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O. Henry's Stories and the Theme of a Gift

Téma daru v příbězích O. Henryho

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František Majer

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Anotace

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analýza povídek amerického spisovatele O. Henryho (William Sidney Porter), zaměřená na opakující se téma daru. Východiskem práce bude přiblížení osobnosti spisovatele, jeho životní a tvůrčí zkušenosti s ohledem na vliv gotických příběhů, Viktoriánské literatury, realismu a naturalismu. Práce dále poskytne stručný přehled hlavních tematických okruhů spisovatelovy tvorby a zamyslí se i nad symbolickým významem tématu daru.

Hlavní náplní práce bude interpretace konkrétních povídek, které jsou s tématem daru spojeny. Mezi interpretované povídky patří „The Furnished Room,“ „The Last Leaf,“ „The Gift of the Magi,“ „The Brief Début of Tildy,“ „The Green Door,“ and „The Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen.“ Tato část práce se bude zabývat různými významnými kontexty daného tématu: dar jako vyznání lásky, dar jako pozornost a zájem o druhého, dar jako pomoc v nouzi, dar jako záchrana, příležitost jako dar apod. Dále bude zkoumáno, jak se toto téma propojuje s problematikou lidských vztahů, štědrosti, chudoby a naděje. V závěru se práce pokusí shrnout O. Henryho pojetí tématu daru jako působivého symbolu.

Klíčová slova: O. Henry, téma daru, láska, zájem o druhého, pomoc a záchrana, příležitost a náhoda, štědrost, chudoba

Abstract

The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to analyse the short stories of the American writer O. Henry (William Sidney Porter) with a focus on the recurring theme of a gift. The starting point of the thesis will be to introduce the writer, his life and creative experience, with respect to the influence of the English Gothic novel, Victorian literature, realism, and naturalism. The thesis will further provide a brief overview of the main thematic areas of the writer's work, and it will also reflect on the symbolic meaning of the theme of a gift.

The main part of the thesis will be the interpretation of specific short stories associated with the theme of a gift. Among the interpreted stories are "The Furnished Room," "The Last Leaf," "The Gift of the Magi," "The Brief Début of Tildy," "The Green Door," and "The Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen." This part of the thesis will explore various significant contexts of the theme: gift as an expression of love, gift as attention and interest in others, gift as assistance in need, gift as help, opportunity as a gift, and others. Furthermore, it will examine how this theme intersects with issues of human relationships, generosity, poverty, and hope. In the conclusion, the thesis will attempt to summarize O. Henry's concept of the theme of a gift as a powerful symbol.

Keywords: O. Henry, theme of a gift, love, interest in others, help and rescue, opportunity and coincidence, generosity, poverty

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	8
2. O. Henry.....	10
2.1 Family.....	10
2.2 Early Life.....	13
2.3 Life in Texas.....	14
2.4 The Dark Years of O. Henry.....	17
2.5 Starting in New York	19
2.6 Last Days	20
3. Literary Influences	22
3.1 Gothic Novel	22
3.2 Victorian Literature.....	22
3.3 American Realism and Naturalism.....	23
3.4 Sentimentalism	23
4. The Theme of a Gift	24
4.1 The Definition of “Theme”	24
4.2 The Definition of “Gift”	24
4.3 Gift-Giving throughout the Time	25
4.4 Theories on Gift-Giving.....	28
5. O. Henry’s Stories: Introduction	29
5.1 O. Henry’s Stories: Humorous Language	29
5.2 O. Henry’s Stories: Tearful Smile	30
5.3 O. Henry’s Stories: Surprising Endings.....	30
5.4 O. Henry’s Stories: Representation of Casual Talk	31
5.5 The Furnished Room	32
5.5.1 The Furnished Room: Analysis	33
5.5.2 The Furnished Room: The Theme of a Gift	36
5.6 The Last Leaf	38
5.6.1 The Last Leaf: Analysis	39
5.6.2 The Last Leaf: The Theme of a Gift	41

5.7	The Gift of the Magi	43
5.7.1	The Gift of the Magi: Analysis	44
5.7.2	The Gift of the Magi: The Theme of a Gift	46
5.8	The Brief Début of Tildy	47
5.8.1	The Brief Début of Tildy: Analysis	48
5.8.2	The Brief Début of Tildy: The Theme of a Gift	50
5.9	The Green Door.....	52
5.9.1	The Green Door: Analysis.....	53
5.9.2	The Green Door: The Theme of a Gift.....	54
5.10.	Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen.....	55
5.10.1	Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen: Analysis.....	56
5.10.2	Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen: The Theme of a Gift.....	57
5.11	Recurring Features in O. Henry's Stories	58
6.	Conclusion	60

1. Introduction

William Sydney or Sidney Porter, known by his pen name O. Henry, was an outstanding author in the realm of American literature, and the world-famous master of the short story genre. By the use of humour, irony, a companionate attitude toward the suffering of his characters, exceptional symbols, and the observation of human nature, he turns stories about ordinary and humble people into fairy tales about eternal values. No matter where he wrote the stories; the Wild West or the big city of New York, he creates characters known to all readers and that connect to them on a more personal and emotional level; from heroes that the readers root for to villains they despise.¹ O. Henry wrote over three hundred eighty stories including some of his most popular works like “The Gift of the Magi,” “The Last Leaf,” and “The Green Door.” Among the variety of themes woven into his stories, the reoccurring theme of a gift is one of the most prominent and detailed. This thesis presents a fair summary of his life and career as a writer, focusing on the theme of a gift throughout his stories and analysing its deeper meaning linked with the importance of generosity, human connection, and the complexities of life. While O. Henry’s stories have been studied extensively, a focused exploration of the theme of a gift offers a new understanding of his storytelling techniques and provides an insight into the social and cultural dynamics of his time, most of them still relevant up to the present time.

The first, theoretical, part of this thesis provides a chapter about the life of the author, O. Henry, and his family. Furthermore, it offers a chapter about the literary influence that O. Henry drew inspiration from; Gothic novel, Victorian literature, American realism and naturalism, and sentimentalism, along with a chapter describing the theme of a gift and the history behind gift-giving.

The second part of this thesis offers an analysis of several O. Henry’s short stories, dealing with the characteristic features he is known for. All interpretations include a deeper examination of the theme of a gift with respect to its various contexts. In accordance with this aim, the thesis concentrates on the following stories:

¹ HENRY, O., *The Roads We Take*, Znannia Publishing, layout and design, Ukraine, 2015, back cover page.

"The Furnished Room" (1904), "The Last Leaf" (1905), "The Gift of the Magi" (1905), "The Brief Début of Tildy" (1906), "The Green Door" (1906), and "Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen" (1907).

2. O. Henry

O. Henry is the pseudonym of William Sydney (Sidney) Porter. His real name was Sidney. O. Henry changed the spelling of his name from Sidney to Sydney in 1898. As Smith states: "... he was addressed as W. S. Porter and the story was published as W. S. Porter's. On April 25, 1898, the day on which he arrived to Columbus, the S. S. McClure Company wrote to him in Austin, addressing him as Sydney Porter. It was his first change of signature ..."² Three stories were discovered signed as Sydney Porter. The stories were "The Cactus," "Round the Circle," and "Hearts and Hands," according to Smith. Before signing as O. Henry, he used other pseudonyms like Olivier Henry, S. H. Peters, and Howard Clark. O. Henry is a famous American short-story writer known for his stories about ordinary life, commonplace, and the lower class in New York. He was born on the 11th of September, 1862, Greensboro, North Carolina, U.S., and died on the 5th of July, 1910, New York, U.S.³

2.1 Family

William Sydney Porter is a combination of names from his mother's father, William Swaim, and his father's father, Sidney Porter. They always called him Will Porter in his early life, except for his grandmother on the father's side, who used to call him Sydney, as Smith states in his biographical book. O. Henry never got the chance to meet either of his grandfathers, they both died before he was born.⁴ The dates of their passings are found on their tombstones.

Later in O. Henry's life, it was figured out that William Swaim was the only journalist and writer among all of his ancestors. His mother's side of the family emigrated from Holland around the year 1700 and is buried in Richmond, Staten Island. The descendants moved to North Carolina. O. Henry's grandfather became one of the main editors of the Greensboro *Patriot* in 1827. Smith talks about the things O. Henry's grandfather wrote as follows: "The ablest thing that William Swaim ever wrote was a protest against

² SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, page 169.

³ MACDONALD, E. Edger, *William Sydney Porter (O. Henry)*, NCpedia, 1994, page 1 [online].

⁴ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, page 20.

slavery. He was an advocate of the gradual emancipation of the slaves, a society for this purpose having been formed at Center as early as 1816.”⁵ Fernando Gale Cartland, a known writer, in his book *“Southern Heroes of the Friends in War Time,”* writes: “William Swaim was greeted with a storm of abuse, but he boldly published his sentiments and often gave the threatening letters which he received a conspicuous place in the Patriot.”⁶

Many people say that O. Henry’s style of writing was very similar to his grandfather’s style. This resemblance can be observed in the way they conclude their stories. Both writers are famous for their surprising endings, inclusion of irony, humour, and sometimes tragedy. Both fought for what they thought was right and they offered a critical view of the society of their times.

O. Henry’s grandmother, Abia Shirley (Abiah Shirley), married Lyndon Swaim after the death of William Swaim. She came from a wealthy family connected with Princess Anne County in Virginia. O. Henry once said that his grandmother was related to the House of Stuart but she ran off with a Catholic priest. Letters sent to Abia Shirley’s ancestors by King Charles II. show that their family was in a close relation to the royal family. In the last story of O. Henry’s life, “If you want to get well, read this story,” he describes his ancestry and potential royal blood. It starts off as follows: “It’s the haemoglobin test,” he [the doctor] explained. “The color of your blood is wrong.” “Well,” I said, “I know it should be blue; but this is a country of mix-ups. Some of my ancestors were cavaliers; but they got thick with some purple on Nantucket Island.” His grandmother’s last two years were filled with pain and the inability to get up from her bed.⁷

Mary Jane Virginia Swaim, O. Henry’s mother, was twenty-five years old when her mother (Abia Shirley) died and when she married Dr. Algernon Sidney Porter. After seven years, O. Henry’s mother passed away when he was just three years old. According to letters sent by O. Henry, he could not remember his mother but he always

⁵ Ibid. page 21.

⁶ CARTLAND, G. Fernando, *Southern Heroes of the Friends in War Time*, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., U.S.A., 1895, page 50.

⁷ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 22-25.

spoke about her in a nice way and described her as a kind and loving woman. Mary Swaim attended the Greensboro Female College and ranked No. 1 in her studies. She was known for her excellent writing skills.⁸

O. Henry's grandparents on his father's side were Sidney Porter and Ruth Coffyn Worth. Sidney Porter worked as a travelling seller of clocks but after a few unsuccessful years of selling in neighbouring counties, he returned to Greensboro and opened a carriage-making firm. Ruth Worth, whose family originally emigrated from England, was left as a widow at the age of forty-three with seven children. To support her family, she started as a seamstress but later on, she studied medicine to become a general doctor.⁹

O. Henry's father, Dr. Algernon Sidney Porter, was a famous physician in Guilford County, North Carolina. O. Henry depicted his father as absent-minded and remembered the times when he had to carry his father's hat after he had forgotten it at home. Dr. Porter was an enthusiastic scientist and he tried to construct a machine capable of perpetual motion. As John H. Dillard, of Murphy, N.C., a classmate of O. Henry, writes of those days: "When the collection of machines got to an uncontrollable amount, O. Henry's grandmother (Ruth Worth) made him take his scientific discoveries to the barn."¹⁰

The distant relative of O. Henry, Kathrine Anne Porter (1890-1980), also became a famous writer popular in the world for her short stories. Similarly to O. Henry, she explores the themes of human ties, emotions, and, in general, human nature. One of her most popular stories "Theft" is an exploration of the human mind, an insight into the life of a poor person, and most importantly, it shows the theme of a gift.¹¹ It can be said that the writing gene runs in their family.

