

# UNDERGRADUATE B. A. Honours

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**SUBJECT:** English

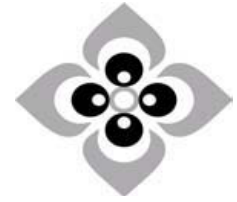
**Paper:** VIII, H American Literature

**TOPIC:** Short Stories

**LESSON:** An Unfinished Story by O Henry

**LESSON MAP:** 8.3.21.C.1





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## One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by A.I.Solzhenitsyn

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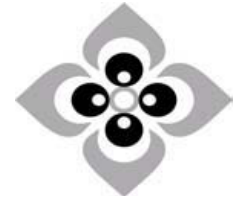
### Introduction

O. Henry: O. Henry was an American writer whose short stories are known for wit, wordplay and clever twist endings. He wrote nearly 600 stories about life in America.

He was born William Sidney Porter on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. His father, Algernon Sidney Porter, was a medical doctor. When William was three his mother died and he was raised by his grandmother and aunt. He left school at the age of 15 and then had a number of jobs, including bank clerk. In 1896 he was accused of embezzlement. He absconded from the law to New Orleans and later fled to Honduras. When he learned that his wife was dying, he returned to the US and surrendered to police. Although there has been much debate over his actual guilt, he was convicted of embezzling funds from the bank that employed him; he was sentenced to 5 years in jail. While in prison he began writing short stories in order to support his young daughter Margaret.

His first published story was "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" (1899). He used a pseudonym, Olivier Henry, only once and changed his pen name to O. Henry, not wanting his readers to know he was in jail. He published 12 stories while in prison. After serving 3 years of the five-year sentence, he was released for good behavior. He moved to New York City in 1902 and wrote a story a week for the New York World, and also for other publishers. His first collection of stories was "Cabbages and Kings" (1904). The next collection, "The Four Million" (1906), included his well-known stories "The Gift of the Magi", "The Skylight Room" and "The Green Door". One of his last stories, "The Ransom of Red Chief" (1910), is perhaps the best known of his works. Some of his stories like Ruthless People (1986), The Ransom of Red Chief (1911) and Delovye lyudi (1962) were even made into films.

In his lifetime O. Henry was able to see the silent film adaptations of his stories; The Sacrifice (1909), Trying to Get Arrested (1909) and His Duty (1909). His success brought the attendant pressure, and he suffered from alcohol addiction. His second marriage lasted 2 years, and his wife left him in 1909. He



died of cirrhosis of the liver, on June 5, 1910, in New York. O. Henry is credited for creation of The Cisco Kid, whose character alludes to Robin Hood and Don Quixote. The Arizona Kid (1930) and The Cisco Kid (1931) are among the best known adaptations of his works.

### Plot of the story

The main plot of the story, 'An Unfinished Story' deals with the past events of the speaker. The speaker is being judged by God on the Day of Judgment for his actions. While there, he is asked by an angel if he belongs to a certain group of men waiting to be judged. At that point, the story moves to the life of girl named Dulcie.

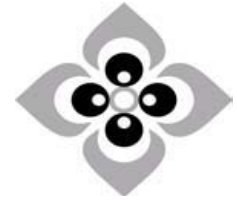
She is a poor girl who works for \$6 per week (a long time ago). That is very little money which leaves her often hungry. She has been asked on a date by a fairly rich guy (Piggy). It seems that he is in the habit of trapping poor girls. He takes undue advantage of their poverty by giving them food and such and expects them to sleep with him.

Dulcie realizes this very late and refuses at the last minute to go out with him. But the story reveals that at some later time when she is hungrier, she does go out with him. Or may she might have gone.

The story then returns to the dream where the narrator talks about the afterlife. The group of men the angel had asked about were rich businessmen who owned the places where girls like Dulcie worked -- the men who paid them so little they had to sleep with men to get food. The speaker in his defense says he burned down orphanages and killed a blind man -- but he was not as bad as the men who paid the girls so little.

### Characterisation

**Dulcie** : Dulcie, the protagonist is a 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



superfluous things she purchases (liquorice drops, pineapple fritters, imitation lace collars etc.) and her consumption habits (Coney Island, window shopping, expensive Sunday breakfasts and generous tips) make her a consumer of 'conspicuous waste and leisure'.

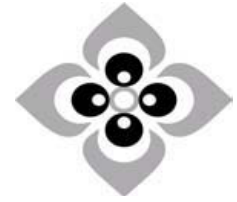
Despite being a victim of the labor market's blatant injustices, Dulcie's impulse to become an active consumer is stronger than the fulfillment of her most basic needs (raspberry jam, crackers and tea make her dinner). And since buying has become a deep-rooted instinct, her story does not need telling. 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 corrupt businessman.

**Piggy:** Mr. Wiggins is the rich businessman who takes the lives of the employees in his firm for granted. He is another important character who is generally addressed as Piggy. The young girls who work for him hardly remember his original name and enjoy calling him as Piggy. Piggy has received a name that aptly describes his character. Moreover, O. Henry writes a brief paragraph that directly describes his nefarious activities. Piggy is a stalker. He hangs around establishments where underpaid girls are working. His practiced eye can detect at a glance how long it has been since they enjoyed their last meal. Then he picks out someone who looks especially hungry and treats her to a hearty meal. His motives are not altruistic. Moreover, O. Henry describes him with the words: "He was fat; he had the soul of a rat, the habits of a bat, and the magnanimity of a cat."

