

The Furnished Room



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF O. HENRY

O. Henry, William Sydney Porter, was a prolific American author in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a young man, he worked as a clerk in his uncle's drugstore before moving to Texas for his health. He tried several different jobs, including book-keeper, bank-teller, and publisher/illustrator of a weekly periodical. In 1895, he found steady employment writing for Houston's *Daily Post*, but only a year later he was arrested for embezzlement. He fled to Honduras, and he later drew on his experiences there to write a book of short stories, *Cabbages and Kings*. In 1897, he returned to Texas and served four years in prison, during which time he wrote several short stories and adopted the pen name O. Henry. After his release in 1902, O. Henry moved to New York City, where he published hundreds of short stories. He was widely-read in his time, and many of his stories, such as "The Gift of the Magi," remain popular to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The second half of the nineteenth century saw an industrial boom in the United States, which led to a rapid growth in urban populations as Americans flocked to find work in factories. Wealth disparity worsened, and urban poverty emerged as a widespread issue. Factory workers and other poor city-dwellers often lived in slums or tenement housing, or rented rooms like those in "The Furnished Room." Show business is also referenced several times throughout "The Furnished Room," which takes place during the rise of vaudeville. Vaudeville was a style of theatre featuring several unrelated acts, such as comedy, acrobatics, and music. Vaudeville performers operated on "circuits," which connected theatres across cities, encouraging inter-city travel, and performances often reflected urban values.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O. Henry wrote hundreds of short stories, including "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Ransom of Red Chief." He was known for his twist endings, which also feature in several short stories by his contemporary Kate Chopin--most famously in her work "Désirée's Baby." A group of journalists called muckrakers also published numerous works about poverty, urbanization, and corruption in O. Henry's era; two of the most notable muckrakers were Upton Sinclair (author of *The Jungle*) and Ida Tarbell.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Furnished Room
- **When Written:** 1902
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1902
- **Literary Period:** American Naturalism, American Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Lower West Side, New York City
- **Climax:** The young man commits suicide in the furnished room.
- **Antagonist:** The Housekeeper, hopelessness, urban capitalism
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The O. Henry Museum. O. Henry's former residence in Austin, Texas has been converted into a museum about the author.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the Lower West Side of New York City, the homeless population wanders like ghosts between crumbling buildings. The owners of these buildings rent out **furnished rooms** to provide temporary housing. One evening, a young man rents a furnished room from a housekeeper. He asks the housekeeper if she has seen a young woman named Eloise Vashner, who left home several months ago to pursue a career in show business. The young man is in love with Eloise and has come to New York to find her. He has been searching for five months without success. To his disappointment, the housekeeper tells him she has not seen Eloise. She then brings him to his room, which is decrepit, musty, and full of moldy furniture. Various stains and marks around the room reveal hints about previous tenants who have stayed there. The young man wonders if the lack of stable housing stirs some resentment in people that causes them to take poor care of their living space.

The young man sits in his room, listening to the many sounds of the city, until the smell of mignonette (an herb used for perfume) breaks through the room's rotting odor. The young man cries out as if the smell has spoken to him, since mignonette is Eloise's favorite scent. He searches the room for something that might have belonged to her, but finds nothing. Grasping for hope, the young man runs to the housekeeper and asks who lived in the room before him. The housekeeper lists many people, but Eloise is not among them. The defeated young man returns to his room, where the smell of mignonette

is gone. With his last hope gone, he uses the furnished room's gas lamp to gas himself to death.

Downstairs, the housekeeper discusses the young man with her friend Mrs. McCool, revealing that Eloise had stayed in the young man's room only last week. The housekeeper did not tell the young man because Eloise committed suicide in the furnished room, and the housekeeper worried that the news would make the young man take his business elsewhere.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Young Man – The young man is a steadfast and hopeful newcomer to New York. He is deeply in love with Eloise Vashner, a girl from his hometown, and he has come to New York City in hopes of finding her. As the story begins, the young man has spent five months searching New York for Eloise. He knows Eloise dreams of being in show business, so he has visited every theatre he can to find her, from famous venues to sketchy, rundown music halls. His search for Eloise has led him throughout New York without a stable home, so he rents **furnished rooms** as he moves around the city. He continues his search despite five months without success, and when he moves into a new furnished room in the Lower West Side, he asks the housekeeper if Eloise ever rented a room there. When the housekeeper tells him no, the young man rests in his room, observing the traces of past tenants scattered around him. The many sounds and smells of the city distract him, and his thoughts are aimless until he smells the herb mignonette, which is Eloise's favorite perfume. The young man reacts to the smell as if Eloise has called out to him, and he becomes convinced that she has been in the room before him. He searches the room for something of hers, but finds nothing. Still hopeful, the young man runs to the housekeeper and asks again if Eloise has ever stayed in the house. When the housekeeper again tells him no, his excitement vanishes. He returns to the room, where the smell of mignonette has been replaced with the smell of rotting furniture, and this final blow to his hope kills the young man's last bit of faith in finding Eloise. He blocks up the windows and doors, turns off the **light**, and turns up the gas of the lamp to kill himself.

