

# “TRUTH IS HELD IN DISREPUTE”: O. HENRY AND THE DISMANTLING OF PARADIGMS

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## 1. Introduction

Since his short stories became the quintessence of American lowbrow culture (he was only an entertainer, F. L. Pattee warned us in 1923), and critics defined them as “cheap jokes” (Bryllion N. Fagin, qtd. in Current-Garcia 1965: 135), or “expanded anecdotes” (Katherine Fullerton Gerould, qtd. in Current-Garcia 1965: 157), O. Henry —*passé* and of scarce literary merit— has been unjustly forgotten, almost ostracized, by the academic establishment. Yet, like no other writer of his time, he is an exceptionally faithful eyewitness to the consolidation of the society of industrialization and consumerism, which Warren I. Susman (1984) has accurately defined as the “culture of abundance”. Between 1897 and 1910 —O. Henry’s years of unprecedented popularity— the nation faced a conflict between an older culture committed to Puritan virtues (self-denial, temperance, thriftiness and character) and conservative traditions (family, the Church, supremacy of men over women), and an emerging consumer culture “with its emphasis on pleasure and self-fulfillment”, overspending and personality (Susman 1984: xxviii). Self-realization, and not salvation, was the goal of a narcissistic self which became “other-directed”, i.e. moved only by “the expectations of others and the needs of the moment” (Lears 1983: 8).

O. Henry’s characters are obviously not alien to these ideological shifts, and many of their dilemmas directly emerge from the difficulties underlying the embrace

and/or refusal of these conflicting values. My contention in this article is that his short fiction is the site where a number of previously incontestable concepts, immutable principles and apparently indelible shibboleths are disputed or erased. Gender roles become unstable categories, and Darwinist postulates are rendered too imprecise to define human types and predict their evolution. These sweeping changes, which affect almost everything, convert the world into a place where nothing is reliable. Cause-and-effect sequences are reverted, logic proves to be blind, sham appearances count more than disguised truths, uncertainties substitute for deeply rooted beliefs, and dysgenic replaces eugenic in the age of progress.

In “Sisters of the Golden Circle” (*The Four Million*, 1906)<sup>1</sup> the visitors to New York riding in a sightseeing car are unable to see what the guide shows them at each moment. Despite their attempts to “make ocular responses” (O. Henry 1953: 82), the sights trumpeted through the megaphone are associated with the wrong places, and thus it is no accident that “[i]n the solemn spires of spreading cathedrals” they see “the home of the Vanderbilts” and, when asked to look at “the highlands of the Hudson”, they gape “at the upturned mountains of a newlaid sewer” (O. Henry 1953: 82). To greenhorns and oldtimers alike, the Big Apple remains an impossible cryptograph. In his monumental work *The Decline of the West* (1932), Oswald Spengler defined the contemporary world and its epitome, the megapolis, as the place where destiny, that is, the belief in the existence of a “living Direction” (1980: 107) governing the flow of events, has been replaced by “Casuality”, accident or hap. O. Henry applies this principle not only to the depiction of a mystifying world where nothing is what it seems but also to the formal structure of his narrative, invariably ruled by the surprise ending, a technique which needs “ambiguities [and] half-statements” (Éjxenbaum 1968: 260), or “some trick of reversal based on essential information withheld” (Current-Garcia 1965: 138).

In the following pages I will attempt to demonstrate how very little can be taken at face value in O. Henry’s fiction. This entails not only the suspension of any permanent truth but also the dismantling of established structures, be it gender, class or genre. There will come a time when events “will happen logically, and the villain will be discomfited instead of being elected to the board of directors” (O. Henry 1953: 1299), the intrusive narrator of “The Plutonian Fire” (*The Voice of the City*, 1917) argues. But, as things now stand, we will have to admit that “truth is held in disrepute”.

## 2. O. Henry and Genre

*Limelight* (1952) shows us Chaplin as Calvero, an aging, washed-up actor who, in the nick of time, saves the waif-like Claire Bloom from gassing herself to death in

her furnished room. Tormented by her inability to survive in a hostile environment, the girl becomes physically and psychologically paralyzed. Lacking self-confidence, she abandons a promising career as a ballerina and contemplates death as the only way out of the world's threats and pitfalls. The melodramatic plot is a clear indictment of the social iniquities of capitalism. Yet the lesson to be learned is not the overthrow of a cruel socioeconomic system but the replacement of self-interest and egoism by generosity and altruism. Only love can vanquish the absurdities of the inevitable struggle for existence, and endow life with an enduring meaning and hope. A semiotic analysis of the motion picture cannot overlook the striking similarities with O. Henry's "The Furnished Room" (1904). O. Henry's characters are also "theatrical people". Eloise Vashner is a "fair girl" who sings on the stage. Unable to survive in the Big Apple, she decides to commit suicide by turning on the gas in her furnished room, and so does the hero by the end of the story. Indeed both seem to be sensitive and devoted, and the youth's quest for his sweetheart demonstrates, once more, the moral superiority of love over the egoism of America's materialistic society.

