New Yorkers – Short Stories

O. Henry

Introduction

The stories

There are five short stories in this volume.

The Christmas Presents. Della and James are poor. Della is unhappy because she cannot buy her husband a proper Christmas present, so she sells her beautiful long hair to buy a gold chain for James’s watch. When James gets home, he shows his present to her, some beautiful combs. He has sold his watch to buy them.

Soapy’s Choice. Soapy spends every winter comfortably in prison but this year he cannot get himself arrested: he tries a number of things, including breaking a window, propositioning a woman, causing a disturbance and stealing an umbrella, but each time his plan fails. He has just decided, in a church, to begin a new life, when a policeman arrests him for no obvious reason and he is sent to prison.

A Walk in Amnesia. Elwyn C. Bellford is a hard-working Denver lawyer who suffers an attack of amnesia. He becomes Edward Pinkhammer and starts to have a wonderful time in New York. His wife and his friend Dr Volney trace him and tell him who he is. He decides to try and remember. But he did have a wonderful time!

Tildy’s Moment. Beautiful Aileen and unattractive Tildy are waitresses. None of the men take any notice of Tildy until one day Mr Seeders kisses her (after too much beer). Tildy’s world is transformed. Then Seeders comes in to apologise. Tildy is devastated and Aileen must try to console her.

The Memento. Men went wild when Rosalind Ray sat on her swing in the theatre every night and her yellow garter fell into the audience. But she tired of the men, went to the country, fell in love with, and married, a man of the church. Then she learns that he loved another woman before her. She leaves immediately when she finds that he keeps a yellow garter.

Background to the stories

O. Henry was the pseudonym of William Sydney Porter (1862–1910). He was born in North Carolina, left school at fifteen and moved to Texas at twenty, where he worked in various jobs including bank teller (1891–94) and journalist (1895–96). In 1898 he was convicted of embezzlement committed while he was a teller, and went to prison for three years, although it is not clear whether he was really guilty. He then moved to New York where, during the last five years of his life, he wrote hundreds of short stories for the popular magazines of his day. His stories deal with all kinds of people, but above all with the less well off, are told with humour and humanity, colour and narrative skill, and often involve coincidence or a narrative twist to produce a surprise ending. One of his best known stories is The Gift of the Magi, and collections include The Four Million, The Gentle Grafter and Options.

Before reading

Here are some ways to help your students approach the story:

1. Give students the title of the book and show them the picture on the cover. Ask them to try and guess what kind of story it is.
2. Ask the students to read the text on the back cover of the book, and the story introduction on the first page. Then ask them a few questions about the story, or use the Before Reading Activities in the back of each Bookworm.
3. Use the pre-reading activity in this worksheet.
4. If there is a recording of this title, play the first few pages and stop at an interesting point.
Match the pictures with the words and story titles

Write the letters in the boxes.

Aim: To familiarize students with the setting
Time: 10–20 minutes
Organization: Give one copy of the worksheet to each student or to each pair of students. When they have matched the pictures and the captions, they can do the second activity: assign pictures to the story titles given. Ask students to tell the story according to the pictures they group. There is no right or wrong answer to this activity. Students may suggest sequences of pictures which are different from the book’s. This does not matter as long as the stories they suggest are also plausible.

Key: 1fq, 2hs, 3pu, 4gr, 5ct, 6ku, 7eq, 8bs, 9dt, 10ls, 11ar, 12nq, 13it, 14ju, 15os, 16mr

Continued on page 108
For a few seconds, Soapy remembered other, happier days.

I found three thousand dollars in my pocket.

In the busy, noisy restaurant men’s eyes did not follow Tildy.

But she still had her friend, and Aileen put her arm round Tildy.

Della gave a little scream of happiness.

Quickly, Della let down her beautiful, long hair.

Strong hands turned Soapy around and helped him out into the street again.

‘You haven’t changed much in fifteen years, Elwyn,’ she said.

Mr Seeders got up, put his arm round Tildy, and kissed her loudly.

‘Yes, Lynn, I left the theatre because I was tired of men.’

‘Arthur was different from other men, I thought – a really good man.’

The next few days in Manhattan were wonderful.

‘We’ll leave him alone tonight’, said the policeman.

‘Oh dear,’ said Della. ‘What’s Jim going to say when he sees me?’

The woman cried out, ‘Oh, Elwyn! Elwyn! I’m your wife!’

Rosalie Ray did this every evening, and every evening a hundred hands went up to catch the garter.
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While reading activity

Who said what to whom, where, and in which story?

Complete the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUOTATION</th>
<th>WHO’S SPEAKING?</th>
<th>WHO TO?</th>
<th>WHERE?</th>
<th>IN WHICH STORY?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ‘Twenty dollars.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 ‘Why don’t you come with me?’</td>
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<td>3 ‘... can you touch, smell, or look at white roses – and not think of me?’</td>
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<td>4 ‘Of course it’s my umbrella.’</td>
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<td>5 ‘Oh dear! I look like a schoolgirl!’</td>
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<td>6 ‘Are all these men druggists?’</td>
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<td>7 ‘Go to your room. He’ll soon be well again.’</td>
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<td>8 ‘Tomorrow I’ll go into town and find work.’</td>
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<td>9 ‘Don’t look at me like that.’</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**To the teacher**

Where: At the end of the third story

Aim: To focus students’ attention on the characters

Time: 10 minutes

Organization: Give each student or group of students a copy of the table. Ask them to identify who said these words, who to, where, and when in the first three stories.