

# 'buried treasure' by o. henry essay sample



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Like many other stories by O. Henry, 'Buried Treasure' also has its genesis in the life of the author and stems from the treasure hunts in which he himself participated during his days in Austin, Texas. The short story under consideration, narrates the spirited adventures of a young man in search of buried treasure, an exercise in futility, but during which he finds the love of his life. However, what intrigues the reader most about the tale is the highly realistic description of the treasure hunt that the author presents. The author seems to be quite familiar with the technicalities involved in such hunts. It is true that such hunts, mostly inspired by rumors of ancient hidden treasures and undertaken by spirited youths with a penchant for adventure, were a common happening in O. Henry's Texas. But what informs this inspired short story as well as another work from the same period; viz. "Bexar Scrip #2692", is the author's personal experience of such matters.

"Buried Treasure" opens with a typical ironic commentary by the narrator on the prudence of a seeker of ancient hidden treasures: "I had been every kind of fool ... But there remained one role of the wearer of cap and bells that I had not played. That was the Seeker after Buried Treasure." However, in the very opening paragraph of the tale, the narrator provides the reader with a clue to the delightful surprise that turns this particular treasure-seeking experience into a "pleasurable promise". The author's actual treasure hunting experience in the legendary Shoal Creek though was not so pleasurable. The one (or perhaps two according to some sources) treasure hunt that he had lead was doomed to failure and left the author impoverished having invested most of his money in the hope of finding ancient gold. It is no doubt a burning tribute to O. Henry's imagination, that

he could turn such a negative experience into a positive celebration of life in this short story.

After Martha Mangum departs from the narrator's life, the narrator comes across an ancient document, brought to him by an old acquaintance, delineating the "the hiding-place of ten burro-loads of gold and silver coin valued at three hundred thousand dollars". The news of the buried treasure brings new hope in the narrator's life as he believes that with that kind of money in his pocket he would not only be able to find out his lady love from any corner of the earth but also acquire Mr. Mangum's consent in the marriage. After two hopeless hunts after the fabled treasure, the narrator does not find even a buried penny in the hills, but ends up finding Martha Mangum herself at the end of the treasure track with whom he promptly elopes. O. Henry too once indulged in a similar quest for buried treasure in the Shoal Creek, though not for finding his ladylove, but rather to fulfill his dream of being a major player in the publishing business by buying the Washington based weekly, 'The Hatchet' which was up for sale. Tipped of by a Texan Pastor, O. Henry invested \$100 in getting the map, and went into a wild goose chase for a treasure rumored to be worth quarter million dollars in 1894. Of course, the treasure map turned out to be a dud, and like the hero of 'Buried Treasure' the author did not find even a buried penny in the quest.

The technical knowledge about treasure hunts displayed by the author in the story can similarly be attributed to his stint in the General Land Office in Austin. As a part of his job, O. Henry was familiar with the technicalities of a map as well as the differences between the true pole and the magnetic pole.

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In the story too, it is a confusion about whether the map referred to the 'true north' or 'variations' that precipitates the second treasure hunt which culminates in the narrators finding May Martha Mangum. Interestingly, according to Trueman O'quinn in 'South Western Historical Quarterly', "the real story behind "Buried Treasure," was an expedition Will Porter and one of his close friends made to the Menard country in search of "The Lost Bowie Silver Mine." O'Quinn claims that this search was also finally abandoned due to a confusion between 'true north' or 'variations' as happened in the story under consideration. However, O'Quinn acknowledges that the popular belief is that the story had its genesis in the author's treasure hunt in Pease Park and the "statement appears in two biographies of O. Henry", for instance by Eugene Garcia.

However, to conclude, it can be safely claimed that like many other short stories of O. Henry, "Buried Treasure" too had a very personal history. The story is not only a evidence of the authors imagination and artistic gifts, but also a testament to the rich and varied life he had lived.

#### Works Cited

Current-Garcia, Eugene. O. Henry. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.

Eckhrdt, C. F. "O. Henry and the Shoal Creek Treasure". Texas Escapes Online Magazine. [http://www.tshaonline.org/publications/journals/shq/online/v043/n2/contrib\\_DIVL3116.html](http://www.tshaonline.org/publications/journals/shq/online/v043/n2/contrib_DIVL3116.html)