

A Retrieved Reformation



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF O. HENRY

William Sydney Porter was born one of three children to a working-class family. Tragically, his mother died while giving birth when Porter was just three years old, and his extended family stepped in to help his father raise the children. By the time he was nineteen, Porter had graduated from high school and was working in his uncle's drugstore as a licensed pharmacist. At twenty, he developed a persistent cough, and in an attempt to lessen his symptoms, moved to Texas in search of dry weather. While in Texas, Porter worked odd jobs as a ranch hand and began writing, concentrating on short stories. Luckily, his health did improve in the Texas climate, and in 1885, Porter met his future wife, Athol Estes. Porter and Estes eloped in 1887 and had one surviving child, a daughter named Margaret. To support his young family, Porter was given a job with the Texas General Land Office by a politician friend. As his job was dependent upon a political appointment, Porter was terminated when his friend was not reelected to public office. He then took a job as a teller at the First National Bank, continuing to write on the side. Meanwhile, Porter circulated a weekly satirical publication, *The Rolling Stone*, focusing on local stories and people; however, the magazine failed by 1895. In 1896, Porter fled to Honduras to avoid arrest after being accused of mismanaging bank funds and embezzlement, but he returned to Texas in 1897 when Estes's health worsened. Sadly, she was dead within the year, and in 1898, Porter was convicted of embezzling \$854.08 from the bank in Austin. He entered the state penitentiary in Ohio that same year and worked as a pharmacist while continuing to write, adopting his pen name, O. Henry. He was released in 1901 for good behavior and moved to New York City, where he began his most productive period of writing. While in New York, Porter wrote hundreds of short stories, including "The Gift of the Magi," "The Ransom of Red Chief," and "A Retrieved Reformation." In 1907, Porter married his second wife, Sarah; however, the marriage was generally unhappy. Life proved exceedingly difficult after his release from prison, and he was plagued by considerable financial problems and alcoholism. Porter died in 1910 secondary to cirrhosis of the liver and complications of heart disease. After his death, he left behind a remarkable short story legacy. He is widely known for his humor and wit, his irony, and his surprise endings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

American prisons saw a great deal of change and reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1903, the

year in which O. Henry wrote "A Retrieved Reformation," Progressive Era politics greatly informed the government's approach to punishment and rehabilitation. Recent industrialization and high numbers of immigration meant that American cities were over-populated, and as people competed for jobs and housing, crime grew with the struggle. Politicians and social reformers did not believe that people broke the law simply because they wanted to; rather, reformers saw law-breaking as a direct result of mental health issues. In the absence of mental illness, progressives believed that people broke the law in response to their social environment, such as a homeless person stealing food. If that same person had access to reasonable work and pay, they reasoned, they would be less likely to break the law. In that same vein, progressive reformers sought to fix the very causes of crime, such as poverty and unemployment, and they focused on social programs as a way to achieve this. Progressive reformers were also the first to introduce probation and parole programs and tended to shy away from fixed sentences. Instead, convicts were often given an undetermined sentence and released based on "good behavior" and evidence of reform.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O. Henry wrote under the greater literary movement known as realism, which began during the middle of the 1800's, mostly within French and Russian literature. Notable realist texts include Gustave Flaubert's [Madame Bovary](#) and Leo Tolstoy's [Anna Karenina](#). Realism soon spread throughout most of Europe and the Americas, and extended well into the early twentieth century. Realism sought to depict everyday people and circumstances as realistically as possible, often focusing on boring or mundane topics and events. Specifically, O. Henry wrote in a style known as local color, which emerged in the United States in the years following the Civil War. Local color literature focuses on particular places and people, often belaboring local culture, customs, and dialects. Local color literature is thought to have originated with southern novels during the second half of the nineteenth century with works like Mark Twain's [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#) and Kate Chopin's [The Awakening](#), and O. Henry made a considerable contribution to this genre with his focus on the people and locations within New York City and Texas. O. Henry's work also helped paved the way for future generations of local color writers, many of whom wrote in urban areas, including Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. O. Henry was a voracious reader, consuming everything from dime novels and comic books to classic texts. He contributed hundreds of short stories to the literary canon, including "The Duplicity of Hargraves" and "The Cop and the Anthem." O. Henry's writing of "A

Retrieved Reformation” was specifically influenced by Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and both works engage the themes of punishment and redemption. Additionally, Henry was influenced by his own prison stay while writing “A Retrieved Reformation.” Reportedly, the story is loosely based on the experiences of one of his fellow inmates.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “A Retrieved Reformation”
- **When Written:** 1903
- **Where Written:** New York City, New York
- **When Published:** 1903
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short story, local color literature
- **Setting:** Arkansas
- **Climax:** Agatha becomes locked in her grandfather’s safe, and Jimmy must turn to his safecracking skills to free her.
- **Antagonist:** Ben Price
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

O. Henry is honored with a yearly “pun-off.” The O. Henry Pun-Off World Championship is a spoken word competition that takes place at the O. Henry Museum in Austin, Texas each May. “Punslingers” gather in the backyard of O. Henry’s former Austin home and trade witty remarks as a way to remember the great American storyteller.

O. Henry coined the term “banana republic.” While living in Honduras and writing *Cabbages and Kings*, O. Henry invented the word to describe the setting of his stories. The term is now frequently used to describe small Latin countries with an unstable farming-based economy.



PLOT SUMMARY

Jimmy Valentine is hard at work in a prison shoe-shop before being escorted to the warden’s office. There, he is given his freedom in the form of a pardon by the governor of Arkansas. Jimmy has been in prison for nearly ten months, after being sentenced to four years, yet instead of celebrating his good fortune, he accepts the pardon “in a tired kind of way.” As a well-connected criminal, Jimmy had expected his friends on the outside to get him out much sooner.

The warden reminds Jimmy that he is “not a bad fellow at heart” before telling him to “stop cracking safes, and live straight.” Jimmy jokingly denies having ever cracked a safe and the warden plays along, defending Jimmy’s feigned innocence. Early the next morning, after being given a five-dollar bill and

railroad ticket, Jimmy is released from prison and walks out into the sunshine a free man.

Once on the outside, Jimmy quickly finds a restaurant to indulge in a luxurious meal before boarding a train and returning to his rented room. There, he notices detective Ben Price’s shirt **button** on the floor, evidence of Price’s arrest of Jimmy for a burglary in Springfield. Jimmy changes into his usual stylish clothing and removes his suitcase of burglar’s **tools** from a hidden panel in the wall.

A string of increasingly higher-stakes robberies occurs in the area, attracting the attention of law enforcement, and, eventually, Ben Price. Price is convinced that Jimmy is responsible; Jimmy is the only thief capable of such difficult jobs, and he is also the only one who possesses the tools to pull them off. Price is well-versed in Jimmy’s crimes, and he is determined to catch him and hold him accountable.

Meanwhile, Jimmy travels to the small town of Elmore to case the local bank and comes upon a beautiful young woman standing outside. He immediately falls in love with her, and soon learns that the young woman is Annabel Adams, the daughter of the local bank owner. He then checks into a local hotel under a false identity, Ralph D. Spencer, and pretends to be a prospective businessman looking to relocate to the area. Under the guise of Ralph, Jimmy lives and works in Elmore, builds a successful shoe business, and wins the heart of Annabel. After one year, Jimmy has the trust of Annabel’s family, is popular and accepted within the community, and is set to marry her in two weeks’ time.

Reformed by his love for Annabel, Jimmy writes a letter to an old friend telling him of his transformation. Jimmy has no intention of returning to his life of crime and wants to gift his friend his suitcase of burglar’s tools. Soon after, Ben Price arrives in Elmore in pursuit of Jimmy, and finds him living as Ralph Spencer.

The next day, Jimmy has breakfast with Annabel and her family before going to Little Rock to order his wedding suit and drop off his suitcase of tools to his old friend. With his tools in hand, Jimmy accompanies Annabel and her family to The Elmore Bank, where her father, Mr. Adams, shows off his new safe. Annabel’s nieces, May and Agatha, play nearby as Ben Price walks unnoticed into the bank.

