

**WOMEN IN O. HENRY'S SHORT STORIES :
A CRITICAL STUDY**

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O. HENRY

1862-1910

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Preface

The short stories of William Sydney Porter, better known to millions of readers under his pen-name O. Henry, have been approached by the critics down the ages from various viewpoints. While these scholarly analyses include many perceptive studies of his works mainly focusing on various facets of the development of his mind and art, critics are seldom eloquent about the ways O. Henry gradually became a champion of women's right and empowerment in his stories. Hence the chief object of this enquiry is to explore and examine, in whatever details possible, how O. Henry depicts the working women of his times in his writings, so as to project him as the authentic voice of the deprived and the downtrodden womenfolk of the contemporary American Southwest and New York—the regions which he knew at first hand.

In writing this dissertation I am greatly indebted to the works of all my illustrious predecessors in the field whose names have been duly mentioned in the footnotes. I am grateful also to many others whom I have failed to include in the list. A select bibliography has also been appended to the work.

Above all, I take this opportunity to express my deep sense of respect and gratitude to my revered supervisor, Dr. Suhash Kumar Roy Moulick, Professor of English, University of North Bengal, but for whose guidance and inspiration this humble work of mine could never have been completed. In this connection I gratefully recall

the generous encouragement and priceless suggestions I had received from him at all stages of my research.

My acknowledgement will remain incomplete if I do not mention my indebtedness to some of my friends and relations who helped me in various ways and would not like to be mentioned individually; I cherish their affection in my heart of hearts. My thanks are also due to the personnel of North Bengal University Central Library, and the National Library, Kolkata for the excellent co-operation I received from them while preparing this thesis. I shall be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge my obligation to the authorities of Indo-American Centre for International Studies, Hyderabad, the American Centre, Kolkata, and last but not least, of O. Henry Museum, Austin, Texas, USA for providing me with some rare and valuable information on O. Henry's life and works.

All references to O. Henry's short stories are from *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (ed.) Paul J. Horowitz; Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993. The work has been done in strict adherence to the guidelines prescribed in *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, Joseph Gibaldi, seventh edition, 2009; Affiliated East-West Press, Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi.¹

1. Please read in italics only and ignore the underlining.

In *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1963) Frank O' Connor, the prominent Irish writer considers the short story to be "a national form" for the Americans. Undeniably it is the form of art that plays a dominant role in the American literature in an age when people are "talking faster, moving faster, and apparently thinking faster".¹ Significantly, in the twentieth century the short story enjoys a prominent position because of its capability to embody and express the American attitude to life. While emphasizing the pre-eminence the short story enjoys in the American literary tradition the noted critic, Adrian Hunter comments : " ... the form has remained a vital and valid one in the twentieth century, and has served as the medium for much that has been new or innovative in modern fiction".² It is noteworthy that the lightness and mobility of the short story made it easily adaptable to the fast changing scenario of the varied American Society in the wake of the great Civil War (1861-65). This genre of literature began to be increasingly popular because of its association with magazine publications and its uncommon appeal to busy readers. It also became a very popular medium to portray the life and ethos of common people – the episodes and crises typical of their ordinary and humdrum existence hardly

1. H.E. Bates , *The Modern Short Story : A Critical Survey* (London : Thomas Nelson , 1941) , p. 21.

2. Adrian Hunter , *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge University Press, Parangat offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi-20, 2008), p. 3.

demanding the developed treatment of the novel. Incidentally, the short story turned out to be a very effective form in the hands of a number of gifted writers such as Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, Jack London, O. Henry and some others.

O. Henry and Jack London are long considered to be very significant among the outstanding American writers representing the growth of the short story at the outset of the twentieth century. O. Henry dealt with a variety of subjects in his stories particularly touching on the panorama of city life. One of the most striking features lending a distinctive character to his stories is his treatment of women afflicted with urban poverty and distress. It can hardly be denied that it is his chivalrous, sentimental romanticism that led him to sympathize with the poor, ill-fated working women of his time. In this context one may refer to Martin Scofield's comment: "It is characteristic of him that most of his stories of poverty and urban distress focus on women, and bring out in him a kind of chivalrous sentimental romanticism which, despite elements of shrewdness, leads him to pity working women."³ Jack London considered the short story ideal as a form of literature. He chose this popular literary form as a very effective medium for dealing

3. Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 2011), p.118.

4. James Mc Clintock, *Jack London's Strong Truths: A Study of the Short Stories* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997),

p.14. —→ Next page

with human crises. He followed the principles of story-writing and understood that "the short story is a rounded fragment from life, a single mood, situation, or action."⁴ Apart from his treatment of various themes, he took up, like O. Henry, issues of urban poverty and social division in his stories. His Northland stories are chiefly concerned with the laws of physical survival. While writing his South Sea stories London counts on his own experiences in his South Pacific tour of 1907.

In the arena of American literature O. Henry emerged as a humourist, as a craftsman and also as a social historian and, to the uninitiated his meteoric rise to eminence in the literary circle of America may appear almost incredible. However, popularly known as the American "Caliph of Bagdad", O. Henry had a chequered career and was gifted "with a brilliant mind, and a frighteningly fertile imagination".⁵ Significantly, whatever he attempted to write was mostly based on his varied, practical experience coloured with his own imagination. The stories he wrote are replete with his own experiences in the major phases of his life—his childhood in North Carolina, his youth in Texas and his maturity in New York. Within the short span of a decade or so the stories O. Henry produced caught the fancy of the millions the world over.

An interpreter of the contemporary society and also a keenly sensitive observer, O. Henry, during his long stay in New

5. E. Hudson Long, *O. Henry, The Man and His Work* (A. S. Barnes and Company, Inc., New York, Perpetua Edition, 1960), p.4.

York, witnessed at close quarters the sufferings, misfortunes and agonies of the working girls who were confronted with the most unfavourable circumstances for just a bare subsistence wage. Since literature reflects social reality, it is natural that O. Henry's stories mirror the state and status of these women at various levels including social, economic and psychological. For example, in "The Trimmed Lamp", while depicting a realistic picture of the abject poverty with which Lou and Nancy, its two major characters, are stricken, O. Henry delves deep into the social milieu to show how they were forced to leave their country homes in search of a livelihood in the big city of New York where they were hardly paid according to their deserts. O. Henry's proletarian sympathy for the hapless women, of whom Lou and Nancy are the archetypes, is much in evidence when at the very outset of the story he raises his voice of protest against the sneering attitude of those who looked down upon the poor working girls like Lou and Nancy as "shop-girls". That O. Henry was adept at portraying the female characters may also be exemplified with reference to such other pieces as "The Memento", "An Unfinished Story", "Elsie in New York", "The Furnished Room", "A Service of Love" and so on. Importantly, it is a firm resolve together with a remarkable endurance and a zealous striving towards self-sufficiency and economic security that seems to be the driving force in the central characters of these pieces reminding us of the same in O. Henry's most other stories.

O. Henry painted life in its unvarnished character. Nevertheless, his main focus was on the poor, ill-fated women directly

affected by the challenges and problems of the contemporary society. What is striking in his portrayal of the deprived women of the contemporary American society is his compassionate, liberal and progressive attitude towards them at a time of the denied women's suffrage in America. Many of the stories present the hardships of working girls and career women and O. Henry became gradually the champion of their cause and a defender of their rights. He wrote about the period when unemployment, poverty and commercial rivalries were prevailing unabated in America.

The short stories of O. Henry have received attention from a host of reviewers and critics down the ages. There have been seminal works done by such eminent critics as C.A. Smith, E.H. Long, G. Langford, E.C. Garcia, F. L. Pattee and so on. Most of the important critical and scholarly analyses of O. Henry's life and work have dwelt upon the various facets of the development of the writer's mind and art. It is time to reassess and take a fresh look at his stories in the light of all the sophisticated critical work that has been done both during his lifetime and since his death. While highlighting O. Henry's unparalleled popularity and success as a short story writer during the first two decades of the twentieth century Richard C. Harris, an eminent O. Henry critic, comments: "Reviewers of the volumes of his stories regularly expressed amazement at his productivity and admiration for the humanity of his characters, the vividness of his setting and the

freshness of his humour and language".⁶ With regard to O. Henry's exceptional genius for dwelling on the life and times of his region in his stories Joseph Gallegly, a distinguished American critic, comments: "I have long believed that a reader could more fully appreciate the humour of O. Henry's stories of the Southwest if he would take time to gain better acquaintance with the people and the social conditions of that geographical area during the years about which the author wrote. To William Sydney Porter, Texas and other sections of the Southwest, old and new were as familiar as the Mississippi river was to Mark Twain, or as the 'old' Southwest was to George Washington Harris and Johnson Jones Hooper"⁷.

Although the critical literature on O. Henry includes many perceptive studies of his works from various angles of discussion, critics, however, seem to be less eloquent about the ways O. Henry gradually became a champion of women's right and empowerment in his stories. In a sense his treatment of and attitude to women seems to have received less than its due from the critics. Hence there still remains a scope to go into greater details in this respect so as to make a full-length study of this significant aspect in his short stories and project him as the eloquent spokesperson for the women of the

6. Richard C. Harris, *William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) A Reference Guide*(G. K. Hall& Co., 70, Lincoln Street, Boston, Mass, 1980), p.viii.

7. Joseph Gallegly, *From Alamo plaza to Jack Harris's Saloon*(Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1970), Preface.

American Southwest and New York—the regions which perhaps inspired O. Henry most to take up the case of the downtrodden and the deprived in his stories.

An “American Chekhov” and a “Yankee Maupassant” as he has been called by critics, O. Henry, once replied to an interviewer with regard to his reluctance to read more fiction: “It is all tame as compared with the romance of my life”.⁸ The reply in O. Henry’s terse and unique style gives a clue to understanding the man and his work. For, his own stories were not only the product of his vivid imagination but they stemmed from the events and circumstances of his life also. No less important are the people and the settings, ranging from the elegant South to the Wild West of Texas, from Honduras in revolutionary Latin America to the sophisticated metropolis of New York that contributed much to his keen perception.

O. Henry’s literary outpouring is primarily a product of the tumultuous situation prevailing in America in the wake of the Civil War (1861-65). After “One of the bloodiest conflicts fought by man” during this significant period there were positive signs of a change in society. With the American society passing through a process of metamorphosis the contemporary writers could not choose to be silent and passive onlookers; rather, they endeavoured to reflect the new situation in a realistic manner as they viewed it in the late nineteenth

8. P.J.Horowitz, *O. Henry, Collected Stories* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. xiii.

and the early twentieth centuries. Gifted with a rare literary talent, and keenly sensitive to the social ethos as he was, O. Henry was capable of presenting a faithful picture of real life of his day. What better evidence can one cite here than the story, "The Memento" in which the glimpses of his society have been reflected very aptly and significantly?

The central theme in stories like "The Memento". "An Unfinished Story", "Elsie in New York" concerns the real picture of agonies, sufferings and misfortunes of women and social discrimination against them. While one can hardly deny O. Henry's amazing success in the artistic portrayal of women characters, what informs O. Henry's presentation is a strong note of humanism and deep sympathy for the downtrodden and the exploited. "The Memento", based on the contemporary social background, presents two women named Miss Lynnett D'Armande and Miss Rosalie Ray, who, are victims of harrowing social problems as they are, can hardly tolerate the severity of the humiliation and injustice they are subjected to. They abhor serving the men who make them puppets in their hands. They are forced to work hard under most unfavourable and inhuman circumstances until all their vitality is squeezed out only for the pleasures of men, but in return what they get is negligibly little for a decent living.

