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Topic- 2. After Twenty Years (Study Notes)

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After Twenty years- O. Henry

"After Twenty Years" is a short story by O. Henry, published in 1906. O. Henry, whose real name was William Sydney Porter, made a name for himself with his unexpected 'twist' endings, and many consider "After Twenty Years" to be one of the best examples of this literary technique. The story entitled 'After Twenty years' is about two best friends who had to part ways. They return to keep an appointment they had made twenty years ago.

"After Twenty Years" by O. Henry is an interesting story with a twist at the end. A 38-year-old Bob is waiting at the door of a hardware store in New York to meet his friend Jimmy wells. A policeman is on patrol duty. He asks Bob why he is standing there. Bob tells the cop that he (Bob) is waiting to meet his friend Jimmy Wells. He says that they make a promise to meet at the same place at the same time on the same date after twenty years, before parting. Bob tells the policeman that he (Bob) has kept his promise. Bob is sure that Jimmy Wells will surely come and meet him. After listening to the story, the cop walks away. Twenty minutes later, a tall man in plainclothes comes to meet Bob. Bob thinks of him, Jimmy Wells. Later Bob identifies that the man he is talking to is not his friend. Actually, the man is a police officer in plain clothes. He gives Bob a letter from Jimmy. Bob learns from the letter that the police officer whom he met earlier was Jimmy, his old friend. Since Bob is a criminal wanted by the Police, Jimmy Wells does not want to arrest his intimate friend. So he has sent another police officer to do the work. Here Bob is a criminal. But he is a true friend. He wants to fulfill his promise at any cost. On the other hand, his friend Jimmy Wells is an honest police officer. When he comes to know that his friend is a criminal, he does not want to arrest him himself. He has sent another policeman to arrest Bob. Duty is more important than friendship for Jimmy Wells.

Characters

Silky Bob - Bob is one of the main characters of the story 'After Twenty Years' written by 'O Henry'. He has been presented as an over-ambitious character. His ambition takes

him to the world of crime and he becomes 'Silky Bob'. He is introduced in the story standing in the dark corner in front of a hardware store and waiting for his friend to whom he had given a promise to meet at the place where once stood, 'Big Joe Brady's' restaurant. His conversation with the policeman, who, later on, turns out to be his friend, Jimmy Wells, and whom Bob could not recognize in the darkness, reveals his character. His character can be drawn as under:

- An Ambitious Young Man: - He is about 38-year-old and has a big scar over his right eyebrow. He is an over ambitious character. Twenty years ago, he made a promise to his friend Jimmy Wells to meet him at the place where he is standing now and where once stood 'Big Joe Brady's' restaurant. He himself says, 'I'm just waiting for a friend. It's an appointment made twenty years ago.'
- A Criminal: - He left his childhood friend Jimmy Wells 20 years ago and tried to make it big in the wild West. He becomes a criminal and indulges in all kinds of illegal activities. He earns money and fame and indulges in criminal activities and gradually becomes the target for law-enforcing agencies that are after him.
- A Man of Words: - He competes with the sharpest wits in the underworld activities and survives. He travels over a thousand miles to make it to the place and keep his promise. He is badly involved in his ambition of making money and in the process loses contact with his friend yet he keeps his promise showing that he is a man of words. He says, 'I came a thousand miles to stand in this door tonight and it's worth it if my old partner turns up.'
- Has Photographic Memory: - The span of twenty years doesn't make him forget his friend and he remembers how tall he was. That is why, at the very outset, he asks the man in the plainclothes, who approaches him in the disguise of Jimmy Wells, how he has grown taller during the period. He remarks, '..... you've changed lots, Jimmy, I never thought you were so tall by two or three inches.'
- Prosperes in Life and obtains a good financial status: - His dress and costumes show that he prospered well in the Wild West and has become worth his name, that is why, the police in many countries are after him. He has a great ego and shows it in his conversation and behaviour. A big diamond scarfpin and diamond studded watch shows how well Bob has prospered after he left New York.
- Over Confident But True Friend: -He is over confident and this makes him spill the beans to the man whom he takes as his childhood friend. His coming back to

New York, against all odds and at the cost of his life, speaks of his sincerity in friendship. Though a bad character, he earns the love and sympathies of the readers.