Suddenly, May inadvertently locks Agatha in the new safe, engaging the bolts and combination before Mr. Adams has had the chance to set them. Agatha is stuck in the vault, frightened and running out of air. The family begins to panic, imploring Jimmy to find a way to get her out. Jimmy smiles and asks Annabel for the **rose** pinned to her dress before opening his suitcase and quickly cracking the safe, freeing Agatha and casting suspicion on his identity as a mere shoe salesman. As Jimmy leaves the bank, he notices Ben Price and resigns himself to his custody, facing his past robberies. Price responds,

“Guess you’re mistaken, Mr. Spencer. Don’t believe I recognize you,” before turning and walking away.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer – The protagonist of “A Retrieved Reformation,” Jimmy is a safecracker and thief living in the American Midwest in the early 1900s. When first introduced, the well-connected Jimmy is being released from prison after serving just ten months of a four-year sentence for robbery. Jimmy initially responds to his freedom with disregard, quickly resuming his life of crime. It is clear that Jimmy has not been rehabilitated; his punishment was a sham and he has no intention of working an honest job. Yet despite Jimmy’s criminal lifestyle, he remains a kind and likeable character. Indeed, Jimmy is witty and compassionate, and he is undeniably a dedicated and skilled safecracker. After a succession of burglaries, Jimmy attracts the attention of Ben Price—the very police detective who had arrested him in Springfield, resulting in his incarceration in the first place. After then traveling to the town of Elmore in search of fresh safes to crack, he falls in love with Annabel Adams, the daughter of a local bank owner. His love for Annabel changes Jimmy, and he adopts the identity of Ralph D. Spencer, an honest shoe salesman. As Ralph, Jimmy finally lives the straight life, wins the heart of Annabel, and gains the respect of her family and the entire town. He even decides to gift his suitcase of burglar’s **tools** to an old friend in Little Rock, convinced that he “wouldn’t do another crooked thing for the whole world.” On the surface, Jimmy has been rehabilitated by Annabel; however, since Jimmy is not who he pretends to be, their relationship is based on a lie and therefore on shaky ground. It is not until he sacrifices his identity as Ralph, by saving Agatha, Annabel’s niece, when she becomes accidentally locked in Mr. Adams’s safe, that Jimmy is fully redeemed for his past sins. Through cracking the safe, Jimmy, in part, betrays his true identity—risking his relationship with Annabel in the process. He sacrifices Ralph D. Spencer so that Agatha may live, thereby using his criminal trade for good. In that moment, Jimmy is wholly reformed.

Ben Price – An “eminent” police detective and the antagonist of “A Retrieved Reformation.” Price is portrayed as the epitome of morality and hard work, and he serves as a foil to Jimmy Valentine’s criminal lifestyle. Jimmy and Ben Price have a long and established history; Jimmy was sent to prison after Price arrested him for an obscure crime in Springfield, and Jimmy again lands on Price’s radar not long after he is released. His dedication to detective work and his familiarity with Jimmy’s handiwork makes “other people with burglar-proof safes to feel more at ease,” and he vows to make Jimmy pay for his crimes. Price is so determined to bring Jimmy to justice that he pursues

him for an entire year, finally finding him living in the town of Elmore under the guise of Ralph D. Spencer. However, Price’s traditional ethics and dedication to the law are put into question when he pretends not to know Jimmy after witnessing his redemption. Price watches quietly from the back of The Elmore Bank as Jimmy saves Agatha, the niece of his fiancé, Annabel Adams, when she inadvertently becomes locked in a safe. Jimmy’s hidden skillset means that he can easily free Agatha, but doing so is an admission that he isn’t who he pretends to be—an honest and law-abiding man—and Price appreciates this sacrifice. Jimmy saves Agatha even though it may very well end his relationship with Annabel, and Price considers this selfless act evidence of Jimmy’s reformation. When Jimmy surrenders to Price after his display of heroism, Price responds, “Guess you’re mistaken, Mr. Spencer. Don’t believe I recognize you.” Price lets Jimmy go, effectively breaking the law by letting him get away with his past crimes. O. Henry’s portrayal of Detective Ben Price complicates traditional notions of ethics, morality, and hard work.

Annabel Adams – The fiancée of Ralph D. Spencer, the false identity of career safecracker, Jimmy Valentine, and the daughter of Mr. Adams, the owner of The Elmore Bank. Jimmy first sees Annabel outside her father’s bank while he is casing potential safes, and he immediately falls in love with her and denounces his life of crime. While he disguised as Ralph, Annabel too falls in love with Jimmy, and she is the very reason he begins to live the straight life as a shoe salesman. Annabel is charming and described by Jimmy as “an angel,” reflecting her savior-like influence on his criminal past. When Annabel’s niece, Agatha, is locked in the safe at The Elmore Bank, Jimmy first asks Annabel for the **rose** pinned to her dress, a symbol of their love and a token of remembrance, before cracking the safe and exposing that his identity as Ralph is a farce.

The Warden – The man in charge of the prison where Jimmy Valentine serves time after his arrest in Springfield. As Jimmy is released from prison, the warden advises him to “brace up” and “make a man of himself,” claiming that Jimmy is “not a bad fellow at heart.” His advice to Jimmy implies that the ticket to the straight life is an honest profession, and through this O. Henry draws a direct parallel between morality and work. The warden is pleasant and jokes easily with Jimmy during his release; however, the crooked nature of Jimmy’s pardon and his expected short stay in his prison makes the warden implicit in the obvious corruption that surrounds Jimmy’s sham punishment.

Mike Dolan – A long-time friend of Jimmy Valentine and owner of the café where Jimmy rents a room. After Jimmy is released from prison, it is revealed that Mike was instrumental in orchestrating Jimmy’s pardon from the governor. Mike is kind and accommodating, yet he is very clearly entrenched in organized crime and political corruption.

Mr. Adams – The owner of The Elmore Bank and father to

Annabel. It is Mr. Adams's bank that Jimmy Valentine initially cases when arriving in town, and it is his safe that Agatha, his granddaughter and Annabel's niece, becomes locked in, prompting Ralph to crack the lock and expose his true identity as Jimmy Valentine.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Agatha – The niece of Annabel Adams and granddaughter to Mr. Adams. Agatha is accidentally locked in her grandfather's safe, causing Ralph D. Spencer to break the lock, effectively revealing his identity as Jimmy Valentine.

May – Agatha's sister. May inadvertently locks Agatha in their grandfather Mr. Adam's safe.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LOVE AND REDEMPTION

Despite being released from prison at the start of "A Retrieved Reformation," burglar Jimmy Valentine clearly hasn't learned his lesson. An expert at cracking safes, Jimmy quickly returns to a life of crime and continues to rob banks throughout the area. Only after seeing Annabel Adams outside one such bank does Jimmy abandon his criminal ways, and, upon falling in love with her, ultimately renounce them forever. Through Jimmy's development from delinquent to honest man, author O. Henry argues for the transformational power of love, through which even the slickest of criminals can find redemption.

O. Henry presents Jimmy as totally unrepentant upon his initial release from prison. On the contrary, having been through this process many times before, Jimmy greets freedom "in a tired kind of way" and jokes with the warden about his own criminal history. Instead of emphasizing any sense of graciousness, O. Henry points out that Jimmy is surprised that his freedom—obtained via a pardon from the governor—has taken so long: "when someone with as many friends on the outside as Jimmy Valentine had is received in the 'stir' it is hardly worth while to cut his hair," the author writes.

Once on the outside, Jimmy notably ignores the beauty of the natural world from which he has for ten months been separated—"disregarding the song of the birds, the green of the trees, the smell of the flowers"—and instead heads for a restaurant to indulge in a bottle of wine and a high-quality cigar. Almost immediately afterwards, he meets up with his old pals

and begins a slew of increasingly-higher stakes robberies. These moments reveal Jimmy to be deeply-entrenched in the world of crime, sheltered from serious consequences for his actions, and desirous of the luxurious comforts such a lifestyle affords—details that, in turn, make his eventual transformation all the more powerful.

Falling in love with Annabel Adams spurs Jimmy to reject his easy life of crime. Jimmy first sees Annabel on the steps of her father's bank—the anchor of his new life directly confronting that of his old. Annabel changes Jimmy immediately: he "looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man." He takes on a new identity and abandons "the old business"—that is, robbing banks—for an honest job in a shoe shop. In addition to winning Annabel's hand, he finds both financial and social success and the "the respect of the community."

Ralph D. Spencer, as he now calls himself, is "the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine's ashes." Jimmy even plans to give away his burglary **tools** to a friend from his past, which suggests that he has no intention of ever returning to his former way of life. In the letter he writes to this friend, Jimmy refers to Annabel as an "angel"—an explicit admission that it is by her love that he feels redeemed. "She believes in me," he writes, "and I wouldn't do another crooked thing for the whole world."

Yet however honest his new life, Jimmy's redemption is tempered by the fact that he has been lying to his fiancée since they met. Indeed, Jimmy plans to continue to evade the consequences of his past by moving "West, where there won't be so much danger of old scores brought up against me." As with O. Henry's reference to Ralph Spencer being born from the ashes of Jimmy Valentine, this moment reminds the reader that while love has *begun* to save Jimmy, his new start has been granted not simply by the renunciation but also the *erasure* of his former, criminal self.

