roads of Destiny and Other Stories*' (Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), William Trevor writes that when Porter was in the Ohio State Penitentiary "*there was a prison guard named Orrin Henry, whom William Sydney Porter . . . immortalized as O. Henry*"¹⁰⁹.

The writer and scholar Guy Davenport offers another explanation: "*The pseudonym that he began to write under in prison is constructed from the first two letters of Ohio and the second and last two of penitentiary*"¹¹⁰.

The Dream:

[In my selected anthology I have given the plot summary of the selected short stories. But, so far as 'The Dream' is concerned, I am bound to give the original story as it is the last and half done story by O' Henry. Hence, the end of the story cannot be concluded, I leave it unto the reader for his/her own perception].

MURRAY dreamed a dream. Both psychology and science grope when they would explain to us the strange adventures of our immaterial selves when wandering in the realm of "Death's twin brother, Sleep." This story will not attempt to be illuminative; it is no more than a record of Murray's dream. One of the most puzzling phases of that strange waking sleep is that dreams which seem to cover months or even years may take place within a few seconds or a minute.

Murray was waiting in his cell in the ward of the condemned. An electric arc light in the ceiling of the corridor shone brightly upon his table. On a sheet of white paper an ant crawled wildly here and there as Murray blocked its way with an envelope. The electrocution was set for eight o'clock in the evening. Murray smiled at the antics of the wisest of insects. There were seven other condemned men in the chamber. Since he had been there Murray had seen three taken out to their fate; one gone mad and fighting like a wolf caught in a trap; one, no less mad, offering up a sanctimonious lip-service to Heaven; the

third, a weakling, collapsed and strapped to a board. He wondered with what credit to himself his own heart, foot, and face would meet his punishment; for this was his evening. He thought it must be nearly eight o'clock. Opposite his own in the two rows of cells was the cage of Bonifacio, the Sicilian slayer of his betrothed and of two officers who came to arrest him. With him Murray had played checkers many a long hour, each calling his move to his unseen opponent across the corridor.

Bonifacio's great booming voice with its indestructible singing quality called out:

"Eh, Meestro Murray; how you feel--all-a right--yes?"

"All right, Bonifacio," said Murray steadily, as he allowed the ant to crawl upon the envelope and then dumped it gently on the stone floor.

"Dat's good-a, Meestro Murray. Men like us, we must-a die like-a men. My time come nex'-a week. All-a right. Remember, Meestro Murray, I beat-a you dat las' game of de check. Maybe we play again some-a time. I don'-a know. Maybe we have to call-a de move damn-a loud to play de check where dey goin' send us."

Bonifacio's hardened philosophy, followed closely by his deafening, musical peal of laughter, warmed rather than chilled Murray's numbed heart. Yet, Bonifacio had until next week to live.

The cell-dwellers heard the familiar, loud click of the steel bolts as the door at the end of the corridor was opened. Three men came to Murray's cell and unlocked it. Two were prison guards; the other was "Len"--no; that was in the old days; now the Reverend Leonard Winston, a friend and neighbour from their barefoot days.

"I got them to let me take the prison chaplain's place," he said, as he gave Murray's hand one short, strong grip. In his left hand he held a small Bible, with his forefinger marking a page.

Murray smiled slightly and arranged two or three books and some penholders orderly on his small table. He would have spoken, but no appropriate words seemed to present themselves to his mind.

The prisoners had christened this cell house, eighty feet long, twenty-eight feet wide, Limbo Lane. The regular guard of Limbo Lane, an immense, rough, kindly man, drew a pint bottle of whiskey from his pocket and offered it to Murray, saying:

"It's the regular thing, you know. All has it who feel like they need a bracer. No danger of it becoming a habit with 'em, you see."

Murray drank deep into the bottle.

"That's the boy!" said the guard. "Just a little nerve tonic, and everything goes smooth as silk."

They stepped into the corridor, and each one of the doomed seven knew. Limbo Lane is a world on the outside of the world; but it had learned, when deprived of one or more of the five senses, to make another sense supply the deficiency. Each one knew that it was nearly eight, and that Murray was to go to the chair at eight. There is also in the many Limbo Lanes an aristocracy of crime. The man who kills in the open, who beats his enemy or pursuer down, flushed by the primitive emotions and the ardour of combat, holds in contempt the human rat, the spider, and the snake.