⁸ Ibid. pages 26-27.

⁹ Ibid. pages 34-40.

¹⁰ Ibid. pages 44-45.

¹¹ PORTER, Kathrine Anne, *The Collected Stories of Kathrine Anne Porter*, A Harvest/HBJ Book, New York, London, 1979, front page.

2.2 Early Life

O. Henry studied in his aunt Evelina Maria Porter's elementary school, from which he graduated in 1876. Then he enrolled at Lindsey Street High School. His aunt continued to tutor him until he was fifteen years old. O. Henry's aunt became the biggest influence and a role model in his life, according to O. Henry himself. The reason was the fact that his parents were not usually available. As mentioned above, his mother passed away and his father was busy with his scientific discoveries and did not show much interest in spending time with his son. Evelina Porter was an enthusiastic reader and she often read to her pupils. According to writings by O. Henry, at times, she even held special overnight reading sessions with her students. O. Henry became interested in sketching and drawing because of her classes. His sketches were superior to the ones of his aunt. O. Henry was seen doing his schoolwork with his right hand and doing sketches with his left hand.¹²

In 1879, he started working as a clerk in his uncle Clark Porter's drug store on Elm Street. Five years in his uncle's drug store meant much to him as a cartoonist. He used to draw vivid sketches of all the shoppers and by this activity, he perfected his drawing skills. Despite his young age, his ability to draw spread to other towns. O. Henry got an invitation to study at Bingham School, where he would receive tuition. However, he was not able to attend because of low funds and the inability to meet the requirements concerning uniforms and books. From working in the drug store, O. Henry got experience and a perspective of how society functions. O. Henry described the work in the drug store as "agony." It was not the right career path for him and he knew that. O. Henry was indecisive as a teenager and no job seemed meaningful to him.¹³

Dr. James K. Hall, who took care of O. Henry while he was sick, had three sons in Texas. His oldest son Lee or "Red Hall" was very successful and O. Henry's parents were on their way to visit him. Dr. Hall offered O. Henry the biggest opportunity of his life. He could travel to Lee's ranch and finally escape "the boring little city" of Greensboro.¹⁴

¹² Ibid. page 78.

¹³ Ibid. pages 79-80.

¹⁴ Ibid. pages 80-94.

2.3 Life in Texas

O. Henry's experience in Texas shaped him as an author and influenced the style of his writing. O. Henry has written a collection of stories inspired by his life in Texas and the romance he encountered. The collection consisted of nineteen stories and is called "Heart of the West." The ranch owner Lee or "Red Hall" made a big impression on O. Henry and whenever a Ranger officer appears in his stories a striking resemblance to Lee is visible. O. Henry stayed on the La Salle County ranch for two years. The women from the ranch were very fond of books and kept on expanding their book library. O. Henry's love for books only increased because of this. "His thirst for knowledge of all kinds was unquenchable," says Mrs. Dick Hall.

"Will Porter was more of a dreamer than an active participant. He passively learned how to shear sheep, lasso cows, ride a horse, and shoot but he did not want to do these things actively," says Mrs. Dick Hall. He got along with the women more and learned how to cook. He was not interested in doing the activities but was intrigued by the idea of ranch life as a whole. His main goal was to compare life in Texas with the life in Greensboro and to analyse the thinking of people living on the ranch.¹⁵

Mr. Joe Harrell, a retired merchant and a friend of Dick Hall, provided a roof for O. Henry when he decided to move to Austin and quit ranch life. Mr. Harrell was born near Greensboro and was welcoming toward other Californian people. O. Henry stayed in the Harrell residence for three years and became a close friend of Mr. Harrell and his three sons. Mr. Harrell saw O. Henry as an adopted son, one of his sons suggested. O. Henry was always wanting more when stuck in a drug store in Greensboro he wanted freedom which is why he moved to a ranch. On the ranch, he felt lonely and unsociable and wanted city life which is why he left and stayed in Austin.¹⁶

In Austin, O. Henry became a bookkeeper for two years and a skilled one at that. Mr. Charles E. Anderson, the owner of the store, praised O. Henry and even offered him a stay-in in his home and wanted to pay for his tuition. O. Henry declined and never

¹⁵ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 100-102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pages 114-115.

went to university. In the meantime, Dick Hall became Land Commissioner of Texas and O. Henry got accepted to a position under him. He worked in this position for four years.¹⁷

The happiest moment of O. Henry's life in Texas was his marriage to Athol Estes, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Mrs. Roach, on July 5, 1887. O. Henry waited until Athol finished her education to elope with her. O. Henry had a great and deep connection with Athol's parents and they never had doubts about him as their daughter's husband. Mr. Roach had died of consumption (tuberculosis) and so did O. Henry's mother and grandmother. O. Henry told everyone that it was love at first sight and even when he got older, he kept on talking about his feelings toward Athol. She helped him with his journalistic writing and even inspired the character of Della in one of the most famous short stories of O. Henry "The Gift of the Magi."¹⁸

The four years O. Henry spent in the General Land Office were some of the best for him, according to Smith. After those four years, Dick Hall did not get enough votes to become the Land Commissioner and O. Henry decided to resign. For almost a year O. Henry worked in the First National Bank of Austin as a paying and receiving teller. This position was not the right fit for O. Henry and he decided to leave but quickly found a new position in writing a humorous weekly called *The Rolling Stone*. After a year, its popularity rapidly decreased and O. Henry was without a job again.¹⁹

O. Henry started writing for any newspaper he could. In July 1895, O. Henry decided to accept a new position in Washington D. C. He was on the verge of leaving when his wife Athol got the dreading disease of tuberculosis. He decided to not leave his wife and declined the offer.

A new opportunity was given to him when Colonel R. M. Johnston offered him a position on the *Daily Post* in Houston. His wife got better and accompanied him to Houston. The *Post* was one of the more known and better-recognized forms of entertainment and constructs of public opinion in the Southwest. O. Henry's work got

¹⁷ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 95-119.

¹⁸ Ibid. pages 120.

¹⁹ Ibid. pages 125.

the recognition it deserved. “The man, woman, or child, who pens Postscripts for the Houston Post, is a weird, wild-eyed genius and ought to be captured and put on exhibition.” This was written about the work of O. Henry. “O. Henry did all of the illustrations himself, mostly on chalk, because he was not satisfied with the illustrations from others,” said an editorial in the *Post* at the time of O. Henry’s death. His brilliant work was quickly noticed and his salary was raised from fifteen to twenty-five dollars a week. O. Henry’s first column appeared in the *Post* on October 18, 1895, and his last on June 22, 1896.²⁰

When O. Henry stopped contributing to the Houston *Daily Post*, he had closed a significant chapter in his life. His first two jobs as a writer, *The Rolling Stone*, and his columns in the Houston *Daily Post*, were not the most famous of his works. They were only the stepping stones for his upcoming success. None of the works that he released for these two publications were selected by him to reappear in the volumes of his short stories.²¹

²⁰ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 120-130.

²¹ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 134-135.

2.4 The Dark Years of O. Henry

O. Henry had to leave Houston because he was summoned to come to Austin and stand trial for alleged embezzlement of funds while working as a teller of the First National Bank of Austin. He was supposed to misappropriate \$554.48 on October 10, 1894; on November 12, 1894, \$299.60; and on November 12, 1895, \$299.60. He protested his innocence to the end. It was notorious that the bank was badly managed. Its patrons used to enter, go behind the counter, take out one hundred or two hundred dollars, and weeks later admit to this kind of "borrowing." "O. Henry was unable to make the book's balance. Because of this, his predecessor was driven to retirement and his successor attempted suicide," said Mr. Hyder E. Rollins.

O. Henry boarded the train from Houston intending to go to Austin. On the train ride, he had time to think and reflect which led to him getting off the train in Hempstead. O. Henry ran all the possible outcomes in his mind. He pictured himself as a prisoner, he knew he would be marked with the stigma of suspicion his whole life. Thanks to this, he got on the night train to New Orleans to outrun the possibility of being charged with the crime. He left his family and was going to start fresh in a new place. These are speculations from Alphonso Smith. O. Henry knew a little bit of Spanish and for that reason, he decided to stay in Honduras. "The freedom, the silence, the sense of infinite peace, that I found here, I cannot begin to put into words." His letters to Mrs. Porter from Honduras show that he decided to make Central America his home. On the journey to his dream destination, he encountered Al Jennings, the leader of one of the most notorious train-robbing gangs in the Southwest. Mr. Jennings and his brother were running from detectives that were right on their tail and O. Henry accompanied them on this long voyage circling the entire coast of South America.²²

In the letters that O. Henry sent to his wife, he expressed cheerfulness and gratitude about his stay. He was building a place for his family and even found a school in

²² HENRY, O., Austin Public Library [online].

Honduras that his daughter Margaret could attend. He had a hard time in Honduras but always stayed positive and hopeful.²³

Athol, Mrs. Porter, wanted to help as much as she could and started taking a course in a business college but she fell ill and was unable to continue her studies. As soon as O. Henry got the news about his wife's illness, he gave up on all his hopes about Latin America and travelled back to Austin. He also prepared himself for all the outcomes of the trial and decided to take them straight on. O. Henry spent all the time he had with his wife, he used to carry her when she felt too weak. On 25 July 1897, she sadly passed away at the age of 29.²⁴

After many postponements, the case of O. Henry came to trial in February 1898. He pleaded not guilty but did not contribute to the case much, and said almost nothing. He was charged with having embezzled \$299.60 on November 12, 1895, "the said W. S. Porter being then and there the teller and agent of a certain National Banking Association, then and there known and designed as the First National Bank of Austin." O. Henry lost his case and even more was added: "further say that between the days the sixth of July 1896 and the fifth of February 1897, the aforesaid W. S. Porter was a fugitive and fleeing from justice and seeking to avoid prosecution in this court." On March 25, 1898, O. Henry was sentenced to imprisonment in the Ohio Penitentiary at Columbus for five years. He entered the prison on April 25, 1898, and came out on July 24, 1901. On account of good behaviour, his term of confinement was reduced from five years to three years and three months.²⁵

²³ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 137-141.

²⁴ Postitnote, *Athol Estes Porter (1868-1897)* - Find a Grave, Grave Memorial ID: 63335370 [online]

²⁵ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 142-147..

2.5 Starting in New York

On July 24, 1901, the day of his release, O. Henry travelled to Pittsburg where his daughter and her grandparents were now living. They moved here after the trial of O. Henry. The main reason for this move was the fact that they would be constantly looked down upon and judged in their previous home for O. Henry's imprisonment. Right after O. Henry arrived, he started to write again. Finally, in 1902 O. Henry got an invitation to New York from Mr. Gilman Hall. The first few accepted stories were considered excellent and O. Henry got paid seventy-five dollars for each published story. The big city became his biggest inspiration and nature lost its meaning to him. "I could look at these mountains a hundred years and never get an idea, but just one block downtown and I catch a sentence, see something in a face – and I have got my story," said O. Henry to Mrs. Porter.²⁶

O. Henry's quick decision to accept the offer to move to New York was like an immediate win for him. He finally found the confidence he had lost in Columbus and discovered the place of his dreams. Here in New York, where O. Henry had no friends or acquaintances, he could be whoever he wanted to be and had no shame in writing whatever he wanted. For somebody like O. Henry who writes about people, New York is the perfect city to live in.