Housekeeper – The housekeeper, who is named Mrs. Purdy, is the landlady of the house where the young man rents his room. The young man dislikes the housekeeper as soon as he meets her, reflecting that she resembles a worm that has hollowed out her home and seeks to devour the lodgers she lures inside. This impression is not altogether inaccurate: the housekeeper sees her residents as sources of income rather than as people. She discusses Eloise Vashner's suicide in the **furnished room** as a threat to her business instead of a personal tragedy, and she refuses to reveal Eloise's past presence in the house to the

young man because it might cause him to reject the room. Even when the young man asks about Eloise, she conceals the truth and diverts the conversation to present her house as respectable. She frequently interrupts conversations to emphasize that a couple who stayed in one room had a marriage certificate, and to boast of the famous vaudeville stars who have rented from her. The housekeeper acts throughout the story as a representative of urban capitalism, acting solely to benefit her business of letting rooms. At the end of the story, her friend Mrs. McCool asserts that renting rooms is how women like the housekeeper stay alive, suggesting that the housekeeper is controlled by the same capitalist systems that cause her selfishness.

Eloise Vashner – Eloise Vashner is an aspiring performer whom the young man has come to New York City to search for. She never appears in person, but her influence is felt as the young man tries to find her, and the housekeeper of the **furnished room** tries to conceal the fact that Eloise committed suicide the week before the story takes place. She died in the same room the young man is renting, and he senses her presence like a ghost when he smells mignonette, her favorite herb. The scent comes on a wind so strong it seems like a living guest, and the narration implies Eloise is in some way guiding the young man as he searches the room for something of hers.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. McCool – Mrs. McCool is a friend of the housekeeper who helped her clean the furnished room after Eloise's suicide.



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.



HOPE VS. HOPELESSNESS

The protagonist of "The Furnished Room," an unnamed young man, has been searching for his lost love Eloise Vashner for five months with no success. Only his hope that he will one day find her keeps him going. The young man's hope is reflected in the presence of light throughout the story. When he first enters the house of rental rooms, hopeful there might be some clue to Eloise, the shadows of the halls are "mitigated" by "a faint light from no particular source," just as the man's despair is kept at bay by his unfounded faith in finding Eloise. Later, the young man smells Eloise's perfume in the **furnished room**, and he believes he might have found her. He rushes to the housekeeper, who is behind "a door that showed a crack of light." The narrow light

mirrors the young man's last sliver of hope. The housekeeper, though, crushes the young man's hope that Eloise had stayed in the furnished room. When he returns to the room, the young man sees it as "dead" and empty of "the essence that had vivified it." Through this language of death and defeat, the story paints the loss of hope as a loss of life—a connection that is strengthened when the young man's hopelessness ultimately drives him to suicide. After the smell of the perfume disappears, "the ebbing of his hope drain[s] his faith." The final death of the young man's last piece of hope is the tipping point for his will to live. After this moment of "draining," he submits "gratefully" to his death. He extinguishes the light that had symbolized his hope and uses the gas from the darkened lamps to end his life.



URBANIZATION AND CITY LIFE

"The Furnished Room" is set in New York City's Lower West Side, and the turn-of-the-century setting shapes the story. The late 19th century was a period of rapid urbanization, and New York City is presented as unnaturally crowded and yet isolating. Much of the story is dedicated to describing the **furnished room** itself, which is crowded with old decorations and the remnants of previous guests much in the way the city is run down and crowded with people. The children who left fingerprints on the wall are described as "little prisoners trying to feel their way to sun and air," positioning the furnished room (and, by extension, all of New York City) as an urban prison distanced from nature. The city also features buildings and furniture of different ages, yet all of them are equally decrepit. These descriptions, especially the reference to "musty effluvium" from the underground vaults mixing with the smells of linoleum and mildew, strengthen the idea that New York City has many layers, and all of them are rotting.

The story also shows how city life cheapens and commodifies the relationships between people. Mrs. Purdy, the housekeeper, does not tell the young man about Eloise's death in the furnished room because renting rooms is how she makes a living. She contributes to the young man's sense of isolation for her own profit, and though she does this to maintain her livelihood, the narrative is not sympathetic to her. The young man compares her to a "worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers," which emphasizes how in big cities, individuals become nothing more than fodder for landlords and other community members who profit from their neighbors.



