

Unraveling the Rhetorical Tapestry in *The Cop and the Anthem*

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Abstract. This paper analyzes O. Henry's short story *The Cop and the Anthem* (1904), exploring how rhetorical devices such as irony, metonymy, and reversal are used to construct a narration that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. The story's humor and subtle social critique, especially for its illustration of urban poverty, are examined in details. These are the revelation of O. Henry's humor and irony, which are not merely decorative but also essential to the plot and the underlying social critique. The paper also applies Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT) to analyze the structure of the story, highlighting the coherence and irony created through discourse relations across episodes. The study shows how O. Henry's rhetorical techniques shape character, theme, and plot, demonstrating that his humor guides reader expectations and sharpens the social commentary. Ultimately, the paper highlight how O. Henry's use of rhetorical devices and discourse structure transforms a simple narrative into a layered critique of early 20th-century urban life.

Keywords: O. Henry; *The Cop and the Anthem*; Rhetorical Devices; Irony; Segmented Discourse Representation Theory.

1. Introduction

O. Henry's short story *The Cop and the Anthem* (1904) is widely praised for its humor, irony, and subtle critique of social realities[4]. This paper looks at how O. Henry uses rhetorical devices like irony, metonymy, and reversal to create a narrative that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. It examines these techniques within the context of early 20th-century American short fiction, where form and meaning reflect the realities of city life. The study also shows how these strategies can enhance our own writing. The main goal is to explore how O. Henry's unique style shapes characters, themes, and plot. His humor highlights the harsh realities of urban poverty and the limited choices for those on society's margins. Through the story of Soapy, a homeless man who tries and fails to get arrested for shelter, O. Henry reveals the tension between comedy and social critique.

William Sydney Porter, better known as O. Henry, is celebrated for his sharp wit, ironic twists, and keen observations of everyday life. Written during the Progressive Era, which is a time of rapid urbanization and deep social inequality, *The Cop and the Anthem* captures contemporary anxieties about poverty and class. O. Henry's humor often serves as a veil for social critique, enabling readers to confront unsettling realities within a lighter, more palatable frame. A close examination of the story's rhetorical structure not only highlights O. Henry's literary craftsmanship but also reveals the broader social climate that shaped his work[5].

This study firstly provides a close reading of the story's rhetorical techniques and their relation to meaning. Second, it demonstrates that O. Henry's use of humor and irony is not merely decorative but serves essential functions in advancing the plot and reinforcing social critique. Third, since the coherence of these elements is central to understanding the story's rhetorical design, it applies Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT) to show how the text achieves coherence through the sequencing of its episodes [2].

2. Literature Review

2.1 O. Henry's Writing Style

O. Henry, the pen name of William Sydney Porter, is widely regarded for his unique storytelling techniques that combine humor and irony social commentary. His work, often set against the

background of early 20th-century American life, is characterized by a style that combine wit with tragedy, creating a narrative style that both entertains and challenges the reader's understanding[4]. Two primary features are frequently identified as central to O. Henry's writing: his humorous, often ironic language and his surprising but convincing endings. These elements are what have earned him a lasting place in the literary canon.

A characteristic of O. Henry's writing is his use of humor to explore deeper social issues. Luo Ling, observes that the humor in O. Henry's stories is often more than just an entertaining tool—it frequently used as a form of social commentary. In *The Cop and the Anthem*, for example, O. Henry uses the phrase “be doomed to liberty” to reflect a sharp irony. The term “liberty,” which is conventionally associated with freedom and opportunity, is here twisted to convey a more painful and ironic reality for the poor. For Soapy, the main character, the freedom he desires is not one of prosperity or opportunity but a kind of liberty that leads to hunger, hardship, and the harshness of life on the streets. This reversal of expectations, where freedom becomes a burden, offers a critic through which O. Henry comments on the plight of the poor in a rapidly modernizing society.

Henry's use of humor is not just limited to the usage of familiar ideas or phrases, but also extends to his language choices and narrative structure. His stories often make use of colloquial language, slang, and wordplay, all of which contribute to an accessible storytelling style. This informal tone allows O. Henry to capture the everyday experiences of his characters, making them relatable to his readers. Yet beneath this casual style lie clear insights into human behavior and society.

Another key feature of O. Henry's writing is his use of irony, which adds a layer of complexity to his simple tales. His stories often end with unexpected twists that challenge readers' expectations. These ironic endings are not just surprise conclusions but are carefully crafted to highlight the underlying themes of the narrative.

For instance, in *The Gift of the Magi*, the story of a young couple who sacrifice their most prized possessions to buy each other gifts ends with a tragic irony: the woman sells her hair to buy a chain for her husband's watch, while he sells his watch to buy a comb for her hair. Their sacrifices render their gifts useless, yet this sacrifice itself is the ultimate expression of their love, and the ending highlights both the futility and the profound beauty of their gestures[3].

