

Ethical Dimensions of Friendship in R. K. Narayan's "Doctor's Word" and O. Henry's "After Twenty Years": A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The paper examines the ethical foundations of friendship in R. K. Narayan's "Doctor's Word" and O. Henry's "After Twenty Years" and comparatively analyses the ethical values in the two stories. Qualitative methodology based on close textual analysis is employed for this study. The fundamental values that sustain the friendship are reciprocal love, trust, empathy and commitment. In "Doctor's Word," Dr Raman's selfless love and unwavering commitment to save Gopal's life demonstrate the ethical dimensions of compassion commitment and responsibility. Despite the demands of their professional and personal lives, their friendship remains steadfast. In contrast, O. Henry's "After Twenty Years" reveals Bob's sense of commitment as he travels a long distance to meet his friend Jimmy Wells exactly after twenty years in the same place. Jimmy's professional commitment to the law leads him to arrange Bob's arrest after discovering his criminal identity. Their childhood companionship reveals that they had love for each other, but only emotional attachment without ethical principles in personal life cannot sustain friendship. The comparative analysis reveals distinct ethical conceptions of friendship in the two stories. In addition, the study discusses that the friendship between Dr Raman and Gopal is characterised by deeper emotional attachment and mutual trust, whereas Jimmy Wells's and Bob's friendship is ultimately tested by legal and moral obligations. The study offers a fresh perspective on the ethical dimensions of friendship in two different short stories.

Keywords: Compassion, Duty, Ethics, Friendship, Loyalty, Responsibility, Trust

1. Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami was an Indian writer known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He was a leading author of Indian literature in English along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. They are called the Big Three in Indo-Anglican literature. Narayan highlights the social context and everyday life of his characters. "Doctor's Word" is one of the outstanding stories which shows exemplary friendship between Dr Raman and Gopal.

William Sydney Porter, better known by his pen name O. Henry, was an American short story writer. He had an obvious affection for New York City, which he called "Bagdad-on-the-Subway," and many of his

stories are set there, while others are set in small towns or in other cities. They frequently feature working-class characters, such as policemen and waitresses, as well as criminals and social outcasts. “After Twenty Years” is one of the famous stories of O. Henry. This story primarily highlights the friendship between Jimmy Wells and Bob.

Both the authors apply twists in the stories, but O. Henry’s stories are considerably more playful and wittier. Narayan and O. Henry belong to different cultural contexts, but they showcase the values of friendship through their short stories. Friendship in these two short stories extends beyond emotional attachment and often demands ethical choices involving honesty, sacrifice, duty, and responsibility.

Mutual love, trust, respect, and emotional support are essential for the survival of friendship. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines a friend as “someone who you know and like very much and enjoy spending time with” (699). Friendship gives emotional support and comfort during the difficult times. Francis Bacon, in his essay “Of Friendship,” emphasises the need for companionship with the following words: “Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god” (Bacon). Similarly, Joan Powers discusses the significance of genuine friendship through the invaluable words, “If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day so I never have to live without you” (Powers).

Friendship is understood as one of the most significant ethical relationships in human life. It helps to contribute emotional well-being, moral development, and social harmony by fostering trust, empathy, compassion, and mutual responsibility. Literary representations of friendship not only portray emotional bonds but also reveal the ethical challenges individuals face when personal loyalty comes into conflict with social and professional obligations.

Although “Doctor’s Word” and “After Twenty Years” have received considerable critical attention individually, comparative scholarship specifically examining the ethical dimensions of friendship in these two stories appears to be limited. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by comparatively analysing how Narayan and O. Henry portray friendship as an ethical relationship shaped by trust, loyalty, sacrifice, duty, and moral responsibility. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores the similarities and differences in the ethical values embodied by the principal characters and demonstrates how the two stories offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on the nature of true friendship.

Research Questions

1. What ethical dimensions of friendship are portrayed in “Doctor’s Word” and “After Twenty Years”?
2. How do the two stories differ in their portrayal of friendship?
3. How do duty and moral responsibility influence friendship in the selected stories?