Uncompromising in temperament in the face of intolerable misbehaviour of men Rosalie gives up her profession as an actress. Least inclined towards any compromise or submissiveness O. Henry's

women are capable of displaying their endurance and courage to raise their loudest possible voice of protest against all sorts of injustice and herein perhaps lies the forte of O.Henry. Unquestionably O.Henry was a staunch advocate of feminism. Hence we hear unmistakably the vigorous voice of protest from his women against the rigours of a male-dominated society. In "An Unfinished Story" Dulcie, the most prominent female character, has been delineated as one highly imaginative, emotional and whimsical on the one hand and sincere, trustworthy, dutiful, unselfish and resolute on the other. The most striking feature discernible in Dulcie's character is her commendable steadfastness in love. "Elsie in New York" is yet another instance where the dismal picture of poverty is presented as realistically as possible. Quite convincing is the portrayal of Elsie who, with the sudden death of her father and thrown into a helpless condition, shows an undaunted spirit and strong urge for attaining self-sufficiency and approaches several persons for an employment, though to her utter frustration she is nearly misguided at every step.

It is important to consider the role and impact of some significant events and episodes on O.Henry's life and art in order to reassess the worth of his stories. One such episode is "the Shadowed years" during O.Henry's imprisonment (1898-1900) – the period he spent in Ohio Penitentiary for his alleged embezzlement of funds. Although the nature and extent of his guilt had never been definitely established, the experience he gained in these years in the penitentiary

was both remarkable and rewarding to him as a shaping force. It was in this period that he found useful materials for such stories as "A Retrieved Reform", "An Afternoon Miracle", "Money Maze", "No Story", "A Fog in Santone", "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking", "A Blackjack Bargainer", "The Enchanted Kiss" and some others. Equally relevant is the impact on O. Henry's writing of the widening economic disparity between the haves and have-nots and social discrimination against women in the days of male chauvinism following the American Civil War. Commenting on O. Henry's handling of the theme of social inequality – a burning issue of the day E.C. Garcia writes : "While portraying the horrors and pinched existence endured by his unpaid shop girls she does occasionally condemn in sweepingly Dickensian general terms the tight-fisted employers who keep them economically depressed. Occasionally too, he chides the idle rich, through irony and understatement, for having so much to waste while others have so little to live on".⁹

O. Henry spent a period of eight years in New York City and drew upon its colourful places and people. But many of his stories have other important locales. He was engaged in ranch work in Texas where he gained experiences to write stories on western settings. He had to remain behind bars for three years which provided him raw material for the vivid tales of grifters, conmen and rogues including

9. E.C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (College and University Press Publishers, New Haven, Conn, 1965), p. 109.

safecracker, Jimmy Valentine. His stay in Honduras also supplied him with ample material for a series of stories concerning a US consul in the backwater of a fictitious Central American country.

O. Henry entered American folklore as a model of the self-made man, both as a writer and a hero who struggled back after an imprisonment of three years to become the voice of "The Four Million"—the vast mass of ordinary people with no other chronicler to record their lives so sympathetically as he did. It is quite usual that a populist intellectual like Upton Sinclair made him almost a saintly figure in his play, "Bill porter: A Drama of O. Henry in prison" (1924) or his biographer, David Stuart cherished almost an obsession for clearing his name of any wrong doing. Because of the unique way he became a writer, O. Henry is a widely known name even among those who scarcely read his works or at best can dimly remember his stories like "The Gift of the Magi" or "The Last Leaf" from school level.

There is no denying the fact that the emotion of love plays an important role in O. Henry's short stories. Love, as portrayed in many of his short stories, is an enduring passion, so intense and varied in its scope that it becomes sometimes self-negating and sometimes ennobling. The majority of O. Henry's short stories, as B.M. Eijxenbaum, an eminent Russian critic, thinks, are built on the most traditional situations: two men love the same woman as is the case in "Cupid ā La Carte", and "The Handbook of Hymen". Obviously the critic touches upon nothing but the common feeling of passionate love.

But the fact that O. Henry can also present the effects of ennobling and selfless love on certain occasions has hardly been highlighted by the said critic. Hence there still remains ample scope to study how love becomes a dominant aspect in O. Henry's stories. As for instance, the intensity of love between Jim and Della, a poor couple in "The Gift of the Magi", is what seems to have added a touch of nobility to their souls. It is the intensity and depth of the mutual flame of love that prompts the couple to part with, without the least hesitation, their respective dearest personal treasures for the pleasure of the other. In "The Last Leaf" Behrman, an old painter had certainly a kind of altruistic love for Johnsy who was obsessed with a strange fancy that she was going to die with the dropping of the last leaf of the ivy vine. Behrman was finally successful in saving the life of Johnsy at the cost of his own life. Examples may easily be multiplied.

Circumstanced to drift into the jobs of a druggist, a book keeper, a draftsman and also a bank teller O. Henry has effectively and artistically too, harnessed the mine of his experiences to the varied presentation of his characters. From his own words quoted below it is evident that he refused to lead an ivory tower existence: "You can't write a story that's got any life in it by sitting at a writing table and thinking. You've got to get out into the streets, into the crowds, talk with people and feel the rush and throb of real life—that's the stimulant

for a story writer".¹⁰ In this context it is worth reminding one of Don Hauptman's comments: "O. Henry's curiosity and ingenuity were boundless. He could glance around a restaurant and find the premises of half a dozen stories"¹¹

Commenting on O. Henry's position in the world of literature Seth Moyle, his friend observes: "He seems to have occupied the best seat in the world's arena and to have pictured the passing show. No other could have made so indelible a record of the things he saw."¹²

O. Henry's stories were written in lucid style and with vivid details. They abound in examples, literary allusions, verbal trickery, explanations and ornamentations. His expressive power was rather remarkable. It is now an established fact that his stories not only present a vivid panorama of the contemporary society but also transcend the period of their writing and acquire a quality of timelessness. His lucid language, wealth of images and psychological development of characters make his stories highly appreciable and enjoyable. "England has her Dickens, France her Hugo, and America has O. Henry. In his book he will live through the ages"¹³

10. P. J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. xiii.

11. "A Surprise Tribute to O. Henry", The Daily Objectivist, Sept 11, 1999.

12. Seth Moyle, *My Friend O. Henry* (Norwood Editions, New York, 1978), p.14.

13. *Ibid.*, p.14.

While undertaking a critical study of O. Henry's stories I have endeavoured to demonstrate and elucidate that he was a great humanist as well as a realist at the same time. It is his keen sense of humanism and realism that awakened in him an overwhelming feeling of sympathy towards the oppressed, deprived and humiliated women of the contemporary American society. Efforts have been made to probe O. Henry's attitude to them on the basis of a study of female characters in particular. In the opening chapter an attempt has been made to highlight certain incidents of O. Henry's life that influenced him profoundly and even provided him with raw material for many of his stories. The aim of the second chapter has been chiefly to present the contemporary socio-economic scenario of the American Southwest so as to reveal what bearing it has on O. Henry's literary career. In the third chapter it has been my sincere effort to demonstrate O. Henry as a realist and a writer of the underdogs and the underprivileged. In the fourth chapter I have highlighted O. Henry's treatment of women in his short stories. Incidentally, the delineation of female characters in O. Henry's stories is perhaps one of the most significant phenomena of his literary art. So far as recent critical attention is concerned, this particular aspect seems to have received less than its due. The next two chapters are mainly devoted to a critical assessment of O. Henry's treatment of love and the characteristics of his literary style respectively. In the concluding chapter an attempt has been made towards a summing-up.

Life Into Art

William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), popularly known as O. Henry the world over, hardly needs any introduction. Recognized as a gifted craftsman in the art of story writing O. Henry has been enjoying a wide readership since his day. Importantly, the never-failing charm and excellence of his story-telling art is evident in his fictional representation of the contemporary society.

During the major part of his life O. Henry's was a chequered career. A series of circumstances occasionally unsettled the normal pace of his life making it singularly eventful. Confronted with the misfortune of his mother's untimely death at his early infancy (1865) O. Henry embarked on a career of persistent struggle. Shifted to the home of his aunt, Evelina Maria Porter (Miss Lina) and grandmother, Ruth Worth Porter in 1865 O. Henry began his academic career with his enrollment in the Private Elementary School of Miss Lina in 1867. But some unfavourable circumstances stood like bottlenecks and his formal schooling after the age of fifteen came to be thwarted. Compelled to drift into the jobs of a druggist, a book-keeper, a draftsman and also a bank teller, O. Henry has effectively and artistically too, harnessed his mine of experiences to the varied presentation of his characters. He refused to lead an ivory tower existence as is evident from his own

words quoted below: "You can't write a story that's got any life in it by sitting at a writing table and thinking. You've got to get out into the streets, into the crowds, talk with people and feel the rush and throb of real life – that's the stimulant for a writer." ¹ O.Henry set about his job as an apprentice pharmacist at Uncle Clark's drug store in 1879 and continued in the same capacity till 1881. His work provided him with ample opportunity to come in direct contact with people of different walks of life. Their mannerisms, oddities, gestures and communicating modes had a lasting effect on his mind in that impressionable age. Immense was his scope to come across peculiar surroundings with various names and words. One may find incorporated in his stories, written years later, such names as Callum, Tate, Yates, Hall, Paisley and a lot of others commonly familiar in Greensboro. For his collection of stories entitled *The Gentle Grafter* he preferred such Greensboro names as Peters and Tucker, and Keogh and Goodwin for *Cabbages and Kings*. The characters delineated in "The Marry Month of May" and "The Door of Unrest" were very intimately familiar to the older citizens of Greensboro. During O.Henry's practice as a Pharmacist patients were prescribed pills made manually from certain medicines mixed with flour and water. Keenly acquainted with drugstore affairs O. Henry recounts faithfully the process of making pills in his short story, "The Love- Philtre of Ikey Schoenstein". That O.Henry was a sincere exponent of the contemporary society becomes evident from the

1. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories Of O.Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993),p. xiii.

lines quoted below from this story: "To this day pills are made behind its tall prescription desk—pills rolled out on its own pill-tile, divided with a spatula, rolled with the finger and thumb, dusted with calcined magnesia and delivered in little round pasteboard pill-boxes".² Unambiguously these stories are often the representation of real life that he observed so closely. Equally significant was the impact of his years at the drug store in Greensboro on his life and works. Naturally the Greensboro atmosphere has been distinctly reflected in his well-known stories such as "A Municipal Report", "A Blackjack Bargainer" or "The Rose of Dixie" in addition to those already discussed. In this respect one may refer to the character of Uncle Caesar in "A Municipal Report". Uncle Caesar is unquestionably a product of Greensboro surroundings. Fictionally O. Henry lifted him from the streets of Greensboro and placed him as a stalwart Negro in Nashville. His invitation to the narrator seems quite appealing when he addresses him in his deep rumbling voice: "Step right in Suh ; ain't a speck of dust in it- jus got back from a funeral, Suh".³

One may have ample evidence of O. Henry's awareness of various social ills in his writings and this is well attested by the short story titled "A Blackjack Bargainer". He witnessed with deep concern how gambling turned out to be a heinous social vice during his time.

2. Ibid., p. 546.

3. Bennett A. Cerf And Van H. Cartmell, *The Best Short Stories Of O. Henry* (The Modern Library, New York, 1945), p.327.



This pernicious habit turned many wealthy people penniless and degraded in the society. As the story reveals, Yancey Goree lost several thousand dollars, the old family home and even his self-respect and manhood because of his vile passion for gambling. This sociological concern in O. Henry's writings puts one in mind of the same in the works of Charles Dickens and W.S. Maugham. Dickens dealt with the social evils of his day in such novels as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*. Similarly Maugham's experiences in London hospitals provided him with the knowledge of London's poorer sections – an experience which left its mark in such early works as *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) and *Mrs. Craddock* (1902).