That O. Henry's short fiction provided the emerging movie industry with melodramatic plotlines, motifs and a gallery of ready-made characters is an indisputable fact. Cisco Kid, the Mexican desperado of the early talkie western *In Old Arizona* (1929), is the protagonist of "A Double-Dyed Deceiver" (1905) and "The Caballero's Way" (1907). The tramps and vagabonds that catapulted Chaplin to worldwide fame also owe a great deal to the writer's immensely popular creations such as Bulger, Soapy or Whistling Dick. In one of the first scenes of *Modern Times* (1936) we are presented with a view of the industrialized city as the byword for labor slavery. American commuters are transformed into a herd of sheep in a way that is reminiscent of O. Henry's "The Pendulum" (*The Trimmed Lamp*, 1907): "A flock of citizen sheep scrambled out and another flock scrambled aboard. Ding-ding! The cattle cars of the Manhattan Elevated rattled away, and John Perkins drifted down the stairway of the station with the released flock" (1953: 1383). Not in vain, Chaplin was soon nicknamed "the O. Henry of the silent drama" (Anon. 1923: 7).

Current-Garcia argues that the writer's fiction is the hybrid result of combining the Southern local color fiction, the Western tall tales and the topsy-turvy city stories. In fact, an amalgamation of hardly compatible texts, registers and genres pervades the dense discursive terrain of the typical O. Henry story. In a seminal essay of the 1920s, Russian formalist Boris M. Eñxenbaum holds that the North Carolina writer chooses parody as the rhetorical principle to unify the most disparate elements (the anecdote, the vaudeville and the feuilleton) into a form which lays bare the construction, the artificial trappings of the story (1968: 259). The result is very often an ironic composite which defies labels and easy categorizations. In choosing

parody as the central axis of his narrative O. Henry is not only recreating textual precedents but also questioning the potential of past formulas to come to terms with the intricacies of the present world. In this regard, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, parody must be here understood as a form of self-reflexivity which aims to disrupt and transgress. Repetition in O. Henry is never a stabilizing agent that unifies or “stresses sameness or stasis” (Hutcheon 2000: 101) but rather a powerful critical tool which foregrounds “irreconcilable opposition between texts and between text and world” (2000: 102). Since the effect we identify as quintessentially postmodern, as Beebee (1994: 9) argues, is one produced “by defeating generic expectations”, O. Henry’s fiction, dominated by a ubiquitous instability, subverts all paradigms and deflates any pretension of a monolithic structure. In so far as his texts postulate “a world of simulacra, without depth, center or causation”, informed only by “pure chance” (Spariosu 1987: 59), the writer has been acknowledged as one who specially favors a postmodern hermeneutics (Evans 1981). If genre is by definition a form of ideology, then “the struggles against or the deviations from genre” must also be regarded as “ideological struggles” (Beebee 1994: 19).

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O. Henry’s parody includes a wide-ranging repertoire. “Thimble, Thimble” (*Options*, 1909), “an ironic presentation of ‘a Southerner’s idea of a Northerner’s idea of the South’” (Current-Garcia 1965: 63) opens with excessively detailed directions how to reach Manhattan’s Financial District (O. Henry 1953: 715). The long-winding passage describes a cityscape with “big Cañons [sic]” (narrow streets), a long “trail” (Broadway), “synthetic mountains” (skyscrapers) and “granite ledges” (sidewalks), all of which converts the urban setting into a replica of the Western wilderness. Not by coincidence, O. Henry was once called “the Bret Harte of the City” (qtd. in O’Connor 1970: 235), and his narrators were defined as “of the Western hotel-foyer type” (Pattee 1923: 358). Furthermore, the tall tale combined two conventions suitable for the representation of the big city’s masquerade: “the discrepancies between what people are and what they appear to be” (Hazard 1927: 189), and the underlying idea that the world is an immoral place where “survival and humor are more important than ethics” (Brown 1987: 37). In describing New York, the epitome of a modern capitalist society, as the stage Far West of a tall tale, rife with perils and outlaws, O. Henry is not only duplicating the props and characters of a popular subgenre, he is also evaluating the moral stature of the dominant world.