He was mostly interested in two social groups in New York. The first were the ones living on the streets, the ones that were barely living. The others were the ones that thought highly of themselves, the ones that were living in wealth. O. Henry also took inspiration from people he knew back in Texas and in the prison of Columbus.

O. Henry became sort of a celebrity in New York. He frequently helped the needy even if he was not the wealthiest himself. Many people looked up to him and found joy, laughter, and amazement in his stories. He also changed the lives of many for the better and inspired generations to come.²⁷

²⁶ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, pages 172-174.

²⁷ JHA, K. Arun, *Knocking Around New York City of O. Henry*, darbhangatower [online].

2.6 Last Days

O. Henry was sick even a year before his death. His sickness affected neither his wit nor his humour. The only problem that O. Henry had to face was his inability to find inspiration. He fell behind on the due dates for his stories and was at a loss for confidence. To come up with a story good enough to his standards was almost an impossible task and everything he had written felt off. Even his letters began to show that his writer's cramp was associated with his illness:

February 13, 1909

My Dear Mr. Lanier:

I have been ailing for a month or so – cannot sleep, etc; and have not turned out a piece of work in that time. Consequently, there is a hiatus in the small change pocket. I hope to be in shape Monday so that I can go to Atlantic City, immure myself in a quiet hotel, and begin to get the “great novel” in shape.

March 16, 1909

It seems that the goddess Hygiene and I have been strangers for years; and now Science must step in and repair the damage. My doctor is a miracle worker and promises that in a few weeks he will double my working capacity, which sounds very good both for me and for him, when the payment of the bill is considered.

April 6, 1909

I hope to get the novel in good enough shape to make and “exhibit” of it to you soon. I have been feeling so rocky for so long that I have not been able to produce much.²⁸

This was a set of letters written from his workshop in the Caledonia, which he wrote to Mr. Henry W. Lanier, a secretary to *Doubleday, Page & Company*. In the letters he tries to stay positive and reassure his publishing company that he will

²⁸ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, page 247.

continue to write even through his illness. The dates show that his illness was intensively getting in his way of working and made his life miserable.²⁹

In the fall of 1909, very ill and suffering from depression, he went to Asheville to be with his family, especially his daughter. He set up a workshop there and wanted to write as much as he could. He lacked ideas as well as energy for writing. "I want to get at something bigger," he would say, "What I have done is child's play to what I can do, to what I know it is in me to do, I could get out something. I could turn out some sort of trash but I cannot do that."³⁰ O. Henry went back to New York to find more inspiration. On the afternoon of June 3, Mr. Gilman Hall received a telephone message: "Can you come down right away, Colonel?" He collapsed on the floor right after sending this message and Mr. Hall found him. O. Henry was taken to the Polyclinic Hospital on East Thirty-fourth Street.³¹

He knew that his time was approaching but stayed optimistic until the last moment. He did not let anyone see that he was in so much pain. "He was perfectly conscious until two minutes of his death Sunday morning," said Doctor Hancock. His last words were: "Turn up the light – I don't want to go out in the dark." The sunlight was upon his face when he passed and it illuminates still his name and fame. Funeral services were held in New York City, and he was buried in Asheville. William Sydney Porter died on the 5th of July, 1910 aged 47. The most likely cause of his death and long illness was cirrhosis of the liver and complications with diabetes. These illnesses can be linked to his unhealthy lifestyle and alcoholism.³²

²⁹ SMITH, Alphonso C., *O. Henry Biography*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916, page 248.

³⁰ Ibid. page 248.

³¹ Ibid. page 248.

³² LOMBARDI, Esther, *The Life and Death of O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, ThoughtCo. [online].

3. Literary Influences

To connect O. Henry with one literary movement is almost impossible. His writing style is unique and original; it reflects a variety of influences, including the Gothic novel, Victorian literature, realism and naturalism, and sentimentalism.

3.1 Gothic Novel

Horace Walpole, an English writer and politician, is considered the founder of the Gothic genre. Walpole's work *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1765, is widely regarded as the first Gothic novel. *The Castle of Otranto* tells the story of a noble family that gets struck with a series of unfortunate and supernatural events like a giant helmet falling on a young man, walls closing in, and a ghost haunting the castle.³³ Walpole's novel was popular and many other authors like Ann Radcliffe, Matthew G. Lewis, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Edgar Allan Poe helped to develop the Gothic genre, also known as Dark Romanticism in American literature. As Aneta Benáčková suggests in her Bachelor's thesis, "the Romantics were known for their use of vivid imagery, intense emotions, and heightened language..."³⁴ Similar attributes can be found in the work of O. Henry. In his stories, O. Henry drew inspiration from the Gothic genre, especially from the Gothic atmosphere, mystery, and suspense.

3.2 Victorian Literature

It can be said that O. Henry's work bears resemblance to the stories of Charles Dickens with the focus on the lower class, poverty, and emphasis on hope. The influence of Dickens can be recognized in O. Henry's stories dealing with difficult life of the poor people in America. Dickens can be described as a prominent author in the era of Victorian literature. The most popular story of Charles Dickens remains *Oliver Twist* (1838): the story of a boy who is forced to grow up in an orphanage and eventually falls into the underworld of London.³⁵ This novel, as well as stories of O. Henry, highlight

³³ STŘÍBRNÝ, Zdeněk, *Dějiny Anglické Literatury 1*, Academia Praha, 1987, page 347.

³⁴ BENÁČKOVÁ, Aneta, *Edgar Allan Poe's Arabesque: An Analysis of this Subgenre*, Bachelor's Thesis, 2023, page 6.

³⁵ DICKENS, Charles, *Oliver Twist*, translated by E. and E. Tilschovi, Vyšehrad, Praha 2, 1985, cover page.

social injustice, the hypocrisy of the society, the importance of mutual relationships, and, last but not least, they tend to create a redemption for the characters.

3.3 American Realism and Naturalism

The intensity of O. Henry's concern with the reality of the everyday life of poor people allows us to compare him with American realism and naturalism. Theodore Dreiser's work exemplifies both realism and naturalism, two very close literary movements that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Vančura, Dreiser's novels arose from his "tireless and insatiable observation of human destinies..."³⁶ The most popular novel written by Theodore Dreiser is *Sister Carrie* (1900) and it is considered a prototypical realistic and naturalistic work. This novel offers a picture of Chicago, the city that is increasingly hostile to the poor and, in this respect, reminds us of O. Henry's New York. O. Henry and Theodore Dreiser share the following concerns in their works: observation of society, urban settings, and emphasis on social issues.

3.4 Sentimentalism

In O. Henry's stories, the reader can find a significant influence of sentimentalism. In particular, these stories allow comparison with the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both authors emphasize social issues, ranging from racism and slavery to class division. They also demonstrate compassion and concern for the misfortune of their characters, and explore the importance of morality and kindness.³⁷

³⁶ DREISER, Theodore, *Tajfun*, translated by Novotná Anna, add-on by Vančura Zdeněk, Odeon, Knihovna Klasiků, 1969, page 280.

³⁷ STOWE, Harriet Beecher, *Uncle Tom's Cabin I.*, translated by E. and E. Tilschovi, Albatros, Praha, 1969, front page.

4. The Theme of a Gift

4.1 The Definition of “Theme”

In literature, the theme is the main idea of the story, or the message that the literary text conveys. However, the message the author intends for the story can be different from the theme the reader discovers in the text. The theme mingles with life and it is more than what the story explicitly express. It is what the work means for the reader. This message is usually about love, death, pain and joy, human nature, all kinds of interpersonal relationships, the relationships between man and society, man and nature, man and God.³⁸

4.2 The Definition of “Gift”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the word “gift” in the following way: it is “something, the property in which voluntarily transferred to another without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent.” It also portrays other meanings such as: “An offering to God or to a heathen deity, something given to corrupt; a bribe, and a faculty, power, or quality miraculously bestowed, in sense of inspiration, talent.”³⁹

A gift is something that you give to someone without expecting something in return, mostly for specific occasions. Gifts needn’t be only material things but they can also include a hug, a kiss, or time. Gifts can also be connected with certain feelings, relationships, or emotions. The most universal gift is the gift of love, in which unconditional love is put first before the needs of the giver. O. Henry’s short story “The Gift of the Magi” is also all about this theme. Other types of gifts are the gift of life, hope, time, friendship, help, and many more.⁴⁰

³⁸ JING Wei, Theme and Thematic Progression in English Writing Teaching, *Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol. 6, No. 21, 2015, College of International Studies, Southwest University, P.R. China, page 178 – 180 [online].

³⁹ LITTLE, William, Fowler, Coulson, revised and edited by Onions, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1967, page 792.

⁴⁰ ELDER-VASS, Dave, Defining the gift, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, Cambridge University Press, 2020 [online].

4.3 Gift-Giving throughout the Time

Gift-giving is an important way for humans to communicate and develop their relationships with others. Gift-giving has a long history and the gifts that humans give out nowadays are more intricate and expensive when compared to the gifts of their ancestors. The gifts have changed but the intention for gift-giving is the same.

According to the paleoanthropologist Ariana Burke, between 35,000 and 10,000 years ago our ancestors were exchanging symbolic objects. They were often created from decorated bones, shells, teeth, ivory, stones, tree bark, or fashions. They were intricately engraved and pierced through so people could wear them as necklaces, bracelets, or sewn onto clothing. The main reason for them was to distinguish individuals from others in the group. Archaeologists also found indications that prehistoric ornaments were given as gifts to individuals or whole groups from other tribes to create bonds.⁴¹

About 5000 years ago, the ancient Egyptians had a unique reason for giving gifts. They did not try to create relationship bonds or strengthen their existing ones. They intended to praise gods and make offerings to them in exchange for protection, a favour, health, wealth, or general mercy. Superstition, religion, and gift-giving were closely connected in ancient Egypt. Gifts were given to deceased people during their burial to guarantee them a safe passage to the afterlife. They believed that everything buried with them would travel to the afterlife with them. These offerings included food, idols, jewellery, furniture, bowls, or flasks with holy water from the river Nile. They also gave gifts to the pharaohs on their coronation day.⁴²

According to historians, in ancient Greece, the superstitions continued and the gift-giving developed with them. Children were given amulets at birth to be protected from diseases. It was believed that evil spirits haunted people on their birthday. For that reason, people were given gifts to drive the evil spirits away. This tradition of giving gifts

⁴¹ FOURCADIER, M., History of Gift-Giving: From Cavemen to Gen Z, *Dundle Magazine* [online].