In his fictional writings O. Henry is largely concerned with exploring the world of the working women—their emotions and identities, their experiences and problems. His treatment of struggling women in the stories such as “Brickdust Row”, “The Trimmed Lamp”, “The Memento”, “Elsie in New York”, “An Unfinished Story”, “A Departmental Case” and so on is highly commendable. The female characters he has painted in his stories are convincingly down-to-earth. In the nineteenth century with the advent of the industrial age, factories came up and business profits increased. Deeply critical of these developments novelists wrote about the baneful effects of industrialization on people's lives and characters. Novelists like Charles Dickens and Emile Zola criticized not merely the greed for profits but also the ideas that reduced human beings to automations, rather instruments of production. It is in the main the world of the working

people—their ethos and sentiments that supplied the raw materials for their novels. In most cases these writers focused on the terrible and dehumanizing conditions of the working people under industrial capitalism. In *Hard Times* (1854), for example, a fictitious industrial town (Coketown) is presented as a grim place full of machinery and smoking chimneys. Here workers are known as ‘hands’ as if they had no identity of their own other than as operators of machines. Emile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885), which describes the life of a young miner in France, explores in harsh and down-to-earth detail the grim conditions of miners’ lives. Fictional writing is now raised from the realm of fantasy, moralizing and simple entertainments. In this connection one may recall Prem Chand’s *Sewasadan* (1916) which is a serious reflection on the lives of ordinary people and social issues. It deals mainly with the poor condition of women in society. Issues like child marriage and dowry are woven into the fabric of the novel.

Standing wide apart from the world of mystery and horror fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, the fiction of O. Henry is used as a powerful medium for critiquing the plight of the working women and grappling with their problems. It makes the lives of the most oppressed section of society worthy of literary imitation. Prolific, humorous, and highly ingenious, especially in his use of coincidence, O. Henry was perhaps the most famous writer of his kind of the day. Besides the ingenious twists and turns of the plot and the casual suspense, his fiction was also relished for its linguistic excellences.

O. Henry left home in 1882 to join Dr. and Mrs. James Hall as their house guest while on a visit to their four sons in Southwest Texas. The Hall family under whose hospitality and care O. Henry had to pass two years of his life contributed remarkably to the romantic legend of the West. Lee Hall, eldest son of Dr. Hall had achieved a nationwide fame as a courageous leader of the Texas Rangers. By 1882 when O. Henry had his entry in his wing, Lee embarked on a new life after his marriage. He left the Rangers to assume the managership of the Dull Brothers' huge cattle ranch in La Salle County. His three brothers began to assist him under his supervision. Significantly, Lee Hall's heroic stature moved Porter's imagination tremendously and in many of his stories written years later Lee Hall appeared as a bold champion of law and order in disguise. Although O. Henry's ranch life in La Salle County was not eventful, it provided him with material for his stories such as "An Afternoon Miracle" and "The Caballero's Way" incorporated in the work, *Heart of the West volume IV*. His reference to "a cattle man's convention", "a bull fight" in "An Afternoon Miracle" and "cowpath" and "a hundred goats" in "The Caballero's way" is evidently a reflection of O. Henry's experience in ranch life.

O. Henry's tenure of engagement in the Texas Land Office from 1887 to 1891 as a draftsman was probably the happiest period in his life. During this period he found a means to maintain his family rather comfortably with his salary of 100 dollars per month and naturally his financial security proved propitious to practise sketching and writing. One can discern a reflection of his varied

experiences of this new employment in such stories as “Bexar Scrip No 2692”, “Georgia’s Ruling”, “Buried Treasure”, “Witches’ Loaves”, and “Sisters of the Golden Circle” written years later. It is perhaps not irrelevant to note here that O.Henry’s marriage to Miss Athol whom he loved at first sight has a significant role in his literary career. It was the happiest event of his life during his days in Texas. With a touch of deep feeling and tender memory O.Henry referred to this significant event of his life in later years. Significantly, he brings back the distinctive moments of his personal life with a touch of freshness and spontaneity in “Sisters of the Golden Circle” written eighteen years later. How excellently and with what a deep respect for women O. Henry writes in the said story! – “On the highest, rear seat was James Williams, of Cloverdale, Missouri, and his Bride. Capitalize it, friend typo – that last word- word of words in the epiphany of life and love. The scent of the flowers, the booty of the bee, the primal drip of spring waters, the overture of the lark, the twist of lemon peel on the cocktail of creation – such is the bride. Holy is the wife, revered the mother ; galliptious is the summer girl – but the bride is the certified check among the wedding presents that the gods send in when man is married to mortality”.⁴ Indubitable was the fact that O.Henry loved Athol from the core of his heart. In New York he told Anne Partlan, presumably his most intimate confidant that Athol was the only woman he had ever loved. And it was Athol who definitely helped to stimulate

4. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.677.

and develop his literary talent. This is warranted from the fact that only after three months of their marriage she inspired him to write more persistently than before. During this period Porter was merely a young man of twenty five (1887). He was fortunate enough to get an offer from the editor of the Detroit Free Press for contributing to the magazine. Written during 1887 were his stories "The Final Triumph" and "A Slight Inaccuracy" selected for the magazine "Truth" in New York.

Not less influential was the memory of his modes of entertainment during his youth on his literary career. Usually Porter had the scope of holidaying on Sundays and sometimes in the week off from drugstore duty. During vacation periods he had recourse to a *favourite pastime of camping out with a group of friends beyond the boundary lines of Guilford County to Pilot Mountain and other far-off places*. In his eighteenth year Will Porter, a vivacious partner in the camping crew of young men set out for Pilot Mountain in the summer of 1880. Ascended high on the Mountain Pinnacle in moon light Porter was in the gayest mood. He started narrating fantastically romantic tales to his friends with no care for sleep. Despite objections from some of his friends because of disturbance in their sleep due to his constant prattling he continued nightlong. Of course, Phon Smith, his intimate playmate and schoolmate was interested in listening to his stories and gave him encouragement. Incidentally, this Phon Smith was none but Dr. C.A. Smith, Porter's biographer. The life of the party, Will Porter was deeply enchanted by the grandeur of the mountain and the solitude

of the surroundings where the rural people lived. These reflections were very nicely and richly embodied in his stories such as "The Whirligig of life", "A Blackjack Bargainer" and "A Midsummer Masquerade". In "The Whirligig of Life" his reference to "a speckled hen", "a slow cloud of dust", "a bull cart", "Hogback Mountain" indicates his reminiscences of the bucolic atmosphere in which he enjoyed moments of romantic pleasure. In "A Midsummer Masquerade" and "A Blackjack Bargainer" frequent references to mountains, green grass, shade of trees, foothills, disconsolate valley, woods, rivulets create an atmosphere of natural surroundings with which O. Henry was deeply acquainted.

Tom Tate, O. Henry's intimate friend highlights his friend's courtship with Miss Coleman in the following manner: "a pretty romance was launched that memorable summer, ... Will often persuaded me to accompany him on a visit to 'Miss Sall(y)', (as Sara was called by the young men). Many times we called there and Will, being of a quiet, rather bashful nature, whiled away his time picking a guitar while Miss Sall(y) and I carried on most of the conversation, but it was easy to see that Will had fallen very much in love with Miss Coleman".⁵ Similar is the situation presented in his story, "The Higher Pragmatism" in which the lover confessed his great fear in the following words: "I had n't the courage to speak to her of

5. Ethel Stephens Arnett, *O. Henry From Polecat Creek* (Greensboro, North Carolina, 1962), p. 186.

my worship. ... that in her presence I could only blush and stammer, and that she looked upon me with a wonderful maddening smile of amusement".⁶

Let us once again turn to his drugstore years when with his wonderful drawings as a cartoonist Will Porter provided a lot of pure entertainment to the community consisting of different age groups. Obviously it was his artistic effort to convert the various moods of peculiar and rare characters into lively and interesting sketches. Porter studied and watched very minutely and intensively the peculiarities of those people who congregated around the pot-bellied stove or under the sycamore tree. Porter was gifted with a faculty of grasping individual characteristics of those around him and subsequently he harnessed his knowledge of people belonging to different strata in society to his literary endeavours. This is particularly discernible in his story, "A Madison Square Arabian Night" written many years later.

No less significant is the reflection of O. Henry's personal life in the stories he wrote. That is why his achievements are being increasingly perceived in close relation to the details of his own life. It becomes virtually impossible to consider some of his stories apart from their writer. Admittedly, many of the characters and situations in his stories are taken directly from life. In "The Gift of the Magi" the intensity and depth of the mutual flame of love between Jim

6. Ibid., p. 187.

and Della reminds us of the similar passionate attachment between O. Henry and his wife, Athol Estes. Besides, in "A Retrieved Reform" Jimmy Valentine serving 'merely ten months of a four-year sentence', reminds one of the fact that O. Henry's duration of five years' imprisonment was reduced to three years in view of his good behaviour in the jail. O. Henry was fond of sketching and cartooning and the fact had a close bearing on his surroundings. Strangely identical with him is the character of Sherrard Plumer in his story, "A Madison Square Arabian Night" as mentioned earlier. When one thinks the bond of love and sacrifice between Joe Larrabee and his wife, Delia Caruthers in "A Sacrifice of Love" one cannot but recall the same attitude between O. Henry and his sweetheart, Athol. In "The Making of a New Yorker" Raggles is portrayed in such a manner that he markedly resembles O. Henry in temperament. It is noteworthy that both are capable of making an intensive study of life and society. Similar instances may be multiplied to show how deeply O. Henry's life coloured his art.

While attempting to reassess O. Henry's short stories it is pertinent to look at the episode of "the shadowed years" during his imprisonment (1898-1901)—the period he spent in Ohio Penitentiary under sentence for alleged embezzlement of funds from the First National Bank of Austin. Significantly, O. Henry's bitter experiences of prison life hardly froze the warmth and passion of his literary zeal and endeavour. Direct experiences behind the bars tormented his soul almost beyond tolerance. The inhuman oppression with which the convicts were afflicted in the jail would have affected rudely any

sensitive person like O. Henry. Deeply humiliated and severely tortured mentally in the prison cell O. Henry was once on the brink of committing suicide. Fortunately enough his knowledge in pharmacy provided him with a good opportunity of serving the sick among the prisoners in the role of a night druggist. This job suited him immensely and also served as an efficacious antidote to his disturbed soul. He was relieved of the pains of a common prisoner and thus he looked upon himself as more fortunate than others languishing in the jail. Engrossed in a world of fiction, ample was his scope for writing stories with plentiful, varied subjects and facts garnered from his direct exchanges with prisoners. Although the extent of his guilt had never been definitely established, the direct experience he gained during the years of his imprisonment was highly valuable to him as a shaping influence. It was in this period that he found useful material for such stories as "A Retrieved Reform", "An Afternoon Miracle", "Money Maze", "No Story", "A fog in Santone", "A Blackjack Bargainer", "The Enchanted Kiss", "Whistling Dick's Christmas stocking", "Georgia's Ruling", "The Duplicity of Hargraves" and some others.

He demonstrates his talent to recapture in swift flashing phrases the concrete surroundings of the locality he wandered about—the lights and shadows, the flowered paths and the local customs, the architecture and dim interiors of public buildings and little cafes, the speech rhythms of native Creoles—the very atmosphere of the Vieux

Carré"⁷. His amazingly pictorial interpretation of New Orleans finds unique expression in the stories such as "The Renaissance of Charleroi", "Cherchez La Femme", "Blind Man's Holiday" and so on. These stories, particularly the last one, reveal quite unmistakably and distinctively O. Henry's state of mind and his experiences in New Orleans.