Notably, only upon being willing to accept the consequences of his past is Jimmy able to achieve lasting salvation. Before he's able to get rid of his tools or head West, Jimmy must go to the bank with Annabel and her family as Mr. Adams, Annabel's father, excitedly shows off a new vault. When Annabel's niece, Agatha, accidentally becomes trapped inside, Jimmy breaks open the safe to rescue her—effectively revealing his past, or at least suggesting he is not who he claims to be. This action is not done impulsively. Jimmy knows that he is not merely *risking* his new life, but *sacrificing* it, as "with that act, Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place." The act of saving Agatha reflects Biblical notions of martyrdom; Ralph D. Spencer dies so that Agatha may live, but also so that Jimmy Valentine may be absolved of his sins and thus allowed to live as a free man.

Indeed, afterwards, he appears to have accepted his fate and

greeted detective Ben Price—who has long been following Jimmy and is currently waiting outside to arrest him—almost like an old friend. “Well, let’s go,” Jimmy says. “I don’t know that it makes much difference now.” Ben, however, simply says, “I don’t believe I recognize you,” and strolls away. Having witnessed Jimmy’s heroism—made genuine by the fact that he had been willing to risk his newfound happiness in the name of helping someone else—Ben decides to let Jimmy go. This final act of mercy implies that, in Ben’s eyes, Jimmy is truly reformed. While Jimmy had worked to make an honest man of himself and no longer be the criminal he once was, more meaningful redemption has required owning up to his past sins. Whether Annabel will accept Jimmy is left unsaid, but O. Henry’s story suggests that her love has already, irrevocably changed him for the better.



WORK, ETHICS, AND MORALITY

As Jimmy is released from prison the warden tells him, “You’re not a bad fellow at heart. Stop cracking safes, and live straight.” According to the warden, to live straight—and thereby be a good person—Jimmy must work an honest job. At the same time, however, the fact that Jimmy’s so good at being a thief elicits a sort of begrudging respect. O. Henry presents the dedicated detective Ben Price meanwhile, as an embodiment of ethics that serves as a foil to Jimmy’s life of crime. Yet despite being an expert crook, Jimmy is not a bad man. On the contrary, he proves to be quite decent, and this irony is only intensified by Price’s own actions at the end of the story when he disregards the dictates of his profession and lets Jimmy go free. Jimmy and Ben Price cannot be viewed in simple terms of good or bad, criminal or cop; with these characters, then, O. Henry upends traditional notions of ethics and morality, forcing readers to judge these men based on more than just their profession.

O. Henry portrays Ben Price as an extremely capable police detective, which is proof of his “good citizenship and prosperity.” When Jimmy returns to his apartment after being released from prison, he finds it “just as he left it,” including Price’s collar-button on the floor. The button, torn from Price’s shirt during the physical scuffle of Jimmy’s arrest, is evidence of the detective’s dedication to his job. Along with establishing their history, the fact that Jimmy immediately notices the button—such a tiny, insignificant object—suggests that Price’s investigation and the subsequent arrest had a lasting effect on him. It also represents the extraordinary effort put forth by Price when he “overpowered Jimmy to arrest him.”

Price is obviously very good at his job and does not waste his time and skills with small or trivial cases. After Jimmy is released from prison and returns to a life of burglary, he has to steal a considerable amount of money before again attracting Price’s attention. It is only after Jimmy relieves the Jefferson City bank of five thousand dollars that his crimes are

considered “high enough to bring the matter up into Ben Price’s class of work.” And as soon as word gets out that Price suspects Jimmy and has resumed his prior pursuit, “people with burglar-proof safes felt more at ease.” He vows to catch Jimmy and make him pay, claiming, “He’ll do his bit next time without any short-time or clemency foolishness.” Price is determined to do his job as a man of the law, and the public believes in his abilities.

However, O. Henry portrays Jimmy as a hard worker who is likewise dedicated to his profession. Like Price, Jimmy is very good at his job. He makes quick work of burglar-proof safes and his adept skills leave “no clue to the author.” In fact, it is only the level of difficulty of his jobs that gives Jimmy away. Price notes, “That’s Dandy Jim Valentine’s autograph. He’s resumed business. Look at the combination knob—jerked out as easy as pulling up a radish in wet weather. He’s got the only clamps that can do it.” Only a superior safecracker could have pulled off the robbery, and Jimmy is known for impressive work.

Furthermore, as noted by Price, Jimmy is the only thief who has access to the proper tools for the job. Jimmy’s safecracking tools, described as the “finest set of burglar’s tools in the East,” include “two or three novelties invented by Jimmy himself, in which he took pride.” Jimmy is so dedicated to his work as a safecracker that he has even engineered his own tools in an effort to do his job better.

When Agatha, the niece of Jimmy’s fiancé, accidentally locks herself in her grandfather’s safe, Jimmy quickly cracks the lock. As Jimmy works to free Agatha, he lays out his special tools “swiftly and orderly” while “whistling softly to himself as he always did when at work.” After ten short minutes, Agatha is free and Jimmy has broken “his own burglarious record.” Just like Ben Price, Jimmy is precise and proficient, and he clearly enjoys his work.

Despite his criminal profession, O. Henry depicts Jimmy as a good man with redeemable qualities. When Jimmy is first introduced, he is hard at work in the prison shoe-shop “assiduously stitching uppers.” Jimmy’s time in prison is limited and his release is already fixed, yet he still approaches this assigned and mundane work with care and attention. Jimmy is also pleasant and displays an easy sense of humor when joking with the warden. Furthermore, the warden speculates that Jimmy was sent to prison in the first place because he “wouldn’t prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in extremely high-toned society.” While Jimmy is certainly not innocent, he displays integrity and loyalty when he refuses to give up a fellow thief.

Additionally, after Jimmy is pardoned by the governor and released from prison, he makes his way to the train depot after first enjoying a good meal and a bottle of wine. Right before Jimmy boards his train, he “tosse[s] a quarter into the hat of a blind man sitting by the door.” Upon his release from prison, Jimmy was given only a five-dollar bill, which must be nearly

gone by this point, yet he is kind and generous—despite having very little to give.

Even though Jimmy does not initially desire to live an honest life, he quickly gives up safecracking for the love of Annabel Adams. His devotion to her is obvious when he risks everything to save Agatha after she becomes locked in Mr. Adams's safe. By breaking into the safe, his true identity as a criminal is revealed. Jimmy selflessly sacrifices his identity as Ralph D. Spencer, the honest shoe-maker—jeopardizing his happiness and future marriage—in order to save Agatha and spare Annabel the death of her niece.

To simply brand Jimmy a morally bankrupt criminal is to overlook his many admirable qualities. Henry's depiction of Jimmy muddles the line between good and bad, and Ben Price's unexpected reaction to Ralph D. Spencer further complicates this grey area. After witnessing Jimmy's reformation in the form of Agatha's rescue, Price pretends not to recognize Jimmy—effectively breaking the law and allowing Jimmy to get away with his crimes. Price's decision to let Jimmy go is not entirely ethical, but this does not define him as a whole, just as Jimmy cannot be defined solely by his criminality. His kindness and loyalty to others implies that he is an inherently a good person—just as the warden suggests.



CHANGE AND IDENTITY

O. Henry's story chronicles the rehabilitation of Jimmy Valentine, who transforms from a career safecracker and thief into an honest and productive member of society. When Jimmy is first introduced, it is as an incarcerated criminal, and his identity undergoes several more transformations before he is ultimately redeemed by his love for Annabel Adams. Though Jimmy's new life with Annabel as Ralph D. Spencer—shoe salesman and all-around good guy—bears very little resemblance to his prior life of crime, in the end of the story Jimmy must draw from his past to free Agatha from a safe. With the progression of Jimmy's character, O. Henry implies that while outward identity can be easily changed, it is impossible for people to escape who they really are.

Upon his release from prison, Jimmy's identity transforms from inmate to free man. O. Henry writes, "The warden gave him a cigar, and shook hands. Valentine, 9762, was chronicled on the books 'Pardoned by the Governor,' and Mr. James Valentine walked out into the sunshine." Prison Jimmy is a different man entirely than the man he is on the outside. On the inside, Jimmy is received with indifference—it is "hardly worth while" to even cut his hair. Yet on the outside, Jimmy is received with cigars and sunshine. Prison Jimmy is reduced to a number, and he is easily left behind. The identity of Mr. James Valentine, however, is rather short lived. At his release, Jimmy dons "a suit of the villainously fitting, ready-made clothes and a pair of the stiff, squeaky shoes that the state furnishes to its discharged

compulsory guests"—prison-issue clothing brands him an ex-convict, and which is little better than "Valentine, 9762" in the eyes of society.

