

In the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to show how the contemporary reality of sufferings and ordeals faced by the working women in the American Southwest served as a driving force to O. Henry giving his short stories a new setting and dimension. The last words of the present treatise are partly devoted to a summing-up and partly a re-assessment of O. Henry in the light of the twentieth century criticism which I had hardly any occasion to consider earlier because of the limited sphere of my enquiry. While Katherine Fullerton Gerrould, a distinguished O. Henry critic, considered Hawthorne, Henry James, Bret Harte and G. W. Cable as masters of the American short story, she hardly saw any value in the works of O. Henry.<sup>1</sup> Alluding to some contemporary critics' unfavourable response to O. Henry's literary style E. C. Garcia remarks contextually: "Their adverse criticism was focused in charges by Katherine Fullerton Gerrould, who deplored the "pernicious influence" of O. Henry's stories and condemned them as merely "expanded anecdotes" shorn of serious intellectual content."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, O. Henry's fame has continued undiminished down

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1. See *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, E. C. Garcia, (Twayne Publishers ,Inc., New Haven, Conn, USA, 1965), p. 180.

2. Ibid., p.157.

the ages and hence such downright rejection of a literary artist appears to many biased. On the contrary, O. Henry's works have never ceased to be a perennial source of pleasure to millions of readers since their publication. Unquestionably, O. Henry hardly suffered from any poverty of ideas in his stories. His stories chiefly concern humanity and for his subject-matter he preferred the pressing issues of the contemporary society to any other matter. Hence most of his stories are characterized by a distinctive human interest which always fascinates common readers rather strongly. Perhaps there lies not a shred of truth in the aforesaid lopsided evaluation of O. Henry. Pertinently, O. Henry's stories came to enjoy immense popularity within the shortest possible period not only in America but throughout the world also, and his works have been translated into such languages as French, German, Spanish, Russian, Italian, Swedish, Chinese, Dans-Norwegian, Bengali and so on. This also underscores O. Henry's world-wide acceptability as a creative writer of great excellence.

O. Henry spent a greater part of his life amid varied trying circumstances that remarkably impacted his literary career. His life, full of adventurism and romanticism, turned out to be a source of a variety of experiences that provided him with abundant material for his stories. Incidentally, his diverse experiences at his Uncle's drug store, his ranch life in Texas, his occupation as a draftsman in a Land office and as a teller in the first National Bank of Austin, the episode of the "shadowed years" of his imprisonment in Ohio Penitentiary, his life of an absconder in Honduras and most

significantly, his life in New York considerably shaped his literary career. Besides, his experiences of an adventurous life have also left their indelible mark on his stories.

The most notable aspect of his literary art is perhaps the treatment of women's characters in his stories. He deals with women of various social standing, both high and low, and the lives of the poor, neglected, struggling women form the most important segment in his short stories. Naturally his forte lies especially in his deep insight into their hardship, woes, sufferings, their sentiments, and emotions, their feelings and passions and so on. He has touched quite realistically on how these deprived women survived their ordeals by virtue of their invincible will-power and sheer determination to continue their relentless battle against all sorts of humiliation and oppression to which they were often subjected. Very few writers of his time had the capability to represent their struggle as credibly as he did so much so that his narratives sometimes look like social documents speaking volumes of the actual status of women in the contemporary society. Relevantly, an in-depth study of O. Henry's widely popular stories like "The Memento", "Elsie in New York", "Brickdust Row" will reveal the extent of discrimination, exploitation and humiliation perpetrated to women of that period. Nevertheless, sometimes critics ascribed little merit to his short stories and unfortunately called him a hack disdainfully. For instance, F. L. Pattee, in "*The Development of the American Short Story*" criticizes vehemently O. Henry's literary art: "He worked without truth, without moral consciousness and

without a philosophy of life".<sup>3</sup> Despite the specious argument of the devil's advocates O.Henry's presentation of real life was unquestionably inspired by his deep interest in the hapless, derelicts and the deprived who were the victims of injustice in a discriminatory social system. In his stories he selected the protagonists chiefly from the humble folk, the shop girls, clerks, mechanics and so on—the invariable offshoots of the days of rapid urbanization and industrialization of the then America.

O.Henry ought to be especially remembered for his remarkable narrative and descriptive skills, his adroit handling of themes of a great variety, his deep sympathy for the neglected and deprived women and *inter alia*, his deep respect for human values, and these are what make his stories indubitably delectable to his readers. After a long gap of nearly a century his style must be at variance with that of the new generation of writers. Besides, viewed from the perspective of modern literary norms his literary style may at times appear somewhat dated. But that is definitely not his weakness. The strength of his writings lies in their human appeal. He was a true spokesman of the working women of the contemporary society and it was his firm conviction that women must acquire their legitimate rights so long unjustly denied to them in a society of male chauvinism where women were increasingly becoming victims of social discrimination, and were often deprived

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3. F.L. Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story* (Biblo and Tannen, New York, 1970), p.36.

of certain advantages to which men had an easy access. It will not perhaps be out of place to state here that like his contemporaries, as for examples, Stephen Crane, W. D. Howells and Theodore Dreiser O. Henry too was a true advocate of feminism. Had he not been a spokesman of the cause of women he would have scarcely striven to address their problems in his stories so persuasively and eloquently as he did, for instance, in "The Memento".

Although the great enthusiasm about O. Henry's tales generated in the wake of O. Henry's death is no longer in evidence, and although the number of critical studies on his works is strikingly small, the second half of the twentieth century saw a resurgence of interest in O. Henry studies, and the same renewed interest in him has informed the scholarly contributions of such eminent critics as Arthur Voss, Jesse F. Knight, Edward Lense, Gilbert Millestein, Judith Dunford, Thomas James Martin, Bruce Watson, Don Hauptman, Walter Evans, Victoria Blake and a host of others. Significantly, most of these critics not only offer some fresh and innovative perspectives on a number of oft-quoted issues concerning O. Henry's stories, but focus also on the patterns and tendencies of the twentieth century O. Henry studies, and thereby provide useful directions that scholars might pursue towards shaping the twenty-first century conception of the story-teller as craftsman.

In this connection it is important to note that O. Henry's literary genius has been warmly acclaimed and widely acknowledged. While assessing O. Henry's literary achievement J.J.W. Rogers, a famous American critic of the current century,

writes quite pertinently: “Horton’s fame would be posthumous, but another son of the Piedmont made a sensational name for himself glorifying the Reconstruction South – Thomas Dixon followed *The Leopard’s Spots* (1903) with *The Clansman*(1905) , a depiction of the ku klux klan that is equally sensational and racist. Born at about the same time, William Sydney Porter of Greensboro achieved more lasting fame as O. Henry, a *prolific* writer of short stories.”<sup>4</sup> (Italics mine)

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4. Joseph M. Flora & Lucinda H. Mackethan, *The Companion To Southern Literature* (Louisiana State University Press Baton Rouge, 2001), p. 646.