

O. HENRY

American short-story writer

O. Henry so advanced the state of American short stories that he made his pen name synonymous with surprise endings. In a little more than a single decade, he published more than two hundred stories in magazines and books, some of which are still read a century later.

BORN: September 11, 1862; Greensboro, North Carolina

DIED: June 5, 1910; New York, New York

ALSO KNOWN AS: William Sydney Porter (birth name)

AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT: Literature

EARLY LIFE

The life of William Sydney Porter was much like the literature he wrote as O. Henry: a short story punctuated by unforeseen twists. He was born during the midst of the Civil War and grew up under the postwar occupation

government. His father, Algernon Sidney Porter, had a well-known drinking problem and no medical degree, but he was known as the best doctor in the county. His mother, Mary Jane Virginia Swaim, died of tuberculosis when Porter was only three years old. Porter and his older brother Shirley (“Shell”) were mostly raised in their grandmother’s boardinghouse by their Aunt Lina, a schoolteacher who encouraged Porter’s love of books. By age ten, he was reading Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. At the age of fifteen he left school and became an apprentice pharmacist in his uncle’s drugstore, just as his father had done. Four years later, he was a licensed pharmacist.

In March of 1882, Porter went to Texas with family friends, hoping that the Texas climate would help his persistent, racking cough. He spent two years on the Dull-Hall Ranch near Cotulla, where he lived as a sheltered guest in Dick Hall’s home doing little real ranch

work. He sent some stories and letters to Greensboro, some of which appeared in the local newspaper.

In 1884, the Halls deposited Porter in Austin, the state capital. He worked briefly in a pharmacy and then part time in a cigar store, but mostly he did little for two and one-half years but socialize, sing in a quartet and church choirs, and serenade women. Late in 1886, he was given a job as a real estate bookkeeper. He learned this job quickly but soon moved to a \$100-per-month job as a draftsman in Hall's new Texas Land Office. Many of his later stories drew on the experiences of his four years there. In January, 1891, Hall had lost his gubernatorial bid, so his job as land commissioner and Porter's job as draftsman both ended. Within one month, however, Porter's friends got him a new job as a bank teller, also at \$100 per month.

Meanwhile, Porter's serenading had been fruitful. A rather normal-looking but foppish man at a height of 5 feet, 7 inches, with broad shoulders, blue eyes, chestnut brown hair, and a fashionable mustache, he eloped with young Athol Estes on July 1, 1887, less than three weeks after her graduation from high school. Athol apparently stimulated Porter into more frequent writing, as he sold some humorous items to the *Detroit Free Press* in 1887. On May 6, 1888, they had a son who died only hours after birth. This seems to have begun the decline in Athol's health that finally resulted in her death nine years later. On September 30, 1889, she bore their only other child, Margaret.

LIFE'S WORK

In March, 1894, Porter and a partner bought a struggling scandal sheet and its press and used it to publish humorous commentary and stories, many of them poking fun at the large German community of central Texas. They soon changed its name to *The Rolling Stone*, stimulating Austin through the next twelve months.

A crucial change in Porter's life began in December, 1894, when bank examiner F. B. Gray uncovered shortages in the accounts and charged him with embezzlement of bank funds. Porter left the bank to spend more time with *The Rolling Stone*, but it folded in April. In July, a grand jury refused to indict Porter, but Gray persisted.

In October, 1895, Porter accepted a new job writing for the *Houston Post*. In February, 1896, Gray succeeded in getting four indictments against him. Porter wrote his last *Houston Post* column on June 22. On July 6, he boarded a train heading up to Austin for his trial; after fifty miles he apparently got off and, hours later, boarded an eastbound train to seek anonymity in New Orleans,

Louisiana. With his excellent command of Spanish, he decided that he could build a new life in Honduras, which had no extradition treaty with the United States, and that he could then send for his wife and daughter to join him there until the statute of limitations expired. Honduras was at that time a stereotypical banana republic but politically more stable than most of its neighbors. Once there, he mixed with the swindlers, bank presidents, confidence men, and other brigands who would later populate some of his stories. The pueblo of Trujillo, Honduras, later became Coralio, Anchuria, in his *Cabbages and Kings* (1904).