After returning to his apartment, Jimmy emerges in "tasteful and well-fitting clothes." With his "taste for good society" and his "impressive" manner, the real Jimmy Valentine makes his first appearance. With his **tools** in hand, Jimmy is ready to return to work cracking safes. Through Jimmy's transformation, O. Henry suggests the difficulty Jimmy would have had maintaining his high-end lifestyle as "Mr. James Valentine." Honest employment is likely to be difficult for an ex-con, and since Jimmy was released from prison with only a bus ticket and five dollars, he has very few options outside of cracking safes.

When Jimmy later falls in love with Annabel Adams, he assumes an entirely new identity. As Jimmy sees Annabel for the first time outside her father's bank, he "looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man." Jimmy's love-at-first-sight experience hasn't caused him to forget his name; it has caused him to forget that he is a thief. However, since Jimmy Valentine *is* a thief, he walks to the nearest hotel and signs in as Ralph D. Spencer, a prospective businessman. Jimmy needs a new name to designate his new identity and obtain a fresh start.

Jimmy quickly morphs into "Mr. Ralph Spencer, the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine's ashes." While living in Elmore, he builds a successful business selling shoes and wins Annabel's heart. Henry writes, "Socially he was also a success, and made many friends." Jimmy's life as Ralph Spencer is proof of his rehabilitation. He is finally living the straight life; he works a respectable job, is engaged to be married, and contributes positively to society. Jimmy's love for Annabel has, on the surface, completely transformed him.

Yet though he has transformed into Ralph D. Spencer, traces of Jimmy Valentine remain. Jimmy's slick style is unmistakable, and the young hotel clerk, himself "something of a pattern of fashion," "perceived his shortcomings" in the presence of Ralph. Jimmy is widely known for his good taste and fashionable appearance, as is Ralph. Appearance is too important to Jimmy to abandon his tastes with his new identity.

Additionally, when Annabel's father shows off his new safe, Ralph responds with "courteous but not too intelligent interest." With his advanced knowledge of safes, Ralph must make a concerted effort to appear ignorant. While Jimmy may have forgotten what he *was*, he certainly hasn't forgotten what he *knows*. Lastly, when Agatha, Annabel's niece, is inadvertently locked in her grandfather's safe, Jimmy again transforms. Before cracking the safe, Jimmy, under the guise of Ralph Spencer, asks Annabel for the **rose** she is wearing—as if to remember her by—and "with that act Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place." Jimmy can't crack the

safe as Ralph, and despite living in Elmore as Ralph Spencer for an entire year, Jimmy Valentine has never been far away.

With Jimmy's frequent transformations, O. Henry argues the complexity of identity. Jimmy's identity changes according to his needs and circumstances; however, a large part of him always remains Jimmy Valentine. Ralph D. Spencer doesn't completely "pass away" when Jimmy opens the safe either. Life as Ralph has made Jimmy a better man, and Ralph survives in the form of Jimmy's newfound selflessness. Opening the safe is an admission of Jimmy's true identity, and for the first time, Jimmy is honest about who he really is. O. Henry's story ultimately highlights both the changes and the consistencies of Jimmy's identity; while Jimmy can easily become Ralph D. Spencer, he will never be able to stop being Jimmy Valentine.



JUSTICE AND THE LAW

O. Henry's "A Retrieved Reformation" is a harsh critique of justice and the law in America during the early twentieth century. When Jimmy Valentine is arrested for an obscure robbery in Springfield, his prison stay is short and sweet thanks to his outside connections, and he is ultimately pardoned by the governor of Arkansas. Despite obviously breaking the law, Jimmy is never held fully accountable for his actions, and he is easily able to continue his life of crime. Jimmy's punishment, while technically legal—that is, formally handed down by the law—is thus certainly not justice. Similarly, Jimmy's redemption, in the form of his love for Annabel Adams and his new life in Elmore, is more *just* than his sham prison stay, yet it is hardly *legal*. Through Jimmy's complicated circumstances, O. Henry argues that justice and the law are not necessarily synonymous.

Jimmy's prison experience does very little to either punish or rehabilitate him. Despite being sentenced to four years, Jimmy and the prison staff know that his stay will be short-lived: Jimmy's friends and connections mean that he is sure to receive a quick pardon from the governor. Jimmy won't be an inmate long enough to even warrant a haircut, and as such, the prison does not attempt to rehabilitate him at all. Instead, he is exploited for labor and put to work in the prison shoe shop. The prison's disregard and neglect of Jimmy and his rehabilitation continues even as he is released into society. After his pardon, Jimmy is given a railroad ticket and five dollars "with which the law expected him to rehabilitate himself into good citizenship and prosperity." Clearly, Jimmy is on his own without any help from the government or the prison system.

Jimmy's prison stay is ultimately more of a nuisance than a punishment. He knows from the outset that he will never serve a full sentence, and as a result, neither Jimmy nor the prison system take his incarceration seriously. He doesn't appreciate his freedom and he disregards the trees and birds upon his release. Jimmy's imprisonment, then, does not provide any reason or encouragement for him to change and live a straight

and honest life. Through his portrayal of Jimmy, O. Henry thus underscores the ineffectiveness of prison as a form of punishment and as a means of rehabilitation.

In addition to this neglect, O. Henry implies that the corruption of the justice system reaches far beyond the prison walls. Ultimately, Jimmy serves only ten months of his four-year sentence. O. Henry writes, "When a man with as many friends on the outside as Jimmy Valentine had is received in the 'stir' it is hardly worth while to cut his hair." Jimmy's connections are high reaching, and the fact that they result in a pardon from the governor is clear evidence of legal and political corruption. When Jimmy is released from prison, the warden speculates that Jimmy was arrested for the robbery in Springfield because he "wouldn't prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in extremely high-toned society." This implies that Jimmy's connections are so powerful, he would rather serve time in prison than risk exposing them.

After Jimmy is released, he returns to his small apartment upstairs of Mike Dolan's café. After apologizing for leaving him in prison so long, Mike claims that he couldn't get to him sooner because he "had that protest from Springfield to buck against, and the governor nearly balked." Clearly, the job that sent Jimmy to prison was a serious crime—serious enough to prompt protests, implicate "high-toned society," and attract the attention of "eminent" police detective, Ben Price. This, in addition to the governor's hesitation, suggests that Jimmy deserved to serve his time, and his pardon, while legal, is certainly not justice.

On the other hand, O. Henry's portrayal of actual, meaningful justice is not exactly legal. When Jimmy begins his life with Annabel Adams in the town of Elmore, he is a fugitive of the law. Ben Price already suspects Jimmy of stealing the five thousand dollars from the bank in Jefferson City, and Jimmy's life as Ralph D. Spencer is the perfect disguise. Jimmy's love for Annabel is ultimately the source of his redemption, and he finally lives a straight life working an honest job. Yet while Jimmy seems genuinely rehabilitated, his life with Annabel is still against the law.

After he witnesses Jimmy's rescue of Annabel's niece, Agatha, when she becomes locked in Mr. Adams's safe, Ben Price lets Jimmy go—despite having chased him all the way from Little Rock to Elmore. It is clear to Price that Jimmy has been fully rehabilitated, and as such, the detective turns a blind eye. However, in doing so, Price himself breaks the law; if Jimmy is free to live his life with Annabel, then he will never be held accountable for his past crimes.

O. Henry's depiction of justice thus forces the reader to look critically at the legal system. Obviously, Jimmy has no intention of ever returning to his former life—this is clear when he gives away his tools and sacrifices his identity as Ralph Spencer—and he has been fully rehabilitated due to this love for Annabel. Reformation is, or at least should be, the ultimate goal of the

justice system, and since Jimmy has already achieved this success, an additional ineffective prison stay at the hands of corrupt politicians is wholly unnecessary. With the illegal actions of Jimmy and Ben Price, O. Henry claims that the particular legalities of any given situation are not always a good indicator of justice.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



JIMMY'S TOOLS

Career safecracker and thief Jimmy Valentine's suitcase of burglar's tools is mentioned several times throughout "A Retrieved Reformation." Made in part by Valentine himself, the high-quality tools represent Jimmy's expertise and dedication to his trade. Jimmy owns "the finest set of burglar's tools in the East," and he takes great pride in his custom-made pieces. When five thousand dollars is stolen from a bank-safe in Jefferson City, detective Ben Price knows that Jimmy is the culprit; after all, Jimmy's "got the only clamps that can do it."