HOMELESSNESS AND TRANSIENCE

"The Furnished Room" begins not with its protagonist, but with the "restless, shifting, fugacious" transients of the Lower West Side. The significance of impermanence, specifically as it pertains to

housing, carries throughout the story. The housekeeper implicitly links a person's housing status with their identity when she remarks, "Them stage people has names they change as often as their rooms." The narrative ties a lack of permanent housing to a lack of personal stability, but it does not cast blame on New York's homeless population for their lack of stability. The city itself makes a solid sense of security impossible; it is "like a monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation." This lack of foundation is felt by all the characters in the story. The housekeeper and Mrs. McCool are constantly renting rooms to rapidly-changing guests in order to stay alive, and the protagonist has been wandering for five months in search of the woman he loves. The theme of transience continues within the furnished room itself. The narrator suggests the room's past guests could treat it so poorly because it is only their home temporarily. In fact, the narrator suggests, perhaps it is the impermanence of their residence that incites "the cheated home instinct..., the resentful rage at false household gods." In one's own home, a person "can sweep and adorn and cherish," but being forced to rent a cheap room reminds the residents of their own transience. Transience, then, becomes a state of emotional turmoil as well as physical discomfort. The emotional impacts of a life without stability are seen at the end of the story, when the young man takes his own life. Through the untimely death of its protagonist, the story depicts life itself as temporary and transient.



INDIVIDUAL STORIES AND MEMORY

"The Furnished Room" takes place in the Lower West Side of New York City at the turn of the 20th century. This part of the city is so old and so crowded that thousands of people have lived in its houses; the story pauses on this fact and extrapolates that each house "should have a thousand stories to tell." The narrator acknowledges that many of these stories would not be interesting, but that does not make them unimportant. He likens these stories to ghosts, which speaks to their significance: even if a ghost can't be seen, it refuses to be forgotten. The language of ghosts resonates with the later description of the **furnished room** as "haunted"—and if stories are ghosts, the furnished room is full of them. Each guest who stayed in the furnished room has left a mark, from the children who left fingerprints on the wall to the person who carved the name *Marie* across the mirror. The narrator grants time and attention to the remnants—effectively, the memories—of each tenant; in this way, the lengthy and detailed description of the furnished room can be taken as a sign of respect for all the previous residents the description takes into account.



SYMBOLS

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



THE FURNISHED ROOM

The **furnished room** symbolizes the struggles of urban poverty and homelessness. Furnished rooms are presented as the temporary residences of New York's homeless population, tying them to poverty and impermanence. This connection is further strengthened by the disrepair of the young man's furnished room, which is decorated with rotting furniture and cheap art that appears in every rental room. The young man's furnished room is full of things past tenants left behind, and the sheer number of previous residents speaks to how widespread poverty is in the city. Despite the large number, the story does not lump these residents together as an indistinguishable mob, but instead describes each feature of the room with care. The detail of these descriptions affords attention to New York's transients—attention that society does not grant them. However, the furnished room itself is not a positive place. Its impermanence as a home stirs rage and despair in its tenants: the furniture is poorly cared for, and remnants of fights and destruction litter the room where “false household gods” have reminded residents of their homelessness. The room sucks the hope from the young man, and did the same in the past to Eloise Vashner. As a symbol of poverty and transience, the furnished room's negative impact on its guests signifies how these difficulties can sabotage people's mental health.



LIGHT

Throughout “The Furnished Room,” the presence of **light** mirrors the young man's hope. He arrives at the building of rental rooms “after dark,” suggesting that his hope is already at a low point after five months of seeking Eloise without success. However, upon entering the house, a “faint light from no particular source” wards off the shadows in the hallway. This represents the young man's faint but groundless hope that this new building will hold some clue in his search for Eloise. When, by chance, such a clue reveals itself in the form of Eloise's perfume, the young man regains a small piece of hope, which he seizes desperately: he runs to the housekeeper's door, which “show[s] a crack of light,” to ask her about Eloise. The crack of light is as thin and fragile as the young man's hope, and this last piece is extinguished when the housekeeper again denies Eloise's presence in the house. Now that the young man is devoid of hope, his final act is to turn off the light in his room—and it is the lightless gas lamp which he uses to kill himself. In this way, light's symbolic connection to hope transitions to an inverse connection between darkness

and hopelessness, as the light becomes the method of the young man's suicide.






QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 2* published in 2018.

The Furnished Room Quotes

●● Restless, shifting, fugacious as time itself, is a certain vast bulk of the population of the redbrick district of the lower West Side. Homeless, they have a hundred homes. They flit from furnished room to furnished room, transients for ever -- transients in abode, transients in heart and mind. They sing ‘Home Sweet Home’ in ragtime; they carry their *lares et penates* in a bandbox; their vine is entwined about a picture hat; a rubber plant is their fig tree.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening to “The Furnished Room,” and it sets the scene for the events to follow. By introducing the homeless masses of New York before the main characters, O. Henry centers transience itself as a prominent and active theme within the narrative.

Several descriptors in the first sentence can seem redundant: “restless,” “shifting,” and “fugacious” all speak to the constant movement of the vagrants, while “vast” and “bulk” highlight how large a population the transients are. However, this repetition calls the reader's attention to the issue O. Henry seeks to address—a disproportionate number of New Yorkers are struggling with homelessness, a condition that renders every aspect of their lives impermanent. Furnished rooms represent that impermanence, as unreliable housing destabilizes not only people's living situation, but also their “heart[s] and mind[s].”