After finishing this brief but effective paragraph, O. Henry contemptuously dismisses him and practically ignores him for the rest of the story.

### **Theme**

*An Unfinished Story* is a satire. O. Henry spends very little time describing the objects of his satire. He uses an indirect approach and leaves much to the imagination of the reader. His satire is chiefly directed at two targets: a man nicknamed Piggy and a class of businessmen who hire girls to work at their stores for six dollars a week.



Ordinarily, a satirist would make one of the businessmen a character in his story, employing a copious amount of irony in describing him, perhaps even giving him a name that aptly describes his character. Instead, O. Henry allows them to remain a faceless class of people. He demonstrates their villainy by showing how one of the underpaid employees fares in her life.

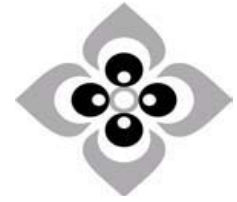
Even as a faceless class, O. Henry says surprisingly little about them throughout the story. Even at the very end, when a satiric bomb explodes in their faceless faces, the satire does not directly describe their activities.

The period in which the story is set is important to understand the story in its true sense. O. Henry wrote this story in the early twentieth century. At that time, six dollars a week went much farther than it would in the present day. However, even in the early twentieth century, six dollars a week was barely enough to keep body and soul together.

Piggy is a stalker. He hangs around establishments where underpaid girls are working. His practiced eye can detect at a glance how long it has been since they enjoyed their last meal. Then he picks out someone who looks especially hungry and treats her to a hearty meal. His motives are not altruistic.

O. Henry believed that when the girls decided to call him Piggy, they were heaping unnecessary denigration on the noble race of swine. The tone of satire is seen throughout the story and in presenting the characters. Moreover, O. Henry describes him with the words: "He was fat; he had the soul of a rat, the habits of a bat, and the magnanimity of a cat."

While O. Henry does not finish the story, he puts some finishing touches on the businessmen who hire girls for six dollars a week. O. Henry tells us that one night he had a dream. He had died, and he and others were about to appear in the celestial court for judgment. Standing nearby were a group of businessmen who during their lifetime had hired girls to work for six dollars a week.



A celestial policeman approached O. Henry and asked him if he belonged to this group of businessmen. O. Henry protested that his activities were more innocent than theirs. The only thing of which he had been guilty was setting fire to an orphan asylum and murdering a blind man for his pennies.

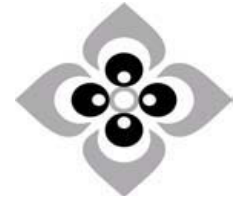
### **WRITING STYLE**

O. Henry began writing short stories as a prison inmate, and he quickly fine tuned his skills behind the bars and developed into an excellent storyteller. Born William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), he produced 270 stories under the pseudonym O. Henry. His stories are superbly outstanding and there is a remarkable style in his writings. "An Unfinished Story" is no exception to these features of O. Henry's style of writing.

Firstly, his brilliant use of language. The stories were written in the first half of the twentieth century, and O. Henry's use of language easily surpasses that of most contemporary writers. Not only does he have an extensive vocabulary, but his writing abounds with similes and metaphors that breathe sparkling life and depth into his stories. "An Unfinished Story" employs profound metaphors of angelic hosts to tell the tragic story of poor Dulcie's struggle for survival.

O. Henry has a great understanding of the trials of the lower class, and he frequently pictures the lives of ordinary people of early twentieth century America with warm and sympathetic colours. His characters are frequently the overlooked: the struggling shop girl, the unsuccessful artist, the impoverished. Admittedly, some of his images can be hard to comprehend for modern readers, and the distance that time has placed between us and O. Henry's beloved New York means that some of his verbal pictures will be harder to understand and identify with. But his genuine sympathy for the oppressed cannot be missed. The present story is also an example of that. This is reflected towards the end of the story when the narrator says that his crime is not very big when compared to those committed by the corrupt businessmen.

Thirdly, his warm humour. O. Henry has an uncanny ability to portray the mundane and the ordinary in the most elevated language. Frequently he puts two



characters together in a remarkable way so that one outshines and complements the other. And on other occasions, he crafts the most ingenious and humorous schemes for outwitting others. The humour aspect in the story is when he says that it would be humiliating the swine if Mr. Wiggins was called Piggy.

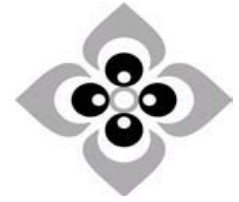
Fourthly, and most importantly, his ironic twist. One of the distinctive characteristics of O. Henry's short stories is the ironic twist at the end, which never fails to surprise and entertain, sometimes reversing the entire story line in a concluding one-liner. O. Henry's suspense and trademark ironic twist ensures that readers who have a good literary taste in short stories will not be disappointed. Though there is no significant twist towards the end, the story is left unfinished to the imagination of the reader. He suggests that Dulcie might have gone out with Piggy at some other time in future.

### **Conclusion**

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 to yield to new patterns of conduct and changing identities, the most visible symptom of this disruption of values is the disbelief in a pre-established set of rules.

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The author tells that the author was innocent than piggy as he just murdered a blind man for pennies while piggy is a play boy who would exploit poor girls by calling them for dinner. It is left to the reader to decide that his acts were not as heinous as those of the others in the group. Thus the story is left unfinished as the title aptly suggests.

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