Similarly, in *The Furnished Room*, O. Henry subverts the reader's expectations by presenting a search for a missing woman that ultimately culminates in a tragic death. The story builds anticipation for a reunion, yet the final revelation—that the woman's disappearance was the result of suicide—creates a profound sense of despair and loss. The story's ending, while shocking, is in some ways inevitable. O. Henry's skill lies in leading the reader through the plot in such a way that, although the ending seems unexpected, it ultimately feels like the only logical conclusion to the events that preceded it.

In *The Cop and the Anthem*, Soapy, a homeless man who desires to be arrested so that he can escape the harsh winter, repeatedly attempts to commit petty crimes. His failures suggest that his luck is bound to change, and the reader might expect that he will eventually succeed in his crime. However, in the final moments, just as Soapy is about to give up his criminal ways, he is arrested not for a crime but for loitering. This ironic twist, where Soapy's moral redemption leads to his arrest, exemplifies O. Henry's mastery of subverting expectations while still maintaining narrative coherence. The ending is both surprising and inevitable, as it reflects the complex interplay between fate, choice, and personal transformation.

The central feature of O. Henry's writing style, however, is not just the humor or the ironic twists, but the seamless integration of these elements into stories that speak to universal human experiences[6]. His endings, which are often both unexpected and emotionally resonant, create a sense of closure that lingers long after the story is finished. Even when the outcomes are tragic, O. Henry's characters experience moments of profound revelation or transformation, suggesting that life, with all its unpredictability, still holds moments of meaning and grace.

In conclusion, O. Henry's style is characterized by his use of humor, irony, and unexpected endings to explore complex social and personal themes. His stories, though often comedic in tone, reveal deep

truths about human nature, particularly the contradictions between personal desires and societal realities. By subverting conventional narrative expectations, O. Henry invites the reader to reflect on the complexities of life, love, and the pursuit of happiness. His ability to blend lightheartedness with profound insight is what continues to make his work both entertaining and thought-provoking today.

3. Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT)

Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT), first introduced by Asher (1993) and further developed by Asher and Lascarides (2003), provides a formal framework for understanding how meaning and coherence emerge across discourse. Unlike sentence-based approaches, SDRT focuses on the relations that connect discourse segments—called Elementary Discourse Units (EDUs)—into coherent structures known as Segmented Discourse Representation Structures (SDRSs). Through relations such as Narration, Contrast, Explanation, and Result, SDRT models how readers infer connections, shifts, and expectations within a text.

In the context of literary analysis, SDRT is valuable not for its technical precision, but for its ability to reveal how meaning develops dynamically through the interaction of discourse units. Its capacity to link non-adjacent segments allows analysts to trace how irony, humor, and narrative reversals are built up across a story. For instance, O. Henry’s sudden twists often rely on subtle shifts in discourse relations—where an apparent Narration or Explanation relation later turns into Contrast or Result, producing a surprising yet coherent ending. SDRT thus helps explain how local cues accumulate to create global irony and coherence, offering a systematic way to describe how O. Henry’s stories achieve both unity and surprise.

4. Application of SDRT to *The Cop and the Anthem*

4.1 Global Analysis

O. Henry’s *The Cop and the Anthem* is structured around a sequence of episodes in which Soapy repeatedly attempts, but fails, to get arrested. Each episode can be treated as an Elementary Discourse Unit (EDU) within the framework of Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT), and these units are connected to the central problem—how to survive the winter—through discourse relations such as Narration and Result. The recurrence of similar attempts creates rhythm and coherence, ensuring that the story does not appear as a collection of unrelated incidents but as a unified progression toward resolution. For example:

A1: “Soapy’s mind now realized that fact. The time had come. He had to plan what he would do for the next three months.”

A2: “So Soapy decided to go to jail.”

A3: “A warm feeling grew inside him. He would make a man of himself again.”

A4: “‘Three months on the Island,’ said the Magistrate in the Police Court the next morning.”

The following image illustrates the rhetorical relationship of the sentences above.