The importance of the transients' meager possessions, among which they carry their *lares et penates*, or “household gods,” foreshadows how objects and furniture will come to represent the individual stories of various vagrants when the story moves to the young man's furnished room. The idea of lugging one's “household gods,” or most prized possessions, from one temporary residence to another

ironically underscores the reality of lacking one's own household.

☛ To the door of this, the twelfth house whose bell he had rung, came a housekeeper who made him think of an unwholesome, surfeited worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers.

Related Characters: Young Man, Housekeeper

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the young man approaches the house where he will rent his furnished room. The fact that this is the 12th bell the young man has rung calls to mind the 12 chimes of a clock striking midnight. This creates a sense of foreboding, since midnight signals both the beginning of one day and the end of another—a fitting image for the beginning of this story that ends in death.

The ringing bell summons the housekeeper, and the young man's impression of her speaks to the corruption and selfishness encouraged by urban capitalism. As a landlady, she is a representative of the system that profits off of New York's rampant homelessness, which earns her a portrayal as predatory and "unwholesome." Further, the young man perceives that the "worm" is already surfeited, or satiated, which means it has no need to continue eating—yet its greed and gluttony demand to feed on more lodgers. This description hints that despite the housekeeper's later claims that she only rents rooms to survive, she might be in a more stable position than she lets on.

☛ [Theatrical people] comes and goes. A good proportion of my lodgers is connected with the theatres. Yes, sir, this is the theatrical district. Actor people never stays long anywhere. I get my share. Yes, they comes and they goes. [...] Them stage people has names they change as often as their rooms. They comes and they goes.

Related Characters: Housekeeper (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 169


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the housekeeper's explanation of her usual tenants ties unstable housing to personal instability. A name is a symbol of a person's identity, and to change it "as often as their rooms" implies a lack of permanence in the renters' personal lives that reflects the lack of permanence in their housing. This relation is strengthened by the renters' connection to show business. Actors take on new identities every time they take on a new role, and the housekeeper notes that actors specifically "never stays long anywhere." The link between physical and mental transience recalls the description of the city's vagrants at the start of the story: "transients in abode, transients in heart and mind."

This passage also highlights the housekeeper's prioritization of profit over people. She only cares about the actors coming and going because it lets her "get her share." This foreshadows her later disregard for the death of Eloise, an aspiring actress, besides what the death might mean for the housekeeper's business.

☛ He was sure that since her disappearance from home this great water-girt city held her somewhere, but it was like a monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its upper granules of today buried to-morrow in ooze and slime.

Related Characters: Young Man, Eloise Vashner

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

The description of New York as "water-girt" gives the impression of a fortress or prison surrounded by a moat, suggesting a certain claustrophobia, or a sense of being trapped in the city. The image of being surrounded by water also introduces the language of natural disaster and rot that runs throughout the passage. The city is characterized by "monstrous quicksand" and "ooze and slime," painting it as simultaneously threatening and unsavory.


This quote also emphasizes New York City's impermanence, and places some blame for the transience of its citizens on the metropolis itself. Because New York has "no foundation" and is "shifting its particles constantly," its residents cannot get their footing. Describing the city as lacking a foundation

also implies that perhaps the issue is at the core of the city, and is not something that could be solved without tearing down the current infrastructure to rebuild on top of a strong foundation.

☛ It seemed that the succession of dwellers in the furnished room had turned in fury -- perhaps tempted beyond forbearance by its garish coldness -- and wreaked upon it their passions. The furniture was chipped and bruised [...]. Each plank in the floor owned its particular cant and shriek as from a separate and individual agony. It seemed incredible that all this malice and injury had been wrought upon the room by those who had called it for a time their home; and yet it may have been the cheated home instinct surviving blindly, the resentful rage at false household gods that had kindled their wrath. A hut that is our own we can sweep and adorn and cherish.

Related Characters: Young Man

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the author illustrates how a lack of stable housing can harm people's mental and emotional health. The "coldness" of the room contrasts with the "passions" of its residents, which manifest as "fury," "rage," and "wrath." This difference speaks to the divide between the room and the people who rent it, and paints the urban infrastructures that fail homeless New Yorkers as unfeeling and unsympathetic. The "separate and individual agony" of the floor planks also mirrors all the different people who have suffered in this room, and who are suffering in other furnished rooms around the city. This description individualizes the suffering of the homeless, acknowledging how the young man's experience is just one of many similar tragedies playing out throughout New York.

This quote also includes the story's second mention of household gods; the first was at the beginning of the story, with the reference to *lares et penates*. The lodgers are not angry because they lack household gods, but because the furnished room represents a "false" household god--a home that is impermanent, inhospitable, and impersonal. The language of gods also adds a spiritual element to the detrimental effect of furnished rooms, implying that because the homeless are unmoored in regard to housing,

they are also unmoored from gods that might actually protect them and guard their wellbeing.