Analysis of the Stories

Friendship as an Ethical Bond in R. K. Narayan's "Doctor's Word":

R. K. Narayan's "Doctor's Word" establishes the ethical perspectives of friendship by means of mutual trust and reciprocal love between Dr Raman and Gopal. The lifelong friendship between them, which began in their infancy, remains unaffected despite their busy professional and family lives. Their strong bond foregrounds mutual affection and unwavering commitment. Their friendship goes beyond ordinary companionship. Narayan underscores the depth of their friendship by tracing its origin to childhood: "They had known each other forty years now, starting with their kindergarten days" (Narayan 22).

They desire to meet each other every day, but it does not become possible due to their unavoidable engagements in their professions. Genuine friendship is not measured by frequency of physical proximity but by emotional attachment. Their seeking an opportunity to meet each other signifies the depth of their true love. As Narayan observes:

"They could not, of course, meet as much as they wanted, each being wrapped in his own family and profession...then they would dine together, see pictures, and talk of each other's lives. It was a classic friendship standing over" (Narayan 22).

The depth of their friendship is clearly tested when Gopal suffers from a severe physical ailment. Just after completing a major operation, Dr Raman comes straight to his friend's house without caring about his own exhaustion and hunger. His sudden decision to come to stand by Gopal shows the ethical dimension of their friendship. After examining the condition of Gopal, he starts his treatment. Narayan writes Dr Raman's worry for his friend with the words as follows: "He rushed off straight from the clinic to his friend's house" (Narayan 23). Moreover, after briefly examining his friend's condition, he started his treatment. The following words talk about it: "he shot up the drug, sat in his chair and gazed on the patient's face for over an hour. The patient remained motionless" (Narayan 24). Dr Raman's actions reveal that friendship is not merely an emotional bond but a moral responsibility that demands personal sacrifice in times of crisis. Francis Bacon's observation that a true friend safeguards another's welfare aptly reflects Dr Raman's conduct, for his devotion illustrates that authentic friendship is founded upon responsibility rather than convenience.

Narayan further emphasises Dr Raman's compassion through his complete dedication to Gopal's recovery. Although he has missed his meal and is physically exhausted, he refuses Gopal's wife's offer of coffee and instead arranges additional medical assistance without delay. For hospitality's sake, when Gopal's wife states, "Doctor, shall I make some coffee for you?" (Narayan 24), Dr Raman's reply was "No." His next step was as follows: "He picked up his bag and went to the car. In a quarter of an hour, he was back, followed by an assistant and nurse" (Narayan 24). This episode illustrates that Dr Raman's professional competence is inseparable from his ethical commitment as a friend. His willingness to neglect his own comfort demonstrates that genuine friendship requires active service and unwavering concern for another person's well-being.

As Gopal gradually regains consciousness, the emotional reciprocity between the two friends becomes equally significant. Gopal's words, "Ramu, it is my goodness that you are here at this moment" (Narayan 26), reveal his complete faith in Dr Raman's presence and care. Even while Gopal's family expresses gratitude, Dr Raman remains entirely focused on his friend, "gazing sternly at the patient's face, hardly showing any signs of hearing what they were saying to him" (Narayan 25). These moments underscore Narayan's portrayal of friendship as an emotional and ethical relationship characterised by empathy, devotion, and unwavering attention during moments of suffering.

The climax of the story introduces a subtle ethical dilemma that further enriches Narayan's portrayal of friendship. Dr Raman is widely respected for his uncompromising honesty in diagnosing his patients, yet he departs from this professional principle when Gopal anxiously asks about his condition. Instead of revealing the seriousness of the illness, he reassures his friend by saying, "You are going to live: your heart is absolutely sound" (Narayan 27). This deliberate reassurance reflects the conflict between professional truthfulness and compassionate responsibility. Narayan suggests that ethical action cannot always be governed by rigid adherence to factual truth; rather, genuine compassion may sometimes require words that preserve hope and strengthen the patient's will to live. Gopal's immediate response, "If it comes from your lips, it must be true..." (Narayan 27), further illustrates the profound trust that forms the foundation of their friendship.

Thus, "Doctor's Word" establishes friendship as an ethical relationship based on reciprocal trust, commitment, empathy and love. Dr Raman's approach shows that true friendship goes beyond emotional attachment to include selfless service, personal sacrifice, and unwavering commitment at the time of need. As Joseph Addison aptly observes, "Among the several qualifications of a good friend, this wise man has very justly singled out constancy and faithfulness as the principal" (Addison). These qualities are also evident in the friendship between Dr Raman and Gopal. Narayan's story ultimately confirms that the highest expression of friendship lies not in words but in ethical action motivated by human values.