Jimmy Wells- Jimmy Wells is again a pivotal character in the story 'After Twenty Years' written by 'O Henry'. He has been presented as a noble, duty-bound, and duty-conscious fellow. His character sketch can be drawn as under Guardian of Peace. Jimmy Wells is about 40 years old. He is a responsible policeman by profession. He leads a life of a responsible citizen. He is a man whose conduct and behavior are exemplary. He is an upright man devoted to his duty. On his patrolling duty, he moves up and down the venue as a 'guardian of peace.' His alertness is habitual and part of his behavior and what he does. He moves his club with artful movements. He is very conscious as he casts his watchful eyes on the surroundings every now and then while performing his duty. Law-abiding citizen: -His behavior and conduct show that he is a law-abiding citizen. He not only earns a name and fame for himself but also brings credit to his department by performing his duties sincerely. His sincerity and sense of duty encourage him to arrest a criminal as his sense of duty and loyalty towards his profession are stronger than his love for his friend. Mentally strong: - He is a strong fellow and is not carried away by emotions. Though he has great regard and emotional feelings for his friend, these don't come in the way of his duty. 'Somehow, I couldn't do it myself. So, I went around and got a plainclothes man to do the job.' The above statement shows that he is not overpowered by his emotions.

Questions and Answers-

Describe the appearance of the policeman on the beat.

The policeman moved up the street of his duty in a very impressive manner. He had alert eyes and strong figure with a proud manner. It made him a fine picture of a guardian of peace. He also kept spinning his stick while doing his duty.

What did he keep doing while on his rounds?

He kept spinning his stick with many intricate and artful movements while doing his duty.

Why were the streets devoid of people?

The time was 10 o'clock at night, there were chilly gusts of wind and it was likely to rain. So, the streets were devoid of people.

What story did the man standing near the hardware store tell the passing cop?

The man standing near the hardware store talked about the peculiar appointment with his friend that had made twenty years back in that venue his passing cop.

What used to be there in the place of that shop twenty years ago?

Big Joe' Brady's restaurant was there in the place of that hardware shop twenty years ago.

Describe the man awaiting the arrival of his friend.

The man had a pale, square-jawed face with keen eyes. There was a little white scar near his right eyebrow.

Why did the friends part ways?

The friends parted ways to seek their fortune.

When and how did Bob realize that the tall man was not his friend?

When Bob and his friend Jimmy Wells came near a drug store and they came into this glare to gaze upon the other's face. He identified that the tall man was not his friend by the appearance of his nose.

Who was the tall man?

The tall man was another cop sent by his friend Patrolman Jimmy Wells.

What did he give Bob?

He gave Bob a note from Patrolman Wells.

Was the place a business center only?

Yes, the place was a business center. The author has mentioned a cigar store and an all-night lunch counter.

What is the most significant happening in the story to be analyzed?

The most significant happening in the story is when Jimmy Wells sends a police officer in plain clothes to arrest Bob.

What is the climax of the story "After Twenty Years"?

Bob identifies that the man he is talking to is not his friend. Actually, the man is a police officer in plain clothes. He gives Bob a letter from Jimmy. Bob learns from the letter that the police officer whom he met earlier was Jimmy, his old friend.

How would you describe Jimmy and Bob's personalities in the story?

Jimmy and Bob are close friends. Jimmy is an honest police officer. When he comes to know that his friend is a criminal, he does not have the courage to arrest him himself. He sends another policeman to arrest Bob. For him, duty is more important than friendship. As far as Bob is concerned, he is a true friend. He wants to fulfill his promise at any cost.

The ending of "After Twenty Years" fills the reader with poignancy, (Strong effect of feeling -sad) making the story effective. Discuss?

The reader expects that Bob and Jimmy Wells, the two close friends, would meet each other after a long separation. They would share their experiences of the past twenty years. But instead, the ending of the story fills the reader with poignancy when one of the friends is arrested by police. In spite of the tragic end, the author makes the story very effective. Bob is not arrested by Jimmy Wells directly. Jimmy sends another police officer to arrest Bob.

How does the writer prepare for the end of the story?

