

# Is O. Henry a Pernicious Literary Influence?

Mrs Katharine Fullerton Gerould Says That He Wrote Expanded Anecdotes, Not Short Stories, with Nothing But Climax

By Joyce Kilmer.

O HENRY has been called many things. Some people have called him the twentieth century Balzac. Some have called him the American Maupassant. Katharine Fullerton Gerould has a new name for him. She calls him a Pernicious Influence.

And the author of "Vain Oblations" and "The Great Tradition" was not in a sternly critical mood. She was enjoying the calm of a Princeton afternoon in vacation time, enjoying it in the mellow shade of Queen's Court, her pleasant Colonial home. Her husband is Professor of English at the university. Mrs. Gerould was at peace with all the world—but, nevertheless, she called O. Henry a pernicious influence.

Now, the traditional way for a contemporary short story writer to refer to O. Henry is blushing to disclaim the inheritance of his mantle. And Mrs. Gerould, in spite of the fame which her extraordinarily vivid articles about the Hawaiian Islands have brought her, is above all things a writer of short stories—in the opinion of some critics the foremost living writer of short stories in English. Therefore, her opinions on the craft of short story writing have authority. I asked her why she characterized O. Henry in this unusual way.

"Well," she answered, with a smile. "I hear O. Henry is being used in the schools and the colleges. I hear that he is held up as a model by critics and professors of English. The effect of this must be pernicious. It cannot but be pernicious to spread the idea that O. Henry is a master of the short story. O. Henry did not write the short story. O. Henry wrote the expanded anecdote."

"What is the difference between them?" I asked.

"It's hard to define the difference," Mrs. Gerould replied, "but it's impossible to confuse the two forms. In a short story there are situation, suspense, and climax. O. Henry gives the reader climax—nothing else!"

"O. Henry takes one incident and sets it down. What he gives us isn't a big enough piece of life to have any associations—though in other hands, those of Kipling, for example, it would have all its tentacles out, so to speak, and would seem to be actually related to life."

"In a short story you should get life in the round, as you do in Maupassant's short stories. From seeing how people act in certain circumstances which are described you should be able to imagine how they would act in any other circumstance."

"It's not a matter of length. In the very shortest of Maupassant's stories you find the people etched in so clearly that you know them; you know how they would act whatever extraneous conditions might enter. But you do not find this to be the case in O. Henry's stories; you know how the people acted in one set of circumstances, but you have no idea how they would act at any other time."

"Therefore, in this respect it seems to me that Maupassant has moral significance, and O. Henry has none. I might say that the O. Henry stories are concrete—there is nothing fluid or lifelike about them. And this is due to the fact that I mentioned—that you are told how the characters acted, and not made to understand how they always would act."

"The really great short story writers make us know their characters, make us know how they would act in any conceivable circumstances."

"Who are the great short story writers?" I asked.

Mrs. Gerould frowned thoughtfully. "In his best stories Bret Harte certainly makes us know how his characters would always act," she answered. She threw up her hands with a despairing gesture. "Oh, I have a most horrid phasia!" she said laughing. "But Henry James has written great short stories of the longer type—too long to be

called short stories if you take Kipling as

the model. In the early volumes by Mary E. Wilkins there is the very purest art—in technique some of her short stories are the best in the English language—it is very special, very local, but it is wonderful art. Mrs. Wharton has written admirable short stories, and so has George Washington Cable—some of his New Orleans stories are exquisite.

"Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote some great short stories. But I don't swear by Hawthorne as some people do. The technique of many of Richard Harding Davis's short stories was almost perfect. Frank Stockton was a master of the short story—he was a great genius. Recently

our national life, so our novels must be localized."

"But cannot a novel be at once local and general?" I asked. "Cannot its characters be peculiar to some locality and yet their motives and emotions be universal—as in some of Hardy's novels?"

"Hardy?" said Mrs. Gerould. "Well, Hardy is so desperately symbolical. I have never had the Hardy feeling strongly, because Hardy really doesn't play fair with his characters—they might be called angelos or something like the characters in a Greek drama—they are not flesh and blood, they are stock figures, puppets. You could re-

the only part of the country which you find adequately reflected is Indiana.

