



CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRAGIC IN O. HENRY'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract:

This article focuses on analyzing the tragic in O. Henry's short stories, a prominent characteristic of his artistic style. By exploring elements such as plot situations, characters, and story endings, the research clarifies how O. Henry expresses tragedy not merely as suffering or loss, but also as the struggle between dreams and reality, hope and disillusionment. Simultaneously, the results also indicate that, even in tragic situations, O. Henry's short stories still contain profound humanistic values concerning love, compassion, and sacrifice. Thus, the research contributes to highlighting the aesthetic value and social significance of the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories.

Keywords: American short story, humanistic values, O. Henry, the tragic, unexpected ending

1. Introduction

O. Henry, whose real name was William Sydney Porter, was a prominent American short story writer in the early 20th century. His prolific career left a rich literary legacy of approximately 300 short stories. His works are renowned for their wit, relatable characters, and unexpected endings, often referred to as an "O. Henry twist" or "O. Henry ending". A distinctive feature of his short stories is his ability to portray the tragic element deeply and subtly.

In the context of American society in the early 20th century, O. Henry's creative inspiration was influenced by the volatile historical, social, cultural, and artistic environment. The miserable lives of laborers, severe wealth disparities, and the conflicts of an industrialized society became profound sources of inspiration for his works. In his short stories, O. Henry vividly depicted ordinary people living in various social circumstances. He is known for his ability to portray simple stories from daily life, which

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always end with unexpected shocks, demonstrating his subtlety in grasping society's contradictions and ironies. His characters often face challenges, difficulties, and conflicts in life, creating tragic yet deeply humanistic situations. The tragic element here is not merely pain or loss but a continuous struggle between dreams and reality, between expectations and harsh truths. A special aspect of O. Henry's portrayal of tragedy is his ability to create unexpected endings, where good and bad interweave perfectly. His stories often leave readers with profound reflections on life, love, and sacrifice. Through this, he not only reveals the characters' pain but also highlights the beauty of the human soul in difficult circumstances. The lessons O. Henry conveys through his portrayal of the tragic are not just about love and compassion but also about resilience and inner strength.

Studying the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories helps to understand the author's narrative art more clearly, from character development to the creation of dramatic situations. Thus, the research findings can open new perspectives on the relationship between the tragic and humanistic values, while highlighting the messages O. Henry intended to convey. Furthermore, studying the tragic element in O. Henry's works also reflects the social context of early 20th-century America, where adversity, suffering, and hope intertwined. This not only helps readers understand the historical circumstances in which the author lived but also suggests valuable lessons about compassion, love, and resilience in life. Finally, the research findings also contribute to enriching literary scholarship, especially in the study of aesthetic objects in literature.

2. Literature review

The study of the tragic in literature is a rich and diverse field, ranging from classical theoretical foundations to interdisciplinary approaches and modern applications. Aristotle's work *Poetics* is considered the most important theoretical foundation for the study of the tragic. Aristotle defined tragedy and the role of *eleos* (pity) and *phobos* (fear) in leading to *catharsis* (emotional purification). He focused on the undeserved suffering of the protagonist and how it evokes compassion in the audience. In this work, basic concepts were established and profoundly influenced subsequent studies.

Recently, numerous studies on the tragic from various perspectives have emerged, expanding the scope and depth of this category: *Narrative Empathy, Historical Understanding, and The Reader's Moral Judgment* (Keen, 2007), *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind* (Burke, 2010), and many articles in journals such as *Poetics Today*, *Narrative, Style, Literature and Psychology*, *Emotions and Society*, etc. These articles often focus on specific aspects of the tragic in particular authors, genres, or cultural contexts, using diverse analytical methods.

Studies on the tragic in Vietnam also appeared very early but flourished in the fields of literary theory and aesthetics from the 20th century to the present with prominent names such as Le Ba Han, Tran Dinh Su, Nguyen Khac Phi, Hoang Ngoc Hien, Phuong Luu, etc., establishing the theoretical basis for "the tragic" as one of the categories of aesthetics in literature and aesthetic education. Doctoral dissertations (*The tragic in its*

aesthetic category system, its expression and aesthetic value (Pham, 2016)), essays, and articles (*Receiving Literature from the perspective of Aesthetics – a necessary and promising research direction* (Bui, 2013)) have presented issues on literary reception, aesthetics, and literary reception from the categories of aesthetics, including the tragic.

