

## A Municipal Report

O Henry's "A Municipal Report" (reprinted in Thomas R. Arp, *Perrine's Story and Structure*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. [Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1998] 320-332) is a well-known and popular story, but many perceive the plot as unnatural. The story does not develop the characters any further than the narrator's descriptions of their outer appearances. These descriptions resemble different types of stock characters which may or may not show each character's true personality. The coincidence of the same dollar bill reappearing is very unnatural and is used as a form of plot manipulation. Azalea Adair took out a "dollar bill with the upper right-hand corner missing, torn in two pieces and pasted together again with a strip of blue tissue paper," which was the same dollar bill the narrator gave to the Negro and that Major Caswell took out of his pocket at the bar. It is not until towards the end of the story when Azalea Adair signs the contract for the magazine that we learn that she is Major Caswell's wife. The chance that the narrator happened to "be standing within five feet of a cuspidor when Major Caswell opened fire on it" (323) is the reason he speaks with Major Caswell and learns that he is a "drunken, worthless loafer" (331).

The natures of the characters in the story are easy to recognize without using much imagination. Azalea Adair, Uncle Caesar, and Major Caswell are all examples of stock characters which are stereotyped by the narrator's descriptions. Azalea Adair's is portrayed as a "product of the old south" (327). She was very poor and suffered from "poverty, pride, and starvation" (330). Azalea Adair, a publication contributor, wrote poems and essays and a Northern literary magazine wanted to contract her. At the end of the story we learn that she is Major Caswell's wife. The "tragic hero" is the type of stock character in which Uncle Caesar's nature was drawn (324). Uncle Caesar was a strong Negro man that resembled "Brutus" from a Shakespearean play and was "once owned" by Azalea Adair's family. The narrator said that his

eyes “suffered at the first sight of Major Caswell”; he had a massive shaved face, one of “great acreage, red, and pulpy” (322-23). The type of stock character the narrator describes him as is an animal. First, the narrator says he is a “rat lacking a general habitat” and then a “starved dog that had forgotten where he had buried his bone” (322-23). Both of these characterizations misrepresent that Major Caswell really is a drunken, abusive husband.

The narrator directly portrayed the theme in the story when he said “human nature is the same everywhere; but there is more color, drama, movement, and romance in some cities than others” (328). This theme would be revealed throughout the plot and narrative even without the narrator revealing it. Azalea Adair discussed the consequences from the romances she witnessed as she traveled around the world. The narrator makes biblical and literary references, for instance “the land of Nod,” which reveal and contribute to the theme that romance can happen anywhere (323). The way the story opens, “East is east, and west is San Francisco,” (320) and closes, “I wonder what’s doing in Buffalo,” (332) expose the theme as well.

The use of plot manipulation and coincidence help explain the story’s early population and these elements also appealed to me as I read the story. The use of the coincidence and reappearing of the dollar bill in three different places is unnatural but suitable at the beginning of story in order to complicate the plot. These coincidences are very “revealing to experienced readers,” but it is not until later on in the story that the relationship between Azalea Adair, Uncle Caesar, and Major Caswell is revealed and the money coincidences are “resolved” (48).