The tools take on deeper significance after Jimmy falls in love with Annabel Adams and vows to live a straight and decent life. Jimmy "quits the old business" and intends to gift his suitcase of tools to an old friend and fellow thief—so that they may be put to good use. Ironically, as Jimmy is delivering the suitcase, Annabel's niece, Agatha, becomes accidentally locked in the safe at The Elmore Bank. At the blind behest of Annabel and her family, Jimmy quickly cracks the safe with the tools, freeing Agatha and saving her life. In that moment, Jimmy (living under the guise of Ralph D. Spencer, an honest shoe salesman) sacrifices his false identity and potentially his relationship with Annabel, even though he has used his tools for good instead of bad. In the end, Jimmy's tools—the very things that make his success as a thief possible—become the means through which Jimmy saves Agatha and redeems himself.



ANNABEL'S ROSE

The rose pinned to Annabel Adams's dress is only mentioned once in "A Retrieved Reformation," yet it is deeply symbolic of Jimmy's love for Annabel. After assuming the identity of Ralph D. Spencer, Jimmy asks Annabel for the rose right before he breaks into Mr. Adams's safe to save Agatha. Jimmy knows that his true identity will be exposed, at least in part, when he cracks the safe, and he asks Annabel for the rose to remember her by. Annabel is not guaranteed to still love Jimmy after she discovers his real identity, and Jimmy knows that he risks her leaving when she learns who, and what,

he truly is. Considering Jimmy's risk, Annabel's rose symbolizes more than just Jimmy's love for her. The thorny nature of the rose's stem implies an inherent risk for pain in relation to love. Undoubtedly, Jimmy's love for Annabel brings his life joy and purpose; however, if rebuffed for being a thief, Jimmy's love for Annabel will certainly be the cause of deep pain as well.



BEN PRICE'S BUTTON

Just like Jimmy Valentine's **tools** represent his dedication to his criminal profession, Ben Price's collar-button represents his own dedication to his job as a police detective. O. Henry points out Price's button on the floor of Jimmy's apartment after Jimmy is released from prison. Price, the epitome of hard work and ethics, lost the button when it was torn from his shirt during his arrest of Jimmy for an unspecified crime in Springfield—the very crime that landed Jimmy in prison. O. Henry's story draws a direct parallel between hard work and morality, and Price's profession serving the public underscores this association. After all, Price, a revered and accomplished detective, puts forth such an effort executing his job that his button is torn from his shirt in the process. Price's button symbolizes his hard work and effort, which in turn is a direct representation of his ethics and morality.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *The Best Short Stories of O. Henry* published in 1994.

A Retrieved Reformation Quotes

●● [T]he warden handed Jimmy his pardon, which had been signed that morning by the governor. Jimmy took it in a tired kind of way. He had served nearly ten months of a four-year sentence. He had expected to stay only about three months, at the longest. When a man with as many friends on the outside as Jimmy Valentine had is received in the "stir" it is hardly worth while to cut his hair.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer, The Warden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 117-8

Explanation and Analysis



This quote occurs at the beginning of "A Retrieved

Reformation” as safecracker and thief Jimmy Valentine is serving a prison sentence for an obscure crime. Jimmy is a highly connected career criminal and his pardon is proof of this. Additionally, the pardon, signed by the governor, implies political corruption reaching to the very top of the Arkansas state government. Both Jimmy and the prison are aware that these connections will ensure a short sentence, although Jimmy is surprised that it has taken so long for him to be released. He takes the pardon in a “tired kind of way” because he has unexpectedly spent seven extra months in prison, forced to work in the shoe-shop. Yet, despite this, Jimmy shows no sign of relief or excitement to be free. Jimmy’s punishment is a sham, and as such, neither Jimmy nor the prison take his reformation seriously.

Jimmy does not intend to reform, and he approaches his prison sentence as an inconvenience, rather than a meaningful form of punishment or repentance. What’s more, the prison approaches Jimmy’s sentence in much the same way. Very little effort, if any, is put into Jimmy’s rehabilitation. As it is “hardly worth while” to even give Jimmy a haircut during his short stay, it stands to reason that any attempt to reform him would not be justified either. Jimmy is simply biding his time, waiting for his connections to pull the appropriate legal strings and free him.

“Now, Valentine,” said the warden, “you’ll go out in the morning. Brace up, and make a man of yourself. You’re not a bad fellow at heart. Stop cracking safes, and live straight.”

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer, The Warden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118


Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the warden counsels Jimmy on how to live a straight life once he is released from prison. In doing so, the story draws a direct parallel between hard work and morality, and according to the warden, if Jimmy is to be a good person, he must also work an honest job. The warden’s words imply that Jimmy is not a good man because of his profession, yet he acknowledges that Jimmy is not all bad. In fact, Jimmy’s job is virtually his only bad quality. He is undeniably kind, loyal, and humorous; however, his profession as a safecracker muddies these more redeemable qualities.

The warden’s advice to “brace up” suggests that the key to living a straight life is rooted in hard work—which also implies that Jimmy is not a hard worker. Of course, this is untrue, as Jimmy has already proven himself industrious in the prison shoe-shop. Furthermore, as a thief, Jimmy is incredibly adept and hardworking, eliciting a strange sort of respect within the story. It is impossible to view Jimmy in traditional terms of good or bad, and he cannot be defined solely by his criminal lifestyle. Jimmy is certainly “not a bad fellow at heart,” even as a criminal, and O. Henry’s portrayal of him forces the reader to look past his profession and judge him in a more comprehensive way.

“How was it you happened to get sent up on that Springfield job? Was it because you wouldn’t prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in extremely high-toned society?”

Related Characters: The Warden (speaker), Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis



Here, the warden plays along as Jimmy comically denies ever having cracked a safe. The warden jokes that men like Jimmy are usually innocent, due either to a biased jury or their refusal to give up a fellow criminal. This is the first mention of the crime that resulted in Jimmy’s prison stay, and while vague, it does offer important insight into Jimmy’s criminal connections. The warden’s reference to “high-toned society” implies that Jimmy’s contacts are powerful and public—and stand to fall if exposed. The warden’s joke speaks to the level of corruption implicated by Jimmy’s pardon from the governor. This passage also suggests that while Jimmy is certainly not innocent, he was likely not working alone.

This passage also speaks to the personal character of Jimmy. Not only is his exchange with the warden friendly and playful, in itself evidence of Jimmy’s affable nature, but the warden’s joke implies that Jimmy possesses integrity and is loyal. He has quietly served his time—which was much longer than expected—instead of implicating another and publically exposing them as a criminal. Certainly, if Jimmy is really just a bad man, he would have proved his alibi regardless of who it implicated. In this light, O. Henry portrays Jimmy’s prison stay as quite selfless, further proof

that he is an inherently good man.

☛ The clerk handed him a railroad ticket and the five-dollar bill with which the law expected him to rehabilitate himself into good citizenship and prosperity. The warden gave him a cigar, and shook hands. Valentine, 9762, was chronicled on the books “Pardoned by the Governor,” and Mr. James Valentine walked out into the sunshine.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer, The Warden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Jimmy is released from prison. The prison system, traditionally intended to be more than simply punishment for someone who breaks the law, is meant as a means of rehabilitation and reform as well; however, the prison fails to offer Jimmy any meaningful rehabilitation. He has been locked up for nearly ten months and presumably has no money to speak of, yet he is given only a measly five dollars. Even with the railroad ticket, it is unlikely that Jimmy will get very far. He must secure food and shelter, and find good, honest work—all of which require at least some money to begin with. The warden may very well want Jimmy to live a straight life, but he does not have many realistic options once on the outside.

This passage also highlights Jimmy’s identity change as he transitions to the outside. Inside the prison, Jimmy is reduced to a number (one of many), and he is referred to in a cold and impersonal way. On the outside, *after* his pardon of course, Jimmy is Mr. James Valentine—a man suddenly worthy of respect, a hand shake, and a cigar. Jimmy is the same person when he is released from prison, yet society receives him in a completely different way, suggesting that Jimmy will never be accepted in society as a criminal.

☛ “Sorry we couldn’t make it sooner, Jimmy, me boy,” said Mike. “But we had that protest from Springfield to buck against, and the governor nearly balked. Feeling all right?”

Related Characters: Mike Dolan (speaker), Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis


Here, in Mike’s greeting to Jimmy when he first arrives at the café after his release from prison, O. Henry confirms the corruption behind Jimmy’s pardon. The length of Jimmy’s prison stay is not based on the severity of the crime he committed, nor is it reflective of his reformation or redemption; rather, it is based on Mike’s ability to negotiate Jimmy’s release due to their criminal connections. This quote also implies the seriousness of Jimmy’s crime. While the crime is not explicitly stated, it is severe enough to prompt public outcry in the form of a protest, which has complicated Mike’s ability to get Jimmy out of prison. Jimmy serves much more time than he expected, which suggests that his pardon was exceedingly complicated—so much so that the governor was hesitant to sign in the end.