"It all comes down to the fact," she continued, "that the country is too big for a novel. Where shall we lay the scene of our novel of contemporary life? Its people must have a social fabric and established traditions. They cannot be isolated; they must have a sense of the world about them."

"What does the novel of Boston life tell us about the people of New York? What does the Chicago novel tell us about the Pacific Coast? We cannot have the genuinely American novel, the novel reflecting our national life. And so we have the short story."

"But Poe, the man who is generally considered our greatest writer of short stories, chose that form in preference to the novel at a time when the United States really had a social fabric." I suggested.

"Poe had no contact with life at all," said Mrs. Gerould. "He would have been the same anywhere; he could not have been a novelist. There was nothing American about his genius—think of his tremendous vogue in France."

I asked Mrs. Gerould how the American short stories of today compared in her opinion with those of fifteen years ago.

"They are better," she replied, "in that they are shorter—they are more thoroughly packed. And this is due to Maupassant's influence. Maupassant has done much for the American short story. Jonathan Sturgis, Maupassant's translator, said that Mary E. Wilkins told him that his translation of Maupassant's 'Odd Number' started her making short stories. For two years she used it as a model, deliberately basing short stories on it, in an effort to master the secret of Maupassant's method."

"In the modern short story the bad influence of O. Henry is to be seen in the treatment of material. In concrete incident the short story is better than it used to be, but it shows lamentable moral unconscientiousness. The author does not stand his short story up and relate it to life as he used to. O. Henry has taught him that this sort of labor is unnecessary."

"The modern short story is better technically than its predecessor of fifteen years ago, but poorer intellectually. The modern short story writer sits down at his desk with nothing in his head but the idea of a man slipping on a banana peel—a concrete incident."

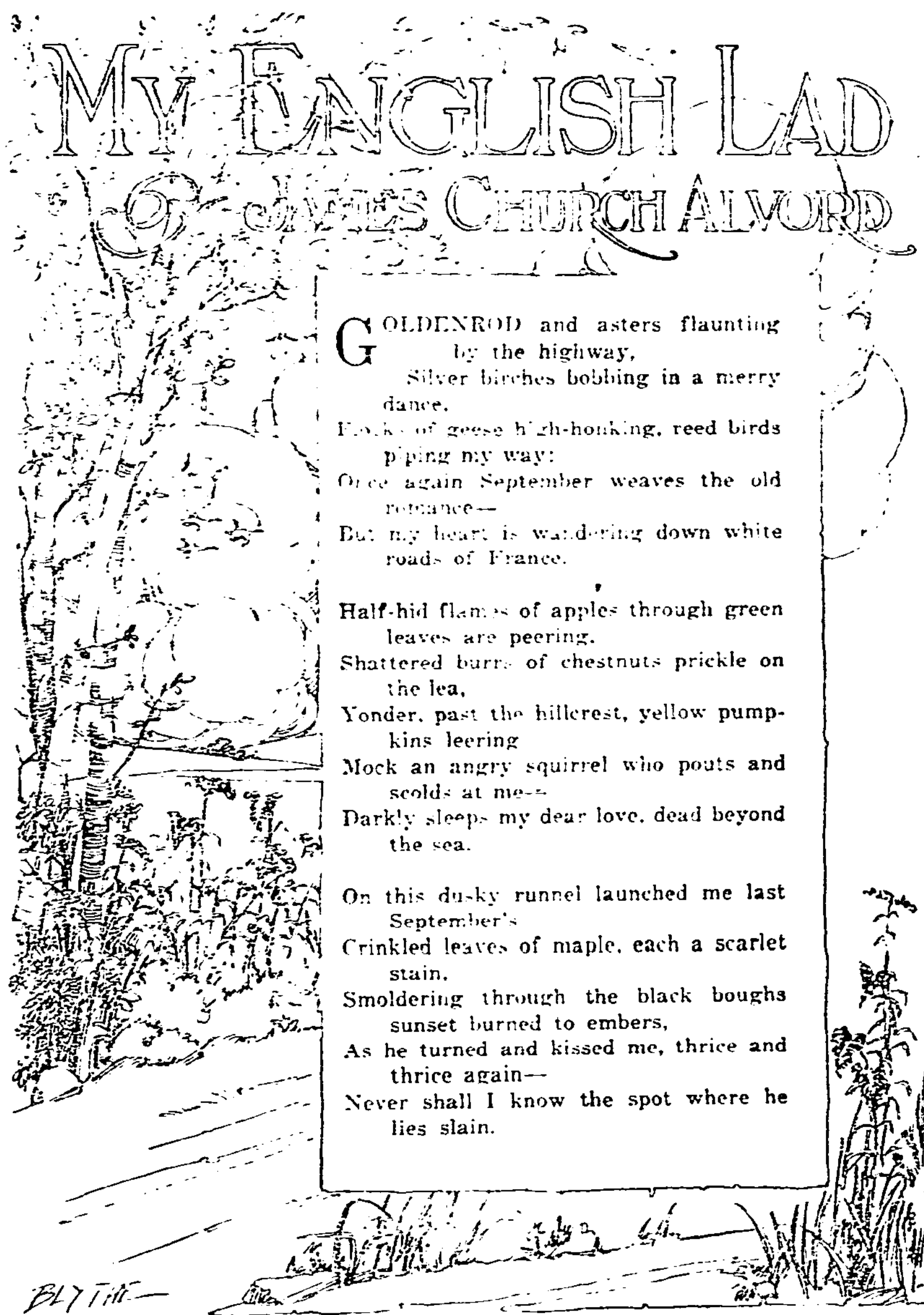
"There is Gouverneur Morris, for example—he is always interesting. But often he writes incidents instead of short stories; he is not always conscious of any possible relation to life that his people might have."