Works related to O. Henry's writings in Vietnam have also been studied from various perspectives, such as: *Urban Space in O. Henry's Short Stories* by Le Thi Thanh Tam (2019), *Conceptions of Art and the Art of O. Henry's Short Stories* by Le Huy Bac (2005), *Short Stories of Nam Cao and O'Henry in a Comparative View* by Nguyen Thi Thuy (2019), *The Unexpected Ending in O. Henry's Short Stories* by Le Thi Thanh Tam (2016), *The Journey to Find Happiness of Female Characters in Some of O. Henry's Short Stories* by Do Thi Hang (2019), etc. In classic works, basic concepts have been laid out, while the latest studies continue to expand and deepen the understanding of the complex and multifaceted role of the tragic in creating meaning and emotional connection between the work and the reader.

3. Research methods

This research employed a combination of the following methods:

- **Analysis-synthesis method:** This method was used to analyze in detail the elements of short stories (plot, characters, setting, language, artistic techniques) and to synthesize elements related to the tragic.
- **Poetics method:** This method was applied to examine the tragic as an element of content, structure, and narrative art, focusing on how O. Henry used formal elements (language, plot, point of view, unexpected endings) to create the tragic effect.
- **Typological method:** This involved identifying and classifying the forms of expression of the tragic (in character relationships, ironic/paradoxical situations, social context, character psychology).
- **Statistical-classification method:** This method was used to quantify and classify the frequency, characteristics, and degree of manifestation of tragic elements and forms.
- **Interdisciplinary research method:** This involved approaching the tragic both as a reflection of reality and as an aesthetic category, clarifying its artistic value and expressive power.
- **Comparative method:** Comparison and contrast with the tragic in the works of other authors were conducted to highlight the research problem.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Theoretical basis of the tragic

4.1.1. The concept of the tragic

The tragic is one of the core aesthetic categories, possessing a powerful and profound emotional impact on the human soul. It is not merely a reflection of sorrow or misfortune

but a special aesthetic phenomenon associated with pity, hardship, and intense conflicts in life. Since ancient Greece, the tragic has appeared and been deeply explored by philosophers and aesthetic theorists, demonstrating its important position in the history of aesthetic thought.

In terms of aesthetics, the term “the tragic” is known as a fundamental aesthetic category that exists alongside beauty, sublimity, and humor. The tragic is known for its role as *“a reflection of an aesthetic quality of objective reality, an important aspect in the human aesthetic system”* (Le et al., 2009). Besides, “the tragic” is also associated with *“loss, suffering”* (Le et al., 2024); *“a special aesthetic phenomenon associated with sorrow, pity, misfortune, hardship, and adversity”* (Nguyen, 2022). Thus, “the tragic” can be understood as reflecting a special aesthetic quality of objective reality and being a distinctive aspect in human aesthetic relations. The tragic is associated with sorrow, pity, misfortune, and difficult, adverse situations. This implies that the tragic in art is a structured, purposeful interaction with human suffering, rather than a passive reflection of negative emotions. This distinction is necessary in academic discourse, as it frames the tragic not as a simple emotional state but as a complex artistic and philosophical construct.

Although the tragic is associated with sadness and misfortune, it should not be equated with pessimism, despondency, or despair. As an aesthetic category, the tragic does not accept pessimism, because deeply hidden within it is a noble humanistic spirit, oriented towards the light of human kindness, longing to bring happiness and joy to people. The tragic is accompanied by conflict, suffering, and horror, but through it, people sympathize with tragic fates, resent the causes of death, thereby creating a sense of responsibility and duty to support and rescue. The proactive and transformative nature of the tragic, moving beyond mere sadness towards humanism and even strength, demonstrates its function as a mechanism for building individual and societal resilience. It transforms suffering into a catalyst for action or deeper understanding. The tragic has the effect of purifying human emotions and consciousness, educating them to despise base phenomena, and forging willpower and courage. This transformative capacity distinguishes the tragic from passive despair and highlights its positive ethical and psychological role in human experience.

