

## Analysis of Social Criticism in O. Henry's Short Stories

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**Abstract.** O. Henry is universally acknowledged as a modern American master of short story. In most of his short stories, he succeeds in presenting the social reality of America in the early twentieth century. Through the truthful description of the society of his time, he strongly conveys sharp criticism and satire towards the government, the American state apparatus, the economic and social system in that society. *The Cop and the Anthem* and *The Gift of the Magi*, belonging to the same category with the description of the same kind of people from the low social and economic class, can serve as a mirror of the social reality of that time. This essay attempts to expose the social criticism in the two stories by analyzing the plots and the characters. It aims to disclose the corruption of the state apparatus and the miserable life of the low class, so that it can help readers to acquire better knowledge of that society in America and the failures and unfairness in the development of capitalism, as well as the miserable living conditions of the poor people caused by the failures and the unfairness.

### 1. Introduction

The corruption of the state apparatus and the failures, unfairness in the development of capitalism as well as the miserable life of the low class in the early twentieth century are presented through the setting, the style of language, characters and the combination of humor and satire in O. Henry's short stories: *The Cop and the Anthem* and *The Gift of the Magi*.

O. Henry (1862-1910), was a prolific American short-story writer, a master of surprise endings, who wrote about the life of ordinary people in New York City. Many of his stories depict the lives of poor people in New York, as well as in other places. He sympathized with the poor and hated the rich who exploited and despised them. Among all his works, *The Four Million* is his best volume, which includes his best individual stories: *The Gift of the Magi* and *The Cop and the Anthem*.

This essay tries to analyze the social criticism embodied in the two short stories: *The Cop and the Anthem* and *The Gift of the Magi*, both of which belong to the same category. For one thing, the protagonists in the two stories, all from the low class in America, represent the poor in the early twentieth century. For another, the two stories, all showing the vivid picture of the poor people's living conditions, suffering and depression, can serve as "a mirror of the social reality" of that time (Yan 53). In a word, in the three stories, through the description of the poor people, O. Henry expresses his strong criticism towards the American state apparatus, the social and economic system and capitalism. Therefore, this essay attempts to expose the social criticism in the three short stories by analyzing the plots and the characters of the two stories respectively.

### 2. The Social Background of O. Henry's Short Stories

O. Henry lived in the period between the end of the civil war in 1865 and the dawn of the twentieth century. After the American Civil War that ended with northern industrialism's triumph over southern agrarianism, the conditions of labor greatly changed, for the machines with their great cost and efficiency seemed far more valuable and more useful than the workers who tended them. As a result, a great number of workers became unemployed completely and found it difficult to survive. The range of O. Henry's experiences from the provincial limitation of boyhood in an embittered reconstruction of south to ultimate triumph in New York supplied O. Henry with abundant materials for his writing. O. Henry's works are typically American and he presents to his readers various types

of people in the United States, especially, the low class—the little men and women dwarfed in the maze of contemporary life.

After the 1880s, the depression of several economic crises caused social turmoil, and all sorts of social problems focused on the eruption in the countryside and the worker-capitalist conflicts got sharper; meanwhile, under the influences of realism and naturalism literature in Europe, a group of newly emerging writers from the low social class, like Mark Twain, O. Henry, Hamlin Garland, and Theodore Dreiser had come to understand more deeply the democratic system in America. With dissatisfaction with the social reality of that time and sympathy for the poor, these writers put emphasis on depicting the miserable life of the low class in order to disclose the panorama of that society in which the low class were exploited by the capitalists who operated the distorted economic system. They condemned the brutal society and the economic system. Among them, O. Henry excelled at revealing “the cruelty and unfairness of that society by describing the life of the underdog”(Li 62). It was in most of his works that he criticized the political, economic and religious system in that society.

### **3. The Analysis of Social Criticism in *The Cop and the Anthem***

#### **3.1 General Introduction to *The Cop and the Anthem***

In the story *The Cop and the Anthem*, the main character, Soapy is a homeless vagrant who decides to be sent to the hospitable Blackwell’s prison on the island. Soapy attempts to practice several illegal activities for the purpose of “wooing capture” (Wu 171) but his attempts end up with failure every time. With great disappointment, Soapy has to go back to the park bench in Madison Square. However, on his way home, the sweet music of the anthem from the church and the beautiful moonlight scenery change his mind; therefore, he determines to pull himself out of the mire and make a man of himself again. Nevertheless, unluckily, when Soapy is planning his tomorrow’s action for being a successful man, he is arrested because a policeman is suspicious of him, without any reasonable evidence.

#### **3.2. Social Criticism Emodied in *The Cop and the Anthem***

With deep study, it is not difficult to see this is a story that is not only full of laughter but also filled with strong criticism towards the reality, the American state apparatus which can manipulate the poor and is capable of molding the weak into any desirable shapes. This is a kind of humor with tears, and it is just this kind of tearful laughter presented by the characters and plots that reveal the social criticism in the story.

Going into prison is the only thing that Soapy desires and he sets about accomplishing this ambition immediately. He tries six times but ends up with failure. For the first time, Soapy plans to enter a glittering restaurant to have a luxurious dinner without paying any money. Thus he can be arrested quietly. Unfortunately, his frayed trousers and decadent shoes betray him. Because, this is a glittering cafe where the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm are gathered together nightly. Poor as Soapy is, he can never entertain himself in such a place. The sharp contrast between the rich and the poor, like Soapy, reveals that in the early twentieth century when America had become the Empire, there were still hundreds and thousands of poor people living on narrow means, even unable to make ends meet, while a minority of wealthy men led a luxurious life.