The inglorious period of "shadowed years" in O. Henry's life was over on July 24, 1901. On the very day he moved to Pittsburg where he met his daughter, Margaret and her grandparents. The gloomy days of his prison life being over, he engaged himself in writing more enthusiastically than before. Then came an invitation for New York in the spring of 1902 from Mr. Gilman Hall, associate editor of "Everyman's Magazine". The stories already submitted to Duffy and Hall were highly appreciated in Hall's letter written to him. However, O. Henry responded to Hall's call warmly and left for New York to embark on a new career. This marked the beginning of his most prolific period extended for eight years during the last decade of his life. O. Henry's stay in New York for a period of eight years provided him with a direct scope to know the city life in its colourful and varied facets. "There was quite literally no neighbourhood in Manhattan with which O. Henry, a prodigious walker and a notable loungeur as well, was not familiar at any hour in any season ; and no social or economic class

7. Eugene Current-Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)* (New Haven, Conn., 1965), p.31.

whose ways he could not reproduce with absolute fidelity”⁸ Since the beginning of O.Henry’s stay in New York the stories drawn upon the colourful places and people of varied occupations started appearing in popular New York magazines to cater to the growing taste of avid readers for a long time even after his death.

Direct communion with the people of different walks of life in New York enriched O.Henry’s experience, widened his vision and generated his sympathies for the common people. He developed the habit of walking along the river fronts, Hell’s kitchen or Bowery at any hour of day or night. With a genuine objective to come in direct touch with people he haunted restaurants, chief café, saloon to while away hours together as an interested spectator. Usually lounged on a bench at Madison Square he kept sitting at times with his attention divided between the park dwellers and the Statue of Diana alluded to very frequently in his stories. Coney Island, a well-known spot he frequented is mentioned in such stories as “Tobin’s Palm” and “The Gift of the Magi”.

At the outset of the twentieth century the roof gardens in New York became the source of pleasure and entertainment to the rich and the affluent. O.Henry found interest in visiting these places frequently and depicted the real atmosphere in

8. Gilbert Millstein, “O.Henry’s New Yorkers—And Today’s”, New York Times Magazine (September 9,1962), pp. 36,132.

several of his stories. In the stories such as “The Caliph and the Cad”, “Lost on Dress Parade”, “While the Auto Waits” O.Henry paints characters visiting the haunts of the rich, imagining themselves wealthy people of the society. Let us refer to the short story, “Lost on Dress Parade” in which the typical character, ‘Towers Chandler’ at the end of every ten weeks “purchased one gentleman’s evening from the bargain counter of stingy old Father Time.”⁹

The accurate and realistic details presented in his stories revealed how intimately O.Henry got acquainted with his contemporary society. While writing “The Furnished Room”, “The Third Ingredient”, “The Last Leaf”, “The Social Triangle”, “A Harlem Tragedy” O.Henry uses the well-known localities and landmarks of New York with which he was familiar directly and intimately. Hence the well-known objects such as The Clock Tower at Madison Square, the Gilded Statue of Diana, The Statue of Liberty, The Flatiron Building are frequently mentioned in his popular short stories.

The year 1904 is very significant in O.Henry’s literary career in view of the publication of his first book, *Cabbages and Kings*. The New York Sunday World Magazine plays a vital role in making O. Henry familiar to the millions of readers in America. The pseudonym, O. Henry was popularized among readers in that very year as all the

9. Paul J Horowitz, *Collected stories of O.Henry* (Gramercy books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. 411.

stories written in 1904 were signed by the author as O. Henry. *The Four Million*, O. Henry's second book of stories appeared in 1906. That O. Henry was essentially a sociologically sensitive writer is vividly elucidated in his Preface to *The Four Million*. O. Henry wrote: "Not very long ago some one invented the assertion that there were only "Four Hundred" people in New York city who were really worth noticing. But a wiser man has arisen—the census taker—and his larger estimate of human interest has been preferred in marking out the field of these little stories of the "Four Million"¹⁰ O. Henry made his mark as a writer with the publication of his second volume. With the appearance of his most popular short stories in this volume O. Henry came to be recognized as an exponent of the life in New York City during his time. In most of these stories he painted a very realistic and credible picture of city life viewed very closely and intensely with his own eyes. With regard to O. Henry's realistic attitude E. Hudson Long, a famous O. Henry critic, remarks: "What Page was to Virginia, Cable to New Orleans, and Craddock to the Tennessee mountains, O. Henry was to the great metropolis in the eyes of readers."¹¹ It is during his stay in New York that O. Henry published in 1907 yet two more volumes of his stories: *The Trimmed Lamp and Heart of the West*.

10. C. Alphonso Smith, *O. Henry Biography* (Garden City, New York, 1916), p. 200.

11. E. Hudson Long, *O. Henry : The Man And His Work* (A.S., Barnes And Company, Inc., New York, 1960), p. 125.

On account of his interest in theatre and its professionals O. Henry got acquainted with a number of actors. As related by Archibald Sessions, O. Henry attended with him a programme on a trapeze act by a girl at Miner's Old Eighth Avenue Theatre. Swinging far out over the spectators when the girl kicked off her garter it was dropped into O. Henry's lap. Almost on a similar background the story entitled "Memento" has been structured. The conversations used in the story seem quite natural and realistic. They suggest a real picture of the oppressed and humiliated women in the contemporary society.

During 1909 O. Henry's health was deteriorating alarmingly. His flow of writing was considerably interrupted. However, he was placed under the treatment of New York doctors who diagnosed him to be suffering from kidney or Liver disease or both. O. Henry fictionalized his experience of getting a new course of treatment in the hands of New York doctors in his widely known story, "Let Me Feel Your Pulse" published after his death in July, 1910. He allowed himself a certain artistic license in this piece of literature. But he and his agent, Seth M'oyl  stated that the account was substantially factual. Written by a writer significantly aware of his real condition at the time of writing the story, it is an extra ordinary presentation of the triumph of spirit over matter.

On the occasion of a dinner at Mouquin's a discussion was going on as to O. Henry's source of ideas for his stories. During the discourse at dinner table O. Henry longed to make a story out of that

table. Then he thought for a little while and with utmost readiness he gave an outline of the story, "Springtime A La Carte" (1905) to his dinner companions. Likewise an alcoholic evening at Scheffel Hall, a popular German restaurant was the background of his well-known story, "Halberdier of the little Rheinschloss" (1907). This is how O. Henry often explored real life for the material of his stories.

In 1909 O. Henry was living alone at Washington place. With a great ambition in mind he wrote "A Municipal Report" one of his most famous stories during this period. Two versions served as the background of this story. O. Henry was not favourable to Frank Norris's assertion that the most American cities were stodgy enough for use as the background for notable literature. Another account of the idea for the story as cited by Bob Davies, O. Henry's editor and friend was that O. Henry and a visitor were talking about how a writer found material for his stories during an afternoon gossip. During the discussion O. Henry made a comment that he believed that an able writer could build a story on the most trifling matter by virtue of his imagination. O. Henry is said to have remarked: "I have got some of my best yarns from park benches, lamp posts and news stands"¹² His companion had had a Rand and McNally booklet on Nashville, a compilation of statistics in his pocket. He held it out to O. Henry and

12. Richard O' Connor, *O. Henry: The Legendary Life of William S. Porter* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden city, New York, 1970), p. 190.

challenged him to write a story on the basis of it. O. Henry accepted the challenge unhesitatingly and finally succeeded in writing a interesting story. Surprisingly it was acknowledged to be the greatest American short story in a symposium conducted by the New York Times four years after O. Henry's death.

From the foregoing discussion one may conclude that O. Henry's life and art seemed inseparably related to one another. He reacted to the varied episodes of his adventurous life—both magnificent and trifling—with almost equal warmth of interest and response. To him his life often posed a tough struggle.

Occasionally he had to face challenging circumstances that could have disrupted his life altogether. But his moral strength sustained him up through the series of obstacles he withstood boldly and steadily. Contextually it is discernible that the female characters depicted in his stories were also endowed with enormous guts to encounter the typically trying situations in their real life with matching courage and resolution. Sometimes his very personal life came up as a source of material for his stories. His intense sensitivity and responsiveness helped him to present a fictional rendering of the real incidents of his life with his excellent story-telling art. Hardly was there any serious effort on his part to make a direct exposition of his life in his stories. Nevertheless, glimpses of his life appear and reappear both as primary and subsidiary issues and settings for his stories. It is significant to note here that though the autobiographical references may

grace the stories in quite a number of ways, the stories never degenerate into the tedious narratives of his exclusively personal life. Herein lies the mark of his excellence.

O. Henry and the Contemporary Society in American Southwest

Critics can hardly gainsay the tremendous impact of the contemporary sociological background on O. Henry's life and works. He spent a significant part of his life in the American Southwest before he embarked on the most significant phase of his prolific literary career in New York (1902-10). Undeniably his stay in the geographical region of the Southwest played a very important role in shaping his literary career. In this connection one may recall the words of Joseph Gallegly, a famous O. Henry critic: "I have long believed that a reader could more fully appreciate the humor of O. Henry's stories of the Southwest if he would take time to gain better acquaintance with the people and social conditions of that geographical area during the years about which the author wrote. To William Sydney Porter, Texas and other sections of the Southwest, old and new, were as familiar as the Mississippi river was to Mark Twain, or as the "old" Southwest was to George Washington Harris and Johnson Jones Hooper."¹

Amid a series of vicissitudes in his life ample was O. Henry's scope to get acquainted with the multi-faceted and multi-hued social milieu of his time. He was in direct touch with different

1. Joseph Gallegly, *From Alamo Plaza to Jack Harris's Saloon* (Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1970), Preface.

people together with their diverse idiosyncrasies by way of his direct interaction with them in varied circumstances.

The stories written on the perspective of social environment bear positive evidence of O. Henry's realistic attitude to life. His remarkable literary career reminds one of Jack London (1876-1916), another famous American author who lived an adventurous life similar, in many respects, to that of O. Henry. Akin to O. Henry's career his was also a chequered one as a Bay Oyster, pirate, seaman, labour in mills and factories and searcher of gold in the Klondike. Like O. Henry London too, exploited all his practical experiences in his fiction. London's hardships in his early life made him a committed socialist as O. Henry's experience of a life of tough struggle prompted him to be a writer of the underdog and the underprivileged, particularly the struggling women.

In 1882 O. Henry left home at Greensboro, North Carolina for Southwest Texas. He lived and worked for two years in the Richard Halls' ranch in La Salle County, Texas. During this period he gained intimate knowledge of cattle raising in raw frontier country. At the end of his ranch life O. Henry moved to Austin (1885) where he was circumstanced to change his occupation over and over again. Many of his stories written on the background of American Southwest present a faithful picture of the contemporary society. His well-known stories like "The Higher Abdication", "Hygeia at the Solito," "The Missing Chord", "Bexar Scrip No 2692", "A Slight Inaccuracy", "The Final

Triumph", "Seats of the Haughty" demonstrate his keen sense of naturalism. His depth in understanding the sociological ethos of his day is beyond question. Like Sol Smith Russell, a distinguished American comedian O. Henry earned reputation in the portrayal of "uncouth characters, often unschooled in social conventionalities"². Undeniably, the characters he presented in the Southwest stories were mostly unconventional.

