

THE BEST OF O. HENRY:

*The Gift of the Magi
and Twelve Other Stories*



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

THE BEST OF
O. HENRY:

*The Gift of the Magi
and Twelve Other Stories*



O. Henry



Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

P.O. Box 658 Clayton, Delaware 19938 • www.prestwickhouse.com

SENIOR EDITOR: Paul Moliken

EDITOR: Lisa M. Miller and Stacey MacPherson

REVIEWING TEACHER: Barbara Bretherick, Wellington, FL

COVER DESIGN: Kyle Price

PRODUCTION: Dana Kerr

 **Prestwick House**
LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

P.O. BOX 658 • CLAYTON, DELAWARE 19938

TEL: 1.800.932.4593

FAX: 1.888.718.9333

WEB: www.prestwickhouse.com

Prestwick House Teaching Units™, Activity Packs™, and Response Journals™ are the perfect complement for these editions. To purchase teaching resources for this book, visit www.prestwickhouse.com

This Prestwick House edition is an unabridged republication, with minor emendations, of thirteen of O. Henry's short stories, taken from various sources in the public domain.

©2006 All new material is copyrighted by Prestwick House, Inc. All rights reserved. No portion may be reproduced without permission in writing from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America. *Revised 2014*

ISBN-10 1-58049-347-5

ISBN-13 978-1-58049-347-5

THE BEST OF O. HENRY:

The Gift of the Magi
and *Twelve Other Stories*

C O N T E N T S

5		Notes
7		Reading Pointers For Sharper Insights
9		The Furnished Room
15		The Last Leaf
21		The Gift of the Magi
27		The Cop and the Anthem
33		The Green Door
41		After Twenty Years
45		A Retrieved Reformation
53		The Third Ingredient
65		The Princess and the Puma
71		Buried Treasure
81		An Unfinished Story
87		Babes in the Jungle
93		The Call of the Tame
98		Glossary
107		Vocabulary

Notes

N O T E S

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

O . H E N R Y

O. Henry is the pen name of William Sydney Porter, who was born in Greensboro, NC, on September 11, 1862. He did not receive a formal education and, at twenty years of age, moved to Texas, where he worked on a sheep ranch.

In 1887, he married Athol Estes Roach, supposedly the model for Della in “The Gift of the Magi,” O. Henry’s most popular story. They had two children, a son (who died a few hours after birth) and a daughter. A year later, he obtained a job at a bank, but was accused of embezzlement and served time in Ohio Penitentiary. However, it was this imprisonment that led directly to O. Henry’s career as a writer; in 1902, after three years in prison, he settled in New York with his new name and nearly a dozen short stories ready to be published.

For three years, O. Henry wrote short stories every week for the *World*, a New York newspaper. *Cabbages and Kings*, his first collection of short stories, was published in 1904. These stories became extremely popular throughout the United States, and O. Henry’s next book, *The Four Million*, cemented his reputation as a vivid portrayer of life in New York City.



However, his personal life was destroyed by a failed marriage, bad financial dealings, and heavy drinking. O. Henry died of complications due to alcoholism, penniless, on June 5, 1910.

The derivation of his pseudonym is unclear: It may be related to a family cat, the name of the prison warden, or a name in a book he read in jail.

Pointers

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read this collection of the best of O. Henry's short stories, keep the following points in mind:

Surprise Endings

- The endings, while unexpected, always seem appropriate to the characters.
- The surprise ending usually shows O. Henry's philosophy about America: Wrongs are made right, the villains are punished, and the good are rewarded.
- Hints that point toward the climax are inevitably provided throughout the story.
- The use of coincidences in the stories helps make the endings more plausible, but may also make the plot seem overly manipulated, just to achieve the surprise.

The Depiction of Poverty and Wealth

- Having no money is not indicative of being poor.
- There is a kind of nobility, even in the most poverty-stricken lives.
- For a few, one tragedy will lead to another.
- O. Henry usually portrays poverty sympathetically and condemns the forces that cause it.
- Money is no barrier when it comes to love.

Settings

- New York City and its surroundings near the beginning of the 20th century
- Texas, or the West, at the turn of the century

Characters

- ordinary people in menial jobs struggling to survive
- con men who derive their income from swindling innocent victims
- people, both rich and poor, caught up by circumstances beyond their control

- O. Henry's sympathetic portrayal of his characters
- immigrants or first-generation Americans
- the underdog
- self-sacrificing heroes

Style

- dialects and slang
- digressions and asides to the reader
- the use of simile, metaphor, personification, and allusion
- puns, malapropisms, and excessive vocabulary used for humor
- lightheartedness and sensitivity

Love

- If love is even slightly dishonest, it will fail.
- Love is available to everyone.
- True love is more valuable than money and will conquer nearly any evil.
- Love is frequently unexpected.