Friendship and Moral Conflict in O. Henry's "After Twenty Years":

O. Henry's "After Twenty Years" delineates friendship as an ethical relationship which is tested by a clash between personal loyalty and professional duty. Unlike R. K. Narayan's "Doctor's Word," where friendship culminates in selfless sacrifice, O. Henry explores the moral complexities that arise when friendship comes into conflict with the demands of justice. The relationship between Jimmy Wells and Bob is founded upon childhood intimacy, mutual trust, and an enduring promise to reunite after twenty years. Recalling their early companionship, Bob tells the policeman, "Twenty years ago tonight... I dined here at Big Joe Brady's with Jimmy Wells, my best chum and the finest chap in the world. He and I were raised here in New York just like two brothers" (Henry 9). The comparison of the two friends to brothers highlights the emotional depth of their relationship and establishes friendship as one of the most significant human bonds.

Trust forms the ethical foundation of Bob's friendship with Jimmy Wells. Although twenty years have elapsed without any communication, Bob remains completely confident that his friend will honour their promise. His unwavering faith is reflected in his assertion, "I know Jimmy will meet me here if he is alive,

for he always was the truest, staunchest old chap in the world. He will never forget” (Henry 10). Bob’s confidence demonstrates that genuine friendship is sustained by trust rather than continuous physical presence. O. Henry portrays friendship as an enduring moral commitment capable of surviving the passage of time.

However, the reunion gradually develops into a moral crisis. Bob initially believes that the tall stranger approaching him is Jimmy Wells, but under the electric light he realises that the man is an impostor. The stranger’s admission, “You are not Jimmy Wells” (Henry 12), marks the beginning of the story’s ethical and psychological turning point. O. Henry employs dramatic irony and suspense to demonstrate that appearances may conceal deeper moral realities. More importantly, the mistaken identity prepares the reader for the revelation that Jimmy has recognised Bob but has chosen not to confront him personally.

The ethical complexity of the story reaches its climax through Jimmy Wells’s letter. Having recognised Bob as a wanted criminal, Jimmy faces an irreconcilable conflict between personal friendship and professional responsibility. His note explains:

“I was at the appointed place on time... I saw it was the face of the man wanted in Chicago. Somehow, I couldn’t do it myself, so I went around and got a plain-clothes man to do the job” (Henry 13).

Jimmy’s decision demonstrates that his affection for Bob has not diminished; rather, his emotional attachment prevents him from arresting his childhood friend with his own hands. Nevertheless, as a police officer, he cannot ignore his legal and moral obligation. O. Henry therefore presents friendship not as an unconditional loyalty that overrides justice but as a relationship that must sometimes yield to ethical and social responsibility. When Jimmy discovers that Bob has become a criminal through counterfeiting, Bob no longer embodies the moral character necessary for virtuous friendship. Jimmy’s decision to uphold the law is therefore not an act of betrayal but an affirmation of ethical integrity. O. Henry suggests that genuine friendship cannot justify immoral conduct or protect wrongdoing from justice. By choosing duty over personal attachment, Jimmy demonstrates that moral responsibility ultimately takes precedence over emotional loyalty.

Thus, “After Twenty Years” portrays friendship as an ethical relationship shaped by trust, affection, and shared memories, yet ultimately tested by moral responsibility. While Bob remains faithful to his promise of reunion, Jimmy remains faithful to the principles of justice. The story reveals that true friendship is not measured merely by emotional attachment but also by one’s commitment to ethical values. Through Jimmy Wells’s painful decision, O. Henry illustrates that integrity and responsibility may require personal sacrifice, even at the cost of losing a cherished friend.

Comparative Analysis of Ethical Dimensions of Friendship:

R. K. Narayan’s “Doctor’s Word” and O. Henry’s “After Twenty Years” justify friendship as an ethical companionship based on trust, commitment, and mutual affection. Both the stories present different perspectives of the foundational values of friendship. While Narayan shows friendship as a lifelong source of compassion and selfless service, O. Henry examines the moral tensions that arise when personal loyalty

comes into conflict with legal and social responsibility. Consequently, the friendship between Dr Raman and Gopal is found more emotionally secure and ethically harmonious than that between Jimmy Wells and Bob, whose relationship is ultimately fractured by conflicting moral ideals.