A major and distinctive aspect of the contemporary society in the American Southwest was love of alcoholism reflected in O. Henry's stories. This pernicious habit of excessive drinking among people was unquestionably one of the challenging problems of the day that threatened to disrupt vehemently the normal balance of community life in the geographical area the author chose to write about. Ironically the author himself was a victim of this detrimental habit. Virtually his abnormal fondness for liquor precipitated the serious breakdown of his health eventually leading to his early death. Quite aware of his social circumstances O. Henry endeavours seriously to present a vivid picture of the rampant social vice in one of his most celebrated short stories "A Fog in Santone". The conversation between Goodall of Memphis and Toledo, two drunkards in the story, exposes the unwanted sequel of their deadly habit of excessive drinking. Unmistakably the baneful habit was corroding the fabric of the contemporary society in American Southwest slowly and steadily. Contextually sometimes the role of

2. Ibid., p.66.

women becomes highly significant in O. Henry's stories. In the story under reference O. Henry upholds the positive role of a woman to save the life of a man from the stage of mortification and absolute despondency. Goodall of Memphis was on the brink of total degeneration. Before him there was no ray of hope. He was awaiting morbidly the call of death. At this critical juncture of life he encountered Miss Rosa, a young girl who came in his life with her offer of love for him and transformed his life altogether. Eventually he was successful in overcoming his morbidity. Deeply inspired and revitalized with her sweet touch of love he admits unhesitatingly: "I don't know why it is, but I don't feel as bad as I did. An hour ago I wanted to die, but since I've met you, Miss Rosa, I'd like so much to live".³

A keenly sensitive observer, O. Henry was quite aware of the problems that seriously affected the society at large during his time. He was not in the dark about the fact that the system of education in practice during his time was subjected to mismanagement to some extent. That everything was not all right in the sphere of education has been reflected in his story, "The Chair of Philanthromathematics". In the story O. Henry presents a frolicsome satire of college life in the contemporary society of American Southwest. He paints the characters of Jeff Peters and Andy Tucker matchlessly as opportunists of Arizona College in the state of Arizona

3. James Hilton, *More O. Henry* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1959), p.357.

in American Southwest. Andy has been portrayed as a kind of grown-up Tom Sawyer who is always capable of conjuring up something for doing something according to circumstances. Peters and Tucker undoubtedly resemble Mark Twain's Duke and King in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. During the period O. Henry wrote about, many towns might have approved of the setting up of colleges for the improvement of urban economy. But O. Henry could hardly subscribe to such an idea with no depth. He seems to have ridiculed it in the following manner: "A new shooting gallery and a pawnshop and two more saloons started".⁴ O. Henry represents Peters and Tucker and their students as materialists more responsive to the commercial factors and influences of college life than the scholarly accomplishment. Thus O. Henry reflects manifestly the real situation prevalent in some leading American universities during his time. According to Henry Beach Needom, a contemporary well-known writer in McClure's Magazine, many students chose a college with an eye to getting the best reward for their prowess on the football field. During the period in question comparatively prominent colleges were Princeton, Yale and Pennsylvania suited to the fulfilment of growing commercialism among students. Eligibility norms were not often maintained in these institutes.

O. Henry's arrival in Texas in 1882 was a turning point in his life. It is his stay in Texas that influenced his literary career tremendously. It meant health and romance to him. His direct

4. Joseph Gallegly, *From Alamo Plaza to Jack Harris's Saloon* (Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1970), p. 73.

experience in cattle raising in La Salle County during two (1882-1884) and his frequent visit to the home of Lee Hall, "a model for many stout-hearted Texas Rangers" because of his outstanding personality and achievement, contributed congenial atmosphere and flavour to a large number of his stories that make up his "Heart of the West". O. Henry estimated Lee Hall as the real type of range officer on whose model he has portrayed Lieutenant Sandridge in "The Caballero's Way." Perhaps he had in mind the same type of range officer when he painted Bob Buckley, another Ranger Lieutenant in "An Afternoon Miracle". His stay at the La Salle County developed his deep interest in its peculiarities. He learnt to make a real contrast between his life at Greensboro and his novel experience at the ranch. He came in close touch with varied characters and also got accustomed to taking down in paragraphs and drawing in pictures what he saw in his surroundings.

In the post-Civil War period there was a genuine bond of comradeship among the Texas cattlemen in American Southwest. Mostly soldiers, unsuccessful in the Confederate Service, these men exerted themselves unitedly in a combined venture of cattle industry. With profound interest about the people and the social conditions of his environment O. Henry was aware of this development in occupations of people in the region. This aspect has been reflected prominently in some of his best known stories such as "Friends in San Rosario", "A Call Loan", "The Higher Abdication", "Hygeia at the Solito", "The Pimienta Pancakes" and so on. On studying these stories one is convinced of how O. Henry was capable of building the plots of his

tales on the foundation of topical contexts. One of the best examples embodying this aspect is "Friends in San Rosario" published in the Ainslee's in April 1902. In the story O. Henry narrates how a banker named Kingman, ex-cow-poke comes forward to be of ample help to his friend, Bob Buckley who acted rather indirectly in making a loan. During this period it was a usual practice among common cowmen bankers to allow loan to trusted patrons without security. O. Henry recollects a period when a respected stockman friend of his borrowed three thousand dollars from bankers D. Sullivan and Company of San Antonio with only his word as collateral. 'Danny' Sullivan got his money back within the scheduled time. But the same banker had to apply coercion with the hope of getting back the money. It was the period when the cowmen of Alabama possessed extensive landed estates near the Dull Hall and Dull holdings. O. Henry spent a few years of his life in these areas which left an enduringly influential impression on his literary career in later years. In this context one must allude to the well-known stream the 'San Miguel' which captivated O. Henry's attention irresistibly. O. Henry mentions it in his stories such as "The Pimienta Pancakes" and "Seats of the Haughty". No less important was San Antonio as a shaping influence on O. Henry's literary career. Its prominence as a wool market was widely known during 1886. Equally well-known was E. D. Buckley as a buyer and grower of wool. His name fascinated O. Henry deeply. This is corroborated by his use of the name in his two Texas stories namely "An Afternoon Miracle" and "Friends in San Rosario".

O. Henry paints not only the picture of woes and sufferings of the struggling women but sometimes he chooses to touch on their good qualities also. This is how O. Henry widens the range of our knowledge about women in the American Southwest during his time. In the story, "The Princess and the Puma" he depicts Josefa O' Donnell as a remarkable woman possessing such qualities as intrepidity, commonsense, the faculty of ruling, love of animals and extraordinary courage. She displayed exemplary valour in shooting a ferocious Mexican lion to death and saved the life of Ripley Givens, "foreman of one of the Espinosa outfits". In "A Chaparral Christmas Gift" written on the background of the contemporary society in the American Southwest one will keep in mind Rosita McMullen's character for her sense of hospitality, her power of judgement and also her optimistic attitude to life. Quite surprisingly she harbours no ill-feeling towards Johnny McRoy despite his attempt to kill her and her husband. She believes that there is "a spot of good somewhere in everybody". Her words sound like those of a true philosopher. In "The Missing Chord" O. Henry points out Mrs. Kenny's remarkable faculty in musical performance in addition to her sincere devotion to "the domestic round of duties". It is also an indication that the contemporary society could boast of its musical culture. In this context one may refer to the pertinent remark of Mrs. D. P. Bowers, a contemporary American actress: "The high state of musical and dramatic culture that I find here surprises me much, and proves how

much Texas is misrepresented and misunderstood in the northern and eastern cities.”⁵

Significantly, the American Southwest milieu was marked by the contemporary women’s urge for economic freedom. Despite the economic progress in the wake of the industrial development in America the women could rarely enjoy economic solvency owing to widespread and unrestrained discrimination against them. While going through O. Henry’s well-known short story, “Madam Bo-Peep, of The Ranches” one becomes aware of the contemporary women’s preference for their economic freedom in stead of remaining hangers-on. Despite being assured of her aunt’s financial help as presented in the story, Octavia Beaupree was bent on finding a living of her own. She asserted categorically in front of her aunt: “I am going to earn my own living”. One may also be convinced from the story that women were not scared of the travails of ranch life. In spite of her aunt’s discouragement and intimidation Octavia insisted on getting to the adventurous ranch life in Texas. Her insistence on choosing the ‘rough and lonely’ life shows explicitly the strong urge for emancipation and empowerment of women in the contemporary society. Octavia represents the women living terribly repressed under social constraints. Her choice of a new life threatened with odds shows her irresistible will for freedom she was deprived of. O. Henry highlights the socially deprived and neglected whose freedom was

5. Joseph Gallegly, *From Alamo Plaza to Jack Harris’s Saloon* (Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1970), p. 42.

seldom recognized in the contemporary society. The story harks back to the pressing issue of women's liberation and empowerment once again.

Time and again O. Henry shows that women are usually practical-minded. In real situations they are not always guided by any fits of emotion as is often thought of them. Sometimes they can apply their practical sense of judgement properly. In the contemporary society economic freedom was almost denied to women. Hence the economic consideration was a very dominant point of issue in the question of love making or marriage. In the story, "The Ransom of Mack" initially Rebosa was supposed to marry Eddie Bayles, a clerk in Crosby's grocery though his economic insolvency induced her to change her mind. But she showed not the slightest hesitation to marry him as soon as she heard of his upgradation of economic status. Unquestionably O. Henry's stories often help comprehend the real socio- economic condition of the contemporary women in American Southwest.

O. Henry's keen interest in realism is evinced in his story, "The Last of The Troubadours" in which he portrays king James on the model of J. King Fisher, the best known outlaw of the Nueces Strip. Apparently a vain autocrat of the range, King James was the greatest cattleman between the Alamo Plaza in Santone and Bill Hopper's saloon in Brownsville. In Southwest Texas he was the loudest and the most offensive bully, braggart and badman. In O. Henry's literary composition the terrible king James has been transformed into a

badman, and the greatest cattleman in his part of the state. The distinction between the sheepman Sam Ellison, the last baron and king James has been demonstrated by contrast. Of course, cattle King and badman were not synonymous—a fact clarified and defined in O. Henry's words: "In those days, as you know, there was cattle barons and cattle kings. The difference was this: when a cattleman went to Santone and bought beer for the newspaper reporters and only give them the number of cattle he actually owned, they wrote him up for a baron. When he bought'em champagne wine and added in the amount of the cattle he had stole, they called him a king".⁶ Undoubtedly the words reveal how intimately O. Henry was acquainted with the society of Southwest America during his time.

The Southwest American feuds that became chiefly well-known in American history were the Capulet-Montagu quarrel, the Graingerford-Shepherdson devastating affair and the Sutton-Taylor feud. The impact of these conflicts of which O. Henry was well aware has been distinctly reflected in his stories like "The Higher Abdication", "A Technical Error", "A Chaparral Christmas Gift" and so on. The motif behind these stories is revenge as reflected strikingly in his famous story, "The Chaparral Christmas Gift" based on the most well-known Sutton-Taylor feud of the seventies in the nineteenth century. In the story O. Henry narrates the murder of Bill Sutton, Jim Taylor's

6. Joseph Gallegly, *From Alamo Plaza to Jack Harris's Saloon* (Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1970), p.139.

feudist rival at the hands of the latter, the chief of his faction. Nearly a year later Jim took it for granted that the case being pretty old would hardly interrupt his free and safe movement. As the Christmas festival drew closer, accompanied by two friends Jim planned to call on one of his friends in a secure, far away region of the country. But hardly had they joined the celebration when they heard of a 'surprise' from Sutton boys. They fled hastily into the darkness of the adjoining woodland. But ill-fated Jim with his two friends fell one after another pierced with bullets as they attempted to cross a cotton field. In the stories of this type O. Henry has blended successfully his historical consciousness with his fictional representation of life.