"But that seems to satisfy people. Anything visually exciting and dramatically emotional will go down. But you can't blame O. Henry entirely. It's the American taste, I suppose. The movies satisfy people—we all go to the movies and enjoy them—and if the movies give us what we want, then why should the short story writers bother their heads to give us anything more than incidents?"

"As to novels," Mrs. Gerould continued, "well, I don't know how we can ever have a real American novel. In England there are practically no short stories—everybody is writing novels. But over here people are interested in politics, and social service, and thousands of other things—vitaly interested—and in addition to the geographical problem, there are all these interests to be put into the novel. The difficulties are sufficiently great to discourage the average writer from attempting to do the big cross-section of American life."

"When Henry James came back to the United States after years of absence, some one said to him: 'Now you'll write us the great American novel!' He answered, 'No, I can't. I don't know the American world of business.'"

"And the American world of business is only one of our myriad American worlds. We cannot have an American novel. We are too young and too distended."



I read a book of extraordinarily good short stories—H. G. Dwight's 'Stamboul Nights.' He manages to get just the right remove from his exotic material.

"But O. Henry will continue to be read," said Mrs. Gerould, "because he is always so sentimental. And of course people adore to be told that there are no moral hierarchies. Nevertheless, he is not the real thing, and his influence is most pernicious."

I asked Mrs. Gerould why the short story was more closely identified than the novel with American writings.

"I wonder if it is?" she said. "We've had great novelists—after all, Henry James was an American. But I think I know one reason why we've never had that much talked of great American novel—a reason which seems to me permanently discouraging. That reason is that we have no central social circle."

"How is one to write an American novel? The novel of New York life, the novel of New England life, the novel of Southern life, the novel of Middle Western life—all these we have in abundance. But how can all the sorts of life in the United States be put into one novel? You see, there is no unity, no social unity in

construct the English social fabric from Charles Dickens, the French social fabric from Balzac—you could not construct any social fabrics from Hardy."

"And Hardy is too much the confirmed pessimist to be a great artist. He is always so certain that everything will come out all wrong in the end! I suffers from a perverted pathetic fallacy."

"You cannot construct the American social fabric from any American novel, because there is no American social fabric. The European novelist has his London or his Paris—the place that sets the fashions in thought and manner, the place to which the people in the provinces look. We have nothing of the sort; we have no typical American city."

"Take even a ripping novel like Mrs. Wharton's 'House of Mirth'—that's local, it's about a special group. Mrs. Deland put a good bit of America into 'The Iron Woman.' Mary S. Watts gets a good deal of America into her books. I have not read Mr. Howells's later work, but in his earlier work you get only groups—you feel that America, by and large, is bigger than that. Considering the contemporary American novel as a whole, you might almost say that