

Narrative Techniques in O. Henry's Short Stories

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O. Henry

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O. Henry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O._Henry)

Abstract

This paper, 'The Narrative Techniques of O. Henry's Short Stories' brings out the various narrative techniques employed by him. O. Henry used the first person narrative and third person narrative in many of his short stories. 1. The author becomes a character narrator. 2. The narrator in all the stories is not the same person. 3. The authorial voice is heard in certain short stories. In the use of narrative techniques O. Henry is unique in many respects. First O. Henry uses 'surprise ending' or the 'twist in the tail'. Virtually speaking, O. Henry wants his stories to end in such a humorous or twisted manner. He is humane and he uses subtle irony in the description and dialogues. Whatever he wants to say, he is very clear; as writer he uses dialogues, incidents and characters for the development of the plot. He also employs flash back techniques of narration. O. Henry commits himself to the use of flash back profusely. He also employs nostalgic memory, suspense, thrill and realism. 1. Flash back technique is used in the first person narrative. 2. Memories from the past are retold to another character 3. It is also used in the self explanatory style. As life is complex, O. Henry is complex. The style of the writer is

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complex and inimitable. He is unique and possesses individual idiosyncrasies. Though they appear very simple, the deep meanings hidden in the stories are unfathomable.

Introduction

The short story ought to be spun in words and structures in order to bring out the desired story of some value. The meaning is the first, the art of narration is the next. As the author narrates the story, the intended meaning is brought out. Meaning and narration are inter-mixed. While narrating the story, O. Henry uses various techniques. He uses the first person narrative in many of the short stories. O. Henry makes his short stories very popular and unique with “O. Henry’s writing technique”, which is manifest in the well-conceived outline, well-knit suspense, intricate plot, humorous coincidence and surprising ending. Two of the techniques are very popular; they are “Surprising ending” and “Smiles full of tears”.

In his short stories, O. Henry shows his ingenious conception while creating the plot. His works are full of humor and readers cannot help smiling or even laughing; but after that, what readers feel left in their hearts, is only sorrow. That’s the reason why people agree with the phrase “smiles full of tears” so readily, when they think about his stories.

On the other hand, while his stories are ingeniously conceived, the endings are always contrary to readers’ expectations. Though his stories’ endings are always surprising, they are not beyond reason, for they conform well to the logic of life.

The Tale of a Tainted Tenner

In ‘The Tale of a Tainted Tenner’, the ten dollar note speaks in the first person: ‘I am a ten dollar Treasury note, series of 1901. You may have seen once in a friend’s hand. On my face, in the centre, is a picture of the bison miscalled a buffalo by fifty or sixty millions of Americans I never knew a really cultured and educated person....’ ‘I’ve paid as many debts as the man who dies...I was lucky money. I kept on the move. Sometimes I changed hands twenty times a day. I saw the inside of every business...’ (O. Henry 189-190).

It is a thrilling account of the Ten dollar note. The author is invisibly present in each line giving the exact details of its life humorously. His narrative technique adds beauty and charm to the inanimate object that becomes animate. Life is given to it; it is the life of the author.

Memories of a Yellow Dog

In the same manner, there is yet another story *Memories of a yellow Dog*. It is a dog that recollects its experiences. But, would it speak out like a human being in the story? ‘I don’t suppose it will knock any of you people off your perch to read a contribution from an animal. In the second page of the story there is the narrative shift. The dog narrates:

‘I was born a yellow pup, date, locality, pedigree and weight unknown...

From a pedigreed yellow pup to be an anonymous yellow cur looking like a cross between an Angora Cat and a box of lemons....If men knew how

Women pass the time when they are alone they’d never marry’. (O. Henry 38-39).

The dog could keenly observe the people and narrate things especially about women. This dog is philosophical and practical. It is also outspoken and witty. The following line would illustrate the meaning. ‘The matrimonial mishap looked down at me with almost canine intelligence in his face’ (39). The old master of the dog was narrating: ‘Me and my doggie, we are bound for the Rock mountains’ (41). The dog is pleased as well as displeased by the master’s speech. He pulled the dog’s ears and the dog howled in pain. Then the man said: ‘you common, monkey-headed, and rat-tailed. sulphur-coloured, son of a door-mat, do you know what I’m going to call you?....’I’m going to call you ‘Pete’.... The dog thought the lovely name would be ‘Lovey’. The author ends the story with the words of the dog humorously. ‘...if .I’d had five tails I couldn’t have done enough wagging to do justice to the occasion.’” (O. Henry, 41).