In the stories chiefly bearing on the social background of Southwest America O. Henry displays his genuine inclination towards the use of Humpty Dumpty word. This device has obviously been adhered to with the object of creating amusement. This particular type of words is used in multifarious meanings according to the choice of the user. The author makes an abundant use of such words in his story, "Hostages to Momus". That O. Henry dealt with the country, unsophisticated people of the contemporary society can be understood from his use of distorted words. It is also noteworthy that the story, "The Ethics of Pig" chiefly known for its use of Humpty Dumpty words is a remarkable testimony to his proficiency in building the plot of his stories on the background of contemporary social life.

Advantageously circumstanced from literary point of view during his stay at the cattle ranch of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Hall valuable material was accessible to O. Henry for his desperado stories. Very frequently O. Henry used in many of his stories the expression, "keep your fences up", a widely acquainted locution of the period. The barbed wire and the railroad brought about a revolution in the cattle industry of Texas. O. Henry had intimate knowledge of this development and the reflection of the society in American Southwest was distinctly apparent in the stories written on the contemporary background. His Texas stories were definitely enriched with the bandit lore he became conversant with from Lee Hall and his exranger cowhands. O. Henry's well-known story, "An Afternoon Miracle" may be cited in this context. It was commonly believed in Southwest Texas during O. Henry's ranch life that Mother Nature was the only remedy for a person with tubercular infection to restore his health. Staying out of doors and spending as much time as possible in touch with natural surroundings would be of great utility for regaining normal health. O. Henry's "Hygeia at the Solito" is a very common story narrating how a generous man restores primal vigour to a consumptive with the application of the simplest remedy. The story vindicates vividly O. Henry's in-depth knowledge of the society and the people of his time very intimately.

Relevantly, in the nineteenth century Charles Dickens (1812-1870) endeavoured seriously to represent himself as a social reformer in his fiction. While handling the contemporary social

problems he made sincere efforts to popularize the low life characters in England. A little later Bret Harte (1839-1902) chose the same sort of material in his literary works in America. In the wake of the American Civil War O. Henry followed the same track and drew upon the characters of low graded people on a wider perspective in his short stories. One of the best examples of such characters is Dick portrayed in his story, "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking." At the same time O. Henry was vastly aware of the oppressed, deprived, humiliated women of his contemporary society. This is why such neglected women and their problems have become the prominent theme in many of his stories.

The human interest of O. Henry's stories is one of the principal factors perpetuating his name and fame among millions of readers throughout the world. There lies at the background of most of his stories a kind of basic human sympathy for the common joys and sorrows of mankind. Keenly sensitive a writer as O. Henry was, he chiefly drew on his life experience for the material of his stories. He attempted earnestly to paint a faithful picture of his contemporary society in American Southwest with his main focus on the poor, deprived, humiliated and ill-fated women directly affected with the challenges and problems of the period.

O. Henry— A spokesman for the underdogs and the underprivileged

With the tremendous rising drift in productive prospect in the nineteenth century in the wake of the American Civil War (1861-65) it was expected that poverty would be a thing of the past. But, as realities hardly ever live up to visions the expectation was hardly fulfilled. Virtually the disparity between the haves and the have-nots widened and the struggle for existence was more intensified than before. Despite the widespread application of labour-saving machinery the under age children were employed illegally and exploited unscrupulously. Hardly was there any advantage for the people representing the lowest class in society to share the benefits of the fast-growing economic development enjoyed by the privileged class. The material progress achieved rapidly through the advancement of science and technology could hardly provide a happy and healthy life for the downtrodden and the distressed while the affluent and the privileged were the sole beneficiaries of its fruits. Thus the maldistribution of wealth culminated in a glaring social inequality. It is in the backdrop of these socio-economic perspectives in the contemporary American society that O. Henry's treatment of the underdogs and the underprivileged might be taken into consideration. Significantly, quite a number of contemporary American writers like Mark Twain (1835-1910), Bret Harte (1836-

1902), Hamlin Garland (1860-1940), Stephen Crane (1871-1900), garnered the materials for their fiction from the plight of the wretched—the have-nots who are the victims of sheer social injustice, inequality and inequity. In later years Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), one of the greatest naturalist writers of America also took up the issue of social discrimination in his novels. Like O. Henry he is widely known as a very sensitive and sympathetic writer showing deep sympathy and concern for the distressed and the deprived as revealed in his work, *A Book about Myself*. In the same book he admits quite frankly: "It was the underdog that always interested me more than the upper one, his woes, his sympathies."¹

Equally notable is the name of Stephen Crane who presents quite realistically the sorrowful tale of a poor girl betrayed by her friends and family and is finally forced by the circumstances to choose the life of a prostitute in his famous novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Almost similar is the plot of O. Henry's story, "Elsie in New York". Elsie, a helpless girl in extreme need of a job approaches several persons but she is misguided and finally forced to lose her dignity. In this connection one may refer to the novels of Hamlin Garland, a crusader against the ills of the contemporary American society. His novels eloquently articulate the protests against the prevailing social condition rendering the lives of

1. Theodore Dreiser, *A Book about Myself* (New York, USA), p.370.

the poor and the downtrodden painful and unhappy. In this group of writers O. Henry undoubtedly occupies a distinct position.

Basically a product of the post Civil War scenario in America, O. Henry paints the sufferings and miseries of the poor, oppressed and exploited people with his main focus on the working women in the America of his times. Gifted with rare literary talent and keenly sensitive to the social ethos he has chronicled faithfully the agonies, sufferings and misfortunes of the oppressed and the destitute— particularly the women who were unscrupulously discriminated against. He reveals with utmost care and sympathy how poor people become the victims of harrowing social ills and problems. More importantly, while presenting the wretched lot of the deprived and the distressed O. Henry might have had the memories of his own intense struggle against the heavy odds of his life at the back of his mind. Obviously poverty becomes the central theme in some of his well-known stories such as “The Cop and the Anthem”, “A Madison Square Arabian Night”, “The Unfinished Story”, and “The Unfurnished Room”. With regard to O. Henry’s handling of poverty one may refer to a brilliant remark of William Peden, an eminent O. Henry critic: “Enormously interested in people, he is capable of swift and compassionate insights into the average person, and his sympathy for the underdog, the little man or woman dwarfed in the maze of contemporary life, to a degree accounted for his enormous popularity.”² Fated to be deprived of mother’s love and care at a very early age he was practically exposed to various storms and stresses

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and this helped him to realize the agonies and miseries of the poor and the downtrodden. Besides, possessed of a lounging habit as O. Henry was, he had a wide scope of studying people very closely. Naturally he perceived directly how a considerable section of people in society had to struggle hard for the bare subsistence of life, and this first-hand reading of the abject conditions of the have-nots provided the raw material for most of his stories. It is perhaps not out of place to mention here that O. Henry's life is a saga of extreme poverty and hardship. In this condition one may recall the period of his stay in Honduras where he fled in 1896 without facing the trial for his alleged embezzlement of funds from the National Bank of Austin. Furthermore, while staying in extremely painful and challenging circumstances in Honduras he refused to submit himself to any weakness or hesitation, rather he resorted to various strenuous and demeaning jobs like digging the ditches and other odd ones for his living.

One may take a look at yet another phase of his odyssey. After the loss of employment in the land office of Texas on 21st January, 1891 he was virtually with no means of support for his family. Though he managed to secure a temporary job as inventory lister in the Annual Stocktaking at Tobin's drug store, he was in dire financial straits once again. The meagre pay he earned from this job

2. Thomas Riggs, *Reference Guide to American Literature (Fourth edition)*, (St James Press, 27500 Drake Rd, Farmington Hills, MI 48331, 2000), p.401.

was quite inadequate to support his family particularly after a period of comparative stability in the Texas Land Office.

That O. Henry was a realist par excellence is beyond question. Whatever he wrote was chiefly based on the first-hand experiences of his life. After his release from the Ohio Penitentiary on July 24, 1890 he moved to Pittsburg wherefrom he journeyed to New York in the spring of 1902 in response to Gilman Hall, editor of "Ainslee's". Most prolific was his literary career during his stay in New York where he showed his intense interest in people of diverse idiosyncrasies in the streets, restaurants, hotels, parks and entertainment halls. In this connection one may recall the words of C. Alphonso Smith, O. Henry's biographer: "O. Henry found his usable material in things seen rather than in things heard, or, if heard, they were heard at first hand."³ It can hardly be denied that O. Henry had a keen sense of naturalism. This is what Gilbert Millstein, a well-known twentieth century critic, highlights in the following manner: "There was quite literally no neighborhood in Manhattan with which O. Henry, a prodigious walker and a notable loungeur as well, was not familiar at any hour in any season; and no social or economic class whose ways he could not reproduce with absolute fidelity."⁴

3. C. Alphonso Smith, *O. Henry Biography* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916), p.183.

4. Gilbert Millstein, "O. Henry's New Yorkers— And Today's" (The New York Times, Sept 9, 1962), pp.36, 132.

Few will deny O. Henry's capability to present life in its unvarnished form. His proletarian sympathy for the poor and the neglected in society combined with his strong and gritty realism contributed to the effortless creation of his wonderful stories. Consequently, his stories are not only the product of his vivid imagination but they also reflect distinctly his experiences of some personal events and his awareness of the contemporary social scenario.

Soft hearted, generous and deeply sympathetic in temperament O. Henry was keenly sensitive to the social ills of his time. He observed very closely how the ill-fated toiling women were victims of gross humiliation, discrimination and economic disparity. Their grinding poverty as well as persistent struggle for existence often becomes the major theme in his stories. Basically a man of soft temperament, O. Henry was always deeply oppressed by the sight of human sorrows and agonies. Of his great generosity writes Mrs. Porter: "He would share his last dollar with a fellow who came to him with a hard-luck story. He would give away the clothes he needed himself to a man poorer than himself."⁵ His personal life of hard and unrelenting struggle which taught him to sympathise with the lot of the downtrodden and the deprived was the veritable background that induced him to take up the cause of the underdogs and the underprivileged in his stories. His keen sense of realism in tandem

5. C. Alphonso Smith, *O. Henry Biography* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916), p. 181.

with his remarkable care and attention for the oppressed and the downtrodden make his characters quite convincing and fascinating at the same time. In many of his stories he deals with the toiling masses with particular emphasis on the life of the ill-paid working girls and career women.

In Deming Brown's article, "O. Henry in Russia" published in the Russian Review, xii (1953) it is clearly indicated that O. Henry exposes the inequalities of the then American capitalistic system in which poverty and inequity were endemic. Mr. Brown touches on O. Henry's attitude to the rich in society in the following words: "He gave a general idea of the absurdity of the system under which dire poverty was the source of the amassing of fantastic wealth, and under which the rich became slaves of their millions and lost all human semblances. For O. Henry they were leeches who sucked their capital out of the poor, to whom they paid a pittance so that they might keep body and soul together and help the rich make their millions.⁶" Relevantly O. Henry cared little for the elite and the higher classes in society. He had his vigilant eyes often fixed on the streets, shops and cafes so as to look for the poor and neglected people in society. Tremendous was his insight to study how they struggled persistently in the face of all odds to earn their daily bread.