THE FURNISHED ROOM

RESTLESS, SHIFTING, FUGACIOUS as time itself is a certain vast bulk of the population of the red brick district of the lower West Side.[†] Homeless, they have a hundred homes. They flit from furnished room to furnished room, transients forever—transients in abode, transients in heart and mind. They sing “Home, Sweet Home”[†] in ragtime;[†] they carry their *lares et penates*[†] in a handbox; their vine is entwined about a picture hat;[†] a rubber plant is their fig tree.

Hence the houses of this district, having had a thousand dwellers, should have a thousand tales to tell, mostly dull ones, no doubt; but it would be strange if there could not be found a ghost or two in the wake of all these vagrant guests.

One evening after dark a young man prowled among these crumbling red mansions, ringing their bells. At the twelfth he rested his lean hand-baggage upon the step and wiped the dust from his hatband and forehead. The bell sounded faint and far away in some remote, hollow depths.

To the door of this, the twelfth house whose bell he had rung, came a housekeeper who made him think of an unwholesome, surfeited worm[†] that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers.

He asked if there was a room to let.

“Come in,” said the housekeeper. Her voice came from her throat; her

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

throat seemed lined with fur. "I have the third-floor back, vacant since a week back. Should you wish to look at it?"

The young man followed her up the stairs. A faint light from no particular source mitigated the shadows of the halls. They trod noiselessly upon a stair carpet that its own loom would have forsworn.[†] It seemed to have become vegetable; to have degenerated in that rank, sunless air to lush lichen or spreading moss that grew in patches to the staircase and was viscid under the foot like organic matter. At each turn of the stairs were vacant niches in the wall. Perhaps plants had once been set within them. If so they had died in that foul and tainted air. It may be that statues of the saints had stood there, but it was not difficult to conceive that imps and devils had dragged them forth in the darkness and down to the unholy depths of some furnished pit below.

"This is the room," said the housekeeper, from her furry throat. "It's a nice room. It ain't often vacant. I had some most elegant people in it last summer—no trouble at all, and paid in advance to the minute. The water's at the end of the hall. Sprowls and Mooney kept it three months. They done a vaudeville sketch. Miss B'retta Sprowls—you may have heard of her—Oh, that was just the stage names—right there over the dresser is where the marriage certificate hung, framed. The gas is here, and you see there is plenty of closet room. It's a room everybody likes. It never stays idle long."

"Do you have many theatrical people rooming here?" asked the young man.

"They comes and goes. A good proportion of my lodgers is connected with the theatres. Yes, sir, this is the theatrical district. Actor people never stays long anywhere. I get my share. Yes, they comes and they goes."

He engaged the room, paying for a week in advance. He was tired, he said, and would take possession at once. He counted out the money. The room had been made ready, she said, even to towels and water. As the housekeeper moved away he put, for the thousandth time, the question that he carried at the end of his tongue.

"A young girl—Miss Vashner—Miss Eloise Vashner—do you remember such a one among your lodgers? She would be singing on the stage, most likely. A fair girl, of medium height and slender, with reddish, gold hair and a dark mole near her left eyebrow."

"No, I don't remember the name. Them stage people has names they change as often as their rooms. They comes and they goes. No, I don't call that one to mind."

No. Always no. Five months of ceaseless interrogation and the inevi-

table negative. So much time spent by day in questioning managers, agents, schools and choruses; by night among the audiences of theatres from all-star casts down to music halls so low that he dreaded to find what he most hoped for. He who had loved her best had tried to find her. He was sure that since her disappearance from home this great, water-girt[†] city held her somewhere, but it was like a monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its upper granules of to-day buried tomorrow in ooze and slime.

The furnished room received its latest guest with a first glow of pseudo-hospitality, a hectic, haggard, perfunctory welcome like the specious smile of a demirep.[†] The sophisticated comfort came in reflected gleams from the decayed furniture, the ragged brocade upholstery of a couch and two chairs, a foot-wide cheap pier-glass between the two windows, from one or two gilt picture frames and a brass bedstead in a corner.

The guest reclined, inert, upon a chair, while the room, confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel,[†] tried to discourse to him of its divers tenantry.