A similar parodic critique of the unprincipled ethics of the consumer culture is found in “The Defeat of the City” (1904). The story rewrites the success myth formula but, as the narrative unfolds, we discover a plot which spoofs the easy, Horatio-Algerish optimism. Robert Walmsley, the protagonist, only becomes a fully accomplished man after leaving the city to return to his small town. The rags-to-

riches sequence has been subverted. A good number of O. Henry’s stories also reinstate the idea of the city as the breeding ground of evil and sin, and in so doing they mimic the urban imagery and hell-fire jargon of preachers. Yet it is not always easy to ascertain whether the narrator subscribes to their moralistic point of view or he is simply lampooning the lingo of the clergy. Thus, Robert, the country bumpkin who becomes an affluent lawyer, may “descend” to the city—like Jesus did to Hell—only to return as a glorious victor who has defeated an enemy compared with “the leviathan [sic]”, or described as “a juggernaut [or] a Moloch” (O. Henry 1953: 1626). But it is no less true that the city also becomes the perfect place to prove one’s values in a contest which will eventually strengthen moral principles (Strauss 1961: 144-148).

As Lanford noted long ago (1957: 80), a vast bulk of O. Henry’s stories read as burlesque crime/detective stories. “The Marionettes” (1902), a tale which partly duplicates the plotlines and intrigue of “A Municipal Report” (*Strictly Business*, 1910), combines the robbery/murder motif with the story of a husband who beats his wife and drives her to starvation. Yet the denouement is not the punishment of a fake doctor who has just murdered the dying patient in his urge to grab whatever is left in the safe. Before the robber leaves, he hands over the loot he has snatched from other victims to the abused spouse, and makes up the story of the deceased husband’s deathbed repentance.

O. Henry’s penchant for melodrama, one of the most popular in the long list of genres of the nineteenth century, can be easily observed from the very beginning. His first published story, “The Miracle of Lava Canyon” (1897), draws heavily on the conventions of frontier drama. We have the hero, Sheriff Conrad, the heroine, Boadicea Reed, and the villain, outlaw Arizona Dan. Yet, as the story proceeds, we discover that the characters hardly fit into melodramatic archetypes. As Current-Garcia puts it, “to pose for what one is not” (1965: 87) is O. Henry’s most persistent theme. Conrad is not the brave man we assumed him to be but a coward who cannot conceal his fright, and far from being a weakling, the girl is an intrepid woman who knows no fear. Grimsted (1968: 176) argues that the structure of melodrama invariably includes a tug-of-war between the heroine’s innocence and the villain’s attempts to destroy her. He is “the snake in the garden”; she, the temple of virtue. In O. Henry’s short fiction the dialectical clash between good and evil is still retained but we are no longer able to say who is who in the moral conflict, and even if we momentarily can, we realize later on that our judgment was absolutely wrong. Characters talk, listen and understand at cross purposes, and miscommunication reigns. If melodrama is “a drama of signs” whose only aim is “making the world morally legible” (Gunning 1994: 50), signs are now always deceptive. Thus, the character we might deem to incarnate the heroine does not correspond to the clichéd portrait, and the same could be said of the protagonist

we initially identified as the villain. Soapy, the bum of “The Cop and the Anthem” (1904), is arrested precisely the moment he decides to reform. Moral repentance does not bring reward but punishment. Vuyning (“From Each According to his Ability”, 1919), the crook who teaches some other rogues how to dress and behave in the West, is finally the wealthy son of a rancho owner in Colorado; Arthur Lyle (“The Memento”, 1906), the small town man of irreproachable morality, a “saint” by all standards, is a regular spectator of vaudeville who collects the dancers’ garters as keepsakes; and contrary to our expectations, Rosalie Ray, the burlesque dancer, emerges as a girl of spotless reputation. All the staple ingredients of melodrama are carefully included only to be subverted. The “meet cute” scene does not reunite the lovers. Far from it, in the travesty of the modern world, Cupid always shoots his arrows at the wrong target. The rich man we believed to be the hideous villain in “Brickdust Row” (*The Trimmed Lamp*, 1907) does not intend to abuse Florence, the poor tenant, when he invites her to Coney Island. Blinker’s intentions are genuine. In the character we identified as the materialistic man we discover the true idealist. Florence’s innocence, however, dies (“I am not a wall flower” [1953: 1409], she blurts out brazenly) the moment we learn that this is not the first time she has spent some time with a gentleman. Country bumpkins from the West may prove to have razor-sharp heads for business and clever city slicks may be easily taken in. Anagnorisis, the discovery of concealed truth in melodrama and the key to all conflicts, does not help solve problems in the O. Henry short story. Conversely, when we find out the impostors’ real identity, questions multiply. If melodrama is “a monopathic theatrical event” (Heilman 1968: 74-87), since it elicits an unmistakable, unique response in the audience—hope when the hero wins in the moral battle and hopelessness when he is defeated—in the O. Henry short story, bewilderment and delusion take over, for permanent, ready-made identities must never be taken for granted. On the cusp of modernity, the antagonist may be a victim and the protagonist the oppressor, the goodies may be punished whereas the baddies are rewarded, and conflicts may be left intentionally unsolved or complicated further.

