

WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

STUDY GUIDE

O. Henry, “Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen”

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I. About the Author

The life of O. Henry, like his much loved short stories, was filled with twists and surprises. Born William Sydney Porter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1862, O. Henry later moved to Texas, where he worked as a ranch hand, bank teller, and journalist. In 1896 he was indicted for and convicted of embezzling funds from an Austin bank, and he spent three years in prison. Prison turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for it was there that he started to write short stories using the pseudonym by which he later became famous. Released from prison in 1901, O. Henry moved to New York City, where he lived for the last ten years of his life, continuing to write short stories, many of which, like the one discussed here, were set in New York City. “Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen,” like so many of O. Henry’s other stories, is rife with irony, mocking humor, and his signature surprise—or as some have described them, “twisty”—endings. These qualities make it difficult to say with certainty what O. Henry is up to: is he irreverently satirizing the tradition of Thanksgiving, or is he, at the same time, showing us and celebrating its redeeming essence?

II. Summary

The plot is fairly straight-forward, at least until O. Henry’s characteristic final twist. After an opening editorial about President Theodore Roosevelt, Thanksgiving proclamations, and the state of “tradition” in America, the story proper begins with Stuffy Pete, a homeless man who occupies a bench in New York’s Union Square. There, as has happened annually for nine years on Thanksgiving Day, he is met by an elderly gentleman, who escorts him to a restaurant and treats him to a lavish dinner which the old gentleman watches Stuffy Pete eat. But this year, while Stuffy is en route to his park

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bench, he passes the mansion of two old ladies of an ancient family, who have their own tradition of feasting the first hungry wayfarer that comes along after the clock strikes noon. The servants of the elderly sisters take Stuffy Pete in and banquet him to a finish. So he is well stuffed by the time he reaches his bench. When the old gentleman appears as usual, Stuffy Pete doesn't have the heart to disappoint the kindly old man, whose "eyes were bright with the giving pleasure." He goes with him to the traditional table at the traditional restaurant, and—like a valiant knight—consumes a second huge Thanksgiving Day meal. As soon as the men go their separate ways, Stuffy Pete, now dangerously overstuffed, collapses and is taken by ambulance to the hospital. An hour later, the old gentleman is brought in, and, as the story's surprise final sentence tells us, he is discovered to be near starvation, not having had anything to eat for three days past.

III. Thinking about the Text

"Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen" is a story that links the spirit of giving and the impulse to charity with the development of tradition and the holiday of Thanksgiving. But the "twisty" ending shows us that good intentions may have bad consequences, and, more specifically, that generous impulses toward our less fortunate fellow citizens do not always yield genuine benefaction. Indeed, the ending seems to support the view—encouraged by the narrator's ironic and mocking tone throughout—that the entire story is intended to expose the hollowness or foolishness of gentlemanly generosity, American traditions, and the holiday of Thanksgiving in particular. Does a careful consideration of the story support this conclusion? Or does the story, by means of irony, turn the reader against himself and toward more elevated teachings about these important things?

A. The Characters

1. Describe Stuffy Pete and the "old gentleman" and also what you know about their circumstances and their lives.
2. Can you explain why each one does what he does? On previous Thanksgiving Days? On this one?
3. What do you think of their intentions? Their deeds? Their relation to each other? Do you admire the old gentleman? Do you admire Stuffy Pete?
4. What might we criticize about the relationship between the old gentleman and Stuffy Pete? About the way they shared (or, rather, *didn't* share) a meal? About the way they interacted with each other?

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IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss O. Henry's story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Christopher DeMuth, distinguished senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Christopher DeMuth: I would say their tradition is satirical, in the sense that it is a twisted, reductionist form of the Thanksgiving tradition. There is bounteous food, but the food, the biological feeding, is all there is. The bounty does not represent any greater bounties or blessings. No families are present. The old gentleman wishes that he had a son. We don't know Stuffy Pete's background, but the people in the restaurant refer to him as a bum. There is no sharing between them. There is only one formulaic sentence that the old gentleman and Stuffy Pete recite.

In fact, there is so little sharing between them that the gentleman doesn't even realize that Stuffy Pete is stuffed. And we've been given a vivid account of his being stuffed—the buttons are flying off his coat like popcorn. Their Thanksgiving has just been reduced to this eating ritual.

Diana Schaub: It does seem very odd. The old gentleman just watches Stuffy Pete eat. They don't dine together. There is no community.

Amy Kass: Unlike Chris, I think this is a wonderful tradition. Though this is clearly not a model for what a philanthropist should do—it is not what we would call “giving well and doing good”—it does seem that the story shows the peculiar grace that attaches to tradition. The giving is *not* just one way. Both men are made better by the tradition. Stuffy Pete, who we have every reason to believe is homeless, or, as the men say, is a bum, really does become a gentleman. And the old gentleman, who lives alone, who has no family, who has no community—we see him happy. We see a smile on his face, which is the only kind of communication over his meal with Stuffy Pete.