The flaw in Porter's Honduras plan was that Athol's tuberculosis was too serious to let her leave her mother's care. In January, 1897, he returned to Austin. He posted a new court bond and spent the next several months caring for his wife until, on July 25, she died. Porter stayed in Austin writing freelance articles and stories. He finally went to trial on February 15, 1898. The evidence seems to imply that Porter was innocent but unwilling to implicate others. However, the jury convicted him on three



O. Henry. (Courtesy, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library)

counts, and he was sentenced to the lightest possible term, five years in the Ohio State Penitentiary.

When Porter became prisoner 30664 on April 25, 1898, he showed the strains of the past two years, during which he had lost his young wife, his home, his job, and his good name. The good news, though, was that he was allowed to work in the night shift of the prison pharmacy, leaving him plenty of time to write stories. It was there that he was to really begin the writing career that brought his fame. The twist, however, was that the more famous he became, the more he feared that people would discover his imprisonment. He submitted his stories through friends in New Orleans and elsewhere.

A model prisoner, he was released from prison on July 24, 1901, and went to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to stay with Athol's parents and his eleven-year-old daughter. He wrote some stories and newspaper features, but it was soon clear that he hated Pittsburgh. In April, 1902, he moved to New York City, which he was to call "Baghdad by the Subway." In New York, Porter's frequent drinking companion Bill Williams said he "drank as the Southern gentleman he was and carried his liquor as a gentleman does. I . . . never once saw him or heard of his being intoxicated."

Although Porter might not have gotten roaring drunk, he nonetheless drank whiskey steadily throughout his short life. In 1909 he began to fade from cirrhosis of the liver. He spent six months back in North Carolina in the hope that the healthier environment might help to cure his illness but eventually moved back to New York City.

Porter collapsed on June 2, 1910, and friends took him to the Polyclinic Hospital. As an attending nurse dimmed the light on the evening of June 4, Porter said, "Turn up the lights. I don't want to go home in the dark." Porter died the following day soon after sunrise.

It was apparently in the Travis County Jail as Porter awaited transportation to Ohio that his middle name migrated from the "Sidney" of his birth and of his father to the "Sydney" of his later years. An April, 1898, letter addressed him as "Mr. Sydney Porter," and prison records also used "Sydney." On the other hand, many theories purport to explain how he settled on his plebeian nom de plume. The first story published by "O. Henry" was also the first one he wrote in prison: "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking," which drew on his experiences in New Orleans and appeared in *McClure's Magazine* in December, 1899. In the December, 1901, *Ainslee's Magazine*, he used "Olivier Henry."

While Porter was awaiting trial after his wife's death, McClure's Syndicate bought "The Miracle of Lava Can-

yon" and published it months later under the name of W. S. Porter. A revision of that story later appeared as "An Afternoon Miracle." In all, Porter used twelve different names for his writing, and it was several years before he settled on using only O. Henry. Some say the name was abbreviated from the name of a French pharmacist, Etienne Ossian Henry. Porter told one writer that he picked "Henry" from a list of notables in the New Orleans society pages, then a friend suggested using a single initial, and he decided that "O is about the easiest written." An Ohio Board of Clemency chairman noted that the prison had employed a Captain Orrin Henry who had retired eleven years before Porter's incarceration but whose signature Porter could well have seen.

Porter's reason for using the pen name is clearer than its precise origin: He was embarrassed about his prison record and did his best to keep it a secret from friends and public alike.