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### 3. Primitive or barbarian: gender roles on the change

Although O. Henry disclaimed any reformist zeal in his stories, it is undeniable that he was soon regarded “by the reformers as a sociological writer” (Stuart 1990: 177), mostly because he published in magazines (*McClure’s*, *The American*, *Collier’s*, *Everybody’s*, etc) which opened their pages to “the new group of infuriated writers whom Teddy Roosevelt would characterize as ‘muckrakers’” (Stuart 1990: 136). Anne Partlan, the labor leader’s daughter and a passionate advocate of

women’s rights, became one of the writer’s acquaintances. In a famous letter to the writer’s biographer and friend, C. Alphonso Smith, President Roosevelt said that many of “his campaigns for social reform —particularly the plight of the office girl— were sparked by his readings of O. Henry’s stories” (Stuart 1990: 178). Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) provides a sociological dichotomy (primitive vs. barbarian) which may help in identifying O. Henry’s gallery of elusive characters forced to inhabit a highly competitive milieu.

Veblen divides mankind’s evolution into three distinct stages: the primitive, the barbarian and the industrial. Honesty, good nature and equity are the objectives of a primitive type of character which is also defined by traits such as “weakness, inefficiency, lack of initiative and ingenuity” (1994: 138). Life has become a struggle in the barbarian stage, and therefore predatory habits such as “ferocity, self-seeking, clannishness, and [...] a free resort to force and fraud” (Veblen 1994: 138) are highly valued. The present-day stage is the industrial age which the economist defines as a hybrid mixture of both primitive and barbarian traits. Working-class individuals are characterized by “honesty, diligence, peacefulness, good-will, an absence of self-seeking” (Veblen 1994: 140). In other words, they have kept archaic traits that belonged to the primitive times. In contrast, the ruling class, far more interested in acquisition and accumulation of wealth, has retained the predatory attitudes typical of the barbarian temperament.

This Darwinian model might be interpreted as dividing the members of the social contract into two opposed types. However, Veblen gainsays this foregone conclusion by adding that all social classes “are engaged in the pecuniary struggle” (1994: 148), and accordingly the barbarian frame of mind may shape the aims of both employers and workers. This leaves open the question of who will be fit to survive in the struggle for existence. No social trait is written in stone, and O. Henry’s unpredictable characters encompass the whole spectrum of responses.

A look at the new role of women at the dawn of the twentieth century will suffice to prove this point. According to Veblen, women are forced into a set of primitive duties which save them from taking part in the pecuniary struggle (1994: 220). Any attempt at achieving a “self-directing, self-centered life” is by definition a barbarian trait, and since women’s natural sphere is always “ancillary to the activity of the man” (Veblen 1994: 216), any deviation from this tenet is likely to bring forth unfeminine results. Yet the sociologist also notes that the massive incorporation of women to the labor market at this time is slowly but surely contributing to breaking many gender-based stereotypes and traditionally assigned traits.

O. Henry is not unaware of the constant state of flux of gender identities which modern industrialization has brought onstage. Married life and domesticity is no longer the exclusive domain of women. Theodora Deming of “October and June”

(*Sixes and Sevens*, 1911) is no longer the Southern belle of the cliché waiting for her gentleman caller. Not surprisingly, she has no qualms about rejecting the captain's wedding proposal because he is slightly younger and she can foresee that the small difference in age will only bring them misery in the future, even though this may entail her remaining a spinster. Women can also challenge the traditional symbols of femininity. Even at the expense of looking like "a truant schoolboy" (O. Henry 1953: 9), Della's decision to have her hair cut in "The Gift of the Magi" (1905) reveals the emergence of a woman who is able to defy conventions. Jim is also forced to abandon the role of the traditional husband, and so he must not only accept Della's new look but also part with the family gold watch, the repository of the patriarchal tradition. Female characters transgress the male-dictated rules of social behavior. Alien to the conflicts of the two major rival ethnic groups of Lower Manhattan, the ugly duckling Irish girl of "The Coming-Out of Maggie" (1904), the paper-box factory worker who never finds a boy to escort her to the Saturday dance, is able to break the norms of the club by inviting an Italian guy whose identity she hides by calling him O'Sullivan. Another good example is Hetty Pepper, the resolute shopgirl of "The Third Ingredient" (1908), fired after slapping a customer who has pinched her arm, and who shares very little with her obliging colleagues. In opposition to her next-door neighbor, Cecilia, the artist who cannot confront problems and attempts to commit suicide, Hetty is the new working girl who does not need a man around to guide her life. Her conclusive words, "It's *us* that furnished the beef" are naturally ambivalent. On one hand, she alone had succeeded in bringing together the ingredients of the stew she is cooking. But even more importantly, it is also on active women like her that New York, the epitome of the nation's melting pot, depends. In Elizabeth Cady Stanton's words, she is "the arbiter of her own destiny, an imaginary Robinson Crusoe, with her woman, Friday, on a solitary island" (2006: 60). The source of Hetty's final tears is left, however, unexplained: do they reveal her fragility as an unemployed woman in the big city? Or are they just brought about by the onion she is chopping? Needless to say, Hetty is the antithesis of the traditional woman, so even if she momentarily breaks down, there is no doubt that she will soon be back on her feet and will, thus, easily give the lie to Veblen's idea of women's traits and their round of duties.