*For more discussion on this question,
[watch the video online.](#)*

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B. Gentlemen

1. Who—what—is a “gentleman”? What defines a “gentleman”?
2. Why does O. Henry call his story “*Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen*”? In what ways, if any, might *both* Stuffy Pete and the old man be regarded as gentlemen?
3. Why does O. Henry call his story “*Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen*”? In what ways, if any, does the holiday of Thanksgiving contribute to their gentlemanliness? Has it made them better than they otherwise would be?

IN CONVERSATION

Christopher DeMuth: The title is important. One of the deepest things about this story is that both the old gentleman and Stuffy Pete become true gentlemen. An important aspect of being a gentleman is a desire to make the other person comfortable, to put the other person at ease. And that is what motivates both of our characters. Stuffy Pete is suffering to put the old gentleman, whom he hardly knows, at ease. And the old gentleman is starving himself to put this person whom he only sees once a year at ease and to make him happy. They really are both quintessential gentlemen.

The twist comes in that by being gentlemen, they are actually hurting the other person. The scene of the second meal is torture. The old gentleman has gone without food for three days. We are supposed to feel pain on both sides, caused by the gentlemanliness of the other.

Leon Kass: We are struggling with the question of O. Henry’s ironies and his mockery. Is the title ironic? Yes. They both become gentlemen, but gentlemanship of this sort is catastrophic.

But despite the irony, there has been a kind of lifting up. The twist at the end causes the reader to ask: “Can we look past the fact that both of the characters end up in the hospital and say that, despite this, something beautiful happened here?” I don’t know the answer, but I think that, by stripping down the story in this way, O. Henry is asking us to consider what really is at the heart of Thanksgiving.

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What is it that really matters? This particular year, thanks to the fact that he is stuffed, Stuffy Pete has the chance to return the old gentleman's kindness, at great personal expense.

*For more discussion on this question,
[watch the video online](#).*

C. Tradition

1. What do you think of the “traditions” reported in the story? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
2. Should either of the traditions reported—that of the two old ladies’ or that of the old gentleman (and Stuffy Pete)—be attributed to American “git-up and enterprise”? If not, how might you account for them?
3. Do you think better or worse of the old ladies or the old gentleman (and Stuffy Pete) for establishing and keeping their respective traditions? How much does your answer depend on the end of the story, with the harm suffered by both men?

D. Thanksgiving

1. Is the restaurant meal a fitting celebration of Thanksgiving? Why or why not? What elements are present, and what are lacking? Which are most important?
2. At the beginning of the story, the narrator asserts that Thanksgiving Day is the one day celebrated by “all . . . Americans who are *not self-made*” (emphasis added). What is the meaning of “self-made”? What does the narrator mean by suggesting that this is a holiday for the “*not self-made*”?
3. Annually, the old gentleman (in the only words we hear him say) greets Stuffy Pete in the same formulaic way: “Good morning. I am glad to perceive that the vicissitudes of another year have spared you to move in health about the beautiful world. For that blessing alone this day of thanksgiving is well proclaimed to each of us. If you will come with me, my man, I will provide you with a dinner that should make your physical being accord with the mental” (4). What understanding of Thanksgiving informs the old gentleman’s remarks? Is it, in your opinion, the right understanding of the holiday and its guiding spirit?

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4. Does the story express the spirit of Thanksgiving as George Washington would have us understand it? Why or why not?
5. Where is America in this story? Where are gratitude and prayer, or religion and piety? Is this a purely secularized Thanksgiving Day celebration?
6. The story begins with a reference to the then president, Theodore Roosevelt, whose own [1901 Thanksgiving Day Proclamation](#) directed the holiday toward generosity to one's fellow man: "We can best prove our thankfulness to the Almighty by the way in which we on this earth and at this time each of us does his duty to his fellow man." Are the citizens in the story confirming or refuting Roosevelt's view?

IN CONVERSATION

Diana Schaub: In certain ways, I'm baffled by this story, and I'm especially baffled by the opening, which opens in a rather political way with a reference that it is President Theodore Roosevelt who gives us this day. I actually went and looked at Roosevelt's [Thanksgiving Day Proclamation](#), and it seems that he was the first president to redirect the holiday away from giving thanks to God—vertical charity—and instead directed us toward generosity to our fellow man. Roosevelt declares, "We can best prove our thankfulness to the Almighty by the way in which on this earth and at this time each of us does his duty to his fellow men." In a certain way, these citizens in the story are acting on that advice. They look for the needy among them and feast them. But this act leads to a strangely one-dimensional relationship between the individuals involved. In other words, the problem with their tradition is that it's a brand new tradition and, in fact, is a violation of the original one.

