Biography of O Henry

O. Henry, pseudonym of William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), noted American author of hundreds of short stories including "The Ransom of Red Chief" (1910), "The Duplicity of Hargraves" (1902), and "The Gift of the Magi" (1905);

William Sidney Porter was born 11 September, 1862 in Greensboro, North Carolina, to physician Algernon Sidney Porter (1825-1888) and Mary Jane Virginia Swaim (1833-1865). The two brothers of William were Shirley Worth (1860) and David Weir (1865) who both died in early childhood. Mary was a graduate of Greensboro Female College (founded in 1838) now Greensboro College. She wrote poetry and had a promising artistic temperament with a natural eye for drawing and painting, surely a talent which young Will inherited. She ran her household with a firm but loving hand. Tragically she died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty when Will was only three years old. His father Sidney was a gentle and good humoured man, gregarious, and generous to a fault. Absent-minded with a long flowing beard, he travelled Guilford county visiting his patients. As was the custom of the time, he never sent invoices to his patients; they were expected to settle once a year. Without his wife to stay on top of their accounts, finances dwindled and Sidney started to drink.

After Mary's death, widower Sidney and his shy, freckle-faced son moved to his mother's farm, that of Will's paternal grandmother Ruth Coffyn Worth Porter (1805-1890). Sidney became increasingly occupied with various inventions he was developing, poking about in his workshop with such contraptions as a perpetual motion water wheel. Also living at the farm was Will's aunt, Evalina Maria Porter or "Miss Lina" as she was known. She would become the most influential person in the first 20 years of Will's life. She became teacher, parent, and mentor to him. She had started a school at her mother's home that was soon established in it's own building on the Porter property. Will studied the basics there, writing and arithmetic, and he read classic literature and poetry. He was very clever with a pencil and loved to draw caricatures.

At the age of fifteen Porter began working as a clerk in his uncle Clark Porter's store. The combined pharmacy, soda fountain, tobacco shop, and newsstand was the local gathering spot. Porter became immersed in the social scene, entertaining the customers with stories and drawing caricatures of them for
which he became well known. He saw the humour in the everyday, and made notes of all the colourful characters he encountered, fodder for his future stories. He also obtained a pharmacist license in 1881. Small town life was not to hold him for long, however, and he had developed a persistent cough. Thinking that a change of climate would do him well, at the age of eighteen he moved to Texas, settling in Austin in 1884. He was already writing short stories while he held a number of jobs including pharmacist before working with the Texas Land Office. Around this time he met Athol Estes Roach. They married in 1887 and had a daughter, Margaret Worth (d.1927), in 1889. With a steady income Porter was now able to focus on his writing. In 1891 he began work as a bank teller with the First National Bank. The Porter's were living in the house which is now known as the O Henry House Museum. In 1894 Porter launched a humorous weekly magazine The Rolling Stone (no relation to the current magazine, founded in 1967.) It featured political and every day satirical articles and cartoons, all by Will himself, which he also published. 1895 found the Porter's living in Houston, Texas, where Porter started a column in the Houston Post.

After time spent in Honduras, during which Porter coined the term "banana republic", he had to return to Texas to face charges of embezzlement. His wife was also suffering from tuberculosis and he rushed to see her. Athol died in July of 1897. At that time Margaret was living with Athol's parents. They then moved to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Margaret never knew that her father had spent time in prison. She was always told he was away on business. After inconsistencies were found with Porter's First National Bank records, Porter was charged with embezzlement. In 1898 he began a five-year sentence in Columbus, Ohio federal prison. Around this time he changed his name to Sydney. The following year, in 1899, from prison, Porter began his short story career by contributing "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" to McClure's Magazine. Thereafter a number of his stories written in prison appeared in print, always under a pseudonym, his favourite being "O. Henry". The general public did not know of his prison term until after his death. After being released from prison in just three years, Porter moved on to the next chapter in his life: New York City. This was where he really came into his own and
all his previous life's experience served to inspire stories. Porter crafted everyday tales of myriad characters, many recurring, based in New York City with humour, wit, and realism. His stories often have a surprise or twist ending, and Porter's fans looked forward to more in such publications as World, Ainslee's, and McClure's. Porter has been compared to other masters of the short story including Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, Bret Harte, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, and French author Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). Porter also wrote numerous stories set in Western and South and Central America. Despite many of his works being panned by the critics he was becoming one of America's most popular short story authors. So much so that several collections were published including Cabbages and Kings (1904), The Four Million (1909), Options (1909), Roads of Destiny (1909), The Trimmed Lamp (1910), Strictly Business: More Stories of the Four Million (1910), Whirligigs (1910), Sixes and Sevens (1911), The Gentle Grafter (1919) and Rolling Stones (1919).

Troubled by ill-health and heavy drinking for many years, surely Porter was happy when he married his childhood sweetheart from Greensboro, Sara (Sallie) Lindsey Coleman, in 1907. But Porter was living an extravagant lifestyle amid increasing pressure to keep his commitments to publishers for more and more stories. This stress plus added financial problems led to Sara leaving him in 1909. William Sidney Porter died of cirrhosis on 5 June, 1910. A funeral was held in New York City. He now lies buried at the Riverside Cemetery in Asheville, North Carolina. His daughter was later buried beside him. His last complete short story is "Let Me Feel Your Pulse". The O. Henry Museum in Austen, Texas, open to the public, serves to preserve artifacts and archival materials related to O. Henry.