Very different from Hetty is Dulcie, the protagonist of "An Unfinished Story" (c. 1905), the salesgirl who believes in pipedreams, gallantry and undefiled innocence, and who illustrates the impossibility of making old world values compatible with the pressures of the new consumer society. On her very low wages (six dollars a week) she can hardly make both ends meet. Yet the list of superfluous things she purchases (licorice drops, pineapple fritters, imitation lace collars, etc) and her consumption habits (Coney Island, window shopping, expensive Sunday breakfasts and generous tips) make her, in Veblen's words, a consumer of "conspicuous waste

and leisure”, a barbarian trait of the ruling classes of industrial societies. Despite being a victim of the labor market’s blatant injustices, Dulcie’s impulse to become an active consumer is stronger than the fulfillment of her most basic needs (raspberry jam, crackers and tea make her regular dinner). And since buying has become a deep-rooted instinct, her story does not need telling. Only too well does the reader know that she will be unable, sooner or later, to resist the temptation of an evening with Piggy, the great “spender”, for spending, as Veblen puts it, has become the Americans’ unavoidable habit, regardless of their social class, the only visible sign of enhancement of one’s position in an atomistic society.

## **5. Eugenic/dysgenic: the dumbfounding of Darwinian laws**

Out of the long list of characters in O. Henry’s short fiction, artists stand out as blatantly unsuited to the struggle for existence. They have been endowed with primitive traits and are therefore unfit for competition. Weak, sensitive, honest, well-meaning, gullible and lacking predatory traits, they are, in the modern world’s chaos, “at a disadvantage, somewhat as a hornless steer would find himself in a drove of horned cattle” (Veblen 1994: 161). The protagonists of “A Service of Love” (*The Four Million*, 1906), Delia, a musician in search of pupils, and Jim, a watercolor painter without patrons, cannot make their living by their art, and so they have to get a full time job in the laundry—one ironing, the other firing the engine—to enable them to survive in the Big Apple. In “Extradited from Bohemia” (*The Voice of the City*, 1917), Miss Medora, another mediocre painter, is on the verge of being engulfed by the perils of the dissipated lives of the artists in the city, after deciding to leave a peaceful existence in the countryside with Beriah, the ever-faithful fiancé who finally comes to her rescue. Miss Leeson, the stargazer and the unsuccessful playwright in “The Skylight Room” (*The Four Million*, 1906), is sent to hospital and saved in the nick of time from death by starvation. Another “failure in art” (O. Henry 1953: 1457) is old Berhman, a victim of pneumonia in “The Last Leaf” (*The Trimmed Lamp*, 1907), a cranky painter with a drinking problem who does little other than talk about his coming masterpiece even though he very well knows he stopped painting seriously long ago. As noted before, Cecilia, the miniature portrait painter of “The Third Ingredient”, attempts suicide as do Eloise Vashner, the aspiring actress, and her boyfriend in “The Furnished Room”, but this time nobody comes in their rescue. Defined as “[r]estless”, “shifting” and “fugacious as time itself” (O. Henry 1953: 98), since they are dominated by an uncontrollable nomadic impulse (“they flit from furnished room to furnished room, transients forever”, 1953: 99), artists are destined to lose the battle in the quest for a secure niche in the big city. In the social

studies of the time, the “wandering blood” (Rafter 1988: 51), or “wanderlust” (Flynt 1907: 53), becomes the most visible symptom of unfitness, one of the identifying features of the pauper class. Overwhelmed by the predicaments of a materialistic society, artists cannot cope with the harsh pressures of a world which undervalues everything that does not easily yield to the laws of supply and demand, or that proves by all accounts useless in a market teeming with tantalizing commodities and trinkets.