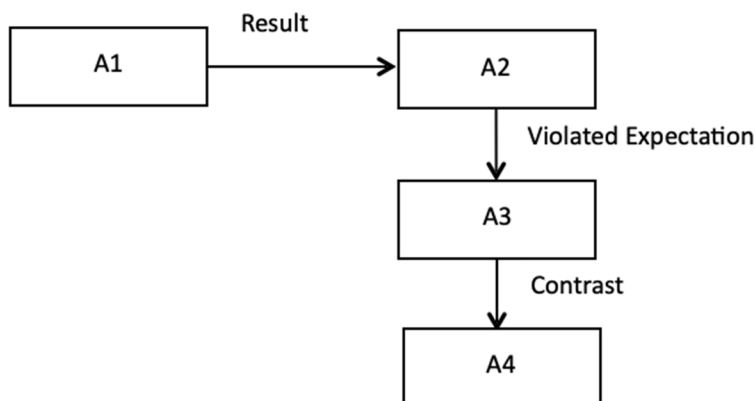


Figure 1. The Connections of EDUs

The connections between these EDUs illustrate how coherence and irony operate in the text. The relation between A1 and A2 is Result, since Soapy’s recognition of his need directly leads to his decision to seek imprisonment. The transition from A2 to A3 can be described as a case of Violated Expectation, a term used here to specify a subtype of the Contrastrelation in Asher and Lascarides’s (2003) SDRT framework. Instead of continuing to pursue jail, Soapy suddenly resolves to reform himself, reversing his earlier intention and thereby violating the reader’s inferred expectation. Finally, the link between A3 and A4 is best captured by Contrast, as the hopeful vision of renewal is immediately overturned by the magistrate’s blunt sentence. Through this configuration, SDRT reveals how the narrative structure transforms pragmatic reasoning into irony, producing an ending that feels both surprising and inevitable.

4.2 Micro Analysis

Beyond the overall episodic rhythm, SDRT also clarifies how irony functions at the micro level of individual encounters. At the micro level, the key passage in O. Henry’s *The Cop and the Anthem* can be analyzed through Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT) to explore how the discourse relations between the sentences create coherence and irony.

S1: “He strolled up and down the street, looking for a policeman.”

S2: “At last he spied one coming toward him.”

S3: “Soapy deliberately jostled the officer.”

S4: “The policeman merely looked at him and passed on.”

The following image illustrates the rhetorical relationship of the sentences above.

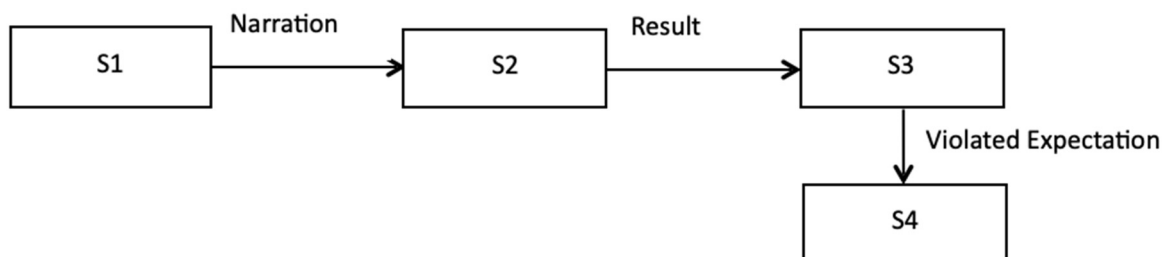


Figure 2. The Connections of EDUs

The first two sentences, S1 and S2, are linked by a Narration relation. S2 follows naturally from S1, as Soapy’s search for a policeman leads to spotting one. This establishes the progression of Soapy’s actions toward achieving his goal of getting arrested.

The third sentence, S3, introduces an Result relation to the previous sentences. This action is the culmination of Soapy’s search and is portrayed as his conscious decision to provoke the officer, an expected result of the previous anticipation.

This paper has examined O. Henry’s *The Cop and the Anthem* through the combined lens of rhetorical analysis and Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT). At the global level, the story’s episodic structure is unified by recurring attempts and narrative progression, creating rhythm and coherence that sustain the reader’s engagement. At the micro level, rhetorical relations such as Result, Contrast, and Narration illustrate how coherence is maintained even in ironic reversals, enabling the text to shift seamlessly from comic surface to deeper social critique.

By showing how humor and irony are structurally embedded in the discourse, this study challenges the view that O. Henry’s style is merely decorative. Instead, humor functions as a guiding principle that shapes expectation, directs reader’s inference, and sharpens social criticism. SDRT proves especially valuable here, as it provides a formal model to capture both adjacent and non-adjacent relations and clarify how irony is an integral part of the story’s coherence and rhetorical power[2].

The significance of this analysis lies in bridging linguistic theory and literary interpretation. On the one hand, it demonstrates how discourse frameworks such as SDRT can enrich the study of narrative by formally explaining shifts in tone, perspective, and meaning. On the other hand, it

contributes to literary scholarship by highlighting the mechanics through which O. Henry transforms everyday urban experience into art that is humorous as well as critical.

Ultimately, the story of *Soapy* reveals more than an individual's failed attempts at survival: it dramatizes the paradox of freedom and constraint in early twentieth-century urban life. For readers, the irony of his fate provokes laughter and reflection in equal measure. For scholars, the case illustrates how rhetorical devices and discourse structures can be systematically analyzed to uncover the interplay of form, meaning, and social reality. Future studies may extend this approach to other works of O. Henry or authors in the same period, further exploring how narrative strategies can both reflect and resist the constraints of their historical moment.

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