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*chill penury and humiliating discrimination the poor and the ill-fated are exposed to, O. Henry's deep concern for them is quite manifest in his well-known story, "A Madison Square Arabian Night" where O. Henry's depiction of abundant luxury and comfort contrasts sharply with the vast multitude of ill-fated underdogs deprived of bare necessities of life. That O. Henry is a staunch advocate of the cause of the underprivileged, obviously ranked insignificantly in society, is evidently exemplified with his reference to the hall porter, the janitor, the elevator man, the messenger boys, the waiters, the milkman, the guard, the cook and the maid in his story, "A Sacrifice Hit". Thus O. Henry gradually becomes a writer of the common people, "always sympathetic to the common man"⁷ in the words of Elmer Kelton.

One may often encounter the people of low rank-neglected, deprived and underprivileged-in such stories as in "Bulger's Friend". Relying on his direct study of people in real life O. Henry paints quite admirably Bulger, an old, peculiar man "who'd lost everything- home and property and friends and health." Bulger's drudgery as a bass drummer makes him experience the sufferings and

6. E. C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (College & University press publishers, New Haven, Conn, 1965), pp. 101-102.

7. Elmer Kelton, *Letters to Lithopolis From O. Henry to Mabel Wagnalls* (2nd Edition, published by Eakin Press, Texas, Nov, 1999), Foreword.

* It may be pertinent here to take up a brief thematic study of some of O. Henry's stories to appreciate his treatment of the downtrodden, ^{and the oppressed,} while presenting a vivid picture of

miseries the poor can hardly escape. "The Cop and the Anthem" justifies O. Henry's leanings towards the poor as evident in his portrayal of Soapy, an extremely poor man leading a desperate life amidst utter despondency. With the hope of a definite shelter and daily meal he prefers the custody of police to the advantages of a free man.

That O. Henry's deep sympathy for the neglected, deprived, humiliated and oppressed women in the contemporary society was genuine can hardly be underrated. He depicted with utmost fidelity their woes and sufferings, their intense poverty, the humiliating and oppressive treatment meted out to them and their hard struggle for existence. The women faced with hostile circumstances and eventually plunged into the gloom of despair stirred his sympathetic heart very deeply and induced him to be ever eloquent about them. He presents the unsophisticated living of those women who are of the economically depressed class and forced to toil hard to earn their daily bread. Notwithstanding their utmost dutifulness they are often treated with intolerable humiliation and oppression. Seldom recognized are their social status, sense of self-dignity and right to personal freedom. With superb credibility O. Henry portrays his working-class heroines in such stories as "The Memento", "Elsie in New York", "An Unfinished Story", "Brickdust Row", "The Trimmed Lamp", "The Guilty Party", "An East Side Story", "Lost on Dress Parade" and so on. Unfavourably exposed to diverse adverse circumstances of life in the tenement districts and also of a system of

inequitable and brutal materialism they are sometimes repressed beyond miseries the poor can hardly escape description. Commenting on O. Henry's handling of the theme of social discrimination and inequity against women—a burning issue of the day—E. C. Garcia, a noted O. Henry critic comments: “While portraying the horrors and pinched existence endured by the unpaid shop girls he does occasionally condemn in sweepingly Dickensian general terms the tight-fisted employers who keep them economically depressed. Occasionally too, he chides the idle rich, through irony and understatement, for having so much to waste while others have so little to live on”⁸

O. Henry's deep sympathy towards the socially deprived and exploited women of his time is exemplified in yet another story, “The Memento” which is inspired by the contemporary social background. The story presents two working girls named Miss Lynnett D. Armande and Miss Rosalie Ray, who are victims of harrowing social problems. Quite dissatisfied with their profession of actress they gave up their jobs and endeavoured to find an alternative way for their livelihood. Grossly humiliated and inhumanly tortured they abhor serving the inconsiderate men who turn them into puppets in their hands. The unfortunate women are forced to work hard under most unfavourable and inhuman circumstances until all their vitality is

8. E. C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (College & University Press Publishers, New Haven, Conn, 1965), p. 109.

queezed out only for the pleasures of men, but in return what they get is negligibly little for a decent living. Incidentally, O. Henry's graphic depiction of these hapless women puts one in mind of Hamlin Garland (1860-1940), a contemporary American novelist who presents the similar picture of drudgery and sufferings of toiling women in his story, "Among the Corn-rows". In the story Garland points out how Julia Peterson is forced to lead a hard life sans joy and freedom in her youth, a 'life of heat and dust and labour' the experience of which makes her burst out at the hard realities of her existence: "I am too cheap a hand. I do a man's work an' get no pay at all."⁹ Quite vivid and credible is the picture of agonies and sufferings Julia is undergoing: "Julia Peterson, faint with hunger, was toiling back and forth between the corn-rows, holding the handles of the double-shovel corn-plough..... Her heart was full of bitterness, her face flushed with heat, and her muscles aching with fatigue"¹⁰

"Elsie in New York" is yet another story where the grim face of poverty is presented as realistically as possible. In Elsie's life poverty is aggravated with the sudden death of her father who left behind just a paltry amount of 2.50 dollars for her daughter. Despite her helpless condition Elsie shows an undaunted spirit and a

9. Robert L. Ramsay, *Short Stories of America*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, June 1921), p. 100.

10. *Ibid.*, p.88.

strong urge for attaining self-sufficiency. She approaches several persons for an employment, and to her utter frustration she is almost misguided at every step. O. Henry here persuasively raises the question of financial insecurity among people, and among women in particular. Women are hardly treated with sympathy in their struggle for existence. The social scenario in which they are forced to live is seldom conducive to decent living.

While depicting a realistic picture of the abject poverty with which Lou and Nancy, two major characters of "The Trimmed Lamp", are stricken, O. Henry delves deep into the social milieu to show how they were forced to leave their country homes in search of a livelihood in the big city of New York. But the hard reality they faced in their life is that they were hardly paid according to their deserts. The poor wages they were paid despite their drudgery for their employers provided even not the bare subsistence for them. Exploitation and deprivation belied all their dreams they cherished. O. Henry's proletarian sympathy for the underprivileged and downtrodden women is much in evidence when at the very outset of the story he raises his voice of protest against the sneering attitude of those who look down upon the poor working girls like Lou and Nancy as 'shopgirls'.

"A Departmental Case" is yet another instance where O. Henry feels quite at home with the treatment of his usual theme: the plight of the humiliated and oppressed people particularly

the toiling women of his days. He paints a faithful picture of the miserable life of such a distressed woman in the above mentioned story. While presenting a very familiar story of an unhappy married life of a woman O. Henry introduces her husband to his readers in the following manner: "brutal, conscienceless husband, a robber, a spendthrift, a moral coward and a bully who failed to provide even the means of the barest existence."¹¹ Quite convincingly O. Henry presents Mrs. Sharp, the distressed woman approaching Luke Coonrod Standifer, Commissioner of Insurance, Statistics and History of the state of Texas for help and sympathy. About the helpless woman O. Henry writes: "There stood in the door a faded woman, one of the numerous sisterhood of the unhappy, she was dressed in black—poverty's perpetual mourning for lost joys."¹²

In this connection one may remember "Brickdust Row" in which O. Henry presents a poor working girl leading a life of hard struggle. Florence, the shop girl heroine in the story is engaged in the manual labour of trimming hats in a millinery shop. On being asked by Blinker why Florence does not entertain her company in her house she lives in, she replies apparently with a bit of depression in her tone: "If you could see the place where I live you would n't ask that. I live in Brickdust Row. They call it that because there's red dust

11. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. 190.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

from the bricks crumbling over everything. I've lived there more than four years. There's no place to receive company. You can't have anybody come to your room. What else is there to do? A girl has got to meet the man, hasn't she?"¹³ Florence's words are deeply moving. We are shocked to learn how desperately she is struggling for existence. Her emotional outburst unquestionably underscores O. Henry's deep concern and sympathy for the have-nots of the contemporary society. In this context one is reminded of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's well-known short story, "Mahesh". O. Henry's depiction of miseries of the poor working girl, Florence, reminds one of the same picture of poverty and hardship of Gafur, the leading character in the story. While describing the poor weaver's, dilapidated hut Sarat Chandra points out in minute details the wretched plight of the collapsed mud walls of Gafur's hut. In fact the hut is beyond identification and there is hardly any mark of demarcation between the hut and the road. The novelist delineates the pathetic condition of the hut during rains when Gafur and his daughter, Amina are forced to pass the night with no suitable space to lie and stretch their legs. Both O. Henry and Sarat Chandra are realists and sociologically conscious writers. Hence profound is their interest in the treatment of the social ills like poverty, exploitation, social discrimination and humiliation against women. What informs the presentation of both the writers is a keen sense of humanism and an overwhelming feeling of sympathy.

13. Ibid., p.796.

Finally it is perhaps not irrelevant to quote the words of Arthur Hobson Quinn, a noted American critic and scholar who is keenly aware of O. Henry's sympathy for the poor and neglected. His deep appreciation of O. Henry's stories prompts him to make the following comment: "What lifts O. Henry at times above his general level was his deep sympathy for the underdog.... He saw the pathos of the daily struggle of those whose margin is small, who live on the sea coast of insecurity..."¹⁴

14. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

Women in the eyes of O. Henry

It goes without saying that women occupy a significant position in O. Henry's stories and the point is well attested by the roles they play in varied situations and circumstances in his narratives. It is worth mentioning here that O. Henry's stories are as good as a social document of the plight of the contemporary working women placed in diverse situations.

Significantly, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century women were portrayed in diverse ways in the stories of the contemporary female writers like Edna Pontellier, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Margaret Deland and some others. They reflected in their works the accepted belief that women's role in society was to sacrifice, to shun self-gratification in order to ensure the pleasure of others ie men. In this context one may refer to Rosalie's intense hatred towards men in O. Henry's short story, "The Memento". She opens out her heart to her dear friend, Lynnette with the following harsh words: "But what I hated most was the men- the men leering and blathering at you across tables, trying to buy you with Wurzburger or Extra Dry, according to their estimate of your price. And the men in the audiences clapping, yelling, snarling, crowding, writhing, gloating- like a lot of wild beasts, with their eyes fixed on you, ready to eat you up if you come in reach of their claws. Oh, how I hate'em!"¹ Despite a great deal of economic development in America in the wake of the American Civil War the living and working conditions of women were hardly congenial. The working women were mostly exploited in factories

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where they had to work hard for hours together. The women workers were given less pay than men for the same work. Thus the women were victims of gross discrimination. A twentieth century writer, June Sochen's account exposes the grim reality: "Women workers were much more vulnerable to exploitation than men. Not only did they receive less pay for the same job, but they were often seduced by their male supervisors and threatened with dismissal if they told what had happened.²" The urban industrial evolution in America exercised a mighty impact on the traditional lifestyle in America. But unfortunately the change affected women too little to be worthy of mention. Accustomed to the age-old household functions, they were subjected to sheer domestic drudgery and gross neglect. Fortunately there arose a strong voice of protest from women social workers for better working conditions for women. In 1909 a general strike was called involving participation of thousands of women workers in particular to protest against the unhealthy working conditions in America.