Treatment of Subjects

Thus, in the world of fiction, the author is at liberty to treat a subject humorously. The Ten dollar, an inanimate object speaks the true story of its life. The yellow dog, an animate but speechless animal, very humorously speaks its account of life. In other words, the author

becomes the non-living and the speechless, and speaks with jest about life for pure fun and entertainment.

Aptly, O. Henry becomes the character and narrates the story. In many of his stories, O. Henry himself narrates the story.

Author's Voice in The Coming out of Maggie

The authorial voice is seen in 'The Coming out of Maggie'. It is an artistic presentation of a girl called Maggie who secured a man at last. He was a wonderful catch. O. Henry narrates: 'Maggie Toole, on account of her dull eyes, broad mouth and left-handed style of foot work in the two-step, went to the dances with Anna McCarty and her fellow' (26). Anna usually went to the hop with Jimmie, but Maggie was without her catch. One day when asked to get ready to go to the hop, she refused to go with her without her 'man'. Surprisingly Maggie had a big 'catch' after some time. The 'catch' was Terry O'Sullivan. The character Maggie was made to speak: 'I never had a fellow in my life. I got tired of coming with Anna and Jimmy every night, so I fixed it with him to call himself O'Sullivan and brought him along. (O. Henry,31).

O. Henry ends the story with his own voice: 'It was remarkable how quickly Maggie's eyes could change from dull to a shining brown. (O. Henry, 32). It does not matter whether that the 'man' or 'catch' is an unsocial element or a wanted man by the cops; it is enough that he is a sturdy fellow to be a partner of life. Maggie has changed the name of Tony Spinelli to Terry O'Sullivan. Though he always carried a knife with him and the most wanted man by the cops, Maggie changed his name and had him as her 'catch'. He was a good match to fight Dempsy or anyone else in that locality. Maggie won't allow her man to go to any of the clubs because it would result in a fight.

Jimmy Hays and Muriel

To illustrate the authorial voice, 'Jimmy Hays and Muriel' is the best example. O. Henry starts:

'Supper was over and there had fallen upon the camp the silence....

The water hole shone from the dark earth...Coyotes yelped. Dull

thumps indicated the rocking horse movements of the hobbled Ponies... A half troop of the Frontier Battalion of Texas Rangers were disturbed about the fire'. (O. Henry, 452).

The time, the atmosphere, the background and the persons are reported very accurately by the author. O. Henry introduces the hero: 'A gangling youth of twenty lolled in the saddle... He dismounted, unsaddled, dropped the coils of his stake-rope and got his hobbles from the saddle horn' (453). One day the youth introduces to them his friend Muriel, a horned frog that came out of his flannel blue shirt. A bright ribbon was around the neck of the frog; it sat on his shoulders motionless. It was a strange sight for all of them. O. Henry again narrates the story in the second part: Jimmy Hays become a favourite in the ranger camp.

He had an endless store of good-nature and a mild, perennial quality of humour that is well adapted to the camp life. He was never without his horned frog. In the bosom of his shirt during rides, in his knee or shoulder in the camp, under his blankets at night, the ugly little beast never left him. (O. Henry, 454).

After two months, Sebastiano Saldar, a Mexican desperado and cattle chief crossed that region...'Sebastiano Saldar and his gang dashed upon them with blazing six-shooters and high voiced yells. (O. Henry, 455). But to their surprise, Jimmy was missing. His gang searched for him, but he was not found.