A polychromatic rug like some brilliant-flowered rectangular, tropical islet lay surrounded by a billowy sea of soiled matting. Upon the gay-papered wall were those pictures that pursue the homeless one from house to house—The Huguenot[†] Lovers, The First Quarrel, The Wedding Breakfast, Psyche at the Fountain.[†] The mantel's chastely severe outline was ingloriously veiled behind some pert drapery drawn rakishly askew like the sashes of the Amazonian ballet. Upon it was some desolate flotsam cast aside by the room's marooned when a lucky sail had borne them to a fresh port—a trifling vase or two, pictures of actresses, a medicine bottle, some stray cards out of a deck.

One by one, as the characters of a cryptograph become explicit, the little signs left by the furnished room's procession of guests developed a significance. The threadbare space in the rug in front of the dresser told that lovely women had marched in the throng. Tiny fingerprints on the wall spoke of little prisoners trying to feel their way to sun and air. A splattered stain, raying like the shadow of a bursting bomb, witnessed where a hurled glass or bottle had splintered with its contents against the wall. Across the pier glass had been scrawled with a diamond in staggering letters the name "Marie." It seemed that the succession of dwellers in the furnished room had turned in fury—perhaps tempted beyond forbearance by its garish coldness—and wreaked upon it their passions. The furniture was chipped and bruised; the couch, distorted by bursting springs, seemed a horrible monster[†] that

Glossary

THE FURNISHED ROOM

the lower West Side – a section of Manhattan, a borough of New York City; New York City is the setting for a large number of O. Henry's stories. The book in which this story was originally published is titled *The Four Million*, which refers to the large number of people living in New York during O. Henry's time and the fact that each one has an individual story to tell. By the 2000 Census, though, New York City's population had grown to slightly more than eight million.

"Home, Sweet Home" – a song from the American opera *Clari, the Maid of Milan*, written by John Howard Payne in 1823

ragtime – a style of jazz music popular from the 1890s through the 1920s

"lares et penates" – [*Latin*] loosely translated as "household gods and guardians"; the phrase is commonly meant to refer to highly valued household possessions.

picture hat – a decorative wide-brimmed hat for women

"unwholesome, surfeited worm" – The narrator likens the landlady to a worm, commonly thought to be one of the lowliest creatures on Earth. Watch for more references to worms throughout the story, along with references to fungus and dank, underground things. The greedy and amoral landlady is represented by these descriptions.

"its own loom would have forsworn" – an example of personification; O. Henry is representing the carpet and its loom as if they are people, instead of unthinking, inanimate objects that they really are. The implication in the comparison is that the loom that made the carpet would have denied that it had actually done so because of the worn quality of the carpet. Note that later in the story, the entire room and its furnishings are personified as well (see note: *Mr. Pneumonia* in *The Last Leaf* glossary).

water-girt – literally, *surrounded by water*; the island of Manhattan is bound by the East River and the Hudson River.

"demirep" – [*slang*] a promiscuous woman; the term literally means "half a reprobate." *Reprobate* refers to a person of loose morals or one who is evil and beyond redemption.

"confused in speech...apartment in Babel" – a reference to Babel, a city mentioned in the Old Testament. According to the Bible, Noah's descendants attempted to build a giant tower reaching to heaven because they believed their unified culture could accomplish anything, and that the tower would be a source of pride and admiration for them. God, however, did not want the people to exhibit such pride because it showed that they were glorifying themselves instead of God; therefore, He confused

Vocabulary

THE FURNISHED ROOM

askew – crooked, slanted

bandbox – a small box used to hold clothes

besought – begged, implored

brocade – a type of heavy fabric

cant – tilt, slant

chastely – purely; modestly

cognizant – aware; informed

commingled – mixed, combined

cryptograph – a message in secret code

demure – modest

discourse – talk

divers – [*diverse*] various, miscellaneous

draying – hauling heavy loads on a type low cart (a *dray*)

effluvium – vapor; by-product, waste

flotsam – debris, remains

forbearance – tolerance, patience

forsworn – renounced, rejected

fugacious – fleeting; elusive

garish – showy, gaudy

gaslight – a gas-burning lamp

heliotrope – a type of plant with purple fragrant flowers

ignoble – vulgar, base

incontinent – lacking self-restraint

inert – motionless

inevitable – unavoidable; certain

ingloriously – shamefully, dishonorably

insolent – rude, brazen

lichen – a type of fungus

loom – a machine used for weaving yarn or thread

mignonette – a type of plant with small, green fragrant flowers

mitigated – made less severe; moderated

peremptorily – urgently; emphatically

perfunctory – routine

peripatetic – constantly walking or moving from place to place

pier glass – a large mirror set between two windows

polychromatic – multi-colored

rakishly – carelessly

ransacking – searching recklessly; pillaging

sophistical – plausible-seeming, but actually false or deceptive