

## **Marriage as a Social Motif in O. Henry's "The Romance of a Busy Broker": A Critique**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is dedicated to the exploration of the theme of marriage as portrayed by O. Henry in 'The Romance of a Busy Broker' (1906). In this short-story, Harvey Maxwell, a broker who is extremely busy, forgets that he is married. In spite of the difficulties they are facing, O. Henry shows a selfless love between the married partners in this narrative. The spouses prioritise the other over themselves, refusing to experience the other's happiness. While he celebrates the marriage bond, he also presents a realistic picture of marriage, one in which the spouses frequently argue over both important and unimportant issues. In order to get the upper-hand in marriage, he portrays the spouses as being divided from one another out of ego. Along with this, he depicts how wealth and financial advantages affect marriages. He also delineates how the current world affects how partners behave.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Society, Love, Relationship, Ego, Bond.

### **Introduction**

O. Henry, real name William Sydney Porter, is one of the most popular American authors throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. His works continue to be read both domestically and overseas. He is an expert in writing tales of tragedy, romance, and extravagance as well as tales of the mystery of everyday life, with a specific talent for writing supernatural stories. In his short-stories, he successfully and lavishly employs his technical abilities. H. L. Mencken, a scathing literary critic, said this about O. Henry in a 1909 review of his collection *Roads of Destiny*: "either he is the best story-teller in the world to-day, or the worst. Sometimes I think he is the one and sometimes I am convinced that he is the other. May be he is both" (175).

O. Henry wrote his stories at a time when society was beginning to experience the advancement of technology, industry, and urbanisation. The lifestyle of the locals has also significantly changed. He depicts marital relationships in his stories against this setting. He investigates how modernism and increased materialism affect marriages. He focuses particularly on how finances and marriage relationships interact. As C. Alphonso Smith reports, in *O. Henry Biography*; "O. Henry was at first better known as a writer of Central

American and South American tales than of those dealing with the West or with New York” (99).

Most of the time people think about marriage as being merely a man and a woman’s bond as husband and wife. It is a planned and legal method of procreation that benefits families, communities, and ultimately the survival of the human race. Technically speaking, marriage is a legally binding relationship between a man and a woman that is governed by cultural laws, traditions, and customs. But having a partner is the fundamental concept of marriage. Friends and family serve as the main forms of companionship for humans. But it makes sense that their emotions yearn for a special, closer bond that endures throughout their entire lives. Friendship and kinship cannot provide the same amount of companionship. The only way to bridge this divide is through marriage. In *Cost of Living*, Eustace Chesser discusses the desire for this close intimacy:

In the process of human evolution, a change emerged in human consciousness about a million years ago which made man conscious of his willingness to co-operate and help others as well as of having a concern for others. This emerging human need infused it with the tenderness and with a new sense of loyalty. (7-8)

O. Henry’s ‘The Romance of a Busy Broker’ from his 1906 collection *The Four Million*, offers a glimpse at how modern society’s hectic pace affects marriage. It takes place in a bustling American inventory office in the nineteenth century. The Short Story centres on Harvey Maxwell, a busy trader, Miss Leslie, his wife, and former stenographer. The day before the story takes place, both got married. However, on the day the narrative takes place, his tremendous degree of busyness causes him to forget his marriage to her and treats her like just another stenographer who works for him. He again asks her to marry him, not realising that she is already his wife.

The frantic pace of broker Harvey Maxwell is shown in ‘The Romance of a Busy Broker’; “He jumped from ticker to phone, from desk to door with the trained agility of a harlequin” (125). Maxwell was working like some high-g geared, strong machine, accurate, and never pausing - in scenes reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. However favourable the language may appear, the truth of such a life is that it was just as miserable as that of the industrial workers and shop girls who would read the novel. The narrative also serves to cast doubt on capitalism as a whole while downplaying the grievances of factory and office workers.

Maxwell’s fast-paced mania has an impact outside of merely his work. When he eventually musters the confidence to propose to his stenographer, he does it as follows; “Miss Leslie. I have but a moment to spare. Will you be my wife? Talk quick, please – those fellows are clubbing the stuffing out of Union Pacific” (126).