Ruse (2000: 97-99) argues that evolution was not only “a tool of professional scientific research” but “a kind of basic way of looking at the world, a sort of secular religion” which provided “social and moral messages rather than insights about the living world”. That O. Henry was acquainted with Darwinian sociological theories is an incontestable fact. Yet his attitude is one which shows that evolution is running counter to scientific evidence: racially inferior and physically degraded citizens are on the verge of becoming superior in number and force to those endowed with better qualities. As Havelock Ellis puts it: “We are [...] making the path smoother for the unfit, helping them to compete with the fit, and encourage them to propagate their unfitness” (1911: 23). In “The Foreign Policy of Company 99” (1904), O. Henry’s use of the protozoa metaphor to refer to the newly arrived Russian immigrant, Demetre Svangvsk, is reminiscent of Herbert Spenser’s thesis (1862) that modern societies must parallel the geological evolution from protoplasmic life into highly distinct creatures. The first organisms on the earth’s crust were protozoa, indefinite in shape and size, living in colonies called “sponges” and “hydras”, lacking internal arrangement, so low on the evolutionary scale that they were closer to plants than to animals. In accepting immigrants as the new sap of American society, the country is cancelling the biological tendency to support superior individuals by allowing the entrance and multiplication of the inferior. Thus, the nation is favoring a regressive measure detrimental to the rights of the “good” citizens. Immigrants can only bring “squalid poverty and profligacy” (Bremmer 1956: 8), a contagious social disease which may spread “from room to room in a tenement and from house to house in a street” (Pimpare 2004: 30). Svangvsk is one who, like many others at this time of mass immigration, has been “dumped out” at Ellis Island in the name of Liberty, “a lump of protozoa”, “expected to evolve into an American citizen” (O. Henry 1953: 1429). Unable to speak the language, with a stupid grin on his mouth and easily distracted by the hustle and bustle of the big city, he provokes an accident by stepping in front of the firemen’s hose-cart driven by John Byrnes. In order to avoid running over the scatterbrain, Byrnes collides with a pillar of the elevated railroad and is sent to hospital. Demetre, the doctors’ chalk mark on his coat still visible, proves unscathed, though. The narrator shows the shortcomings of the American Constitution which declares identical rights for every man in stark contrast to the

firemen’s code that dictates that some men are unfailingly better than others. However, the prejudiced opinion Byrne has of Russians (one which re-inscribes Lothrop Stoddard’s principle that some men are naturally inferior) is, if not substantially modified, at least alleviated in the second part of the story, when he avoids an accident by jumping on the unbridled horse and thereby saving the life of his own child. We then discover that Demetre is a Cossack, and this realization makes Byrnes, a passionate defender of the Japanese in their war against the Russians, change his point of view to the extent that he ends up defending the superiority of the latter.

“The Furnished Room” also invites a serious Darwinian reflection. The room, set somewhere in the crumbling brownstone houses of the Bowery, fulfils the function of a burial place where the weak come to die, a sort of Paleozoic Sea in whose tepid waters the mass of protoplasmic life will inevitably perish. While the protagonist goes upstairs, we are shown a damp, musty place where everything has gone, or is on the verge of becoming, vegetable. The stair carpet has degenerated to “lush lichen or spreading moss”, as if it were viscid, decomposing “organic matter”. The room is also located in “a water-girt city” which is likened to a “monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its upper granules of to-day buried to-morrow in ooze and slime” (O. Henry 1953: 100). The passing tenants are now castaways, the jetsam and flotsam of a ship sinking during a tempest, indeed an old Romantic image of the man’s inability to fight the adversities of destiny (Landow 1982: 92-103), and by 1912 a staple metaphor in social studies to refer to the ominous fate of vagrants living in the Bowery and Tenderloin (Hunter 1912: 106).

In a thought-provoking article, Pittenger (1997: 50) argues that during the Progressive Era the descent to the lower depths in New York City was frequently described as falling down into the “treacherous quicksand” of a jungle, “infested by the most venomous creatures”, which put into action a regressive process that went “from man to beast, to reptile, and to that most noisome of living creatures, the human worm”, an invertebrate which takes up the lower steps of the evolutionary ladder. In fact this is how the landlady is depicted at the start of the story: Mrs. Purdy is compared to “an unwholesome, surfeited worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers” (O. Henry 1953: 99). She speaks with a furry voice that seems to come from remote depths. Her talk with Mrs. McCool over a glass of beer at the end of the story —the use of words such as “colleen”, the glide of the vowel [i:] into diphthong [ei], and the flouting of number in the verb forms— corroborates that they are Irish, a fact that the narrator has carefully planned in order to confirm the widespread prejudice that the Irish are the dregs of society. As Hunter notes (1912:

286), the vast majority of paupers in almshouses were Irish, and the Irish were considered the lowest Caucasian variety at that time (Tucker 1994: 35).