⁴² FOURCADIER, M., History of Gift-Giving: From Cavemen to Gen Z, *Dundle Magazine* [online].

on a person's birthday continues even today but people do not know the history behind it.⁴³

The first gift-giving recorded in a text can be found in the oldest surviving literary work; *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It was composed nearly 4000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia.⁴⁴ Gilgamesh, the godlike figure with immense strength, enchanting beauty, and wisdom, starts mistreating his people as the king of Uruk. He forces them to build a giant wall around the city with unsettling methods. The people plead to the gods, who make Enkidu, a challenger for Gilgamesh's strength. The intention for Enkidu to surpass Gilgamesh is unsuccessful when Enkidu creates a special bond with Gilgamesh and helps him in his upcoming battles. Enkidu, a gift from the gods that was intended as a setback for Gilgamesh, becomes his best friend, and some parts of the book even suggest a strong love relationship between them. Enkidu is the gift of love and friendship for Gilgamesh. As Sedláček mentions in his study, "právě v přátelství často vznikají – jako vedlejší produkt – myšlenky a činy, které společně dokážou přeměnit tvář společnosti."⁴⁵

Enkidu's death is devastating for Gilgamesh and makes him realise that his death is approaching as well. He wants to live forever and sets out on a journey to find a special plant granting eternal life. When unsuccessful, he returns to Uruk and realises that he cannot live forever but humankind will and that he will be remembered for all his heroic acts, and stay immortal in people's minds. This is a gift of wisdom, when individuals are given some ideas that change their views of life.⁴⁶

In Greek Mythology, during the Trojan Wars, which took place around the 12th or 13th centuries before the common era, a major gift-giving event took place. As Wood in his book *In Search of the Trojan War*, suggests the Greeks built a wooden horse to gain access to the city of Troy by stealth and trickery. The horse had a hollow belly in which armed men were hiding. The horse was left outside Troy's wall as a thank-offering. The Trojans pulled the horse into the city. At night, when the Trojans were sleeping, the

⁴³ Ibid. paragraph about Ancient Greece.

⁴⁴ EMPSON, W., Reading the Epic of Gilgamesh, *The Journal of General Education*, 1976 [online].

⁴⁵ SEDLÁČEK, Tomáš, *Ekonomie Dobra a Zla*, Praha, 65. pole, 2017, page 358, my translation: "Yet within friendships, there often emerge ideas and actions that, as a byproduct, can together change the face of society."

⁴⁶ MATOUŠ Lubor, *Epos O Gilgamešovi*, Mladá Fronta, Praha, 1971.

armed men from inside the Trojan horse jumped out and let more armed men in through the city's gate. The Trojans were all killed and the Greeks won the Trojan Wars. The Trojan horse was accepted as a gift of peace in the eyes of the Trojans but it turned into a symbol of trickery, stealth, and murder.⁴⁷

Gift-giving is an important idea in the *Bible*. The three Magi Kings brought gifts to baby Jesus to show their respect and appreciation for him and his birth. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on Earth, frankincense as a symbol of deity, and myrrh as a symbol of death. These gifts are historically seen as free gifts, nothing was expected in return. J. Derrida came up with the theory that a free gift does not exist, people always want something in return. He suggests that the Magi gave gifts to baby Jesus to be in "good standing" with him.⁴⁸ On the other hand, E. Lévinas suggests that to have a possibility or ability to give another person a gift is a gift in itself.⁴⁹

When Europe entered Medieval times, the church saw amulets and other jewellery as symbols of the devil's hold over men, for this reason, other things were given out as gifts. The biggest gift of this time was food. The food people ate and gave out depended on their social rank. To give out certain food or to invite others represented the way how to impress and show off wealth. People's accumulated wealth was given out to prove their loyalty to powerful people like the king or the church. In the Middle Ages, people did not give gifts only to make others happy but their giving was more concerned with making a good impression on others or praising the higher social class.⁵⁰

In the late modern period, the exchange of gifts became complicated due to gender roles and relationships. People were expected to give gifts to their partners or children. Children received gifts based on their behaviour. The need to appease certain people disappeared and people gave out gifts to make others happy or to congratulate them for special achievements. This proves the theory of E. Lévinas.

⁴⁷ WOOD, Michael, In Search of the Trojan War, *The Washington Post*, University of California Press, 1998, pages 24-25 [online].

⁴⁸ Cf. KLEIN, Terrence, Epiphany: Is there really no such thing as a free gift?, *America magazine*, *The Jesuit Review* [online].

LEITHART, Peter, *Notes on Derrida, Gift of Death*, Theopolis, *President's Essay*, 2006 [online].

⁴⁹ LÉVINAS, Emmanuel, *Být pro druhého*, 1981, Paříž, Rozhovor E. Lévinase s B. Casperem [online].

⁵⁰ FOURCADIER, M., History of Gift-Giving: From Cavemen to Gen Z, *Dundle Magazine* [online].

4.4 Theories on Gift-Giving

As mentioned above, J. Derrida and E. Lévinas offer different theories on the topic of gift-giving. J. Derrida argues that for a thing to be considered a gift it is crucial that “the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt.”⁵¹ He argues a true gift is impossible because it always involves some form of debt, expectation, or reciprocity. Derrida’s critique concerns the understanding of a gift as a selfless act, he suggests that it is always connected to some form of obligation. However, Derrida recognizes time as a form of gift-giving. Spending time with another person is considered as a gift.⁵² In the study *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss, the idea of gift-giving is further examined and it is argued that gifts are not given freely. The receiver feels obligated to reciprocate, creating a cycle of exchange. Mauss highlights gift-giving in social circumstances, it reinforces social hierarchies and expresses status or privilege.⁵³

Contrastingly, E. Lévinas believes that gift-giving is an ethical act built into the unconditional responsibility towards the other. He also suggests that not only does the person receiving a gift get something but the giver obtains something in return. It shows the receivers a form of respect for them, their life, feelings, and ideas. Lévinas recognizes the time spent with someone, the reassurance, and attention as a gift.⁵⁴ The main idea behind the work of O. Henry reminds us of the theory of E. Lévinas. O. Henry recognizes the possibility of gift-giving as vital and highlights this idea in his works. He connects gift-giving, for example, with themes of selflessness, sacrifice, love, friendship, responsibility, and compassion.

⁵¹ LEITHART, Peter, Derrida on Gift, Theopolis, *President’s Essay*, 2006 [online].

⁵² CHAMPERTIER, Charles, Philosophy of the Gift: Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, Angelaki, *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 2001 [online].

⁵³ MAUSS, Marcel, *The Gift*, London: Routledge Classics, 2002.

⁵⁴ ATTERSON, Peter, *Derrida’s Gift to Levinas – The Feminine*, *International Studies in Philosophy* 35:2, 2003 [online].

5. O. Henry's Stories: Introduction

O. Henry is called “the father of modern American short stories” and is known as “encyclopaedia of American humour” in the world of literature. His novels and tales have been constantly getting published in the world, and to this day he has plenty of readers. O. Henry created over 300 short stories. Some of his most famous works, such as “The Gift of the Magi,” “The Last Leaf,” “The Furnished Room,” and “Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen,” earned him a great reputation in the world. There is no doubt that O. Henry made a significant contribution to the world of literature. His famous stories are usually filled with irony, metaphors, language puns and other ways to create a humorous story. As Lu Tong points out, O. Henry's typical writing style is generally branded with such features as humorous language, tearful smiles, and surprising endings.⁵⁵

5.1 O. Henry's Stories: Humorous Language

As Lu Tong states, the language in O. Henry's novels is rich and colourful, with slang, irony, metaphor, metonymy, exaggeration, and so on. Therefore, his stories are usually described as amusing and humorous.⁵⁶ Payne talks about the humour of O. Henry as follows: “If there is a single characteristic of O. Henry that has endeared him to the American public more than any other, it is the ever-present and all-pervasive sense of humour that we find in his stories.”⁵⁷ O. Henry transfers humour to every single page of his stories, which makes the stories more fluent and thought-through. As Payne states, the inordinate use of slang has been pointed out as one of O. Henry's chief faults. It might be true that he overuses slang at times but it purely adds depth to the story.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ LU, Tong, A Brief Analysis on the Typical Writing Styles of O. Henry, *Atlantis Press*, 2016, page 205 [online].

⁵⁶ Ibid. page 205.

⁵⁷ PAYNE, L. W., The Humor of O. Henry, *Texas Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1918, page 18 [online].

⁵⁸ Ibid. page 18.

5.2 O. Henry's Stories: Tearful Smile

Lu Tong describes the idea of a tearful smile as follows: "Although some plots or ends of O. Henry's stories are sad, there are usually some hopes and warm and true feelings in the story, which will make readers smile bitterly."⁵⁹ A tearful smile is described as a combination of humour and tragedy. O. Henry's works are filled with humour that eases the true tragedy portrayed in the story. By this act, O. Henry tries to balance out the feelings of the reader. While the readers may be sad about the outcome of the story, they will smile at all the exaggerated and humorous language. This "roller-coaster of emotions" leaves a lasting impression on the reader. As Ning Li suggests in their paper, the unexpected outcome is generally reassuring, though it may seem sad, and it often includes some kind of light, which is called "smile with tears."⁶⁰

5.3 O. Henry's Stories: Surprising Endings

The most important feature of O. Henry's writing is the surprising ending. The story begins in one direction and ends in another that the reader will not be able to predict. As Ning points out, the ends of O. Henry's stories bring sudden changes not only to the plot but also to our view of the characters. The hero's fate can be suddenly reversed, with unexpected results. However, there is a logic in this method.⁶¹ Cai describes the surprising ending as follows:

"O. Henry's novels use a large number of plots at the beginning and in the middle to pave the way, that is, to dig a few pits and put them there first, and then to carry out the seemingly normal development of the plot. At the end of the plot, the foreshadowing suddenly turns out in front of the plot, making the ending suddenly reverse, thus making readers feel surprised, but not unreasonable at all. This is the so-called unexpected and reasonable ending."⁶²

⁵⁹ LU, Tong, A Brief Analysis on the Typical Writing Styles of O. Henry, *Atlantis Press*, 2016, page 207.

⁶⁰ NING, Li, "Smile with Tears" – An Interpretation of O. Henry's Short Stories, *English Language - Literature and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2021, pages 44-45 [online].

⁶¹ Ibid. page 46.

⁶² CAI, J. Y., On the O. Henry's ending and its literary influence, *Home Drama*, 2018, page 1 [online].

5.4 O. Henry's Stories: Representation of Casual Talk

One of the most important impressions O. Henry's stories give is their representation of casual talk. The readers feel as if they were listening to a friend talking to them. F. L. Pattee, who compiled a history of the American short story, refers to O. Henry's stories and his use of casual talk:

"To read him [O. Henry] is at times almost to feel his physical presence. He slaps you on the shoulder, asks advice on points of grammar and the wording of quotations, and you can almost hear his laugh when he springs his final ending."⁶³

O. Henry is fond of the first-person narration. He often uses the first and the second person pronouns "I" and "you." The use of these pronouns directly suggests personal interaction between the writer and the reader. In contrast, if the third person pronouns are used, as well as ordinary nouns, the readers most likely see them as separate objective situations in another time-space of the act of communication.⁶⁴ Furthermore, he adds other elements to make the reader believe that he tells them the story straight to their face. For instance, in the last paragraph of "The Gift of the Magi," the following proverbial sentence can be seen:

"The magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger."⁶⁵

By inserting the phrase "as you know," the narrator motivates the reader to share information with him.⁶⁶ This only further deepens the relationship between the writer and the reader. It also makes the text easy to read and the recipient wants to continue.

O. Henry was also smart in his characterizations of the protagonists, who resemble people all readers know. They reflect the way people commonly conceive a member of a specific social group, and O. Henry confirms the social image of that type. O. Henry does not depict the details of the personalities because he assumes that the reader is already familiar with the kind of people he is talking about.