The writer prepares for the end of the story contrary to the expectations of the readers. The story begins very interestingly. Two close friends Bob and Jimmy meet each other after twenty years. Bob does not recognize Jimmy in the police uniform. After Jimmy's departure, another police officer in plainclothes comes whom Bob considers being his Jimmy. The police officer arrests Bob because he is wanted in Chicago.

What did Bob share with the cop about their friendship?

Bob shared with the policeman his strange appointment made twenty years ago. He also shared the details of their childhood days and how they were raised in New York.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Jimmy Wells from Bob's point of view?

Strengths: Jimmy Wells is very shrewd. He has a sharp memory. He can recognize his friend as soon as he sees his face in the cigar lighter. He is duty-bound.

Weakness: He is a very cordial and soft-natured person. Though his friend is a criminal wanted in Chicago, he could not arrest him. Hence, he sent another cop to do the duty.

Was Bob hopeful of his friend's arrival? How do you know?

Yes, Bob was hopeful of his friend's arrival. The lines "I'll give him half an hour at least. If Jimmy is alive on earth he'll be here by that time" reveal his hopefulness of his friend's arrival.

How did the cop come to understand that Bob had been successful in the West?

Bob pulled out a handsome watch having the lid set with small diamonds. Then the patrolman came to know that Bob had been doing well.

Why didn't Jimmy Wells, being a cop himself, arrest Bob?

Jimmy Wells is very cordial with everyone, especially with Bob. He has no will and guts to arrest his most intimate friend. Hence, he could not arrest Bob.

What time does the story begin?

The story began around 10 o'clock at night when the policeman was patrolling along the roadside trying doors, working as a guardian of peace.

Where was the man from the West leaning?

The man from the west was leaning in the doorway of a darkened hardware store where there used to be 'Big Joe' Brady's restaurant, twenty years ago.

How did the policeman perform his duties?

The policeman was on the route doing patrol duty. He was moving smartly. His smartness was real and not for the show. It was night and most of the business houses in the street were closed early due to bad weather. There was darkness everywhere except light coming from a few shops and lamp-posts. In spite of this, the policeman was inspecting every closed door. He was holding a lathi and making some funny movements. The policeman, with his well-built figure and smart movements, was proving himself as the guardian of the law. He was very watchful and cast his eyes on the entire peaceful road. He was seriously searching for a notorious criminal from Chicago. This duty was assigned to him by his boss and he was very confident as a dutiful officer for the last eighteen years to do the job perfectly.

What was the appointment made between two friends twenty years before?

The two friends in the story are Bob and Jimmy Wells. Both were born and brought up in New York and bred like two brothers. When they come of age. Bob went to the West to make his fortune but Jimmy stayed in New York. On the day of parting, they had dined together in a restaurant and agreed that night that they would meet here again

exactly twenty years from that date and time in spite of their distant living and conditions. This appointment was made between two friends twenty years ago.

When did Bob realize that the tall man, he had met was not Jimmy Wells?

When Bob and the tall man reached the medicine store walking arm in arm, they could see each other's faces in the electric lights. Bob suddenly stopped by leaving his arm. He thought that how this tall man with a flat nose would be Jimmy Wells who had a sharp nose. One could be 6 to 8 inches long in twenty years' time but it is not long enough to convert a sharp nose to a flat nose. Thus, Bob realized that the tall man he had met was not Jimmy Wells.

Why did Jimmy get Bob arrested?

Jimmy, who was a policeman, was a man of principle, honest and dutiful Bob, on the other hand, was a professional criminal who printed counterfeit notes and earned easy money. Once upon a time twenty years ago, they were good friends. Before they got separated, they had promised to meet each other at the Brady's Restaurant where they had taken their last dinner. But when they meet, Jimmy saw the face of the man who was wanted in Chicago. The responsibility and devotion to his duty made him ignore his personal relationship. Therefore, he got arrested.

Write the character sketch of Bob.

Silky Bob is an ambitious person who didn't mind going illegal ways to accumulate wealth. Apparently, we see Bob as a negative character as at the end of the story, he was found guilty and was arrested. But, when we see that he travelled miles and risked his life to meet his best friend, we realise how loyal and faithful he was. Again, we find him a bit boastful as he was flaunting about his fortune and comparing his luck with Jimmy's luck.

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