Maxwell, like as the Chaplin character, is powerless to stop the working world from peeping into even the most personal areas of his existence. But right after pointing out how pervasive Maxwell’s work is, O. Henry undermines his own critique by telling the reader that Maxwell and Miss Leslie had been married the day before: everything is well. The story’s inescapable

conclusion, however, is that Maxwell's private life has become just another commodity, like everything else in a capitalist world. The humorous story turns out to be rather depressing and gloomy.

In 'The Romance of a Busy Broker,' the final phrase sums up the entire narrative: "We were married last evening at 8 o'clock in the Little Church around the Comer" (217). If O. Henry's stories have any vaudeville-like elements, as Pattie argues, it is more in the concluding sentence than the unexpected conclusion. The phrase "surprise ending" will be used to include both, with the caveat that there is a differentiation, because the technique is the same for both.

O. Henry depicts the slaying power of love and its enormous influence on Maxwell Harvey in 'The Romance of a Busy Broker.' Because of his line of work, the exceedingly busy and forgetful broker was totally unconscious of the obvious fact that he has wed Leslie, his stenographer, the previous evening. As obedient, truthful, straightforward, and kind as Miss Leslie was, her love for Maxwell was genuinely sincere despite the fact that Maxwell barely had the time or opportunity to return the favour. However, the time had finally come for him to speak honestly: "I have but a moment to spare. I want to say something in that moment. Will you be my wife? I haven't had time to make love to you in the ordinary way, but I really do love you" (126). Leslie responded in a gentle and caring voice after being wise enough to recognise Harvey's issue: "I know now. It's this old business that has driven everything else your head for the time" (127).

O. Henry handled the episodes involving their small joys in life, their manifestations of love, and their moments of pleasure in the company of those who pleaded to woo them in various situations very deftly while depicting the agonies, torture, neglect, and humiliation that the women were subjected to in the contemporary society. In 'The Romance of a Busy Broker,' O. Henry depicts the image of the girls' hard lives of struggle, but he also outlines the covert flow of their love, though it is hidden, yet readily apparent in certain circumstances. Despite the daily repression and persecution they are made to endure, they nevertheless seem to have plenty of enthusiasm for life. Under difficult conditions, love and romance are frequently muted among the underprivileged, unappreciated working girls. O. Henry, who has a great deal of sympathy for melancholy women, recounts the times in their lives when brief moments of love suddenly emerge and then vanish, bringing a temporal variation to their mundane and repetitive daily tasks.

Harvey is the manager of the inventory office. He is incredibly busy and loses track of everything else when he is at work. He has Miss Leslie stenographically supporting him for a year. Without telling anyone, Harvey proposed to her the day before at a nearby church and afterwards took her as his wife. He instructs his clerk, Mr. Pitcher, to request a replacement stenographer on the same day. The following day, Harvey comes into the workplace with his wife, but as soon as he enters his private cabin, he forgets about his previous marriage to Miss Leslie. Harvey doesn't offer any advice as to whether she should keep working as a stenographer or stop since she has become the new employer as a result of the marriage, and the new stenographer has not yet been hired, so she decides to continue. Harvey chastises Mr.

Pitcher for forgetting that he had instructed him to send a woman for the position and calls him a forgetful man while asserting that Miss Leslie has been doing an excellent job and that he has no plans to fire her. He says all this while being unaware that she is his brand-new wife. He smells Miss Leslie in the afternoon and remembers how much he loved her. He approaches her table, proclaims his love, and makes another marriage proposal.

Even though she was initially astonished, Miss Leslie realises that he only did it because of his severe busyness and forgetfulness, and she recounts their story of their wedding the day before. O. Henry skilfully illustrates how modern folks' hectic lives affect their marriages and interpersonal connections. A busy broker named Harvey Maxwell quickly forgets everything as soon as he gets to work. He is described as a "busy New York broker, pushed by buzzing motors and uncoiling springs; that machine seated at that desk was no longer a man" (125).