☛ Then, suddenly, as he rested there, [...] the strong, sweet odour of mignonette [...] came as upon a single buffet of wind with such sureness and fragrance that it almost seemed like a living visitant. [...] The rich odour clung to him and wrapped him about. He reached out his arms for it, all his senses for the time confused and commingled.

Related Characters: Young Man, Eloise Vashner

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 170


Explanation and Analysis

The arrival of mignonette, an herb that produced Eloise's favorite perfume, comes as a moment of revitalization for the young man. It strengthens his resolve to find Eloise and convinces him that she once stayed in his furnished room. Though this story falls in the genre of realism, and does not contain overt supernatural elements, in this passage the perfume seems to act almost as Eloise's ghost. It enters the room with deliberateness and "sureness," in a "single buffet of wind," as if Eloise sensed her former boyfriend's distress and wanted to send him a sign. The description of the fragrance as "like a living visitant" adds to its role as a representation of Eloise, which is bolstered by the personification when the smell "clung to him and wrapped him about." The young man's confusion is also tragically significant--he is sure that he's witnessed some sign of Eloise, but he cannot positively identify it. This confused uncertainty later allows him to be deceived by the housekeeper, who convinces him that Eloise never stayed in his room.

☛ And then he traversed the room like a hound on the scent, skimming the walls, considering the corners of the bulging matting on his hands and knees, rummaging mantel and tables, the curtains and hangings, the drunken cabinet in the corner, for a visible sign, unable to perceive that she was there beside, around, against, within, above him, clinging to him, wooing him, calling him so poignantly through the finer senses that even his grosser ones became cognizant of the call.

Related Characters: Young Man, Eloise Vashner

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 171


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the young man is scouring the furnished room for any sign Eloise might have stayed there. His search comes in one rambling sentence, which is broken up into short clauses that give the passage a sense of desperation. This desperation is felt by both the young man and the spirit of Eloise, as her attempts to reach out to him jump in to join the rapid series of commas with tiny, one-word clauses that quicken the pace of the sentence even further. Beginning this sentence with “and then” adds to the fast pace and overall sense of action, since it implies the young man moves right from one activity to searching through the room without pausing in between. His search is described in great detail, with the narrator noting all the places the young man looks. This demonstrates irony--the young man is going through so much effort for a “visible sign,” when an invisible sign is begging him to notice it.

●● He ran from the haunted room downstairs and to a door that showed a crack of light. She came out to his knock. He smothered his excitement as best he could.

Related Characters: Young Man, Housekeeper

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis



The young man has picked up on the scent of mignonette in his room and is desperate to find out if Eloise ever stayed there, so he goes to ask the housekeeper about her again. The word “haunted” to describe the room has multiple meanings. For one, the furnished room is “haunted” by all the tenants who have rented it before the young man. They linger in the room through the scraps they left behind and the damage they did to the furniture that drew their malice. “Haunted” also acts as a sort of ironic foreshadowing, since the young man will shortly take his life in that room, adding


himself to the ghosts that haunt it. And, of course, Eloise herself haunts the furnished room, in the form of her mignonette perfume.

The young man’s death is further foreshadowed by his attempt to “smother” his excitement. It is precisely the death of his hope that leads to his suicide, and “smother” is a particularly apt description considering the method by which he ends his life. His approach to the “crack of light” symbolizes how little hope he has left. Throughout the story, the presence of light echoes the presence of the young man’s hope, and his desperate run to the light behind the door shows how desperately he is pursuing his last shred of hope that he might find Eloise. The housekeeper, however, steps out of the lit room to speak to the young man in the shadows of the hallway. Just as she does not allow him entry through the crack of light, she will rob him of his final sliver of hope by refusing to tell him the truth about Eloise.

●● The room was dead. The essence that had vivified it was gone. The perfume of mignonette had departed. In its place was the old, stale odour of mouldy house furniture, of atmosphere in storage.

Related Characters: Young Man

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the young man loses faith in his quest for Eloise. The smell of mignonette gave the young man his last bit of hope for finding Eloise, and its replacement by the “stale odour” of furniture represents that hope being corroded by the degradation of New York City. The emphasis on furniture is also significant. The furnished room is always called as such, with that same descriptor: “furnished.” The furniture is what makes the room what it is. By depicting the furniture as rotting, O. Henry paints the room itself as in a state of decay, which mirrors the approaching end of both the young man’s final hopes and his life itself.

The language of life and death also provides an eerie parallel to the ultimate fates of Eloise and the young man. The phrasing positions the smell of mignonette as “the essence

that had vivified” the room, which recalls the perfume’s previous ghostly quality, as if Eloise’s spirit had briefly haunted her final residence before finally leaving New York for good. Since the young man came to the city to follow Eloise, it is perhaps unsurprising that when the last trace of her leaves, he again follows her, though without consciously knowing why.