SIGNIFICANCE

Even after his death, the ending of Porter's life story took a characteristically ironic twist. Somehow, the Little Church Around the Corner had scheduled a wedding for 11:00 A.M. on June 7—the same time as Porter's funeral. The bridegroom's brother, trying to hide this omen from the bride, told the wedding party that another wedding was under way, so they spent the next hour in a nearby hotel while William S. Porter and O. Henry were eulogized in the church.

In the decade after his death, Americans bought nearly five million copies of his books, second only to Rudyard Kipling. They were translated into French, Spanish, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Russian, and Japanese. Ironically, this man's stories of the Western and urban life of the United States became even more popular in the new Soviet Union than in his own country. While American writers were using the Russian Anton Chekhov as their model, Russian writers were putting out O. Henry twist endings. In 1962, a Soviet postage stamp commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of Porter's birth, although his own country had never so honored him. His Christmas story "The Gift of the Magi" eventually became universally known to American schoolchildren, and one of his characters, the Cisco Kid, became a mainstay first to many radio listeners and then to a new generation of television viewers.

—J. Edmund Rush

FURTHER READING

Blansfield, Karen Charmaine. *Cheap Rooms and Restless Hearts: A Study of Formula in the Urban Tales*

- of *William Sydney Porter*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988. Analyzes the character types and plot patterns in O. Henry's short stories. Examines how his varied jobs and life experiences, and conditions in nineteenth century New York City, influenced his writing. Reevaluates his contributions to American literature.
- Current-Garcia, Eugene. *O. Henry: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1993. Interprets O. Henry's short stories and surveys how critical attitudes toward his stories have changed over the years. Includes an annotated bibliography and index.
- _____. *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*. Boston: Twayne, 1965. Summarizes O. Henry's life in one chapter, then focuses on the literary influences of his southern upbringing, Texas development, prison experiences, and New York life. Includes chronological summary, endnotes, extensive bibliography, and index.
- Langford, Gerald. *Alias O. Henry: A Biography of William Sidney Porter*. New York: Macmillan, 1957. Covers O. Henry's entire life, with emphasis on his two marriages, his time in Houston, and the evidence in his embezzlement trial. Includes photographs, endnotes, index, and an extensive appendix about *The Rolling Stone*.
- O'Connor, Richard. *O. Henry: The Legendary Life of William S. Porter*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970. Covers O. Henry's entire life. Includes photographs and index.
- Porter, Jenny Lind, and Trueman E. O'Quinn. *Time to Write: How William Sidney Porter Became O. Henry*. Austin, Tex.: Eakin Press, 1986. Focuses on O. Henry's life in Texas. Includes index and twelve short stories written while he was in federal prison in Columbus, Ohio, each with notes.
- Stuart, David. *O. Henry: A Biography of William Sydney Porter*. Chelsea, Mich.: Scarborough House, 1990. Biography focused on O. Henry's life; does not provide literary analysis. Stuart maintains O. Henry was wrongly convicted of embezzlement and describes how the author's shame about his imprisonment made him obsessively paranoid and desperate to maintain a secret identity.
- Watson, Bruce. "If His Life Were a Short Story, Who'd Ever Believe It?" *Smithsonian* 27 (January, 1997): 92-102. Biography strewn with anecdotes and some literary criticism. Includes photographs.
- Williams, William Washington. *The Quiet Lodger of Irving Place*. New York: Dutton, 1936. Firsthand account of Porter's life in New York written by a longtime friend and newspaper reporter with emphasis on the people and locations that inspired many of O. Henry's stories.
- SEE ALSO:** Ambrose Bierce; Anton Chekhov; Charles Dickens; Rudyard Kipling; Guy de Maupassant; Edgar Allan Poe; Sir Walter Scott.
- RELATED ARTICLES** in *Great Events from History: The Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900*: 1819-1820: Irving's *Sketch Book* Transforms American Literature; December, 1884-February, 1885: Twain Publishes *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; December, 1887: Conan Doyle Introduces Sherlock Holmes.