⁶³ PATTEE, Fred, *The Development of the American Short Story*, (1923; rpt. New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1966) pages 361-362 [online].

⁶⁴ KUMIKO, Yoshioka, *A Stylistic Analysis of O. Henry's "Chatting" Effect – in terms of the "tenor"*, 1988-04, University of Tsukuba Library - Tulips, pages 77-79 [online].

⁶⁵ HENRY, O., *The Gift of the Magi*, U.S. Department of State, 1905, page 6.

⁶⁶ KUMIKO, Yoshioka, *A Stylistic Analysis of O. Henry's "Chatting" Effect – in terms of the "tenor"*, 1988-04, University of Tsukuba Library - Tulips, pages 81-82 [online].

5.5 The Furnished Room

The short story begins with a detailed description of the neighbourhood of lower West Side of New York. It is depicted as a home to hundreds of homeless people, who travel from one place to another with all of their life possessions in their hands. It is mentioned that because of these dwellers and constant travellers, the hostel rooms contain thousands of stories within their walls.

One of these stories is about a young man who knocks on doors in this district to find a bed for the night. At the twelfth house, a mean-looking housekeeper answers and offers him a room on the third floor, which has been vacant for almost a week. The man agrees to take a look at it and follows the housekeeper through the old, broken-down, mossy building.

The young man agrees to rent the room and pays in advance for the whole week. He also asks the housekeeper whether she has seen a young girl named Eloise Vashner. The housekeeper has no idea about her whereabouts. It is revealed that the young man has been searching for Eloise, his beloved, for the past five months. The man lies on the bed and tries to relax.

Suddenly, the scent of mignonette, a common flower, the same scent Eloise used, appears. He searches the room for any clues leading to her. He gets frustrated and talks to the housekeeper again to find traces of his lover, though in vain.

Being unsuccessful one more time was too difficult to withstand. The young man tears sheets into strips and stuffs all of the gaps in the room in order to block the escaping air. He turns on the gaslight, puts out the fire, and suffocates himself to death with gas.

Meanwhile, the housekeeper meets her friend. They talk about the new tenant and how she finally rented the room after an incident. A young girl, matching the description of the man, killed herself with gas in that same room a week prior.

5.5.1 The Furnished Room: Analysis

The short story "The Furnished Room" relies on detailed descriptions of the setting to visually transfer the viewer into the homeless neighbourhood of lower West Side in New York. O. Henry also uses a particular set of themes, motifs, and symbols to create a well-rounded and emotional story.

An important symbolic image of the story is the furnished room. O. Henry spent a lot of time describing it in the story, not only to set the scene but the room itself can be counted as an individual character. It evokes the tension between the idea of a safe home and the real character of the room: a transitory refuge for lonely and homeless people. The room represents a release of psychological emotions and the deletion of feelings from bad relationships. The reader follows almost a naturalistic description of violence, brutality, and cruelty, as seen in this sentence: "A splattered stain, raying like a shadow of a bursting bomb, witnessed where a hurled glass of bottle had splintered with its contents against the wall."⁶⁷ For the young man in the story, the room also represents loneliness and isolation. Additionally, the setting of the room suggests a notion of losing one's senses and psyche. The room can be seen as an ambiguous symbol: the reader may interpret it as positive or negative. As the negative feature, the room symbolizes an escalation of despair, eventually death. For the positive interpretation, the readers may think of the room as a gate to transformation, an escape from depression. Thus, the interpretation of the Furnished Room depends on every reader.

The first walk through the building is filled with a foreshadowing of the inevitable. It implies that the conditions in the building are not suited for life and nobody stays here for a long time. The foreshadowing signs were described in this short extract: "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."⁶⁸

The description of the building brings out supernatural elements in the story. The author suggests that the existence of ghosts in the building is certain. While talking

⁶⁷ HENRY, O., *The Furnished Room, Selected Stories from O. Henry*, edited by C. Alphonso Smith, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1922, page 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid. page 84.

about the dead plants on the stairs, other supernatural creatures are mentioned such as imps and devils that are believed to be the ones that have dragged the plants into the darkness of the underworld. Another supernatural element is implemented when the young man smells Eloise's scent in the furnished room. It is almost as if the young girl's dead body still haunted the room and made the young man commit suicide. This can be interpreted in two ways. Either the girl wants him to join her in the afterlife so that they can be together, or she desires to destroy his sanity and end his life. There may also be a realistic explanation. Only the young man can sense the smell as he is very familiar with it.

The motif of the hostel is connected with the housekeeper woman and her friend. They represent the working class of the time. They are willing to do anything for money to support themselves. First, when the housekeeper pushes the young man to rent out the furnished room, she talks about all the talented and famous people who have rented the room before him. This is an attempt at making the room seem better than it actually is. Second, she talks to her friend over some beer that she finally rented out the room to the young man without telling him about the disaster that took place in the exact room over a week ago.

The main themes of the story are hopelessness and despair. The young man loses all hope of finding his loved one and ultimately decides to end his own life. The theme of despair is seen throughout the whole story when the young man is searching for Eloise and is always unsuccessful. He can even hear her voice in the furnished room. This can suggest either the loss of his mind due to constant despair, or the presence of the supernatural, evoking that the girl's ghost is haunting the room.

Another implied theme is obsession. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "obsession" as follows: "The action of any influence, notion, or 'fixed idea', which persistently assails or vexes."⁶⁹ Obsessed with Eloise, the young man has been searching for her for five months. He knocked on eleven other doors before being let into this

⁶⁹ LITTLE, William, Fowler, Coulson, revised and edited by Onions, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1967, page 1353.

building. He asks the housekeeper about her whereabouts multiple times. He becomes crazy for the reader because of this obsession.

An important symbol mentioned in the story is the scent of the common flower mignonette that the young girl wore. It is recognized by the young man, suggesting that people are drawn to even the smallest things that remind them of certain people in their lives. The fact that the flower is quite usual suggests that the young girl is not extraordinary. She is purely an ordinary girl but the young man finds her irresistible and feels she is the love of his life. The author points out that people find their loved ones exceptional and unbelievable even when they might seem normal and ordinary to others.

The story also points out the role of unhappy coincidence in life; there is only one week between Eloise's and the young man's stays in the furnished room, between unity and separation. However, the reader can hope for the possibility of spiritual reconnection after the death of both young people.

5.5.2 The Furnished Room: The Theme of a Gift

“The Furnished Room” can be interpreted as a story about a theme of a gift of transformation and also about a gift of reunion. The gift of transformation can be imagined in many forms. Two different approaches are recognisable in the short story but they are closely related. The first approach is bodily transformation, the other is emotional transformation. The young man in the story transforms due to suicide. He goes through a bodily change leading to an emotional change as well. By deciding to kill himself, he releases all the pain and emotional suffering caused by the fact that he is not able to find his lover. At the same time, his body goes through a change too. It can be interpreted that the giver of these gifts is the furnished room itself.

O. Henry describes the room in detail along with its origin. The items and furniture in the room add to an overall feel that the reader gets. The room transforms with every tenant, leaving a mark from each one. There can be something forgotten in the room, a mark on the wall, scratches on the furniture, or smells left after the tenants that have shaped the room. The gift of transformation in this room shows the reader how quickly time passes, how many people have been in the same place like us, and how easy it is for humans to destroy something. The author offers the readers the knowledge that they should focus even on the smallest, most common things. These ordinary things can change a person’s perspective on life and ultimately make them want to live.

The young man may escape into another world, where he now has the ability to meet with his lost lover again. In this respect, his death can be interpreted as a way of transformation to afterlife. On the other hand, he gives up the gift of life. In this respect, the story raises the question if suicide should be seen as a gift of death or a rejection of the gift of life.

In the story, Eloise, the young girl, is portrayed haunting the furnished room after committing suicide in this place. She gives signs of her existence to the young man, and at the same time, she makes him go crazy. She pushes him over the edge of his emotions, making him decide to take his own life. It can be a way of transforming the young man into a ghost who could join her in the haunted room, reunite with her so that they could spend eternity together.

The theme of a gift of reunion is another major part of the story. The characters do not actually meet but they reunite in the eyes of the readers. Their bodies do not get to touch each other but their presence in the same room creates a sense of reunion for the main characters. The deaths of the lovers may remind the readers of the famous story *Romeo and Juliet* written by William Shakespeare. In both of the stories, the first death is considered a mistake because the other lover ultimately finds them. This can be interpreted as a warning to not give up and keep fighting. If the characters of Eloise and Romeo kept living and believing, they could have met their lovers and completely reunited. Both were only a step away from help, which might have saved them.

Accordingly, the story suggests the importance of the personal interest in the life of the other person, which can symbolically become a gift. The young man searches for Eloise. If she had not ended her life, they could have met again. The constant worry and search that the young man goes through is a gift in itself. To be present in someone's life can be a vital gift that people often forget about. It goes beyond the fact of being there for someone physically: it encompasses being fully engaged, attentive, and emotionally available. In this regard, it creates a special connection between the two people. This effort might have potentially saved both partners. If only Eloise had fought a little longer, the couple could have met again. This would symbolize the real reunion in the mutual recognition of the value of the gift of life.

5.6 The Last Leaf

The short story solely focuses on the lives of two female painters. Their names are Johnsy and Sue. They move in together in spring but the story truly starts toward winter. The cold and rainy weather is ideal for sicknesses to spread. One of these illnesses is pneumonia, an infection of the air sack in the lungs.

Johnsy gets this illness and is just in bed all day without moving an inch of her body. When the doctor comes, he tells Sue that her roommate has a slim chance of survival because she does not fight enough. While Sue is quietly painting, Johnsy is counting something. After asking her, Sue finds out that she is counting falling leaves on the plant in front of their window. Johnsy decides in her mind that when the last leaf falls, so shall she, meaning that she will pass away with the last leaf on that tree. Sue is flabbergasted when she finds this out and tries to persuade Johnsy not to look at the leaves but just sleep.

For her painting, Sue needs a male model. She goes down to the first floor of their apartment to an old painter named Behrman. For the past few years, Behrman has been unable to come up with a good piece of art. Sue tells Behrman about Johnsy's plan of dying.

At the end of that day, there is only one last leaf on that tree. When they wake up, Johnsy wants to see the tree and she is ready for her passing. Unexpectedly, the last leaf is still there, and even the next day. It keeps holding on.

After many days, Johnsy realises that her behaviour is not good. She regrets her want for death and finds inner strength to keep on going. Her life dream of painting the Bay of Naples comes back. On the other hand, the health of Behrman is not as good. He gets pneumonia as well. Sadly, he passes away.

Sue and Johnsy discover the real reason why Behrman caught the illness. He was painting something outside all night in cold weather. He painted the last leaf that was on the tree. He saved the life of Johnsy but sacrificed his own.

5.6.1 The Last Leaf: Analysis

A heartwarming yet deeply saddening story, "The Last Leaf," is filled with many symbolic images, which add depth and complexity to the narrative, and which also help the reader to fully experience the emotions underlining the story.

The main theme of the short story is hope, which is a contradiction to hopelessness that can also be seen in the story. O. Henry shows the reader how important it is to have will to live and hope even in the darkest of days. Johnsy loses all her hope while fighting the sickness so she stops believing in herself and lets all of her life goals go. She gains new hope when the last leaf determining her faith does not fall. This motif shows that even the smallest item can help suffering persons to regain hope and it makes them fight for their life again. It also indicates how crucial it is for a human being to be mentally thriving. Physical pain may be less painful than emotional or psychological hurting. Furthermore, the pain that one person goes through can be transmitted to their friends and family. While Johnsy is hopeless at one point, Sue never loses hope and is always there for her friend.