Despite this complication, however, both Mike and Jimmy seem to take it in stride. Mike was not deterred and Jimmy is not upset. Jimmy’s prison stay is all in a day’s work for a career criminal—an expected occupational hazard—and they both move on rather quickly. With this passage, O. Henry underscores the ineffectiveness of prison as a form of rehabilitation and punishment. Justice was not served when Jimmy was sentenced to a sham prison stay, nor is it just when the governor signs his pardon. With Mike’s words, O. Henry alludes to the deeply broken and corrupt nature of the American justice system at the turn of the twentieth century.

☛ Pulling out from the wall a folding-bed, Jimmy slid back a panel in the wall and dragged out a dust-covered suitcase. He opened this and gazed fondly at the finest set of burglar’s tools in the East. It was a complete set, made of specially tempered steel, the latest designs in drills, punches, braces and bits, jimmies, clamps, and augers, with two or three novelties invented by Jimmy himself, in which he took pride.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jimmy has just returned to his small rented room above Mike Dolan's café after his release from prison. The fact that the very first thing Jimmy does upon his return home is go to the hidden spot in the wall behind the panel and retrieve his suitcase of burglar's tools speaks to their importance. Jimmy's tools are a symbol of his skill and proficiency as a criminal safecracker, and they are the very reason that he is able to be such a good thief. Jimmy doesn't just have a few tools to crack safes; he has a complete set of the latest gadgets made of the strongest steel.

Furthermore, Jimmy's tools symbolize his dedication and hard work. He is so committed to his profession that he has designed his own tools in order to do his job better. Jimmy's tools are not only the finest set in the East, they are original and custom-made, and they ensure that he is the most talented crook around. While Jimmy's work is certainly dishonest, he nevertheless displays an incredible work ethic, and, in that vein, O. Henry upends traditional notions of hard work and morality.

☛ A young lady crossed the street, passed him at the corner and entered a door over which was the sign "The Elmore Bank." Jimmy Valentine looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer, Annabel Adams

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Jimmy arrives in Elmore, Arkansas to case potential safes to burgle. While surveying the local bank, Jimmy lays eyes on Annabel Adams for the very first time, falling helplessly in love with her. Annabel is a complete stranger to Jimmy and, ironically, is the daughter of the owner of The Elmore Bank. Notably, this love-at-first-sight experience does not cause Jimmy to become disoriented and forget his name—it causes him to forget that he is a crook who came to town specifically to crack safes. For the first time, Jimmy is compelled to live a straight life and abandon his criminal ways.

As the daughter of a respected bank owner, it is not reasonable to expect Annabel to accept Jimmy as a criminal safe cracker, and since his profession is the only thing keeping him from being a good and decent man, it is clear he

must stop cracking safes. O. Henry implies that Jimmy is not worthy of Annabel's love as a thief, and furthermore, that Annabel is sure to reject him if he robs her father's safe as he planned. As such, Jimmy must become another man—one who is more deserving of Annabel.

☛ Mr. Ralph Spencer, the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine's ashes—ashes left by a sudden and alternative attack of love—remained in Elmore, and prospered.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer, Annabel Adams

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Jimmy falls in love with Annabel and assumes the false identity of Ralph D. Spencer, an honest shoe salesman. Jimmy's new identity is born when he leaves behind his life of crime, emerging a new and better man. Because of Annabel, Jimmy finally lives a life that even the warden could be proud of. He wins Annabel's heart, builds a thriving business, and becomes a social success. Even Mr. Adams, Annabel's father and owner of the Elmore Bank, accepts and approves of Ralph. Jimmy appears to be completely rehabilitated by the standards set forth by the warden.


Jimmy is totally transformed by his love for Annabel, and through this identity change, O. Henry argues that even the hardest criminal can be reformed through the power of love. Furthermore, through Jimmy's unexpected love for Annabel, O. Henry implies that true reformation cannot be made compulsory. Prison did nothing to deter Jimmy's criminal behavior, and as soon as he is released, he quickly breaks the law. After all, Jimmy certainly does not arrive in Elmore looking to fall in love and reform—he is only looking for a safe to rob. It is only after falling in love that Jimmy finally reforms and surrenders to the straight life.

☛ "Annabel," he said, "give me that rose you are wearing, will you?"

Hardly believing that she heard him aright, she unpinned the bud from the bosom of her dress, and placed it in his hand. Jimmy stuffed it into his vest-pocket, threw of his coat and pulled up his shirt-sleeves. With that act Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer (speaker), Agatha, Annabel Adams

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis


This passage occurs right before Jimmy breaks into Mr. Adams's safe, thereby saving Agatha's life and exposing that his Ralph D. Spencer identity is a charade. Jimmy asks Annabel for her rose, a classic symbol of love, as a token to remember her by. Jimmy knows that his upcoming marriage to Annabel is not guaranteed once she learns that their life together has, in large part, been a lie; however, he loves her too much to let Agatha die. Interestingly enough, since Jimmy has already established himself as a good and decent man (in spite of his dishonest profession), it seems unlikely that he would let any danger befall Agatha regardless of the cost to him of saving her.

Nevertheless, when Jimmy decides to save Agatha, he does so knowing that he may be saying goodbye to Annabel forever. Jimmy can't credibly claim to crack Mr. Adams's safe as a shoe salesman, so he knows that cracking the safe will be the death of Ralph Spencer. By sparing Annabel the agony of enduring Agatha's death, Jimmy risks considerable pain to himself, and this pain is symbolically reflected in the thorns of Annabel's rose. Through the metaphor of the rose, O. Henry implies that love, while beautiful, has the power to cause great pain.

☞ From that time on [Jimmy] seemed to be unconscious of the presence of any one else. He laid out the shining, queer implements swiftly and orderly, whistling softly to himself as he always did when at work. In a deep silence and immovable, the others watched him as if under a spell.

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer, Agatha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jimmy abandons his identity as Ralph D. Spencer and cracks Mr. Adams's safe to save Agatha. As soon as Jimmy begins, he easily and completely slides right back into his true identity as Jimmy Valentine, criminal safecracker. He is so intent that it seems as if he is the only one in the room, and as he expertly organizes his tools, he displays both his dedication and his skillset. Jimmy whistles while he works because he truly enjoys cracking safes, even under the current dire circumstances. To watch Jimmy work his magic on a safe is to be rightly entertained, and Annabel and the others are "under his spell."

With this passage, O. Henry argues that while Jimmy may have easily changed his outward identity by becoming Ralph Spencer, selling shoes, and winning Annabel's love, he is not able to escape who he truly is. Jimmy's identity is complex, and he must change and adapt in order to get what he wants. However, through all of his changes—from a prison inmate, to a free man, and finally, to Ralph—a large part of him will always remain Jimmy Valentine, a good guy who just happens to crack safes.

☞ "Hello, Ben!" said Jimmy, still with his strange smile. "Got around at last, have you? Well, let's go. I don't know that it makes much difference, now."

Related Characters: Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer (speaker), Ben Price

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears when Jimmy discovers that Ben Price has witnessed his rescue of Agatha. Ben has finally found him, hiding out in Elmore as Ralph Spencer, and Jimmy does not appear surprised. He greets Ben as if he is happy to see him, resigning himself to punishment. For the first time, Jimmy doesn't deny his criminal lifestyle; instead, he is ready to go with Ben and be held accountable for his crimes. After all, Jimmy has very little left and seems convinced that he has lost Annabel for good. Breaking into the safe means that Jimmy had to sacrifice his identity as Ralph Spencer, and in the process, he believes that he has sacrificed his relationship with Annabel, as well.

Jimmy's sacrifice of Ralph Spencer carries with it biblical connotations of martyrdom—his identity as Ralph must die so that Agatha can live, and in doing so, Jimmy is absolved of

his sins. Yet he is not truly reformed until he fully owns up to his past. By saving Agatha *and* surrendering to Ben, Jimmy has completely atoned for his crimes, earning the right to again live as a free man. Annabel may very well leave Jimmy; however, his love for her has irrevocably changed him for the better, and, with Jimmy's words, O. Henry again asserts the transformative power of love.

“Guess you're mistaken, Mr. Spencer,” he said. “Don't believe I recognize you. Your buggy's waiting for you, ain't it?”

Related Characters: Ben Price (speaker), Jimmy Valentine/Ralph D. Spencer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing lines of “A Retrieved Reformation,” and with them detective Ben Price walks out of the Elmore Bank, effectively letting Jimmy get away with his crimes. Ben has witnessed Jimmy's transformation and his heroism

when he frees Agatha from the safe. By saving Agatha, Jimmy selflessly uses his criminal skillset for good, and he further impresses Ben when he so easily acquiesces to his own arrest. In Ben's eyes, Jimmy's behavior in the Elmore Bank is genuine proof of his redemption. In this final act of mercy, Ben acknowledges that Jimmy has truly changed.