●● It was Mrs. McCool’s night to go with the can for beer. So she fetched it and sat with Mrs. Purdy in one of those subterranean retreats where housekeepers foregather and the worm dieth seldom.

Related Characters: Housekeeper, Mrs. McCool

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

The meeting between Mrs. McCool and Mrs. Purdy, and the notion that housekeepers often gather together, gives the

sense of an alliance among housekeepers—or, more insidiously, a conspiracy. The description of their meeting place as “subterranean” casts housekeepers as creatures of the dark, which is reinforced by the return of worm imagery from Mrs. Purdy’s introduction. When she first appeared, Mrs. Purdy (the young man’s housekeeper) was compared to an “unwholesome, surfeited worm,” and the image of her meeting Mrs. McCool in a “subterranean retreat” where “the worm dieth seldom” seems to verify that comparison as accurate. (The latter phrase, in fact, is an allusion to the Bible’s Gospel of Mark, where the phrase “the worm dieth not” signifies the unquenchable fires of hell—a strong condemnation indeed.) This unflattering depiction of housekeepers, who act as landladies to their own houses of furnished rooms, serves as a condemnation of the urban capitalism they represent. Without women like Mrs. Purdy and Mrs. McCool, who profit off the unstable living situations of their neighbors, poor New Yorkers might be able to unite and combat the systems that oppress them. Instead, however, the housekeepers unite against their lodgers in “foregather[ings]” like Mrs. Purdy and Mrs. McCool’s.



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.

THE FURNISHED ROOM

In New York City's Lower West Side, at the turn of the 20th century, transients without permanent homes rent **furnished rooms** for short periods. These people are "transients in abode, transients in heart and mind," and most of the residences in the Lower West Side have housed a thousand such wanderers. Because so many people have lived in each house, each has many stories to tell; the "vagrant ghosts" must leave "a ghost or two" behind.

One such vagrant is a young man, who skulks among the houses, ringing doorbells in hopes that someone will offer him a place to stay. At the 12th house, the bell rings faintly, as if far away, and a housekeeper opens the door. The young man takes an instant dislike to the woman, who reminds him of a worm who hollowed out her home so she could feast on new tenants. Despite this impression, the young man asks the housekeeper if she has a room to rent, and she tells him that a room on the third floor has been vacant for a week if he would like to look at it.

The young man follows the housekeeper up the stairs, through a hallway lit by "a faint **light** from no particular source," and across a dilapidated carpet. Empty niches stand near the stairs, which might have once lodged plants or statues. The plants likely died in the foul air, and the building is in such disrepair that any statues of saints might have been dragged to some "furnished pit" in Hell.

Urbanization, industrialization, and urban poverty were pressing issues at the turn of the 20th century, and by focusing on New York's vagrants even before introducing the characters or plot of the story, the narrative establishes that these issues will be at its forefront. As O. Henry considers homelessness, he argues that unstable housing can undermine people's mental health and sense of identity. Despite the New York City homeless population's massive numbers, each person who's experienced homelessness has a story to tell. Though these people are so lacking in the necessities of life that they are more like ghosts than living people, they still affect the world around them and leave stories in their wake.



The young man is never named, which identifies him with the unnamed masses of transients that wander the city. The housekeeper, meanwhile, is equated with a predatory worm, which indicates her role as a profiteer from the epidemic of homelessness. The young man dislikes the housekeeper, but he is too desperate for a place to stay to turn down her offer.



The building that houses the furnished room is run down and ugly. It is a place of hopelessness, but light from an unidentifiable source still breaks through, symbolizing that the young man still has hope, despite how irrational that hope may be. The lack of plants or statues speaks to the lack of life and beauty in areas of urban poverty, and the imagery of Hell emphasizes the abject degradation of the building. The idea that Hell might have its own furnished rooms in the form of pits also hints that furnished rooms have some inherently negative quality, suggesting that the young man's hope might not be rewarded.



The housekeeper shows the young man the **furnished room**. She claims the room is very nice and rarely vacant, and she boasts about the elegant and famous people who have previously stayed in the room. She interrupts herself to show the young man the gas for his lamps and to reiterate that this room is very popular. The room has apparently been let to many stage performers, and the housekeeper claims that theatre workers make up much of her tenancy. Actors help her get her share because “they comes and they goes” more than average civilians.

The young man pays for a week in the **furnished room**, and because he is tired he will start his stay at once. As the housekeeper starts to leave, the young man asks a question he has asked a thousand times before: whether a young woman named Eloise Vashner has stayed at the house. He describes her as a singer with reddish gold hair and a dark mole near her left eyebrow. The housekeeper says she doesn't remember the name Eloise Vashner, though actors change their names as often as their rooms.

The young man is deeply disappointed. He has been searching for Eloise for five months, asking everyone he can meet in show business and attending any show he can find in hopes of locating her. The young man “had loved her best,” so now he “trie[s] to find her.” She disappeared from home, and the young man is confident that she is in New York somewhere, but the city is like “a monstrous quicksand,” shifting constantly with no foundation.