Nearly after a year, one afternoon, the rangers crossed the prairie, and found a mutilated body. O. Henry's narration adds a feather to his cap: 'And then from beneath the weather-beaten rags of the dead man, there wriggled out a horned frog with a faded red ribbon around its neck and sat upon the shoulder of its long-quiet master'...The narration becomes quite pathetic: 'The outburst was at once a dirge, an apology, an epitaph, and a paeon (sic) of triumph. A strange requiem, you may say...' (O. Henry 457)...but if Jimmy Hays could have heard it he would have understood. O. Henry ends the story accepting the true friendship between youth and frog. The voice of the author becomes pathetic. The last part of the story is filled with pathos.

Again the author narrates the story. It is the authorial voice found in the background in the beginning of the story.

The Hand that Riles the World

In 'The Hand that Riles the World' O. Henry becomes a character and narrates it in the first person: 'Many of our Great men' said I, 'have declared that they owe their success to the aid and encouragement of some brilliant woman'. (200). But his friend Jeff Peters is of the opposite view about the women, that they are 'little use in politics or business'. 'He also holds the opinion that a woman is an absolutely unreliable partner in any straight swindle (200). Then the friend describes about Mrs. Avery the central character: 'she had on a low-necked dress covered with silver spangles, and diamond rings and ear-bobs. Her arms were bare; and she was using a desk telephone with one hand, drinking tea with another'. (202). again he says: 'A woman of high intellect and perfect beauty is a rare thing. (O. Henry, 202). The story continues to describe her activities: '..... she is writing postal cards to the Chinese Minister asking him to get Arthur (a character in the story) a job in a tea store. Finally his friend Jeff Peters was cheated by the lady. He received a letter: 'it appointed him postmaster of Date City, Fla' instead of United States Marshal for 500 dollars. The entire story is a conversation between O. Henry and his friend about the honest-looking but cheating lady called Mrs. Avery. He starts the story in the identical manner of O. Henry. He narrates it in the first person.

First Person Narrative

First person narrative is very effective especially in the short stories. The author writes as though from his authentic experience. He places characters amidst difficult situations. He creates a world of make believe. The readers are in the illusionary world of the author after suspending their own world of experience. The words of the author, his personality and the description portray the unreal situation in a realistic manner.'

The Cop and the Anthem

In 'The Cop and the Anthem' Mr. Soapy commits unsocial activities in order that he might again court arrest and live a leisurely life in the prison. Finally he changes his mind and wants to live a decent civilian life. The surprise ending is superb. Soapy enters a church. The

music enchants him. He was sure to change from the next day and become somebody in the world. But the last part of the story has a ‘twist in the tail’.

Soapy feels a hand laid on his arm. He looks quickly around into the broad face of a police man.

‘What are you doin’ here?’-asked the officer.

‘Nothin’, said Soapy.

‘Then come along’ said the policeman.

‘Three months on the Island’, said the magistrate in the police court the next morning. (O. Henry 37).

The story ends. Unexpectedly Soapy is arrested and put inside the prison.

The Romance of a Busy Broker

Again in ‘The Romance of a Busy Broker’ O. Henry’s ‘twist in the tail’ could be seen. It was a broker’s office with a busy office routine every day. That day was an interview day. The typist, who came, was sent back. The office had pitcher, a clerk, Harvey, the manager, Leslie, the lady Typist. In the evening, Harvey talks hurriedly to Miss Leslie.

‘Miss Leslie, have but a moment to spare. I want to say something in that moment. Will you be my wife? I haven’t had time to make love to you in the ordinary way, but I really do like you. Talk quick, please...’

He continues:

I want you to marry me. I love you, Miss Leslie-I wanted to tell you, and I snatched a minute...won’t you, miss Leslie.’

After listening to the wooing words of Harvey, Leslie sobs and O. Henry’s twist in the tail’ is very interesting in the end. ‘... Do you remember, Harvey? We were married last evening at night eight O’clock in the little church around the corner.’ (O. Henry 74). One might wonder what would be the answer of the lady. But to the surprise of everyone, they are already man and wife. The busy broker has clean forgotten his romance and marriage. O. Henry has similar **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013
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endings in his short stories. Social oppression, suppressed moments, money constraints and life saving acts-all these are found in society.