In literature, “the tragic” is *“an aesthetic category that reflects a law-governed phenomenon of social reality, often occurring in unequal struggles between good and evil, new and old, progressive and reactionary...”* (Le et al., 1992). The aesthetic essence of the tragic is: *“the temporary failure of the beautiful, the sublime, meaning it contains the good, the new, the progressive”, “the struggle between beauty and ugliness, good and evil, the sublime and the base, but beauty, goodness, and the sublime are endangered and fail,”* and the tragic is precisely: *“an aesthetic phenomenon associated with suffering, and at the same time, it evokes interest and pride”* (Nguyen, 2017). However, “the tragic” is not synonymous with pessimism; on the contrary, it often carries a deep humanistic spirit and a profound longing for human happiness and joy. It often appears with conflict, suffering, and contradiction, evoking empathy in the reader for tragic fates. In artistic works, “the tragic” is understood as a process of typifying tragic elements from real life. Experiencing a tragic work of art evokes strong aesthetic emotions, profoundly impacting the entire human emotional

system. It can be seen as the transformation of pain into a form of artistic “inspiration,” stimulating compassion and fear, ultimately leading to a special positive pleasure, called “catharsis” – the purification of the soul. The tragic does not exist independently but has a close relationship with other aesthetic categories such as beauty, humor, and sublimity.

4.1.2. The relationship between the tragic and other aesthetic categories

The Tragic and the Beautiful: Beauty is often conceived as harmony and balance, bringing pleasant and positive feelings. However, in many cases, the tragic appears alongside the beautiful. Noble sacrifice, intense love, or extraordinary courage in tragic circumstances can simultaneously be sources of both the tragic and the beautiful. Beauty here lies not only in form but also in spiritual qualities and profound humanistic values.

- **The Tragic and the Humorous:** Humor is laughter, the ridicule of the ridiculous and grotesque. The humorous and the tragic are often seen as two opposing aesthetic categories. Humor brings laughter and release, while the tragic evokes sadness and pity. However, in some works, these two elements can intertwine, creating unique artistic effects. The contrast between humor and tragedy can further highlight the tragedy, or conversely, humor can help alleviate tension and sorrow.
- **The Tragic and the Sublime:** The sublime is an aesthetic category that expresses what is great, extraordinary, and transcends the ordinary limits of human beings. The tragic often appears in situations where people face great challenges and painful losses. However, it is precisely in such circumstances that the sublime qualities of human beings can be revealed, such as courage, sacrifice, and love. The tragic and the sublime have a dialectical relationship, complementing each other, increasing the aesthetic value of the work.

From this, it can be seen that the tragic in O. Henry's short stories does not exist in isolation but always has an interconnected relationship, complementing other aesthetic categories, creating richness and diversity in the reader's aesthetic emotions.

4.1.3. Manifestations of the tragic in literature

In literature, the tragic often refers to elements that evoke compassion, pity, sadness, or deep sympathy for the characters and circumstances depicted. However, the tragic does not necessarily lead to full-blown tragedy but can exist in specific moments and situations, creating emotion and reflection for the reader. Below are the main manifestations of the tragic in literature:

- The tragic expresses suffering and loss: This can be physical pain from severe illness, injury, torture, or facing death. Or it can be mental suffering from loneliness, despair, betrayal, misunderstanding, remorse, loss of loved ones, shattered dreams, or helplessness in the face of fate. It can also be material and status losses, such as poverty, destitution, loss of property, degradation, and humiliation.
- The tragic expresses misfortune and adversity: These are ironic, paradoxical situations where characters fall into difficult, inescapable circumstances due to

accidental coincidences, misunderstandings, or uncontrollable objective factors; injustice and oppression where characters become victims of dark forces, unjust society, or harsh prejudices; loneliness and abandonment where characters are separated from the community, not receiving sharing or understanding.