Then, Soapy has another idea, he throws a cobblestone to a glass window, standing still there in hope of the policeman catching him smoothly, while ridiculously, the cop does not believe Soapy has done that. After two failures, Soapy tries again. In his fourth attempt when he seduces a girl who turns out to be a prostitute, the policeman just looks at them. And then Soapy yells to disturb social order but the cop considers him innocent. It sounds funny but in fact it is a relentless sarcasm of the police force, of the law and of the whole state apparatus of America. The police force is neither the defense of peace and safety nor the embodiment of justice. Furthermore, sarcasm lies in his last attempt. When Soapy steals an umbrella, the cop never inquires about it at all. Instead, he hurries to assist a tall

blonde in an opera cloak across the street in front of a streetcar that is approaching two blocks away. Why is the cop indifferent to Soapy but gallant to an actress? The cop is not doing what he is supposed to do. Even cops live a dissolute life of pleasure and fun, and of vulgar taste. All of these satirize the abnormal law system. At last, the sparkle of Soapy's hope is extinguished by the law. It makes readers wonder what the law is. As a matter of fact, "it is not law at all"(Wang 73). There is no right or wrong but the will of governing as they see fit. The law is enacted to protect the property of the wealthy and manipulate the poor who have no control over their own fate.

Under such a social system, the rich got richer, while the poor got poorer. For the rich, the wealthier, the more avaricious, and the more dehumanized. For the poor, the more impoverished, the more desperate and the more dehumanized. Soapy, still young, can make a decent living through his work, but he lives a life as an idler, just because he is compelled by the unfair social reality. However, essentially, he is a good guy, when he hears the anthem, he resolves to pull himself out of the mire, and conquer the evil that had taken possession of him. Unluckily again, the dream that he will make a man of himself is shattered, but the former dream that he longs to be jailed on the Blackwell island is realized. Such a surprising ending indicates that in that society, there was no law at all and no distinction between right and wrong, good and evil. Meanwhile, it repudiates the author's strong sarcasm and indignation toward the society. Through the story, O. Henry criticizes the distorted society which is full of unfairness and disorder.

#### **4. The Analysis of Social Criticism in *The Gift of the Magi***

##### **4.1. General Introduction to *The Gift of the Magi***

*The Gift of the Magi* is included in O. Henry's second collection of short stories in 1906, and has been anthologized many times since then.

In the short story, Della and Jim Young, are a newly married couple that suffer financially. Jim suffers a thirty-percent pay cut, so the young husband and wife have to be awfully economical. With the coming of Christmas, the poor struggling couple determine to buy the other a suitable Christmas present. Without any discussion, unanimously, they sell their most valuable possessions to buy the appropriate Christmas presents for the other: Della Young sells her beautiful hair to buy Jim a platinum watch chain, and Jim sells his heirloom watch to buy Della some tortoise shell hair combs. Ironically, Della cannot wear her combs without her hair, and Jim, without his watch, cannot use his watch chain.

##### **4.2. Social Criticism Embodied in *The Gift of the Magi***

At the beginning of the short story, Della counts her pennies which she saves one or two at a time by "bulldozing the grocer and the butcher"(Zhu 150). She also realizes the behavior of haggling over every ounce makes her ashamed. However, she has no choice. She lives in such a society where the rich and the poor live a sharply different life. On the one hand, the rich men lead an exaggerate life, indulging in debauchery, while on the other hand, poor people suffer from poverty, starvation and diseases. At the foot of the skyscrapers are rows of crowded slums. As Wei Rongchen said, "the wide gap between the rich and the lowly reveals the abnormal development of the society."(Wei 69) Thus the cruel social reality compels Della such a poor woman to value every penny carefully. After consideration, she finally determines to sell her hair. The shopkeeper only pays twenty dollars for Della's hair. In fact, her hair can deserve more. This also indirectly condemns and satirizes the capitalist class imposing ruthless exploitation on the lowly.

What about Jim? He sells his most prized possession to buy his wife the beautiful combs without hesitation. This presents the true love between the young couple, and it is just the great love that moves the readers to tears. On the other hand, this great, pure love serves as a foil to the corruption, hypocrisy and the darkness of the upper society. The poor deserve sympathy while the rich ought to be criticized. At the ending of the story, "the truth is unfolded—their gifts turn out to be useless"(Xu 20), because both of them sacrifice their own most precious belongings to buy the gift. How ironical!

The unexpected ending is actually a comic result full of grievous tragedy. Meanwhile, this surprising ending also implies that in such a reality, even if the poor go to any length to work hard, and even to sacrifice what they treasure, they still hardly realize their dream, because the unfair, cruel manipulation of the bourgeoisie casts shadow over them materially and spiritually. It is hard for the oppressed to throw off the shackles to get real and thorough freedom.

Admittedly, this short story is full of love; apart from the love, O. Henry attempts to show his bitter sarcasm and criticism toward such a society through Della and Jim as well as what they have sacrificed.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay has probed into the miserable life of the lowly and the cruel social reality in the early twentieth century in America by analyzing the poor living conditions of the characters and the plots in the two short stories. Meanwhile, through studying the two short stories one by one, O. Henry's sympathy for the underdog and sharp criticism towards the government, the American state apparatus, the social and economic system are also presented.

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