Both the stories showcase prolonged physical distance between two friends, albeit on different grounds. The physical separation in “After Twenty Years” is longer than that in “Doctor’s Word.” In “Doctor’s Word,” the distance between Dr Raman and Gopal results from the ordinary demands of professional and family life, and it never weakens their emotional bond. They continue to value each other by supporting each other. In contrast, the separation between Jimmy Wells and Bob is intentional, as the two friends agree to meet only after twenty long years in order to evaluate the course of their lives. It is true that both friendships survive long periods despite physical separation.

The ethical outcomes of the two friendships vary significantly. In “Doctor’s Word,” Dr Raman risks his personal comfort and devotes himself to saving the life of his friend. His professional knowledge works as an instrument for him to treat his friend. In “After Twenty Years,” however, Jimmy Wells fulfils his professional duty by arranging Bob’s arrest when he comes to know that he is a most wanted criminal. Although Jimmy’s decision causes personal pain, it reflects his commitment to justice rather than his personal relationship. Thus, Narayan presents friendship as a force that preserves life and hope, whereas O. Henry portrays friendship as a relationship tested by competing ethical obligations.

Both the stories differ on the ground of the portrayal of reciprocal respect and moral obligation. Dr Raman and Gopal belong to different social ranks and positions. Despite this fact, Dr Raman never treats himself superior to Gopal, and their friendship extends beyond material possessions and boastfulness. Their relationship is characterised by equality, trust, and emotional bonds. In contrast, Bob’s boastful remark that “Jimmy might have earned half, as he is slow in brain” (Henry 12) reveals a sense of vainglory in Bob due to material success. His unethical lifestyle further weakens the ethical foundation of the friendship. It signifies that true friendship cannot grow on weak integrity. O. Henry therefore underscores that ethical character is indispensable for the preservation of lasting friendship.

Two stories differ on the ground of commitment. In “Doctor’s Word,” commitment is expressed through action, as Dr Raman places his friend’s welfare above his own physical needs and comfort. Similarly, Gopal continues to value their companionship despite the busy round of daily life. In “After Twenty Years,” commitment initially appears in the friends’ determination to actualise their promise of reunion after two decades. However, the reunion ultimately shows that keeping a promise is not enough to maintain friendship when moral integrity is lost. The contrast between the two stories reveals that enduring friendship stands not only on commitment but also on shared ethical principles.

The endings of the two stories present their distinct conceptions of friendship. “Doctor’s Word” concludes with hope, recovery, and the reaffirmation of trust, presenting friendship as a source of healing and emotional fulfilment. By contrast, “After Twenty Years” ends with separation and arrest, illustrating the painful consequences of choosing justice over personal loyalty. Together, the two stories demonstrate that friendship is both an emotional and an ethical relationship. While Narayan celebrates friendship as an

enduring moral ideal founded on compassion and selfless devotion, O. Henry presents it as a relationship that must ultimately be reconciled with the demands of justice, integrity, and social responsibility.

Conclusion

The comparative study of R. K. Narayan's "Doctor's Word" and O. Henry's "After Twenty Years" from an ethical perspective shows that friendship is not only an emotional connection but also a relationship based on empathy, selfless love, trust and commitment. In "Doctor's Word," Dr Raman makes the utmost dedication for his friend Gopal, whereas, in "After Twenty Years," there is no question of dedication, but commitment is there. Bob comes to meet his friend, Jimmy Wells, adhering to his commitment made twenty years ago. The comparison, moreover, reveals that the friends in both the short stories remain connected by trust and shared memories, but the moral choices they make determine the longevity of their relationships. Dr Raman's friendship with Gopal is strengthened through reciprocal love and trust, whereas Jimmy Wells's friendship with Bob is tested by the demands of law and ethical responsibility. Jimmy's decision to uphold justice despite his love for Bob reveals that moral integrity sometimes requires painful personal sacrifice. Thus, the two stories give insight into the distinct conceptions of friendship. Narayan promotes the ethical values of friendship, whereas O. Henry portrays it as a relationship that must ultimately be reconciled with justice and moral duty. Together, these stories suggest that the true value of friendship lies not only in affection and loyalty but also in the ethical principles that guide human relationships and shape individual character.

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