- The tragic expresses sacrifice and altruism: This is noble sacrifice when characters are willing to give up personal interests, even their lives, for others, for a noble ideal; it is kindness and tolerance when characters show humanity, empathy, and forgiveness towards those who cause them suffering; resilience and noble qualities in adversity when characters maintain their integrity, optimism, and love for life despite facing many difficulties.
- The tragic expresses weakness and helplessness: This is the depiction of fragility in the face of fate when characters feel their smallness and weakness before invisible forces, before the harsh flow of life. It is a deep internal conflict when characters face contradictions and conflicts within their souls, feeling helpless in making the right decisions. It is also endless regret and remorse when characters feel guilty and regret past mistakes.

The tragic expresses sad and unfinished endings: This can be a tragic death when characters die unjustly and tragically, leaving regret for the reader. Permanent separation occurs when loved ones are separated forever, with no chance of reunion. These are shattered dreams when characters' aspirations and ambitions cannot be realized.

4.2. Manifestations of the tragic in O. Henry's short stories

O. Henry's short stories are deeply marked by the tragic, but the tragic in his stories has its own characteristics, both inheriting traditional concepts and containing new innovations. O. Henry inherits the concept of the tragic associated with people's difficult fates and painful situations. He often focuses on small, unfortunate characters in society, those who face poverty, illness, injustice, etc. His stories evoke pity and sorrow for suffering human lives.

However, O. Henry also has his own innovations in expressing his tragic element. He often combines the tragic with elements of surprise and irony, creating situations that are both tragic and humorous. The tragic in his stories is not just pure suffering but also the struggle between hope and disappointment, between dreams and harsh reality. He also focuses on portraying the beauty of humanity in tragic circumstances. Even in the most painful situations, people can still maintain compassion, sacrifice, and love.

4.2.1. The tragic in ironic situations

Situational irony in literature is generally understood as the unexpected appearance of contradictory or opposite elements, events, or ideas that nevertheless convey a deep meaning or an underlying truth. Through irony, authors can evoke profound reflections on humanity, society, and worldview. O. Henry is a master at constructing ironic situations because he not only aims to create surprise, appeal, or highlight themes and messages, but also to evoke strong emotions and encourage deep critical thinking. O. Henry often skillfully arranges plot details, conceals important information, or creates

misunderstandings and coincidences to lead readers in a certain direction of thought, then abruptly “twists” at the end of the story, revealing a truth completely contrary to what has been presented or expected.

Firstly, there is the irony of fate. This form of irony expresses the harshness of human destiny. Characters fall into awkward situations, and despite their struggles, cannot escape the whirlpool of fate. This is the irony between intention and outcome of action in the fate of the character Soapy in *The Cop and the Anthem*. He is a homeless man who tried to commit a crime six times in hopes of being arrested to have a warm place to stay in prison during winter, but all his efforts ironically failed. The irony lies in how petty criminal acts go unpunished, but a moment of conscience leads to arrest.

Table 4.1: Manifestations of irony in the short story “*The Cop and the Anthem*”

Attempted Criminal Act	Outcome 1: Not Arrested	Resolution to Reform	Outcome 2: Arrested
Tried to dine and dash at a luxury restaurant	Was refused service due to shabby attire	Standing near an old church, hearing the organ music and contemplating a bright future with newfound resolve	He was arrested for loitering and sentenced to three months in Blackwell's Island Prison – exactly where he initially wanted to go.
Broke a store window	Police chased another person		
Dined and dashed at a cheap restaurant	Was merely thrown onto the sidewalk by a waiter		
Intentionally flirted and harassed a woman on the street	She appeared quite willing		
Pretended to be drunk and disorderly in public	Police thought he was a celebrating student and ignored him		
Snagged another man's umbrella	The man cheerfully gave it up, thinking it wasn't his anyway		

With its inverted model structure, the story reflects the injustice and harshness of society towards the poor. The “tragic element” here lies in Soapy's complete helplessness and the cruel irony of a system that fails to provide him with basic needs but is ready to punish him when he finally finds a glimmer of hope. This highlights a “tragic element” stemming from social injustice. Soapy’s desire for basic shelter and his repeated failures to get arrested expose the shortcomings of the social system. The ultimate irony of his arrest after deciding to reform underscores the tragic plight of marginalized individuals. On the other hand, the ironic situation also creates bitter satirical laughter, tinged with tragedy, making readers both amused and reflective about life. Notably, the story's situation also highlights the ability to explore human nature and destiny. The irony in the story raises questions about free will and the irony of fate. Do people truly control

their lives? Soapy's desire for reform, though sincere, is thwarted by cruel coincidence. However, the story also affirms that a spark of goodness still exists in the human soul, even in those considered at the bottom of society.