The housekeeper's obsession with presenting her rented rooms as respectable further reveals her fixation on running a successful business, and foreshadows that she might conceal certain truths that would cast her rooms in a negative light. Specifically pointing out the gas lamps also suggests to the reader that they might have a more important role to play later. The room's popularity with performers adds to the theme of identity and its relation to housing; the author implies that an unpredictable living situation can lead to an unstable identity. The housekeeper supports this notion by emphasizing that actors, who constantly change identities, are especially transient people.



The young man is dedicated to finding Eloise, but he has no real means or method to do so. All he can do is ask everyone he meets if they know Eloise. The fact that she is a singer suggests that the housekeeper, who is so attuned to the world of show business, might know her, but the housekeeper quickly crushes that hope. Her comment about actors changing their name as often as their rooms highlights the link between variability in housing and unstable identity.



The story reveals how hard the young man has worked to find Eloise. Concluding that the young man is trying to find Eloise because he loves her best paints an interesting picture of love, tying it directly with effort and hard work on behalf of those one loves. The revelation that Eloise and the young man are not native New Yorkers demonstrates how cities grew as people flocked to them in O. Henry's era, and the author makes clear his dislike of urbanization by describing New York as a city that actively undermines residents' attempts to find stability. This description challenges common arguments that homeless people are to blame for their misfortune, since O. Henry suggests impermanence is in the city's very nature.



The **furnished room** welcomes the young man with tired and hectic hospitality. It is full of decayed furniture. As the young man reclines on a chair, the room, “confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel,” tries to tell him about the diverse guests it has hosted in the past. The multi-colored rug is like an island surrounded by soiled matting, and the pictures on the walls are stock images that hang in most rented rooms. On the mantel are pieces of “desolate flotsam” left by the “room’s marooned”—trinkets and knick knacks past guests have left behind.

The reference to Babel is a Biblical allusion: according to the book of Genesis, ancient humans tried to build a tower tall enough to reach Heaven. As punishment for their hubris, God confused the humans so they could no longer understand each other, which led to the development of different languages and cultures instead of a single unified language. The “Babel” reference highlights the diversity of the room’s past tenants, as well as the room’s inability to fully connect with its tenants due to how briefly they each live there. The impersonal art on the walls adds to the detachment between the room and its tenants, and so does the description of the rug as an island and the tenants’ lost belongings as “flotsam” left behind by the marooned. The language of a shipwreck implies that only disaster can drive a person to stay in a furnished room.



As the young man spends more time in the **furnished room**, the signs of previous tenants make themselves obvious: a threadbare spot on the rug by the dresser where a woman walked, tiny fingerprints where “little prisoners” reached for the sun and air outside, a splattered stain where someone threw a glass or bottle, and the name Marie carved into the mirror.

The detail granted to each resident’s impact on the room serves as an acknowledgment of the importance of those people’s stories, as if to say that although this story is about the young man and Eloise, every person who passes through the furnished room is equally important. In particular, describing the handprints of “little prisoners” poignantly implies that all the furnished room’s tenants, including children, are trapped in the same oppressive systems that keep them from finding permanent lodgings.



The **furnished room**’s disrepair seems to have been caused by the “malice” of guests who inflicted injuries upon the room they briefly called home. The narrator suggests their “resentful rage” may have come from the lack of a permanent home that they could call their own, since “a hut that is our own we can sweep and adorn and cherish.”

The furnished room’s tendency to kindle anger in its inhabitants makes clear the detrimental emotional impact of homelessness. Even a hut, the simplest form of housing, is preferable to a rented room if its resident owns it. Not only is a hut preferable, but such a simple dwelling could also be cherished and loved. Furnished rooms inspire only rage and frustration, since they’re not an occupant’s own space, and living in one is a constant reminder of the precariousness of one’s own life.



The young man ruminates as his room fills with “furnished sounds and furnished scents” from outside and from other rooms in the house. People laugh and cry, someone sings a lullaby, someone else rolls dice, doors slam, a train passes, and a cat yowls. The man inhales the breath of the house, which is dank and musty as odors from “the underground vaults” mix with the smells of linoleum and mildew.

Again, the story gives time and attention to the disparate lives of various New Yorkers. Describing the scents and sounds of these other people’s lives as “furnished” suggests that all the residents of the Lower West Side are in some way related to the business of furnished rooms, whether they rent rooms themselves or simply live in the unsteady impermanence New York forces on all its residents at this time.



The house's odors are disrupted by the smell of an herb, mignonette, which comes "with such sureness" that the scent "almost seemed a living visitant." The young man cries out as if the smell calls him. It clings to him, and he reaches for the smell, which has confused his sense of time. He wonders if the odor could have called him. He tries to convince himself he heard a sound, but it is the smell that has embraced him.