The bulk of the story is, however, devoted to the hero's thoughts and sensorial experiences while he is sitting in the chair breathing "the breath of the house", "a cold, musty effluvium as from underground vaults" (O. Henry 1953: 101). Since he embodies the primitive type, he is dominated by an animistic sense, that is, by an instinct to see preternatural agents behind things, which rules out any attempt to look for a causal explanation of phenomena and which finally leads him nowhere, for he naïvely opts to believe in the landlady's false words. Although he correctly identifies the actress's perfume and hears her voice, he is unable to use his intuition to his own ends, and finally Mrs. Purdy's lies and egoistic code ("rooms are made for to rent", O. Henry 1953: 103), a clear symptom of her barbarian nature, prevail over the primitive actor's altruistic quest for his beloved. While in the room, and before contemplating the idea of suicide, every object has been transformed into a sign which reveals the former tenants' history to him: their hopes and agonies, their wild passions and outbursts of wrath. "One by one, as the characters of a cryptograph become explicit, the little signs left by the furnished room's procession of guests developed a significance" (O. Henry 1953: 100-101). The young man now becomes an archaeologist unearthing whatever object has been left behind that brings back Eloise's fossilized presence, "ransacking the drawers", digging into "the corners of the bulging matting on his hands and knees", "skimming the walls" (102) of a room like a gigantic water bed round whose edges the silt slips down and disappears. It is evident that O. Henry was acquainted not only with Lyell's geological principles, but also with paleontology and stratigraphy. In "Extradited from Bohemia", for instance, he speaks of "prehistoric granite strata" [...] "herald[ing] protozoa" (O. Henry 1953: 1345). By mid 1880s fossil hunting and finds became absolutely central to the development of evolutionism, already the dominant model in the textbooks of the nation's colleges, North or South (Numbers 1999: 133), and also an increasingly popular topic. Lyell's ideas (1830-1833) are particularly useful for an understanding of O. Henry's depiction of the tenants' fate in "The Furnished Room". Lyell starts with the premise that the earth's successive changes entail a parallel "destruction of species" which has now become a "part of the regular and constant order of nature" (1997: 265). Among the agents that remodel the globe's geography he mentions "the solvent power of water" (Lyell 1997: 105) in the shape of torrents, rivers, currents and tides, and the destructive power of fire active through volcanoes and earthquakes. The description of the room that we get through the protagonist's eyes includes explosions (a bottle or glass thrown against the wall and splintered like "a bursting bomb"), convulsions (a couch "distorted by bursting springs"), and a "potent upheaval" which has cleft "a slice from the marble mantel" (O. Henry 1953: 101),

each of them conspiring to destroy a water-corroded room. And since “some portion of the earth’s crust is [constantly] shattered by earthquakes or melted by volcanic fire, or ground to dust by the moving waters of the surface” (Lyell 1997: 333), some species, unable to survive these geological changes, must inevitably perish. Yet the ending is not Mrs. Purdy’s defeat but Eloise and the young man’s death.

Although the story has been labeled as “sheer melodrama” (Quinn 1936: 521-49), and rewrites the principles of O. Henry’s narrative composition, surprise ending and incredible coincidences included, the tone is not characteristically the author’s. Current-Garcia (1965: 116) points out that very few of his stories “match the bleakness of ‘The Furnished Room’”. Irony and humor have vanished to give vent to a powerful description of a gloomy place. “This story illustrates another quality in the best of O. Henry’s fiction—that which makes places and localities articulate”, argues Arthur Hobson Quinn (1936: 521-49). However, on this occasion O. Henry uses a literary formula unprecedented in his short fiction: the haunted house motif of the Gothic tradition. Dale Bailey (1999), following Leslie Fiedler’s suggestions, argues that very few other subgenres are politically more subversive for it provides a diagnosis of the cultural ills by provoking “our fears about ourselves and about our societies” and questioning everything “we hold to be true—about class, about race, about gender, about American history itself” (1999: 6). Gothic tales are not only politically aware but deeply “concerned about ethical problems” (Just 1997: 25). From the 1839 publication of “The Fall of the House of Usher” the haunted house tale has become a deep-rooted tradition in American fiction. The setting—formulaic even in its minor details—is a defining symbol. Whereas the Gothic castle stood for the old values and lifestyle of an aristocracy in its death throes, Hawthorne’s celebrated *House of the Seven Gables* was the first to dislocate the conventions of the gothic novel by converting the house into the vehicle to express “all that is corrupt in American ideology” (Bailey 1999: 8): political power, social justice or distribution of wealth.