An important theme that permeates through the story is the theme of sacrifice. While Johnsy is ill and believes that her life ends with the falling of the last leaf, Behrman paints a new leaf on the wall next to the tree. Thanks to this Johnsy gains her hope back and her health blossoms. On the other side, Behrman paints that leaf through the cold and rainy night, which results in his developing the same sickness. He later passes away because of complications connected to the sickness. By this, he unintentionally sacrifices his own life for the life of a young and prosperous woman. As O. Henry's story suggests, sacrifice can be life-giving if it is connected with compassion and kindness.

A suggestive motif that appears just twice is the Bay of Naples, a sunny place in Italy known for its beautiful scenery. To paint the Bay of Naples is a dream of Johnsy that she sadly loses when she becomes seriously ill. After her recovery and regaining hope, Johnsy dreams of painting this beautiful place once again. The re-emergence of this motif is a sign of Johnsy's rapidly improving health and her renewed desire to live. The Bay of Naples can also be seen as a contradiction to the weather in Greenwich Village. In the depiction of the story, Greenwich Village is experiencing rainy, cold, and windy

weather as opposed to the bay in Italy where the weather is filled with sun. Johnsy may not only want to paint the Bay of Naples but it also might be a place where she would like to run off to.

A central symbolic image is connected with the leaves on the tree opposite their apartment. The leaves are rapidly falling down in preparation for winter, and with every leaf, Johnsy is losing more and more hope. Leaves are supposed to die off before winter and then, when spring comes, new ones grow. This is the cycle of life in which the old needs to be replaced with the new. Ultimately, this idea is not linked to the life of Johnsy and she survives.

Another symbol is the broth that Sue offers to Johnsy. The broth symbolizes health. At first, Johnsy does not want the broth which represents the bad condition she is in at that moment. When she starts feeling better, she asks for some of that broth to help her health.

An ambiguous symbol of the story is a man. When the doctor visits Johnsy, he mentions that a man may be the reason for Johnsy's wish to die. Sue dismisses this by saying that a man is not worth all of this. In contradiction to that it is a man who actually saves Johnsy. The old painter Behrman even has the word "man" in his name. This is to further deepen the importance of the symbol itself.

The central idea of the whole story is for the reader to not give up easily even when difficult obstacles come. Throughout the story, Johnsy loses all hope and is ready to die. When the last leaf was not falling, she got more courage to stay alive. O. Henry encourages the reader to stay optimistic and keep on going.

5.6.2 The Last Leaf: The Theme of a Gift

In the short story “The Last Leaf,” the theme of the gift of life is depicted. Johnsy was dying of pneumonia and did not want to fight for her life anymore. By drawing a leaf on the wall opposite her window, Behrman saved her life. In exchange for her life, Behrman decided to sacrifice his own. While painting the leaf, he caught pneumonia in the rain and died. At the same time, his lifelong dream of creating a meaningful masterpiece became true.

The gift of life is something everybody should be grateful for. All people have only one life that they should experience to the fullest. Johnsy shows the signs of giving up and not continuing to fight with her illness. By seeing the last leaf not falling even through the unpleasant weather, while all the other leaves have already fallen, she gets the motivation to keep fighting and experience more from life. Not only is this a gift of life to Johnsy but to Sue as well. By surviving, Johnsy gave the gift of her life to her friend Sue. Sue was devastated when the doctor’s diagnosis meant a slim chance of Johnsy’s recovery. With Johnsy’s full recovery, Sue has years to come spent with her friend.

Life is always a gift to every single person. The life of someone might mean a lot to another person. Behrman’s sacrifice fulfilled his life and, in the eyes of the reader, made it a successful one.⁷⁰

The gift of life is not purely about living but living a happy and prosperous life. A person can be alive but they can still feel empty and dead inside like Johnsy did before seeing the last leaf still holding on. Finding a reason for living is vital. Behrman is desperate that he is not able to create the masterpiece he dreamed of. He turns to alcohol and is depressed. By continuing and believing in himself, he finally gets the opportunity to realize that the value of true art does not depend on the amount of money or on the number of people viewing it at the museum. The leaf he has painted saves life and it is more than he could have dreamt about before. Public glory is not as valuable as helping someone in need.

⁷⁰ ERIPUDDIN, Syahada N. U. and RAHAYU Pipir, An analysis of Moral Value in Short Story “The Last Leaf” by O. Henry, *Journal of English Education*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, page 52 [online].

In accordance, Johnsy gets saved by art, which can be interpreted as the true meaning of art. Art is not solely for aesthetic purposes but has a deeper meaning for many people. Kant defines art as “a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication.”⁷¹ An artist Cedar Lee talks about the feeling of relief when looking at art as follows: “When you feel bogged down by apathy or lost in painful frustration, looking at art can bring you back to yourself and help you keep going.”⁷² For many art has the power to keep them going and it helps them to relax. In the story “The Last Leaf” art is able to save life and help Behrman find his goal and realize the true importance of his life.

The gift of life can be imagined in a variety of contexts: mother and father can give life to their children, doctors can give or return life to those whose life they support, or, for religious people, God gives life to all living creatures. As it is written in the *Bible*, Jesus Christ sacrificed his life for all of humanity’s sins. Thus, for religious people, sacrifice is a way of achieving something great in return for the “gift.” People brought gifts to sacrifice to their gods to obtain, for example, fertility, rain, life, rescue, and safety. The phrase “sacrificial lamb” comes from the *Bible* and it holds a metaphorical meaning for even non-religious people.

By writing this short story, O. Henry tells the reader not to give up even in the darkest time, and experience the wonders of the gift of life. Other themes the reader might decipher in the story are the gift of hope or the gift of courage to live.

⁷¹ KANT, Immanuel, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Guyer translation, 1790, section 44.

⁷² LEE, Cedar, What is the meaning of Art?, *Art by Cedar Lee* [online].

5.7 The Gift of the Magi

The story takes place a day before Christmas and the main protagonists are a young woman named Della and her husband Jim. They live in a furnished apartment that is in poor condition. They moved into this apartment when Jim has an opportunity to more money but the situation changed and his salary was lowered. Della is in a state of despair. She tries to save up money to get Jim a nice Christmas present but she cannot save up enough.

Nevertheless, Della gets an idea of how to get the necessary money fast. She has long and silky hair that people are jealous of. She decides to get her hair cut for money. She earns twenty dollars and with her remaining savings she can buy a great Christmas gift for Jim: a chain for his watch. She tries styling her remaining hair but she is not happy with the outcome. However, she feels she did the right thing by selling her hair. She prepares dinner for her husband and worries whether he can still like her even with short hair.

Jim returns home and he is in shock but assures Della that he will love her no matter what she looks like. The young couple decides to exchange Christmas presents. Jim is sad because Della will not be able to use the gift he bought for her. It is a set of combs.

The shocking part comes when Della gives her gift to Jim. She wants to put the chain on the watch right away but it is not possible. Jim sold the watch to buy her the set of combs.

Both lovers are unable to use their presents but are still deeply in love. It is not the present that is important, it is the thought behind it that counts.

5.7.1 The Gift of the Magi: Analysis

“The Gift of the Magi” is one of the most popular O. Henry’s short stories. It is a collection of typical features characterizing O. Henry’s work. It perfectly portrays the life of the lower-class, individual struggles in the big city, and love. Particular motifs, themes, and symbols woven into the story make “The Gift of the Magi” an engaging story with memorable characters.

The first theme of the story is poverty. The first sentences of the story instantly show the reader what the story will be about and how difficult the life of the main characters is: “One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies.”⁷³ The feeling of poverty is deepened by the mention of the sixty cents being in pennies because pennies are the smallest form of currency. To save up this amount must have taken a long time and it is not even a large sum. People from the middle-class or the higher-class often do not pick up pennies when they are given back. Pennies are considered worthless but for Della, they represent at least a small chance of getting something nice for her lover. The theme of poverty appears constantly throughout the story.

The theme of poverty is also connected with the problem that women are judged only according to their physical appearance and not with respect to their personality or achievements. Della’s biggest concern after cutting her hair off is whether Jim will still love her. Della pleads to God that Jim will find her attractive even with short hair. When Jim enters through the door, she starts being hysterical and does not want him to leave her forever. Ultimately, Jim tells her that he will love her in any shape or form. Seeing women purely as a creation of beauty and good looks has been an ongoing trend throughout the ages. Women were treated as objects and, in some parts of the world, they still are. Women around the world still do not have the same rights as men and have to work harder to achieve success. Discrimination is being fought against and the idea of equality is getting closer.

⁷³ HENRY, O., *The Gift of the Magi, Selected Stories from O. Henry*, edited by C. Alphonso Smith, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1922, page 149.

The first symbol is Della's hair, which represents femininity and beauty. In her eyes, it is the most valuable possession she owns, which makes her unique, likable, and worth being loved. With shorter hair, she feels ordinary and unlike herself. In the past, women were seen as feminine solely with respect to their long hair. With shorter hair, they were rejected as sick or badly mannered. O. Henry describes Della's hair as follows: "hair fell about her, rippling, shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her."⁷⁴ The function of hair as a covering for a woman's body was a significant motif even in the *Bible*. Eve, the first woman on Earth, was depicted in a similar way. Eve represents sin and seduction. O. Henry might be trying to portray Della as a seductive goddess for whom men would sin. This might be linked to the fact that Della was inspired by O. Henry's wife and by their happy relationship.

The next important symbol is Jim's watch. The watch is an heirloom passed on to Jim from his grandfather. The watch symbolizes nobility and success. For Jim, the watch is the only thing that makes him look rich and elegant. It is the most prized possession for him. Della notices that Jim sometimes looks at his watch not to check the time but just to show it off to other people.

Another symbol is the card on the letterbox bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young". When Jim Dillingham Young moved into the apartment with his love, he was making thirty dollars per week. Now that his income is only twenty dollars, the name on the card looks blurred and is gradually vanishing. By this motif, the author points out how the amount of money changes the response to the name of the individual person. The names of the wealthy are easily remembered but the names of poorer people tend to be forgotten.

⁷⁴ HENRY, O., *The Gift of the Magi, Selected Stories from O. Henry*, edited by C. Alphonso Smith, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1922, page 151.

5.7.2 The Gift of the Magi: The Theme of a Gift

The story shows the theme of a gift of love and sacrifice. Jim and Della both sacrifice their most prized possession to get a Christmas gift for each other. Della sacrifices her long hair and with it, she loses her femininity and beauty. Jim sells his watch and with it, he loses the feeling of being successful.

Della and Jim's love is the central theme of the whole story. Their love is so strong that they are willing to sacrifice their most valuable things in order to express their love to each other in the form of a Christmas gift. Both value their relationship more than all material things.

Della shows her love for Jim by agreeing to live in a badly established apartment with very little money. She copes with this by haggling with the shop owners to save as much money as possible. She was saving money throughout the year to buy Jim a present but with their budget, she is unable to get him something meaningful. She decides to sell her hair to get enough money for the present. Della thinks of Jim very highly and has deep feelings for him. Accordingly, Jim sells his watch to get a gift for Della. O. Henry shows the readers that wealth is not everything when it comes to love and that a relationship can be successful and happy even in poor conditions. O. Henry also points out that in close relationships people should be able to sacrifice their things for the relationship to develop.