The young man is certain that Eloise has been in this room, since mignonette is her favorite smell and she wears it often. He searches the room for "the smallest thing" that she may have owned or even touched. He ignores hairpins and a woman's hair-bow, discarding them as "indistinguishable" and "uncommunicative" because they are used by too many women to hint at an identity. He finds a handkerchief and presses it to his face, but throws it away when he realizes it smells of heliotrope, not mignonette.

The young man continues his search for a possession of Eloise's, ransacking the room and investigating every feature. He is looking for "a visible sign," but doesn't notice that "she was there beside, around, against, within, above him...." It is from this state Eloise calls to him, and again the young man's subconscious notices the call and he responds, despite not understanding why. As he keeps looking, he finds "dreary and ignoble small records" of past residents, but no trace of Eloise.

The young man thinks of the housekeeper. He runs from "the haunted room" to a door, ajar with a crack of **light** through it. He knocks on the door and the housekeeper emerges. The young man asks the housekeeper who lived in the room before him, and she tells him again about the actors who have rented her rooms. She reminds him her house is known for respectability, and emphasizes that two of her guests hung their marriage certificate on the wall. The young man ignores her, hoping one of the past guests might have been Eloise under a different name, but the housekeeper describes the past tenants' appearances and none match Eloise. The young man thanks her and returns to his **furnished room**.

The story's personification of the mignonette is strange and has a startling effect on the young man. At this point readers don't know why the young man reacts this way, but it's reasonable to guess that the herb scent has something to do with Eloise. The confusion of his senses and perception of time create a mystical atmosphere, adding to the idea that Eloise is in some way haunting the furnished room.



The young man's desire for even the smallest thing Eloise may have touched reiterates the importance the story places on small personal objects. However, that importance is complicated by the young man's dismissal of items any woman might have. This suggests that the miscellanea of the room are only important because of the individual stories they carry. If an item is too general, its story is lost and it loses its value.



Though the spirit of Eloise tries desperately to make herself known to the young man, his attention is focused entirely on what he can see in the furnished room. This might represent how the mundane struggles of urban life distract people from seeing more important truths right in front of them. Additionally, the description of past tenants' possessions as dreary and ignoble reminds the reader that although these objects carry important stories, the stories are often dismal, and the objects themselves speak to the transients' poor quality of life.



The room is haunted both by Eloise's spirit and the room's past inhabitants. The young man pursues his last hope of finding Eloise, which is represented by his rush to the light behind the door. The housekeeper crushes that hope, redirecting the conversation to a topic that supports her business and its profits. The young man attempts to push through this entrepreneurial mindset and asks again about Eloise, but the housekeeper refuses to sacrifice the reputation of her business for the sake of empathy. With his last hopes gone, the young man leaves the light and returns to the dismal furnished room.



To the disappointed young man, the **furnished room** is “dead.” The smell of mignonette is gone, replaced with the stale, musty odor of the molding furniture. The young man’s hope has left him, and he no longer has faith he will find Eloise. He stares into the **light** of the gas lamp. After a while, he tears the bedsheets into strips and uses a knife to drive the sheets into the crevices by the room’s windows and doors. With this done, he turns off the light, turns on the gas, and lies “gratefully” upon the bed to die.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Purdy, sits with her friend Mrs. McCool. Mrs. Purdy tells Mrs. McCool about the young man renting her **furnished room**, and Mrs. McCool is impressed. She asks the housekeeper, “Did ye tell him?” Mrs. Purdy tells her that because rooms are furnished to rent, she did not tell him, and Mrs. McCool agrees this was a wise business decision. After all, Mrs. McCool says, many people would turn down a room if they knew a suicide had taken place inside. They discuss the suicide, revealing that one week ago in the young man’s furnished room, a young woman killed herself with gas. Mrs. McCool calls the death a pity, because the girl was so pretty. Mrs. Purdy says the girl might have been pretty if she didn’t have a mole near her eyebrow.

While the furnished room was once rendered alive by the traces of past guests and the spirit of Eloise, these vivifying forces have vanished along with the young man’s hope. The parallel between a lack of life and a lack of hope goes further, as the young man extinguishes the light, a symbol of hope, and uses the unlit gas lamp to end his life. His “grateful” acceptance of death suggests that to him, a life without hope is a worse fate than death.



The detail of the mole near the young woman's eyebrow confirms that the former tenant was indeed Eloise. The revelation that the housekeeper has been lying about Eloise exposes just how much she prioritizes her business and its reputation over the wellbeing of her tenants. Mrs. McCool's support of the housekeeper's decision shows that this perspective is not specific to the housekeeper, but is in fact endemic in the urban capitalist system of renting furnished rooms. Even their discussion of Eloise's death treats her like merely a cog in that system, discussing her wasted beauty like it is a good that she never got to sell and relegating her importance to her suicide's effect on the housekeeper's business. But the biggest twist is that the young man, without ever knowing what happened to Eloise, kills himself by the same means in the same place. This coincidence suggests that there might, after all, have been some kind of supernatural connection between the two of them—but, regardless, that the despair of a furnished room was enough to explain both of their deaths by itself.





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