Humour in The Lost Blend

O. Henry uses subtle humour in his 'The Lost Blend'. It is the story of the silent love of the shy Con Lantry, who is working in Kenealys'. Con was tongue-tied and scarlet in the presence of ladies. He was even a trembler, bashful and dumb before Katherine, the sweet daughter of Kenealy. Whenever Katherine came asking for a beer bottle, Con was silent, but dreamt of her. Thus he became a silent wooer. One day he drank a glass full of drink. He felt elated and was flying. The following dialogue is the finest illustration of the subtle humour of O. Henry:

'As he (Con Lantry) returned through the hall Katherine was just going up the stairs'.

'No news yet, Mr. Lantry?' She asked, with her teasing laugh. Con lifted her clear from the floor and held her there. The news is, he said, that we're to be married'. 'Put me down, Sir!' She cried indignantly, or I will-oh, Con, Where, oh, wherever did you get the nerve to say it?'(O. Henry,167)

The end is so beautifully drawn by O. Henry. By drinking the illegal mixture Con gets the courage and succeeds in lifting Katherine. Now she wonders at the smartness and boldness of Con.

The Brief Deput Tildy

O. Henry uses the character for subtle humour. In 'The Brief Deput Tildy' he describes two marriageable girls namely Aileen and Tildy working as waitresses in Bogle's Cheaphouse, a family restaurant in the boulevard. O. Henry narrates '... Aileen. She was tall, beautiful, lively, and gracious and learned in persiflage ...' The author contrasts the other waitress: 'Tildy was dumpy, plain faced and too anxious to please to please' (sic) (O. Henry 81).

'.... Aileen could successfully exchange repartee against a dozen at once. And every smile that she sent forth lodged, like pellets from a scatter-gun, in as many hearts. And all this while she would be performing astounded feats with orders of park....with all this feasting and

flirting and merry exchange of wit Bogle's came mighty near being a gallon... Aileen could have had an engagement every evening'. (82).

O. Henry contrasts Tildy with Aileen. 'Tildy was a good waitress, and the men tolerated her. They who sat at her tables spoke to her briefly with quotations from the bill of fare; and then raised their voices in honeyed and otherwise-flavoured accents, eloquently addressed to the fair Aileen.' (O. Henry 82).

As the author introduces and contrasts the two characters he narrates the passages with subtle humour and laughter. He also brings in Seeders (a character) to kiss Tildy in a drunken mood to heighten the feelings of Tildy just for a day. The next day he comes and apologizes for the wrong he has done to her. According to Aileen the apologizing man is not a gentleman 'He ain't anything of a gentleman or he wouldn't ever of apologized'. (85). depicts the character of a writer. This is narrated in flash-back. His poor existence, the troubles created by the printers, the poor payment given to him, his inability to pay the rent and his loneliness-all these are narrated in the story.

The Door of the Unrest

Similarly O. Henry narrates the story called 'The Door of the Unrest' in flash-back. He portrays the life of an immortal character called Micob Ader who lived for two thousand years and witnessed several incidents of history in different nations. O. Henry writes it as though he has taken it from old papers: 'He says himself that his name is Micob Ader; and that when Jesus, the Christian Messiah, was condemned by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, he paused the test while bearing his cross to the place of Crucifixion before the door of Micob Ader. The shoe maker struck Jesus with his fist, saying 'Go, why tarryes thou'? The Messiah (sic) answered him:

I indeed am going; but thou shalt tarry until I come, 'thereby condemning him to live until the Day of Judgment. He lives forever, but at the end of every hundred years he falls into a fit of trance, on recovering from which he finds himself in the same state of youth in which he was when Jesus suffered being then about thirty years of age. (O. Henry 458).

Like Tiresias of 'The Waste Land' written by T.S. Eliot, he had seen George Washington, Ptolemy the great, and King Nero. According to Ader, Nero smoked a long black cigar and threw it which caused the great fire in the city, but he was not fiddling. The king was tearing down and pathetic. Ader had walked through Siberia and Afghanistan; he had also seen Cherubs and Cupid. He had also seen Solomon's temple which was neither written in the history nor described in 'The Bible'. He also gave the additional information that the temple had 80,000 goats. Ader also talked about Tamer Lane of Timour. He was a witness to the destruction of Jerusalem. He saw the coronation of Charlemagne and lynching of Joan of Arc. He also remembered that Pontinus committed suicide.