By selling their most prized possessions but receiving the things to improve these possessions, they are left with unusable objects. Della receives a set of combs for her now short hair, and Jim gets a chain for the watch he has just sold. Even after this unlucky coincidence, they are still deeply in love and still appreciate receiving the gifts. The author points out that it is not the material gift that matters in a relationship but the thought of giving somebody a present filled with love.

O. Henry mentions that the gifts that Della and Jim give to each other are as wise as the gifts of the Biblical magi for Jesus Christ. They do not think materialistically but emotionally. Essentially, they put their whole heart into their gifts and sacrifice a part of themselves in the process.

5.8 The Brief Début of Tildy

“The Brief Début of Tildy” starts with a detailed description and history of Bogle’s Chop House and Family Restaurant. The restaurant is known for its good food and low prices. The owner Bogle works at the cashier’s desk. He is described as cold, slow, and smoldering. He is not there to chat with people. He only wants the customer’s money and is not interested in making friends.

Two waitresses work at the restaurant. The first one is Aileen, who is tall, lively, beautiful, and gregarious. The other waitress is Tildy, who is anxious, short, and a bit bigger. For her beauty and charming personality, Aileen constantly gets compliments from the men at the restaurant. Some of these men invite her on vacation, propose to her with rings, bring her gifts, and flirt with her. On the other hand, Tildy does not receive the same attention from men. She is a good waitress but does not appeal to the eyes of the men the same way as Aileen.

One morning Aileen goes to work with a bruised eye because a drunken customer followed Aileen down the street and tried to convince her to sleep with him. When she slaps him, he attacks back and strikes her eye. At this moment, Tildy is grateful that she does not get this same attention from men. However, at the same time, she wishes that men would notice her, or even follow her home. She is not jealous of her friend Aileen and she supports her.

That same day, a regular customer Mr. Seeders gets very drunk and touches Tildy. It ends up in a kiss and Mr. Seeders runs away. Tildy finally feels attractive.

After four days, when Mr. Seeders arrives, he apologises to Tildy for kissing her. He says that he did it only because of alcohol and that he would not normally do such a thing. Tildy starts crying, feeling like her prince will never come.

Aileen comforts Tildy as her friend and says: “Don’t you fret, Til. That turnip-faced little clothespin of a Seeders ain’t worth it. He ain’t anything of a gentleman or he wouldn’t of ever apologised”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ HENRY, O., *The Brief Début of Tildy, Selected Stories from O. Henry*, edited by C. Alphonso Smith, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1922.

5.8.1 The Brief Début of Tildy: Analysis

The short story “The Brief Début of Tildy” portrays the life of the working class and the problems that only women face. O. Henry uses a lot of details to make the short story believable and heartbreaking at the same time.

The first theme of the story is poverty. The description of the restaurant shows the readers the condition, in which the establishment is. It is a good place to eat for only the less fortunate. O. Henry describes the restaurant as follows: “For if you are one of the fortunate ones who dine expensively you should be interested to know how the other half consumes provisions.”⁷⁶ To further deepen the feeling of poverty, the pepper in the cruets is tasteless and the salt cruet is empty. It can be interpreted that the restaurant owner does not want to spend money on quality spices.

The next important theme is the portrayal of the female characters and how badly women get treated by men. In this story, the value of a woman comes solely from her appearance. Aileen gets a lot of praise and attention from men because of her looks. Tildy is overseen and struggles with her confidence. Aileen gets groped, catcalled, and even attacked, when she does not agree to a man’s advances. The way she is portrayed makes the reader think that she loves all of this attention. Later in the story, the actual reason for her actions is revealed. When Tildy gets touched and kissed, she tells the owner of the restaurant, Bogle, about it. He raises her income for attracting customers. From this moment, the readers can now understand why Aileen acts the way she does. She needs to be as appealing to the customers as possible to earn enough money.

Another interesting theme is the feeling people get when they are excluded from something. The feeling can be described as sadness, loneliness, distress, and self-doubt. Tildy does not get noticed by men the same way Aileen does. Tildy is happy for her friend but at the same time, she wants a man to give her attention as well. She is feeling desperate and is wishing for a prince to come and rescue her. When Mr. Seeders kisses her, she finally feels noticed and even attractive. She starts taking more time dressing herself and tightens her waist to look thinner. This motif shows how easily people

⁷⁶ HENRY, O., *The Brief Début of Tildy, Selected Stories from O. Henry*, edited by C. Alphonso Smith, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1922, page 50.

change their appearance because of others, and it points out the influence even strangers can have on the minds of people. Tildy is devastated when Mr. Seeders blames his actions solely on alcohol. It was not her looks but the alcohol that made Mr. Seeders kiss Tildy. It should be noted that Tildy is never jealous of Aileen. She is a good friend and cannot be jealous of her.

Both the female characters resemble the classical fairy tale about Sleeping Beauty. They are waiting for the right man to come and wake them up from their slumber, to save them. After kissing Mr. Seeders, Tildy wakes up for a moment. She is filled with happy emotions and feels alive. However, she finds out that Mr. Seeders is not her prince, and she falls back to sleep. Aileen is always surrounded by men but none of them are the correct choice.

The grey colour plays an important role as a symbol. After Tildy finds out the truth about the kiss, O. Henry describes her feelings as follows: "out and back again to the grey plain."⁷⁷ This colour symbolizes sad and dreary emotions or settings. Tildy is sad from her first heartbreak and returns to the way she was. She tears out her red hair bow, stops smiling as much, and stops tightening her waist. She goes back to her old and mopey self.

⁷⁷ HENRY, O., *The Brief Début of Tildy, Selected Stories from O. Henry*, edited by C. Alphonso Smith, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1922, page 56.

5.8.2 The Brief Début of Tildy: The Theme of a Gift

In “The Brief Début of Tildy” we can follow the theme of a gift of friendship. Tildy finds her true friend in Aileen. Aileen helps her feel better when Tildy needs her support the most. They are connected by the same workplace and gender. Even one common topic with another person can create a close friendship. They both fight with the same issue; men. Nevertheless, at the same time, they desire true love and interest. In this respect, the story refers to the motif of the Sleeping Beauty.

As mentioned above, Aileen is slim, tall, beautiful, and talkative. Tildy is stubby, anxious, and anti-social. They are completely different but still create an amazing bond. Their differences complement each other very nicely. Aileen has the characteristics that Tildy lacks, and it works the other way around as well. The same struggle that both women go through helps them to understand each other. The constant harassment from male customers in the restaurant, the same moody boss, and their gender tightens their friendship and shows them how similar they actually are. The women are also connected by the motif of gifts. Aileen gets many gifts from the drunken customers, Tildy receives her first kiss. All of these gifts have no value for the women and they cannot bring Sleeping Beauty back to life. Both girls must continue to wait for their prince. Tildy yields to depression because she does not believe that can ever find love. This shows the reappearance of the grey colour, which symbolizes the return back to sleep. Aileen tries to wake her up by comforting her and being by her side. She reassures Tildy that the problem is not her but men. Aileen ultimately becomes the prince for Tildy, keeping her sane.

As the story suggests, the friendship between two women can become one of the strongest bonds known to people after the bond between a parent and their child. Women tend to keep their friendship going for years, whereas men do not plan to meet their male friends as often. Women tell each other deep secrets and create wonderful emotional bonds that are not easily broken. Women know the struggle other women have to go through, how hard it is for them to be treated the same way a man is, and feminine problems only another woman understands.

Both Tildy and Aileen are there emotionally for each other, when the other is at their lowest point. Tildy listens to Aileen's story about her fight with the drunk customer. Aileen comforts Tildy when she discovers the truth about the special kiss for Tildy. They know how to react and what to do when the other is feeling down. The bond that they have created helps them both. They encourage each other, ease the bad feelings, and uplift the mood of the other. O. Henry shows how even two very different people can become good friends and how important it is to have somebody to trust and have their back.

Friendships portray individual and social values. They are considered "life-enhancing" and they make people "feel more alive." As Helm mentions in his book *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*: "If my friend and I form a kind of union in virtue of our having a shared conception of how to live that is forged and maintained through a particular history of interaction and sharing of our lives."⁷⁸ Friends shape each other, share the same values, and form similar identities. Friendships are important for people and are a part of the human nature.⁷⁹

The theme of a gift of friendship is accompanied with the gift of forgiveness.⁸⁰ Aileen does not only help Tildy to forgive the man who kissed her but she guides her to forgive herself and surpass her negative emotions.

The women are a gift for each other. They have the same dream to meet their prince but on the way they both experience a form of sexual harassment. At first, they behave almost as prostitutes to make more money and get more attention from men. This act becomes destructive and hurtful for them. Aileen gets attacked and Tildy experiences a harming kiss. It becomes eye-opening and the women realize that the problem is not within them but in the men they encountered. It is not wise to change for someone because the right person will like them just the way they are. Ultimately, they comfort each other and substitute the role of a therapist for one another.

⁷⁸ HELM, Bennett, Friendship, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* [online].

⁷⁹ Ibid. paragraph 2.1 Individual Value.

⁸⁰ Cf. REYNOLDS, Jack, Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [online].

5.9 The Green Door

The author sets the tone of the story by giving a hypothetical situation in which the reader gets presented with the option of experiencing true adventure. The described situation ends with a question; “How would you react?” Furthermore, the author encourages the reader to take risks and embrace the possibility of adventure before it is too late.

The perspective of the story changes when the narrator introduces Rudolf Steiner, a true adventurer. He embarks on many adventures and gets into strange places and situations. During his evening walk, he receives a piece of paper on which the words “The Green Door” are written. Rudolf receives the paper from a black man standing outside a five-floor tall building. The ground floor is occupied by a restaurant. Rudolf decides to look for the green door on the second floor.

He knocks on the first green door he notices. A pale, lifeless girl opens the door and immediately faints. Rudolf catches her and puts her down on a bed. She wakes up and explains the situation to Rudolf. She has not eaten for three days. Rudolf runs to the store and surprises the girl with bags full of groceries and food from the restaurant.

The girl eats and drinks to satisfy her hunger. During the feast, she shares her life story with Rudolf. The world is full of stories like hers but for Rudolf, it is the only tale that matters. She still feels weak and tired after the meal. Rudolf leaves her for the night and promises to come back tomorrow.

On his way out of the building, he approaches the black man and asks about the paper. The black man gestures across the street towards the theatre hosting a play “The Green Door.” Rudolf does not believe that it was only a coincidence: the words sent him to meet the starving girl.

5.9.1 The Green Door: Analysis

“The Green Door” is a story about a desire for adventure that can become a gift. The author encourages the readers to embrace adventure. The story functions as a portrayal of what might happen if we decide to embark on a journey offered to us. The story deals with the depiction of poverty, generosity, and gift-giving.

The most significant symbol is the green door. The door symbolizes an escape from ordinary life for Rudolf. It represents an opportunity to liberate from the monotony of existence and explore the unknown. It also embodies adventure and the will to take risks. The green door serves as a way to new experiences. It helps Rudolf to create a special bond and find a new desire to help.

The door also serves as a metaphor for the contrast between illusion and reality. Rudolf expects a lot from the green door, his interest in finding out what lies behind it is extreme. The reality is quite different. He faces poverty and starvation. However, the door helps him to become more serious, to develop an intense interest in the life of another person, and, possibly, to experience love.