In addition, there is the irony of fate reversal (life and death), of art and reality, of outward appearance and the true nature of destiny. The ironic situation in *The Last Leaf* demonstrates the absurdity between opposing categories: expectation – reality, fragility – stability, despair – hope, failure – success in human life. The “tragic element” is expressed through Johnsy's despair and resignation, as well as the profound friendship and sacrifice of the old artist Behrman. The loss of hope is overcome by an act of compassionate art. Behrman's death after painting the last leaf is a tragic sacrifice. The story explores the power of hope and art in overcoming despair. The “tragic element” in this story is multifaceted, encompassing Johnsy's despair and Behrman's tragic sacrifice, whose act of saving her life ultimately costs him his own. The contrast between Johnsy's restored hope and Behrman's death creates a profound sense of the tragic.

Secondly, there is the irony of emotional life. O. Henry, with his romantic and surprising short stories, always skillfully incorporates themes of love and marriage into his works, yet full of irony. The tragic element in *The Gift of the Magi* lies in the noble sacrifice for love that leads to an ironic outcome, bringing a gentle but deep sadness to Della and Jim. Although the ending is emotionally happy, there is still a material loss and an incompleteness regarding the gifts. The story is often compared to the biblical account of the Magi, who brought precious gifts to the Christ Child, to affirm that they were the “wisest” gift-givers because their gifts stemmed from pure love and sacrifice, emphasizing the wisdom in sacrificing for love. The tragedy lies in the practical futility of their sacrifices, yet the story celebrates their actions as a testament to profound love, suggesting a “tragic element” interwoven with a higher moral or emotional value. Although they received unusable gifts, the story still emphasizes the depth of their love and selflessness. This creates a profound irony consistent with the concept of “the tragic,” which includes loss but also affirms spiritual values.

In contrast, in the story *A Service of Love*, there is an ironic situation between noble lies and extreme sincerity that fosters deep affection and noble sacrifice between lovers. One sacrifices their studies and dreams to earn money for the other to continue pursuing their dreams, but both keep their actions secret, choosing silent sacrifice. Delia lies about giving music lessons to a general's daughter, but in reality, she works as a laundress, while Joe says he is painting but works as a furnace tender. This situation brings a sweet and touching feeling when both realize that their love and sacrifice were not in vain, and each feels that the other loves them more than themselves. This is a very sacred aspect of marital affection.

The surprise and irony are also evident in the awkward encounters of fated lives. In *After Twenty Years*, the “tragic element” is expressed through the changes wrought by time and fate, the opposition between friendship and duty, and the loss of friendship. The irony is that the long-anticipated reunion leads to betrayal (from the perspective of the criminal friend, Bob). The ending is sad as the friendship cannot overcome the divergence in their life paths. The “tragic element” here stems from the irreconcilable

differences in the lives of the two friends over time, forcing one (Jimmy Wells) to make a painful choice between loyalty and duty, ultimately leading to the loss of their close relationship. The story explores the theme of how time and diverging life choices can erode even the strongest friendships, leading to a tragic separation despite initial hopes for reunion.

If in *After Twenty Years*, the irony lies in two friends becoming enemies, then in *A Retrieved Reformation*, Jimmy Valentine demonstrates an irony within himself. Jimmy's irony is the struggle between his desire for reform and freedom versus a life of imprisonment, between personal gain and selfless righteousness when he must choose between saving someone and saving himself. Ultimately, he allows compassion to prevail, accepting the exposure of his past criminal identity to save the child Agatha, who is locked in a safe. And that act moved the heart of detective Ben, who had been hunting him for 20 years, and changed his perspective. The moment the detective says, "I don't believe I know him," not only surprises Jimmy but also overwhelms readers with emotion as goodness emerges.