Christopher DeMuth: The story begins with this mocking of President Roosevelt. O. Henry is setting the stage. We may not remember who the Puritans are, but I'm sure that if they tried it again, we could really lick 'em when they showed up. O. Henry is making light of the tradition. It is not just that these men are bizarre because they are not part of the actual, long-standing tradition. They are not part of that tradition because they are not part of families. They do not have homes.

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Diana Schaub: O. Henry, in fact, offers the story as evidence to the Old World that Americans can, through their own determination and enterprise, sort of “get up a tradition” overnight.

*For more discussion on this question,
[watch the video online](#).*

IV. Thinking with the Text

O. Henry’s story, like George Washington’s Thanksgiving Proclamation, invites attention to larger issues: the meaning of Thanksgiving, its place in our national calendar, and its role in expressing and shaping our national identity and national character; the best ways of giving and receiving, and the place of philanthropy or charity in our public life; and the importance of tradition, ritual, and religion for American civic life.

A. Thanksgiving and the National Calendar

1. What is special about Thanksgiving as a national holiday today? Is it a public or a private and familial holiday?
2. What does or should Thanksgiving mean for people who are without families or who are down and out?
3. What is the place of Thanksgiving on our national calendar? How does it compare—in substance, tone, and manner of celebration—to the Fourth of July?
4. How does Thanksgiving express American identity and American character?
5. What does Thanksgiving contribute to American identity and American character?
6. What is the meaning of the Thanksgiving feast?
7. Does our current mode of celebrating Thanksgiving—centered around huge family feasts—fit the deeper meaning of the holiday? What could be added to your own family celebration that might make the day more meaningful?
8. Can we square the spirit of Thanksgiving and the spirit of “Black Friday,” the fanatical shopping day “celebrated” on the day after Thanksgiving?

B. Giving and Receiving: The Place of Charity and Philanthropy in Public Life

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1. What does it mean to give well? Does one give well if one's gift does harm? (For example: Does the "old gentleman" give well? Is his giving admirable?)
2. What does it mean to receive a gift well? Does one receive well if receiving does harm? (For example: Does Stuffy Pete receive his gift well? Is the way in which he received the old gentleman's gift admirable?)
3. Is it better to give than to receive?
4. What is the proper response to a gift: admiration and appreciation of the benevolent act itself? Gratitude for the specific benefit received? A desire or felt duty to reciprocate? Something else?
5. How should we treat fellow citizens like Stuffy Pete—both on Thanksgiving Day and during the rest of the year? Are good intentions enough? Or are good deeds and, especially, good results the only true measures of philanthropic action?
6. Which is more important: seeing someone's problem and trying to solve it, or seeing someone as a person and being present to him or her?
7. Who and what should define what charity should give: the beneficent impulses and notions of the donor, as experienced *by the donor*, or the needs and wishes of the recipient, as enunciated *by the recipient*?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: The consequences of the meal are torture, but the scene itself is not. O. Henry says that Stuffy Pete "rallied, like a true knight." This is a man who really did his duty, and he sees the beneficent happiness on the old gentleman's face. The old gentleman lives his life according to traditions—he has one for winter, one for spring, one for summer, and one for fall. This is the only one that has brought a smile to his face. There is something to be said for what happens right there between them at the meal, regardless of what happens later.

Leon Kass: In years past, Stuffy Pete joints the old gentleman because he is hungry. This time he goes not because he is hungry, but because it is tradition. He has become a kind of valiant knight with a crown of laurels, as it is this occasion where the generosity goes both ways. It is no longer just the donor and the recipient, but Stuffy Pete is making it possible for the old man to enjoy his act of generosity.

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I grant that the consequences are bad, and so there is the question of whether generosity that produces bad consequences is genuine generosity. But, you can also turn that question around and say that the way you really can see what is in the heart is by separating the generosity from its consequences. You try to see the inner meaning of the deed as between these two people.

Christopher DeMuth: That's a very convincing exegesis. Although they do not have family, they do not have real homes, they do not have a lot of the things that make Thanksgiving special to us, they are doing the best they can in their circumstances. The fact that each of them is physically in extremis when they meet and they don't even recognize it.

Amy Kass: To call attention to their mutual neediness would really move us in a very different direction. In a certain way, each of them rises to the occasion. They rise above their own neediness.

Christopher DeMuth: I'll grant you this: if they had communicated and Stuffy Pete had told the old gentleman that he was stuffed, that he had just eaten a big Thanksgiving meal, the old gentleman would have been devastated. It would have been terrible news to him.

*For more discussion on this question,
[watch the video online.](#)*

C. Tradition, Ritual, and Religion and American Civic Life

1. How important are traditions and rituals for American civic life? Which traditions and rituals are most important, and why?
2. How do we keep our rituals and traditions from losing their meaning?
3. What is the relation between the strength of the American polity and the spirit of religion?
4. Can the United States of America do without the disposition to gratitude and prayer? Without a connection to something higher than itself?