However, in order to let Jimmy go free, Ben must ignore the dictates of his job, and in doing so, he breaks the law. Jimmy's reformation is genuine, and certainly more just than his sham prison stay, yet it is not legal. With this surprise ending, O. Henry brings to light the inconsistencies between the law and justice. It is unlikely that Jimmy will ever break the law again, and there is nothing to be gained from another ineffective prison stay. The ultimate goal of prison should be rehabilitation, and it is obvious that Jimmy is reformed; however, Ben does not have the authority to make this call. This closing passage complicates Ben's character as an “eminent” man of the law. Ben serves as a personification of morals and ethics, and when he breaks the law, O. Henry blurs the line between what is traditionally considered good and bad. Just as Jimmy is not entirely bad, Ben is not entirely good, and instead of accepting these men at face value, O. Henry forces the reader to approach them, and the law, through a critical lens.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A RETRIEVED REFORMATION

Jimmy Valentine is hard at work in the prison shoe-shop when a guard comes to escort him to the warden's office. Jimmy has been pardoned by the governor, and instead of celebrating, he accepts "it in a tired kind of way." Jimmy is a connected criminal, and he expected to serve only about three months—not the ten months he actually served—of his four-year sentence. Even the prison is aware of Jimmy's connections and his inevitable short stay, believing that when a prisoner like Jimmy "is received in the 'stir' it is hardly worth while to cut his hair."

The warden advises Jimmy to stop cracking safes and live straight, reminding him that he's "not a bad fellow at heart." Jimmy playfully denies safecracking and the warden acts along with him, defending Jimmy's feigned innocence. The warden states that Jimmy was either treated unfairly by a biased jury, or he simply "wouldn't prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in extremely high-toned society." Jimmy continues to maintain his innocence, claiming to have never even been to Springfield, the location of his alleged crime. The warden orders the guard to obtain Jimmy new clothes for his release and to escort him to "the bull-pen" early the next morning. He then urges Jimmy to again consider his advice and live a straight life.

The next morning, Jimmy is released from the penitentiary wearing prison-issued clothing. He is given a railroad ticket and a five-dollar bill before walking out into the sunshine. Jimmy disregards the beauty of nature around him and instead immediately finds a restaurant to indulge in food, wine, and a good cigar. Before boarding a train, Jimmy tosses some pocket change into the hat of a blind man by the door.

O. Henry is careful to point out that Jimmy approaches his work, even the forced labor of a prison shoe-shop, with dedication and focus, and this establishes Jimmy as a hard worker. O. Henry also establishes Jimmy as a career criminal—one with connections that reach the highest rungs of government. Jimmy knows his connections will pay off and he will be pardoned; he is only "tired" because it has taken so long. The prison too is aware of these connections, and as such, they put little effort into rehabilitating Jimmy.



The warden doesn't believe that Jimmy is inherently a bad person; rather, it is Jimmy's job as safecracker and burglar that makes him bad. This assumption implies that hard work—work that is generally accepted as honest, that is—is essential to living a moral life. The warden's guess that Jimmy served time because he wouldn't give up another suggests that Jimmy has integrity and is loyal, both qualities of a good person, and Jimmy's playful denial of his crimes cement him as pleasant and humorous. Yet Jimmy's identity as a convict cancels out his more redeeming qualities and Henry's use of the word "bull-pen" reinforces this. Criminals, often each painted with the same brush, are often stereotypically likened to animals by society, regardless of circumstance or individual qualities.



Jimmy is terribly disadvantaged at his release. His clothes are of poor quality and he is given very few resources to re-enter society. The prison is uninvolved and indifferent regarding Jimmy's rehabilitation, both inside and outside the prison walls. However, Jimmy is not looking to reform. He doesn't appreciate his freedom and he immediately indulges selfishly in food and drink. Still, Jimmy's donation to the blind man suggests that he is deeply caring and empathetic.



After three hours on the train, Jimmy arrives at a town near the Arkansas state line and goes directly to Mike Dolan's café. There, Mike apologizes for leaving Jimmy in prison for so long. He explains that a protest in Springfield had complicated the matter and the governor was hesitant to sign the pardon. Jimmy, not particularly upset, immediately goes to his rented room above Mike's café.

Once upstairs, Jimmy finds his room "just as he had left it," and notices Ben Price's collar-button on the floor. Jimmy pulls the folding-bed down and removes a panel from the wall, revealing a dusty suitcase. He opens the case and "gazes fondly" at his set of state-of-the-art burglar's tools, some of which he actually invented himself. A half an hour later, Jimmy appears back at Mike's café, wearing stylish clothing and carrying his tools. Mike asks Jimmy where he is headed, and Jimmy playfully responds, claiming to be a representative for an imaginary company. Mike laughs at Jimmy's joke, and Jimmy is so pleased with himself that he drinks seltzer-and-milk, since he never touches "hard drinks."

A week later, a safe is broken into in Richmond, Indiana "with no clue to the author," and "a scant eight hundred dollars" is all that is taken. Two weeks after that, a burglar-proof safe in Logansport is taken for fifteen hundred dollars in cash. Strangely, the silver and securities are left behind. Lastly, a safe in Jefferson City is broken into and five thousand dollars is stolen, an amount large enough to attract the attention of detective Ben Price. Price immediately suspects Jimmy—after all, he is the only burglar with the skills and the tools to actually pull off the jobs—and he vows to arrest him and make him pay. Price is familiar with Jimmy's handiwork and the owners of burglar-proof safes in the area immediately feel safer with Price on the job.

Meanwhile, Jimmy, with his suitcase of burglar's tools, hitches a ride on a horse-drawn wagon delivering mail and ends up in Elmore—a small town located in a backwoods Arkansas county, five miles away from the nearest railroad. He notices a young lady outside The Elmore Bank and instantly falls in love with her, the sight making him forget "what he was, and [become] another man." The young lady blushes as Jimmy looks at her and is clearly attracted to him as well. Jimmy finds a boy nearby and asks him about the lady's identity. The boy reports that the girl is Annabel Adams, the daughter of the local bank owner.

Jimmy's interaction with Mike confirms that his prison stay was a sham and, because of this, Jimmy has very little incentive to reform. Jimmy is deeply entrenched in a life of crime, and his connections (and the government's corruption) are indeed high-reaching. O. Henry's mention of a protest in the town where Jimmy's alleged crime took place, and the apprehension of the governor to pardon him, suggests that Jimmy's crime was both serious and public.



Price's collar-button serves as symbol of his dedication to his job as a lawman. As a highly respected detective, the torn button is evidence of Price's hard work—an association that also implies Price's high moral standing. Likewise, Jimmy's tools symbolize his own dedication to his trade. Jimmy takes pride in his job as a safecracker, and his tools are evidence of that. He dresses nicely and presents himself professionally, despite his dishonest work. Notably, Jimmy is exceedingly pleasant and never drinks hard liquor. While his profession is certainly unscrupulous, Jimmy behaves in ways that are typically regarded as moral and good.



Price is a serious detective, only investigating high-dollar crimes, which is a direct reflection of his experience and hard work. As the suspected thief, it is remarkable that Jimmy only steals a "scant" amount of money from Richmond and leaves behind silver and securities in Logansport. This implies that he has, at least, some restraint and is not entirely greedy—until the Jefferson City job. Price is convinced Jimmy is guilty because he is the only safecracker skilled enough (and in possession of the right tools) to pull off such complicated work without leaving behind evidence, and this speaks to Jimmy's hard work and proficiency.



Jimmy's arrival in Elmore is not planned—he goes there simply because the mail wagon is headed in that direction. He has his suitcase full of tools and it is clear that he is looking to crack safes; however, he doesn't appear to have a particular safe in mind. By "forgetting" what he is, Jimmy stops being a safecracker and thief when he falls in love-at-first-sight with Annabel. Her father owns a safe that Jimmy would traditionally break into, and this marks the beginning of Jimmy's reformation.



Jimmy walks to the nearby Planters' Hotel and registers as Ralph D. Spencer. He claims to be in town looking for a new business venture and asks about the current shoe trade in town. The hotel clerk, impressed by Jimmy's style and manner, informs him that there is not currently an exclusive shoe-shop in Elmore. Yet he assures Jimmy that business in town is generally good and he secretly hopes that Jimmy sets up shop. The clerk describes Elmore as a nice town with nice people. Jimmy decides to stay and books a room.