The story also includes motifs of a fairy tale. A sad princess is locked behind the door and needs to be rescued. She is waiting for a miracle to happen, for a prince to come and save her. The prince eventually comes and rescues her when she is at her lowest point. She falls in love with him and cannot wait for him to come and visit her again. The story has an open ending but the reader is assured that Rudolf will visit the poor girl once more at least.

The story makes the reader think about the questions of fate and coincidence. Rudolf Steiner explores the green door, which illustrates the idea that there are forces beyond human understanding that guide people towards their destiny. Rudolf gets led to the green door through a series of unexpected events. Despite his initial hesitation, he is compelled to investigate the green door and what can be found behind it. He meets a malnourished girl, with whom he creates a special bond and saves her life.

5.9.2 The Green Door: The Theme of a Gift

The theme of a gift is woven into the short story in several dimensions of meaning. Not only does the tale portray a material gift, it also depicts the gifts of imagination, human ties and generosity. With the use of irony, fairy-tale motifs, and the theme of a gift, O. Henry shows the readers the uneasy situation of the nineteenth-century poor people in a more heart-warming light.

As a material gift, the lifeless girl receives food that sustains her hunger and keeps her alive. This can be interpreted as a gift of life that ultimately leads to a special connection between the two people. The girl even mentions that she is happy about Rudolf's single status. For Rudolf, the physical gift is only a minor inconvenience that leads to an exciting love story. The gift is a life-changing opportunity for the girl also. It keeps her alive and introduces her to a "prince." Without this random occurrence, the girl would die and Rudolf's life would remain unchanged. He would still be searching for adventure to find the true meaning of his life. The next material gift is the paper that Rudolf receives. Other people usually throw away advertisements but he sees the paper as a gift. For the readers, this act is a sign of the incredible and rich imagination that Rudolf has.

The author highlights the theme of gift-giving with the use of irony. The green door is initially perceived as a gift of opportunity and fulfilment of the need for adventure. The door leads Rudolf to disappointment: to a dying girl. This upsetting revelation turns out to be a gift of an unexpected value. As the story suggests, it is the unpredictability of life that can contribute to positive changes. A certain irony is reflected in the title written on the paper: "The Green Door." Rudolf interprets the advertisement literally; he searches for a real green door. However, the title refers to a dramatic performance.

Rudolf and the pale girl are a gift for each other. Rudolf's interaction with the girl brings him an insight into the life of the less fortunate people. For the girl, it is a chance to live and also a possibility to create a special bond with another person, as explained above. She mentions that she does not have a family or friends, she feels lonely. Rudolf represents an escape from loneliness, the feeling of safety and a chance to have a happy life.

5.10. Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen

The short story begins on Thanksgiving Day in New York City. The main protagonist and also the narrator of the story is a homeless man. Thanksgiving Day is the only time of the year when the homeless get fed by the rich. This act is considered a tradition and people feel obligated to help others on this special day.

The homeless man gets fed by the same person each year, Mr. Gillis. Even if, this year he gets fed by some wealthy ladies, he cannot deny the offer from Mr. Gillis. He knows how much this gesture means to him and he cannot let Mr. Gillis down. He goes to the restaurant with Mr. Gillis to get fed.

People at the restaurant applaud Mr. Gillis for his kindness. The homeless man eats and eats to fulfil Mr. Gillis's tradition. After he leaves the restaurant, he feels unwell from all the food he has ingested. He is taken to hospital so that the cause of his illness could be found.

An hour later, Mr. Gillis is taken to the same hospital. It is discovered that he has not eaten for several days. He rather used his money to fulfil the tradition of charity than to buy food for himself.

5.10.1 Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen: Analysis

“Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen” is a portrayal of the lower-class and it shows the difficult lives of homeless people. With the use of a variety of motifs, the story gets a unique and heart-warming atmosphere.

A major theme of the story is generosity. Mr. Gillis, who despite his own financial situation, willingly spends money on another person’s needs. He offers a meal to a homeless man even if he has not eaten for three days. His gesture highlights the importance of selflessness and compassion. It is a tradition of helping the poor but it is also beneficial for Mr. Gillis. He does not have a family and the creation of a special bond with the homeless man substitutes the missing family for the gentleman.

The story deals with the problem of wealth and poverty. The difference between the wealthy and the poor is crucial for the story. Despite the fact that Mr. Gillis is poor, he still helps people whose financial situation is even worse. He can be described as wealthy in kindness, generosity, and gratitude. O. Henry points out the importance of inner richness compared to material wealth. In the story, wealth can be considered a burden. The tradition of feeding a homeless man in a fancy restaurant to maintain a good reputation as a good Samaritan and a wealthy person ultimately leaves Mr. Gillis impoverished.

O. Henry is famous for the use of irony. In this story, irony adds depth and complexity to the narrative. Mr. Gillis’s Thanksgiving tradition of paying for an extravagant meal every year leaves him penniless for the rest of the year. This tradition of celebrating the spirit of Thanksgiving by feeding hungry people ironically leads to Mr. Gillis’s own poverty and hunger. It could be interpreted as sacrifice, however, his gift does not help anyone. This irony may evoke a question: isn’t this tradition only a charity for charity?

5.10.2 Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen: The Theme of a Gift

The theme of a gift in the short story can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It encompasses the concepts of generosity, friendship, gratitude, and the value of human ties. The gift revolves around the act of giving without the expectation of receiving something in return. Mr. Gillis is considered a hero for his almost charity-like work.

O. Henry points out that through selflessness inherent in giving, joy and fulfillment can be found by the giver. The main protagonist of the story, Mr. Gillis, shows that to help others, people do not need a lot themselves. Furthermore, the potential loss of something important is overshadowed by the accomplishment of helping another person and the inner warm feelings.

Mr. Gillis does not only receive fulfillment from helping a person in need but this generous act also provides him with a crucial human bond that he desperately needs. He is a retired old man who does not get in contact with others very often. The invitation for a Thanksgiving dinner could be interpreted as a symbolic and mutual gift of friendship, highlighting the importance of human concern with empathy for others.

Nevertheless, Mr. Gillis sacrifices his food which is vital for him, for the homeless man at the moment his sacrifice is useless; both men turn sick. In other words, his sacrifice is meaningful only for him as he wants to spend Thanksgiving Day with the traditional act of charity. In this respect, the story is also about the power of a tradition. The gift becomes a part of a ritual. For the homeless man, cheaper food on another day of the year, when nobody cares about him, would be a more helpful gift.

The story also shows the readers that they should be grateful and appreciative of life's blessings. The act of Mr. Gillis reminds us of the importance of acknowledging and cherishing simple pleasures in life, regardless of material wealth. His gratitude to have the opportunity to spend time with other people points out that people should be thankful for every opportunity they can spend with their loved ones.

5.11 Recurring Features in O. Henry's Stories

Throughout the analysis of O. Henry's stories, multiple features and details are used more than once. The author creates similar characters, storylines, and possible endings of the stories.

In the stories "The Furnished Room," "The Green Door," and "The Last Leaf" the female characters are similar in the way they are portrayed. In all stories, there is a woman stuck in a room in need of rescuing. In "The Furnished Room" the "prince" does not come to save Eloise in time. She loses hope and dies. Johnsy from the story "The Last Leaf" loses all hope and wants to die too. However, her saviour comes and creates a leaf that gives her the will to live. The man ultimately dies after saving her, he sacrifices his own life. The starving girl from "The Green Door" gets help from her "prince" through a chain of unexpected events. Through the process, they can create a possible love story. Similarly depicted female characters appear in the short story "The Brief Début of Tildy." Both Tildy and Aileen could be defined as "princesses," waiting for their "prince." They fight their struggles with men in a constant search for true love. Their "prince" does not show up in the story. Nevertheless, they do not yield to despair. To sum up, there are similar types of women in these stories: they are young, sensitive, poor, and longing for love.

In O. Henry's works, there is also a tendency to portray similar types of men. Men are frequently characterised as saviours. They are willing to lose their own life in the process of saving another person. It can even be described as an obsession. In "The Last Leaf," "The Furnished Room," and "Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen," the men want to save another person even if they risk their own well-being. The men from these stories end up dead or seriously ill. This description of men further proves the idea that men are seen as heroes or princes, dedicating their whole lives to save people in need.

In O. Henry's stories, the portraits of both men and women can be seen as stereotypical in the sense of distinguishing between gender roles in society. Nowadays, these barriers are being destroyed and both genders tend to be treated more equally.

The stories often generate the question of the paradox of help in gift-giving. "Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen" is a clear representation of this topic. The good will to

help and keep the tradition sends the homeless man to hospital. Moreover, the man wanting to help the homeless person ends up ill from not eating for three days. However, if people would help the homeless regularly and not only on Thanksgiving Day, they could save more people and help on a bigger scale. This act of help is ironically more devastating than helpful. In "The Gift of the Magi" both partners end up with an unusable gift, yet they are still happy. This story can be interpreted as a paradox in which the main protagonists lose a part of themselves and receive something of no value. Nevertheless, they still have each other and it is their mutual love that adds an absolute value to their gifts.

The stories are often left with open endings for the readers to continue the plots in their preferred way. As people tend to create a happy ending in their minds if the story does not have a generally happy conclusion, we can compare O. Henry's stories with the hopeful messages of fairy tales.

6. Conclusion

O. Henry, an expert in the short story genre, is an excellent literary figure who made an undeniable mark on American literature. This thesis has explored the life of O. Henry and his family, the literary genres that influenced his work, the theme of a gift and gift-giving throughout time, and, most importantly, the analysis of the author's short stories along with the theme of a gift portrayed in them.

Losing his mother at a young age and not having a male model in his life, O. Henry was raised by his grandmother and aunt, who was also his teacher. Throughout his life, O. Henry struggled with poverty, illness, and imprisonment, yet he managed to create many marvellous stories that influence people's views of life even today. By undergoing life in the Wild West and in New York, and by working at a small drug store, O. Henry obtained experience and knowledge about the lives of ordinary people: he understood how to create characters that the reader can identify with on various emotional levels. By examining O. Henry's biography, we obtain a better understanding of what challenges he had to overcome to provide his literary works to us.

This thesis also offers an overview of the history of gift-giving and the understanding of the theme of a gift. The investigation of different theories of a gift highlights the view of O. Henry and his idea of a true gift. Like E. Lévinas, O. Henry suggests that the possibility to give someone a gift is a gift in itself and people should be grateful for it. This inquiry leads us to the analysis of several O. Henry's short stories in a special sub-chapter, observing the theme of a gift in each story. The analysed short stories include "The Furnished Room," "The Last Leaf," "The Gift of the Magi," "The Brief Début of Tildy," "The Green Door," and "Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen."

In response to Derrida's theory, we can say that most of O. Henry's characters give free gifts without any expectation of receiving something in return. However, it may happen that in spite of this fact, the giver sometimes receives an unexpected gift too. It can be seen especially in the story "The Gift of the Magi," which expresses O. Henry's vision of unselfish love.

Through the part of the analysis concerned with the theme of a gift in each of the stories, several important themes were described: the gift of life, sacrifice, hope, love,

friendship, and generosity. O. Henry teaches the readers essential human values, evokes intense emotions, and describes vital interpersonal relationships. By employing the theme of a gift, O. Henry creates a more interesting setting, deepens the emotions the readers share with the characters, and highlights how crucial human friendship is. The principles portrayed in his stories are still important and remain relevant.

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