

Interpretive questions for “After 20 Years”

Answer the questions with an *asterisk in ACES format.

1. The first words we see in the story are “The policeman on the beat moved up the avenue impressively. The impressiveness was habitual and not for show, for spectators were few.” Why do you think O. Henry focuses on how impressive the officer is?
2. When the officer encounters the man in the darkened hardware store doorway, the man says, "It's all right, officer," he said, reassuringly. "I'm just waiting for a friend. It's an appointment made twenty years ago. Sounds a little funny to you, doesn't it? Well, I'll explain if you'd like to make certain it's all straight.” What do you make of his quickness to reassure the officer and his comment about the officer making sure “it’s all straight”?
3. When the man in the doorway lights his cigar, “The light showed a pale, square-jawed face with keen eyes, and a little white scar near his right eyebrow. His scarfpin was a large diamond, oddly set.”
 - a. What significance is there in the scar above his eyebrow?
 - b. In the “large diamond, oddly set” in his scarfpin?
- *4. As the man in the doorway talks to the policeman, he says, “You see, the West is a pretty big proposition, and I kept hustling around over it pretty lively.” His comment is vague, but it possibly contains a clue. What clue might there be in the words “kept hustling around over it pretty lively”?

5. The man in the doorway says the following about his friend Jimmy Wells: "But I know Jimmy will meet me here if he's alive, for he always was the truest, stanchest old chap in the world. He'll never forget." How does this comment mesh with the last words of the story? What is ironic in the man's words?

*6. The story says that "the waiting man pulled out a handsome watch, the lids of it set with small diamonds." What significance do you find in this revelation?

7. After the policeman left, "a tall man in a long overcoat, with collar turned up to his ears, hurried across from the opposite side of the street. He went directly to the waiting man" and asks, "Is that you, Bob?" Who is Bob?

8. As the new arrival and Bob walk arm in arm, "The man from the West, his egotism enlarged by success, was beginning to outline the history of his career. The other, submerged in his overcoat, listened with interest."

9. What do you suppose Bob is revealing? What clues do you see that allow you to guess what Bob is saying?

10. There are at least two clues that Bob observes to know that the "new arrival" is not Jimmy Wells. What are those clues that the text mentions?

1.

2.

11. Bob observes that "twenty years is a long time, but not long enough to change a man's nose from a Roman to a pug," to which the "tall man" responds, "It sometimes changes a good man into a bad one, said the tall man. "You've been under arrest for ten minutes, 'Silky' Bob."

- a. What does the tall man mean when he says that 20 years is long enough to change a good man into a bad one?
- b. What is the significance of the name "Silky Bob"?

*12. What does the ending reveal about what Jimmy Wells has been doing while Bob has been making his fortune in the West?