The flash-back comes to a stop when Ader weeps. The author is the only person who listens to him. Whenever he walked he saw the seven geese which represented the seven souls of Jews who helped crucifixion. Ader also relates that his real name was Mike O' Bader. He remembers that he had a daughter. Whatever he narrated nobody listened to him or recognized him. The entire story is in the flash-back narration of Ader. The author listens to the narration and forms his opinion that death is a boon; forgetfulness is a welcome variation. Eternal living is a curse and long suffering. The message of the author is that one should die after a life time. He subtly hides the fact that one should not incur the wrath of the divine as Ader. is a flash back narration in the first person by the story begins.

The Ethics of Pig

In The Ethics of Pig, O. Henry starts narrating: 'On an East-bound Train I went into the smoker and Jefferson Peters, the only man with a brain west of the Wabash River...' (252). Then the author introduces Jeff is the line of illegal (sic) graft. He is not to be dreaded by widows and orphans....' (252). The author then becomes a passive listener to Jeff. The rest of the story is narrated by Jeff. He narrates a tale connected with another criminal called Rufe Tatum. Both Jeff and Rufe went down into the low lands. They stayed in a house near the circus grounds maintained by a widow called Peevy. Jeff narrates:

'That night I went down to the circus tents and opened a small shell game. Rufe was to be the capper. I gave him a roll of phony currency to bet with and kept a bunch of it...' (O. Henry 255).

Rufe earned 42 dollars. After two days Rufe brought pigs that were making terrible squealing.

The next day Jeff saw an ad in the papers about the stolen and educated pig from the circus and a suitable reward would be given. Rufe was feeding the pig with milk and Apple-peeling. Jeff asked him for ten dollars because he wanted to keep it among the rare species of pigs and that pig would add to his inspiration and genius. Rufe did not want to get a low price for the pig; last he got 800 dollars from Jeff.

‘Seven hundred’ says (sic) I.

‘Make it eight hundred’, says Rufe ‘and I’ll crush the sentiment out of my heart’.(258).

The deal came to an end. Jeff narrates: ‘I took the pig by the hind leg. He turned on a squeal like the stream calliope at the circus’. (O. Henry 259).

Then Jeff saw a big advertisement for the stolen pig for five thousand dollars by the circus company. He mounted the pig on a wagon and drove down to the circus. On enquiries he found there was no such ad was given and the reward of five thousand dollars was not announced. Then Jeff rushed to the newspaper office and found the fellow who gave the ad was a crank. Jeff got vexed and rushed home and found Rufe Tatum missing. Thus Jeff was cheated by his friend. The following sentence is addressed to the author about the missing Rufe. ‘So there, you see,’ said Jefferson Peters, in conclusion, ‘how hard it is ever to find a fair minded and honest business-partner. (O. Henry 260).

Conclusion

O. Henry uses familiar forms of narrations such as authorial voice, third person narration, first person narration, simple dialogues, flash back technique and recollections. He also use the following techniques; the author becomes the narrator or the narrator becomes the character, or the character narrates the story or an inanimate object narrating its experience like a human, or an animal voicing its feelings like a sensible human, very strange angles of looking or analyzing; subtle portrayals, comparisons, contrasts, images, similes, myths, suggestive meanings and direct or indirect ways of telling or showing.

The art of telling the story for writers is like the flowing stream and readers either pleasantly swim or drink the sweet water to quench the thirst of reading. From the authors many passages pour out to illustrate the natural flow of the language. These passages also contain the various ingredients of the usages. Mostly the common, day to day language is used. Single words act as the meaningful sentences, crisp dialogues aim at the central theme of the story. The sudden shifts, waiting for a long time, negative turning points change into the positive of life and an innate cry to live - all these are also found in the narrations; references, naturalness, flow, images drawn from common life and surprises also abound in the stories. Stage setting, explanation of the meaning of an action, summary of thought processes or of events too insignificant, description of physical events and details of such descriptions cannot spring naturally from a character; these will occur in many different instances, in various forms within the story.

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