So, of the seven condemned only three called their farewells to Murray as he marched down the corridor between the two guards--Bonifacio, Marvin, who had killed a guard while trying to escape from the prison, and Bassett, the train-robber, who was driven to it because the express-messenger wouldn't raise his hands when ordered to do so. The remaining four smouldered, silent, in their cells, no doubt feeling their social ostracism in Limbo Lane society more keenly than they did the memory of their less picturesque offences against the law. Murray wondered at his own calmness and nearly indifference. In the execution room were about twenty men, a congregation made up of prison officers, newspaper reporters, and lookers-on who had succeeded.

Here, in the very middle of a sentence, the hand of Death interrupted the telling of O. Henry's last story. He had planned to make this story different from his others, the beginning of a new series in a style he

had not previously attempted. "I want to show the public," he said, "that I can write something new--new for me, I mean--a story without slang, a straightforward dramatic plot treated in a way that will come nearer my idea of real story-writing." Before starting to write the present story, he outlined briefly how he intended to develop it: Murray, the criminal accused and convicted of the brutal murder of his sweetheart--a murder prompted by jealous rage--at first faces the death penalty, calm, and, to all outward appearances, indifferent to his fate. As he nears the electric chair he is overcome by revulsion of feeling. He is left dazed, stupefied, stunned. The entire scene in the death-chamber--the witnesses, the spectators, the preparations for execution--become unreal to him. The thought flashes through his brain that a terrible mistake is being made. Why is he being strapped to the chair? What has he done? What crime has he committed? In the few moments while the straps are being adjusted a vision comes to him. He dreams a dream. He sees a little country cottage, bright, sunlit, nestling in a bower of flowers. A woman is there, and a little child. He speaks with them and finds that they are his wife, his child--and the cottage their home. So, after all, it is a mistake. Some one has frightfully, irretrievably blundered. The accusation, the trial, the conviction, the sentence to death in the electric chair--all a dream. He takes his wife in his arms and kisses the child. Yes, here is happiness. It was a dream. Then--at a sign from the prison warden the fatal current is turned on.

Murray had dreamed the wrong dream.

The Dream: Critical Appreciation

“*The Dream*”, supposedly the last literary contribution of O’ Henry, contextualizes the plot encircling the psychological implication of the central character of the story, Murray, a convicted criminal in prison – custody counting the last few hours of his mortality, before his time of execution approaches him.

Murray, as depicted by the author, is a convicted criminal penalized by death sentence, and this consequence verily describes the creator an impetus to sketch the character of Murray. As Murray gradually approaches the time, his state of response to the reality gets partitioned into two or rather quietly cynical. If precisely introspected from the perspective of a continuous dilemma, we see, how overtly Murray’s state of mind sensitively reacts to certain occurrences and phenomenon which otherwise in a natural state, would have sanguinely being surpassed. The author creates an imagery, visualizing the occurrences affecting Murray’s state of mind. We find Murray keenly observing, “*an ant crawled wildly here and there*”¹¹¹, implicating Murray’s state of mind delving deeply into a sphere of micro-existence and rejoicing the state of existence viz. life, may be, for the first time he endears life in such a manner.

But on the other sense, Murray equally is cynical, a parallel state of mind existing like an alter-ego, counter facing Murray’s

psychosis on reality. The alter-ego, a component state of superficial reality which was building up around Murray's state of existence, is not a mere repercussion of fear and trauma of death, even though as I mention, it is superficial by a deep state of evocation of a transcended motion of mind. Making Murray, see the mortal life around him from a point of view, a spiritual articulation fills up Murray's mind and reflects toward his sense of reality.

Murray overcomes fear, as his conscience is remorse, and this sense of guilt occurred in him due to his behavioural tendency, which was sensitive in nature. In the story, we find Murray as a criminal not by inheritance or self instinct but his art of criminality of murdering his love interest due to a certain mishap caused in his material environment affecting his emotional balance. So in a way, we can put that certain reaction of violence expressed by Murray was not a pleasurable response from Murray but unsuccessful outcome of his emotional restrain.