While the ironic situation in *A Retrieved Reformation* unfolds dramatically along the plot, in *The Faked Shock*, the ironic situation focuses on the story's ending. The work revolves around the character's emotions and reverse reaction upon learning he has inherited a huge fortune from his uncle Paulding. According to normal logic, Ide would be very happy to become wealthy, but instead, he becomes extremely anxious and fearful. The technique of creating ironic situations through the contrast between opposing categories: emotion-reason, good-evil, friend-foe, rich-poor, material-spiritual, etc., makes O. Henry's short stories both specific in character portrayal and generalized in their meaning and value of life. In any circumstance, conscience and beauty always prevail.

O. Henry has a unique style in constructing ironic situations. Compared to other writers, irony in his stories often appears at the end, creating a surprising twist that overturns all reader expectations. At the same time, irony in O. Henry's stories is also humorous and satirical, creating bitter laughter about life's absurdities. Despite constructing ironic and paradoxical situations, O. Henry always aims to express love and compassion for humanity. Compared to Edgar Allan Poe, the master of 19th-century detective and horror short stories, Poe's exploration of tragedy delves into the darkest aspects of human psychology and supernatural elements, creating a sense of horror and despair distinct from O. Henry's depiction of "the tragic" in everyday life, which is often more ironic (Robbins, 2019). The tragic nature in Poe is often internal and psychological, focusing on madness and the bizarre. O. Henry's tragedy, though sometimes involving personal loss, often arises from external circumstances and ironic reversals in more ordinary settings.

4.2.2. Characters with difficult fates

O. Henry often focuses on the tragedy of small, unfortunate individuals in society. His characters often have difficult fates and face many hardships and challenges.

Firstly, these are the poor. This is the most common type of character in O. Henry's stories. They are impoverished laborers living in destitution and hardship. Their tragedy is the struggle between dreams and reality, between aspirations and helplessness. They share the psychological characteristic of always yearning for a better life but feeling helpless in their circumstances (Soapy in *The Cop and the Anthem*). They possess love and sacrifice, but their impoverished lives prevent them from achieving complete happiness (Jim and Della in *The Gift of the Magi*). They have deep love but tragically lose each other (Leeson in *The Furnished Room*). In this work, the "tragic element" is expressed through loneliness, despair in a hopeless search, and an ironic death. The irony is that the young man is right where his beloved died, but is completely unaware. The story reflects the harshness and indifference of urban life. The death of both main characters creates a tragic and haunting ending. The "tragic element" here stems deeply from themes of isolation, the harsh realities of urban life, and the tragic irony of lovers being so near yet so far, ultimately leading to their deaths in the same room. The story paints a bleak picture of isolation within a bustling city, where the characters' desperate search for connection ends in a shared tragedy of which they are unaware. This emphasizes the sense of hopelessness and the indifferent nature of urban existence.

Secondly, these are the oppressed and exploited. They often carry physical and mental suffering. They may lose faith in life, but they can also rekindle the will to fight and resist. Their tragedy is the injustice and absurdity of society. The character Lena in *The Green Prince* lives an extremely difficult and miserable life; at just eleven years old, her father sold her to a hotel to work diligently as a room cleaner until she became pale and weak. She is described as "thin and underfed." The most painful tragedy is surely when "her back and limbs ached, but the ache in her heart tormented her most" (Nguyen, 1997). An eleven-year-old girl with a weak body and very innocent, lovely, yet pathetic thoughts, because in reality, no prince will come to save Lena. Every day she has to face strenuous work from early morning until late at night in a place full of noise and torment. Tragedy strikes her when the only fairy tale book that was her companion and sole source of motivation is taken away by Mrs. Maloney. Soapy in *The Cop and the Anthem* is also like this; the living situation of the character Soapy is described with the image of a homeless person facing the bitter cold of winter, sleeping on a bench with three Sunday newspapers under his coat and over his ankles and stomach, no longer able to resist the cold. He yearns for a place to stay and food to avoid winter, but even prison refuses him.