Bailey provides a useful chart of the obligatory ingredients of the haunted house formula. First, he mentions that the setting is an old house with “a troubled history”, “disturbed by supernatural events” (1999: 56). The setting of O. Henry’s story is a Lower Manhattan flophouse. The narrator tells us that the temporary tenants’ life-stories may be dull and unexciting but occasionally there can be found “a ghost or two in the wake of all these vagrant guests” (O. Henry 1953: 99). The young man “prowls” along the streets “after dark” in search of a room, and he finally rings the bell of the “twelfth house”. The sound of the bell is “faint” as if it came from “some remote, hollow depths” (O. Henry 1953: 99). Later on, after taking the haunted room, he hears his dead beloved’s call and smells her perfume through his “finer senses” (O. Henry 1953: 102). Secondly, Bailey points out

several possible climaxes of the cliché tale: either the house is destroyed or it continues to exist. In “The Furnished Room” the whole building is slowly crumbling away, and although no destruction takes place, it is clear that everything is going through a slow process of putrefaction. Bailey mentions that since Poe’s celebrated story, the haunted house has become “a prism through which to refract issues of social class and economy” (Bailey 1999: 57), and this is definitely the symbolic role assigned in our story. Like the house of Usher, Mrs. Purdy’s brownstone fulfils an antagonistic role insofar as it becomes the graveyard of those ill-equipped to challenge new living conditions.

## Conclusions

O. Henry’s narrative poses important questions about which ideological assumptions are being dislocated in the Progressive Era. In a world where long-standing principles are being put to the test in order to yield to new patterns of conduct and changing identities, the most visible symptom of this disruption of values is the disbelief in any pre-established set of rules. I have attempted to demonstrate that a welter of literary traditions —Horatio Alger’s stories, melodramatic and Gothic elements, tall tale ingredients and crime stories— are carefully gathered in O. Henry’s fiction in order to be either spoofed or subverted. To readers this systematic use of parody becomes an unmitigated source of bewilderment and distrust for they realize that their expectations will inevitably be overturned sooner or later. “Distill[ing] true meaning” in his narrative, Current-Garcia noted long ago, can only be accomplished through “deceitful immediacies” (1965: 97). What remains is a masquerade whereby the ritual rules are closely observed even though the spirit of the ceremony is gone. If, as John Fiske once held, Darwinism marked the “period of decomposition of orthodoxies” (qtd. in Loewenberg 1935: 233), O. Henry’s narrative maps out the tension caused by the suspension of any belief. Guidelines are written only to be flouted. The result is not only a rigmorole of signs and countersigns, but the reconfirmation of the epistemological uncertainty which defines our approach to the world. Gender identities and social roles or types, the categories we use to make sense of a society in a non-stop state of flux, contain little or no value. O. Henry’s characters live in a universe of masks and symptoms. The criteria which set the boundaries between what is true and what is not are no longer operative. What is left is, in Baudrillard’s words, “a precession of simulacra” (1998: 166), visual emblems of a meaning which cannot be retrieved. Poverty may be only an empty show (as in “While the Auto Waits”), and being rich only consists in feigning to indulge in what one assumes that the wealthy people do (even though one can make the mistake of

putting ice cubes in a glass of champagne). The important thing in the social scenario is to show simulations, to become, like Mr. Chandler (“Lost on Dress Parade” 1904), “an exhibit as well as a gazer” in an attempt to be “a wealthy idler” (O. Henry 1953: 92) at least for a day, and to save as much money as possible to spend it lavishly in front of others. Consumption has become a carnivalesque festival insofar as it has replaced the driving force of evolution —struggle for existence— for the urgent need to keep up appearances.

It is no mere coincidence that Darwinian postulates also fail to predict human responses in the social contest. Veblen’s barbarian/primitive dichotomy as the basis of the gender duality (men and women) and social classes (employers and workers) does not help to classify O. Henry’s characters. If evolution is not producing the multiplication of the best as expected but the victory of the unfit —as I have shown in the analysis of “The Furnished Room”— no criterion can be reliable.

In the story he left unfinished at his death, “The Dream”, O. Henry draws the blurred contours of a landscape that is partly real and partly a phantasmagoria. “Murray dreamed a dream”. This is the opening line and from this point onwards we ignore how much of the story has happened and how much is illusory. The moment he is sitting on the electric chair, condemned to death —he has killed his wife— he dreams that his execution is a nightmare from which he is on the verge of waking up. He is at home, takes his sweetheart in his arms and kisses his child. Happiness is real, the execution was only a bad dream. Yet his certainty —and ours— vanishes when he hears the prison warden turn on the machine. The ambiguous ending —he “had dreamed the wrong dream”— gives the story a Chinese-box structure and a creepy edge, and leaves the problem purportedly unsolved. The borderline between one dimension and the other is so imprecise that our resolve to choose this or that version wavers at the last second: is his execution factual or imaginary? Maybe by placing his narrative in the context of these postmodern ideas we can unearth some of the ideological reasons underlying O. Henry’s intentional indeterminacy concerning every aspect of his craft.

## Notes

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1. The title and the date in brackets allude to the volume of collected stories. When only the date is included, I am referring to its first published version in the literary magazine.

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