O. Henry compared Harvey with a machine. When the machine is turned on, it only continues to complete the tasks that have been allocated to it. Harvey is similarly engrossed in his work to the point where his mind is unable to function or consider anything else. O. Henry intentionally parodies modern man, who brought this on himself because of his desire for achievement and wealth. Harvey is an example of this kind of man, and his hectic schedule is what caused him to neglect his marriage.

O. Henry writes that due to Harvey and Miss Leslie's hectic schedules, the idea of marriage itself has devolved into a menial task. The marriage, which needed to be performed with friends and family but it done at night in secret since they felt they couldn't take time away from their jobs. The following day, when he decides not to be married and goes back to ask her out, he still demands an immediate response from her. As his "fellows are clubbing the stuffing out of Union Pacific," he tells her that he barely has "a second to spare" (128). Harvey is so busy that he can only spare a minute to make a proposal and he also wants a woman to respond right away.

Although O. Henry presents a flawed husband, he also shows a modest and forgiving wife, who is the key to their marriage's success. After Leslie married Harvey, he became her boss, but she remained on the ground and chose to work as a stenographer until the new one arrived. She says to Mr. Pitcher that "she will do the work as usual...until someone comes to fill the place" (127). This demonstrates her practical character and, most importantly, her dedication to her husband's business's success. She did not want the production line to break down and disrupt Harvey's work as well. Even when Harvey approaches her to make a second marriage proposal, the same kind spirit is nicely conveyed.

At first, Leslie was perplexed when Harvey asked her to marry him. She quickly learns that he was acting strangely because of his forgetful mind and hectic schedule. She tells him that they were married at the Little Church around the Comer last night at eight o'clock and acknowledges that his work has kept everything else out of your thoughts right now. She makes the decision to comprehend and accept her husband's flaw. Their marriage would have ended if Leslie refused to accept her new husband's flaw. The fact that Leslie is humble and understanding is the reason their marriage worked out. O. Henry illustrates the negative

effects of a modern lifestyle as well as the importance of mutual acceptance and understanding between the spouses for a successful marriage.

O. Henry aims to paint a picture of marriage in the contemporary era through the analysis of 'The Romance of a Busy Broker.' He depicts the impact of modernity and the rise in consumerism on marriage relationships in a straightforward and concise manner. He suggests that, rather than love and friendship, people choose their spouses based on their riches or social standing. He presents marriages as being nothing more than a social and material relationship. He also aims to provide a glimpse of the happiness and contentment that may be found in a marriage that is based on respect, devotion, and love for the other person. In spite of severe financial hardships, the spouses in the story demonstrate the virtue of selflessness and sacrifice, which ultimately strengthens their marriage.

O. Henry illustrated how a man and woman's marriage is characterised by both affection and conflict. He also emphasised the realistic affection that exists between married couples. He emphasised how their spouses' minor shortcomings were overlooked, and how they both came together and went on with their lives while still showing each other the same love and affection. The concept of marriage also continued to be one through which one might take advantage of one's partner for the sake of enjoying prosperity and in order to reach a certain social level, much like the conceptions of friendship and love that he represented. According to O. Henry, relationships built on distrust and taking advantage of opportunities will not last very long and will undoubtedly result in an unsettling and chaotic way of life devoid of peace.

Through this narrative, O. Henry tries to make a point about gender stereotypes and the division of labour. He believes that in order for a marriage to be successful and joyful, the spouses should accept one another's skills and let them carry out their respective tasks in accordance with those skills. He delineates how modern life affects marital relationships. According to him, the busy schedules of modern life, which aim to achieve more money and fame, lead to psychological problems in both men and women, and these disorders have a substantial negative impact on the health of marriages.

### **Conclusion**

O. Henry portrays marriage as a difficult path with following happy and sorrowful times. He shows how a married couple's pragmatic love grows; despite being upset by these difficult times, they finally get past them and have a happy marriage. He also depicts the dissolution of a marriage devoid of love and understanding at the same time. In 'A Romance of a Busy Broker', O. Henry presents the impact of modern lifestyle which was evolving because of the capitalization and industrialization of American society.

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