Thirdly, these are lonely, failed individuals. They often carry sadness and despair, unable to find happiness or meaning in life. They may lose their direction and purpose in life. Their tragedy is loneliness and alienation in life. These include Johnsy and old Behrman in *The Last Leaf*, Trysdale in *The Cactus*, James in *The Double-Dyed Lover*... The tragedy of the two characters in *The Last Leaf* is a tragedy in their psychology, thoughts, and even circumstances. Johnsy, a young girl suffering from pneumonia, falls into despair and believes her life will end when the last leaf falls from the vine. This psychology reflects the tragedy as she feels helpless against illness and fate. Old Behrman had a dream of creating a great work of art but never achieved it. Both characters express the tragic through the interaction between hope and despair, between life and death.

While Johnsy struggles with physical pain and mental hopelessness, Mr. Behrman, despite his old age, finds the motivation to live in helping others. The “tragic element” is expressed through Johnsy’s despair and resignation, as well as the profound friendship and sacrifice of the old artist Behrman. The loss of hope is overcome by an act of compassionate art. Behrman’s death after painting the last leaf is a tragic sacrifice. The story explores the power of hope and art in overcoming despair. The contrast between Johnsy’s restored hope and Behrman’s death creates a profound sense of the tragic.

To gain a deeper understanding of the difficult fates of characters in O. Henry's short stories, it is necessary to place them in the social context of early 20th-century America. This was a period of significant economic and social changes in the United States. The development of industrialization and urbanization created a wealthy segment of society but also pushed a large portion of the population into poverty and injustice. This contributed to themes of loneliness, isolation, and the search for connection. O. Henry’s personal experiences with financial hardship and time in prison likely fostered a deeper understanding of human fragility and life’s unexpected turns, influencing the ironic and sometimes tragic nature of his plots and character outcomes. This may have influenced the tragic elements in his stories, even those set in seemingly ordinary circumstances. The social reform movements of the Progressive Era likely influenced O. Henry’s gentle social commentary in his stories, where “the tragic” can sometimes relate to systemic issues affecting the poor and marginalized, as seen in *The Cop and the Anthem*. Compared to Theodore Dreiser, a contemporary writer who also focused on the harsh realities of early 20th-century American life, the tragic in Dreiser’s stories is often more naturalistic, emphasizing the influence of environment and social factors on human destiny, leading to grim outcomes with less humor or gentle irony like O. Henry (Sewall & Conversi, n.d). Dreiser’s tragedies often feel more fatalistic and bleak, focusing on the overwhelming power of societal forces, while O. Henry’s “tragic element” often retains a sense of individual agency, though sometimes leading to ironic or bittersweet results. O. Henry often explores these difficult fates to create empathy and reflection for readers. And it is this exploration that highlights the tragic element in the difficult circumstances of his short stories.

4.2.3. The contrast between expectation and reality

The contrast between expectation and reality has a powerful effect in expressing the tragic. It creates a large gap between desire and reality, leading to tragic and heartbreaking emotions. This contrast also highlights human helplessness in the face of fate, against the ironies of life.

This can be the contrast between dreams and reality, where characters have beautiful dreams and aspirations, but life's reality is harsh and not as desired (*The Green Prince*). Or it can be the contrast between noble ideals and a mundane, petty life (*The Last Leaf*, *The Double-Dyed Lover*). There is also a stark contrast between hope and disappointment. Characters have intense hope for a bright future but ultimately fall into dismal disappointment or deadlock (*The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Gift of the Magi*). The commonality of this type of contrast is that characters reveal their good and kind nature

regardless of the difficulties they face, showing the beauty of humanity even in the most tragic circumstances. Simultaneously, O. Henry demonstrates that human fate is influenced by many factors, and people sometimes cannot control their own destiny.