Living in Elmore, Jimmy becomes "Mr. Ralph Spencer, the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine's ashes—ashes left by the flame of a sudden and alternative attack of love." As Ralph, Jimmy manages to build a prosperous shoe business, becomes a social success, and wins the heart and hand of Annabel Adams. They are to be married in two weeks' time, and even Annabel's father, Mr. Adams, approves of Ralph D. Spencer.

Jimmy writes a letter and mails it to his old friend in St. Louis. In the letter, Jimmy requests to meet his friend next Wednesday in Little Rock to "wind up some little matters" and gift him his suitcase of burglar's **tools**. Jimmy knows his friend will appreciate the tools, and since he has "quit the old business," Jimmy no longer has a use for them. Jimmy tells his friend, Billy, about his new, honest life and his upcoming marriage to Annabel. He further tells Billy that after his marriage he intends to move West, putting more distance between himself and his past crimes. Jimmy closes by telling Billy that Annabel is "an angel," claiming that, because of her, he wouldn't dream of ever doing another crooked thing.

Meanwhile, detective Ben Price quietly arrives in Elmore, still in pursuit of Jimmy for the Jefferson City break-in. He spends some time snooping about town and finds Jimmy living happily as Ralph D. Spencer. "Going to marry, the banker's daughter, are you, Jimmy?" Ben says. "Well, I don't know!"

The next day, after having breakfast with Annabel and her family, Jimmy readies himself to deliver his suitcase of burglar's **tools** to Little Rock. He also has to order his suit for the wedding and he wants to buy something nice for Annabel while he's there. Jimmy notes that he hasn't left town since first arriving; his trip to Little Rock will be the first time. It has been a year since he pulled off the job in Jefferson City, and Jimmy figures it is safe to travel.

Jimmy can't live a straight life with a crook's identity, so he claims to be a shoe salesman, ironically falling back on his prison trade. Yet Jimmy has not completely changed his identity—he is still stylish and pleasant, and because of this, the town of Elmore is eager to accept him.



Jimmy did not intend to fall in love and relocate to Elmore; he intended to rob Mr. Adams's safe and move on. Instead, he assumes a false identity and tricks Annabel into falling in love with him too. Ralph Spencer is the phoenix arising from Jimmy's ashes because Jimmy has effectively killed the part of his identity that makes him bad, and thereby unworthy of Annabel.



Jimmy is transformed by his love for Annabel and has no intention of ever robbing another safe—yet he still subtly hints at crime in his letter to Billy and has no problem gifting him his tools so that he can use them to rob people. Jimmy even intends to move further West so that he can continue to evade the law and avoid paying for his past crimes. Clearly, although Jimmy appears on the surface to be reformed (he works an honest job, after all), he remains unremorseful for his criminal acts.



Price has not forgotten about Jimmy, and after a year he is still chasing him. Price has the power to completely destroy Jimmy's fake identity as Ralph Spencer, potentially costing Jimmy Annabel in the process.



Jimmy's breakfast establishes him as an accepted part of Annabel's family, and his trip to Little Rock will serve dual purposes. Jimmy wants to buy something nice for Annabel at the same time he is deceiving her, which suggests a hidden guilt. Jimmy falsely assumes that enough time has passed since Jefferson City that Ben Price won't still be looking for him.



Jimmy walks downtown with Annabel's entire family, including her father, Mr. Adams, her sister, and her sister's children, Agatha and May. Jimmy grabs his suitcase of **tools** from the room that he still rents at the hotel and they head to The Elmore Bank. Inside, the party goes behind the oak railings into the banking-room; "Mr. Adams's future son-in-law is welcome anywhere." They are greeted warmly by the clerks, and once Jimmy puts down his suitcase, Annabel picks it up and puts on Jimmy's hat, playfully mimicking him. Annabel is surprised by the weight of the case, and Jimmy claims that it is full of shoe-horns set for return. He is delivering them himself in order to avoid an express charge, since he is becoming more concerned about spending money.

Jimmy is not merely accepted by Annabel's family, but is accepted in particular by Mr. Adams. So much so that he allows Ralph inside his bank, behind the railings that separate the general public from the money. Ironically, Jimmy is treated like royalty by the bank tellers under the guise of Ralph Spencer; however, Jimmy's true identity is contained in his suitcase, which he must continue to lie about in order to remain in Mr. Adams's good graces. Furthermore, Jimmy is only concerned about spending money because he now has to work for it.



The bank has just installed a new safe and vault, and Mr. Adams wants to show it off. While small, the vault is equipped with a state-of-the-art door, solid steel bolts, and a time-lock. Mr. Adams explains the inner workings of the safe to Ralph, who shows "a courteous but not too intelligent interest." May and Agatha are clearly fascinated by the metal knobs and clock.

Jimmy is incredibly knowledgeable about safes and vaults, and he must be careful not to give himself away and draw suspicion to his identity as Ralph Spencer. Mr. Adams is so involved in explaining the safe that he doesn't notice May and Agatha's interest.



As Mr. Adams engages Ralph, bragging about his new safe, Ben Price walks undetected into the bank. He stands around casually and tells the teller behind the desk that he is just waiting for a man he knows.

Unbeknownst to Jimmy, Ben Price is still in pursuit of him for the Jefferson City robbery. Ben is patient and calculated as he closes in on Jimmy.



Suddenly, Annabel and her sister scream. Without their knowledge, May has locked Agatha in the safe while playing. Mr. Adams tries to open the vault, but he has not yet set the clock or the combination and he is unable to disengage the lock. Annabel's sister, worried that her daughter will suffocate to death in the safe, panics and demands the men do something. Mr. Adams responds, "There isn't a man nearer than Little Rock who can open that door." He turns to Jimmy, desperately seeking advice on how to proceed, but resigns himself to the worst. Annabel, not entirely hopeless, blindly begs, "Ralph—try, won't you?"

Despite giving Ralph a detailed description of his safe, Mr. Adams is not able to open it and Agatha is running out of air. Ironically, Mr. Adams claims that anyone who could open the safe is miles away, while standing next to the best criminal safecracker around. Annabel has no reason to believe that Ralph has the knowledge to open the safe, yet she believes in Ralph—the very thing that Jimmy credits as his reason for leaving "the old business" in his letter to Billy.



Smiling, Jimmy asks Annabel for the **rose** that is pinned to her dress. Confused, Annabel unpins the rose and hands it to Jimmy. He puts it in his pocket, takes off his coat, and rolls his sleeves up, and "with that act Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place." Jimmy orders everyone away from the safe and begins to remove the **tools** from his suitcase.

Jimmy asks for Annabel's rose, a symbol of their love, as a way to remember her. Annabel is not guaranteed to still love Jimmy once she learns of his true identity, and Jimmy can't crack the safe without casting some doubt onto his life as Ralph. Once Jimmy opens the suitcase of tools and begins to crack the safe, he can no longer convincingly pretend to be merely a shoe salesman.



As Jimmy begins to work, freeing Agatha from the safe, he seems to be unaware of those around him. He methodically removes the strange **tools** from his bag and whistles as he works. Jimmy is silent and appears “immovable” while “the others watch him as if under a spell.” Jimmy opens the safe in ten minutes flat, breaking his current record. Agatha, thankfully, is safe on the other side of the door. She collapses on the floor and is picked up by her mother.

Jimmy puts on his coat and begins to walk toward the other side of the oak railing. As he walks, he hears an unmistakable voice yell, “Ralph!” He turns around without hesitating.

Ben Price stands blocking the front door of the bank. Jimmy greets Price warmly with a smile, stating, “Got around at last, have you? Well, let’s go. I don’t know that it makes much difference, now.” Ben begins to behave in a peculiar way and pretends not to recognize Jimmy. “Guess you’re mistaken, Mr. Spencer,” Price says, before turning and walking out of the bank.

As Jimmy begins to crack the safe, he easily settles back into his true identity. He is a skilled safecracker, and this is obvious to those around him. He whistles because he truly enjoys cracking safes, and he is able to free Agatha quickly—quicker than he has ever cracked a safe before. Jimmy uses his criminal skills for good—despite the risk it poses to his false identity—and it is in this moment that he is truly redeemed.



As Jimmy attempts to leave the bank, certain that Annabel’s love is lost, he recognizes Ben Price’s voice and resigns himself to his punishment—now ready to accept it.



Price stands by the door to ensure that Jimmy sees him, and Jimmy is not surprised to discover that he is still pursuing him. Redeemed and certain that Annabel will reject him, Jimmy does not attempt to elude Price. Surprisingly, after witnessing Jimmy’s redemption, Price lets him go—effectively breaking the law in the process—suggesting that what is right or good may not always be legal.





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