As the time approaches, Murray entered into a realm of subtle sense i.e. he returned to the shape of realization, where he actually dwelled in, where his instincts was unaware of any criminal expression. He dreamed of a benevolent moment, visualizing a country cottage amidst tranquillity of nature, a woman of his love, his children, his family. This can be interpreted as an impression of the reality being reflected from a person's conscience in the middle of the unabridged reality – a more of the cinematic philosophy of realism, in

the preview of Film-making master Victoria De Seica. So it seems, Murray's mind was fulfilled with that sense of divine completion, a reflection of his continuous consciousness of what he was originally, overcoming the reality in and around him, or the existence prevailing. Murray attained his immortality through the dream.

O'Henry – Point of view by Somerset Maugham

The stories of O'Henry are in great tradition of American short story writing that stretches from Irving and Poe through Damon Runyon and even PJO Rourke. In all, Henry wrote two hundred and seventy stories, and they consist of a rich mixture of semi realism, sentiment and surprise endings. Though he is frequently thought of as a 'funny' writer, O'Henry was, like Runyon, capable of addressing the darker side of life – '*A Municipal Report*' and '*The Furnished Room*' are two such stories. At the same time, his genius for comic invention flows through the pages of this book, exemplified by the epicurean exchange in '*Hostages to Momus*' between the narrator and Caligula Pork.

The extraordinary life and experiences of O'Henry inform all his stories. He is as at home describing life south of the Rio Grande as he is with 'the four million – the ordinary inhabitants of teeming, turn-of-the-century New York.' Although he has been criticized for relying too much on coincidences and contrived circumstances. O' Henry had a genuine sympathy for the downtrodden and oppressed which was unusual in

writers of his era. And it is an era that he depicts with remarkable clarity; though some of the conversations may grate on those whose consciousness is attuned to political attitudes of the late twentieth century rather than the realities of the early twentieth century, the stories are valuable examples of how life was lived at a time when slavery and the Indian Wars were only a generation or so in the past.

A pernickety critic might object that from its own standpoint '*The Dream*' is not a perfect story, for this kind of narrative should have a beginning, a middle and an end; and when the end is reached the whole story should have been told and you should neither wish nor need to ask a further question. Your crossword id filled up. But in this case O' Henry satisfied himself with an end that was ironic and effective. It is a tribute to O' Henry's skill that few readers remain so self-possessed that these objections occur to them. Such an author as O'Henry does not copy life; he arranges it in order the better to interest, excite and surprise. He does not aim at a transcription of life, but at a dramatization of it. He is willing to sacrifice plausibility to effect, and the test is whether he can get away with it; if he has so shaped the incidents he describes and the persons concerned in them that you are conscious of the violence he has put on them, he has failed. But that he sometimes fails is no argument against the method. At some periods readers exact a close adherence to the facts of life as they know them – it is then that realism is in fashion; at others, indifferent to this, they ask for the strange, the unusual, and the marvellous; and then, so long as they are held, readers are prepared to exercise a willing suspension of disbelief. Probability is not an entity that

is settled once for all; it changes with the inclinations of the time: it is what you can get your readers to swallow. In fact, in all fiction certain improbabilities are accepted without question because they are usual and often necessary to enable the author to get on with his story without delay. Hawthorne's 'Twice –Told tales' says everything that is to be said on the matter. I will content myself with a short extract:

A skillful artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care a certain unique or single effect to be brought out, he then invents such incidents – he then contrives such effects as many best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If this very initial sentence tends not to the out bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed...

It is not hard to state what O' Henry meant by a good short story: it is a piece of fiction, dealing with a single incident, material or spiritual, that can be read at a sitting; it is original, it must sparkle, excite or impress; and it must have unity of effect or impression. It should move in an even line from its exposition to its close. To write a story on the

principles he laid down is not so easy as some think. It requires intelligence, not perhaps of a very high order, but of a special kind; it requires a sense of form and no small powers of invention. No one in America has written stories on these lines better than O' Henry. Among the American writers of short stories he alone can bear comparison with the masters of France and Russia. At present he is unduly depreciated. That is natural. When an author of renown dies, obituaries are published in the papers and everyone who has had commerce with him, even if no, no more than to have a cup of tea in his company, writes to '*The Times*' to give an account of the occurrence. In a fortnight he is no longer news, and is quite quietly consigned to oblivion. Then, if he is fortunate, after a certain number of years, perhaps few, perhaps many, depending often on circumstances having nothing to do with literature, he will be remembered and restored to public favour after a generation of neglect, with the change that had come over American life.