The contrast between expectation and reality in O. Henry's short stories shares similarities with existential philosophy regarding human helplessness in the face of fate. Existential philosophy posits that humans are finite, "thrown" into life without predetermined purpose or meaning. Humans constantly confront the meaninglessness and absurdity of existence, and often feel powerless in the face of destiny. The tragic element in O. Henry's short stories also partly expresses this spirit. In this regard, compared to Guy de Maupassant, a 19th-century French short story writer also known for unexpected endings, "the tragic" in Maupassant's stories is often more pessimistic and deeply critical of society, with characters often facing the cruelty of fate and the hypocrisy of society (Sandefur, 2021). Although both authors use unexpected endings, Maupassant's endings often aim to highlight the cruelty and irony of fate more bitterly than O. Henry, whose "reversals" sometimes offer a glimmer of hope or a bittersweet sense of human connection even amidst tragedy.

However, O. Henry's contrast between expectation and reality sometimes also brings laughter that is both refreshing, witty, and subtly satirical. The short story *The Ransom of Red Chief* is considered one of O. Henry's and American literature's most humorous short stories. Laughter arises from the absurd reversal of the situation, from exaggerated actions and words, and from the contrast between the appearance and essence of the characters. The helplessness and misery of the two criminals (Sam and Bill) in the face of young Johnny's "torture" create a special humorous effect. The story can be seen as a gentle satire on the greed and miscalculation of those who engage in illegal activities. Sam and Bill's seemingly perfect plan collapses due to a factor they could not foresee: the "unruly" nature of a human (specifically, a child). It may also subtly comment on the complexity and unpredictability of life, where every plan can be overturned by unexpected elements.

Through these situations, O. Henry skillfully demonstrates that life often does not unfold as expected, and grand expectations can lead to tragic or humorous outcomes. This tragic element not only creates empathy but also provides profound lessons about love, hope, and reality.

4.3 Discussion

The above analyses show that the tragic element is a pervasive and prominent feature in O. Henry's short stories, playing a crucial role in shaping his artistic style and conveying his messages. However, the tragic element in O. Henry's stories is not merely a re-enactment of unfortunate lives or ironic situations, but also a lens through which to look deeper into human nature and the laws of life.

One of the prominent characteristics of the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories is its connection with ironic situations. O. Henry often constructs situations where normal expectations are overturned, human efforts become futile, or seemingly opposing values intertwine. These ironic situations not only create surprise for the reader but also

raise questions about the meaning of life, the role of fate, and the human ability to control one's destiny.

The tragic element in O. Henry's short stories is also deeply expressed through characters. O. Henry's characters are often ordinary, even small and unfortunate, individuals in society. They may be impoverished, oppressed, or lonely and failed. However, O. Henry does not merely describe their suffering but also explores the good qualities hidden within their souls. Even in the most tragic circumstances, O. Henry's characters can maintain love, altruism, and the will to live. This creates a contrast between the tragic and the beautiful, between pain and hope, making O. Henry's works profound and deeply humanistic.

Compared to some contemporary writers, O. Henry's way of expressing the tragic has unique characteristics. While naturalistic writers like Theodore Dreiser often focus on social and environmental factors to explain human tragedy, O. Henry tends to look at the ironic and paradoxical aspects of life. While Edgar Allan Poe explores the tragic through horror and supernatural elements, O. Henry finds the tragic in ordinary and everyday things. This uniqueness helps O. Henry create his own style, which is both relatable to readers and offers profound reflections on life.

In summary, the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories is a complex and multifaceted aesthetic phenomenon. It is not only a reflection of human difficulties and suffering but also an expression of profound humanistic values and discoveries about the nature of life. Studying the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories is important for a better understanding of the author's artistic world and his contributions to American literature.

5. Conclusion

This research has helped clarify the important role of the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories, not only as a distinctive artistic element but also as a means to explore profound aspects of life and human beings. By analyzing ironic situations, difficult fates, and the contrast between expectation and reality, the results have shown that the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories is often associated with the irony of fate and social injustices, but simultaneously contains noble humanistic values such as love, altruism, and resilience. These findings not only help us better understand O. Henry's artistic world but also suggest reflections on the nature of humanity and society. Further research on the tragic element in O. Henry's short stories could focus on comparisons with other literary movements or explore the connection between the tragic element and cultural and historical factors.

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