O. Henry was quite aware of the challenging problems that the contemporary working women faced. It is hardly an exaggeration to state that he identified himself with their problems deeply. Their agonies, misfortunes, and the real accounts of their hard struggle awakened his genuine sympathy towards them, and his stories present a dismal picture of oppression and humiliation to

1. J. Donald Adams, *O. Henry's New York* (Pawcett World Library, New York, USA, July 1964), p.134.

2. June Sochen, *Her Story (A Woman's View of American History)*, (Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., New York, March 1971), p. 212.

which they were inhumanely subjected. He was sincerely interested in their well-being. That is why he was strongly opposed to any sinister move that might deprive them of their legitimate rights in society. Contextually one may refer to Ariela's sudden and unexpected demand of her alimony before the divorce was going to be finalized in O. Henry's story, "The Whirligig of Life." O. Henry shows that the woman was aware of her right. In the stories such as "The Guilty Party", "An Unfinished story", "Brickdust Row" and "The Trimmed Lamp" O. Henry focuses quite realistically on the serious problems affecting mostly the lives of shop girls. The poor unfortunate girls like Masie in "A Lickpenny Lover" and Florence in "Brickdust Row" remind one of the similar experiences of hardship and agonies in the lives of hosts of poor and deprived women in the contemporary society. Very few writers of his time were so candidly eloquent about the conditions of women as O. Henry. Moreover, to him woman was a source of inspiration so far as his personal literary accomplishment was concerned. In his marriage with Athol O. Henry's literary development found an impetus. Undeniably his wife played a crucial role in encouraging him in his literary venture. Contextually his delineation of Della's character in "The Gift of the Magi" is very strongly influenced by Athol's temperament. The use of Athol's model for the character of another woman reveals O. Henry's genuine love and respect to his wife. Undoubtedly O. Henry's attitude to women is decent and courteous. Besides, he is a strong advocate of the place and position women deserve in society. This is why he highlights the dignity of women in the

following manner: "Holy is the wife; revered the mother."³

O. Henry's women are often highly idealistic. What inspires them is a spirit of sacrifice and a feeling of nobility. In certain circumstances they can show their strong mental power to sacrifice their most cherished objects for the gratification of others or subject themselves to self-immolation or sufferings for the similar reason. Sometimes they appear to be tremendously noble-hearted for the happiness of others. In "The Gift of the Magi" both Jim and Della are quite candid in their temperament. One's love for the other is intense and quite genuine. This is why one can sacrifice easily and unhesitatingly one's dearest treasure for the other only for the sake of love. In "A Service of Love" almost similar attitude is shown by Joe and Delia towards each other. Both Joe and Delia suffer for the sake of deep love for each other. Women like Della and Delia set the rare examples of self-sacrifice and nobility. Though they are ordinary women their extraordinariness lies in their uncommon role and attitude under practical circumstances. Similarly idealistic is the character of Miss Marian also in "Lost on Dress Parade". Hence she upholds the significance of altruistic love that inspires people to be quite unselfish and prepared for self-sacrifice. Such love in her estimate heightens individuals and ennobles them profoundly. During her talk with her elder sister she approves not of the kind of love that encourages mere selfishness and generates narrowness in the minds of individuals. Her words quoted

3. P. J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. 677.

below give an idea of her nobility and idealistic bent of mind: "I could love a man with dark and kind blue eyes, who is gentle and respectful to poor girls, who is handsome and good and does not try to flirt. But I could love him only if he had an ambition, an object, some work to do in the world. I would not care how poor he was if I could help him build his way up. But, sister dear, the kind of man we always meet—the man who lives an idle life between society and his clubs- I could not love a man like that, even if his eyes were blue and he were so kind to poor girls whom he met in the street".⁴ When Mr. Chandler tries to tempt her with a series of pleasures such as clubs, teas, golf, riding, kennels and cotillions, tours abroad and a yacht lying at Larchmont her idealistic attitude to life prevents her from being tempted in the least. She hardly indulges in any feminine weakness to be won over easily. She is bold enough to reply unhesitatingly: "This way of living that you speak of sounds so futile and purposeless. Have n't you any wok to do in the world that might interest you more?"⁵

In many of O.Henry's stories women are simple, alert, candid, cheerful, grateful, kindhearted, courteous, self- respecting and gifted with many other good qualities. In the story, "Lost on Dress Parade," for example Miss Marian has been painted as soft hearted, sincere, self-conscious, self-respecting, grateful, simple, ingenuous, courteous and also practical minded. Her sense of

4. Ibid., p. 414.

5. J. Donald Adams, *O.Henry's New York* (Pawcett World Library, New York, 1964), p. 72.

delicacy is so keen that at Mr. Chandler's proposal to call a cab for her help she refuses to take further cooperation from him. At the same time she admits quite frankly that it was due to her awkwardness that she had to face the trouble. In "The Memento" the image of Rosalie brings before our eyes the portrait of a woman gifted with some praiseworthy qualities like boldness, self-dignity, straightforwardness and assertiveness. In "An Unfinished Story" O. Henry draws the picture of a sincere, genuine, trustworthy, resolute, and at the same time whimsical and emotional woman. Dulcie is such a heroine in this story. In the story O. Henry shows that despite out of sight general Kitchener dominated Dulcie's mind altogether. Her love for him was quite genuine and no temptation could deflect her in the least from her emotional attachment to her lover. In "The pint Flask" colonel's wife has been portrayed as a dutiful, devoted, sincere and considerate woman. She behaves as a truly loving wife to her husband. In "The Romance of a Busy Broker" O. Henry presents Leslie as simple, dutiful, sincere and keenly efficient in her profession. It is true that O. Henry's stories present a faithful picture of the distressed, oppressed, humiliated and deprived women of his time. Here it is important to note that we can have an idea of O. Henry's attitude to women if we study carefully the female characters depicted in his stories.

O. Henry's women are often not meek and weak to tolerate the bulk of injustice and ill-treatment meted out to them. Occasionally they can display their mettle and raise their voice of protest against the humiliation and oppression brought about to them mercilessly in a male-dominated society. In "The Harbinger"

Mr. Peters told a blatant lie to Mrs. Peters with the purpose of seizing her hard-earned money. But Mrs. Peters saw through his ill motive. She called him a liar undauntedly. She reacted sharply without surrendering to him: "I rubbed the skin off both me hands washin' Jumpers and overalls to make that dollar. Do you think it come out of them suds to buy the kind you put into you? Skiddoo! Get your mind off of money".⁶ O.Henry attempts to reveal through the portrait of Rosalie in "The Memento" that it is beyond toleration for women to be repressed and humiliated. They have their own voice of protest and they can oppose strongly whenever any injustice is perpetrated to them. Sympathetic to the underdog and underprivileged of the contemporary society. O.Henry is obviously opposed to the prevailing trends of repression and humiliation against woman. Hence there may be a motive behind the creation of an assertive character like Rosalie. Perhaps O.Henry upholds Rosalie to let her represent all those women who are oppressed and humiliated in defamatory ways in a patriarchal society. She stands out to voice a protest against all sorts of discrimination and humiliation of which women are often made victims. Her harsh words may send a distinct signal to all women that to surrender quietly to every injustice means to face oppression and discrimination in greater degree. To protest and fight for justice and self-defence is the best means for survival with respect and dignity. Rosalie has obviously a distinctive role to play as a bold woman in society Sick of the intolerable life she grows aggressive against the

6. P. J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O.Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. 778.

misdeemeanour of men. She hates to tolerate injustice like a silent onlooker. Instead of maintaining silence she grows vocal and speaks out undauntedly and unhesitatingly all her hatred and anger towards those tyrannical men whose neglectful and discriminatory attitude to women is at the root of the latter's degradation in society. Rosalie gives vent to her feelings to her friend quite frankly: "And the men we have to meet after the show are the worst of all. The stage-door kind, and the manager's friends who take us to supper and show their diamonds and talk about seeing 'Dan' and 'Dave' and 'Charlie' for us. They're beasts, and I hate'em."⁷ In the context of O. Henry's handling of self-assertive female characters George Egerton's well-known story, "Virgin Soil" may be referred to here. It is an anecdote of unhappy marriage thrust upon Florence at her early age of seventeen. Her mother felt relieved after her marriage with Philip, a well established man in point of social status. But Florence was a victim of torture and humiliation in the hands of her husband who carried on illicit relations with another woman. She spent five years of her life with her husband in spite of facing a virtual ordeal in his company. But eventually she failed to bear further insult and brought an end to the relations for relief from the painful life. She has no longer a desire to remain a plaything in the hands of a man for whom she has not the slightest love. Protesting against her mother who gave her in marriage injudiciously Florence gives vent to her strong feeling with extreme bitterness: "It has killed the sweetness in me, the pure thoughts of womanhood-have made me hate myself and

7. J. Donald Adams, *O Henry's New York* (Pawcett World Library, New York, 1964), p. 134.

hate you cry, Mother, if you will; You don't know how much you have to cry for- I have cried myself barren of tears- cry over the girl you killed-with a gust of passion-why didn't you strangle me as a baby? It would have been kinder; my life has been a hell, Mother".⁸ Her words of protest are as sharp as a sting. She pours out all her venom towards her mother who was responsible for spoiling her life. Contextually one may hear quite distinctly the words of protest in Madam Schukina's voice in Chekhov's short story, "A Poor, Defenseless Creature". In response to her appeal when Alexei Nikolaich asked her to get out in an insulting tone she could not but protest against his manner. Despite being a sick and defenseless woman she was not at all mentally infirm. She had the courage to react befittingly to Nikolaich's insolence. She declared sharply that she would have him 'grovelling' at her feet for his insolence.

O.Henry's stories prominently feature poor factory girls, struggling professional women, young shop girls and other female characters reminding the readers of the poor working mothers, struggling factory girls, confident artists, stylish heiresses, aspiring ingénues and others in the works of Theodore Dreiser. The contemporary well-known American writers like William Dean Howells (1837-1920), Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) took up the burning issue of social discrimination against women in their works. Like O.Henry Dreiser was an extremely sensitive and sympathetic writer. He was honestly and

8. Georgina Hammick, *Love & Loss* (Virago Press Limited, October 1992, 20-23 Mandela Street, Camden Town, London NW 1 OHQ), pp. (182-183).

sympathetically interested in the horrible deprivations inflicted upon a section of people in society. About his first novel, *Sister Carrie* Charles C. Walcutt, a famous American critic makes the following comment: "Into this novel Dreiser has brought all the vivid reality of his own experience with the dreary, beaten, downtrodden life of those who have no money, no background, no sophistication, and no especial talent. With a deep compassion that never assumes the right to pass moral judgement upon the actions of his characters, he shows Carrie Meeber coming to Chicago from the country, drearily passing from one ill-paid and health-breaking job to another, and at length jobless and depressed by the thought of having to return defeated to the country, setting up housekeeping with Drouet, a 'drummer' whom she had met on the train as she first entered the city".⁹ Crane and Howells also presented the sorrows and sufferings of the deprived and the underprivileged men and women in their works. What O. Henry endeavours to bring home to us is that women were frequently looked upon as weaker than and inferior to men in the contemporary society. This explains why they as they appear in his stories, are victims of deception, humiliation and helplessness. Notwithstanding their vigorous clamouring for freedom they were deprived of their right to freedom quite unjustly. Often in their best efforts to find out a suitable means for their self-sufficiency O. Henry's women face adverse circumstances. It was not easy at all for the women to share the social progress meant for all. It is deplorable that they were discriminated against, oppressed, neglected

9. Donald Pizer, *Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie* (Second Edition, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., USA, 1991), p.491.

and humiliated in an inhuman manner in the so called civilized society. In O. Henry's stories there are instances galore that speak volumes for the prevailing wretched conditions of women. In the story, "Elsie in New York" O. Henry attempts to exemplify the issue of financial insecurity in the lives of women. That women are usually considered weaker and inferior in society can be understood from the study of Elsie's life. After her father's death she becomes quite helpless and looks out frantically for an employment. In her extreme financial uncertainty she approaches some persons for a job. But they can hardly help her. Ultimately she is misled and her dignity is imperiled. As a woman her right to financial freedom is not safeguarded in the society she lives in. She is robbed of her dignity too. Elsie's life shows that the poor women in the society of her days are hardly provided with help and sympathy they deserve to live decently in society. While going through "The Harbinger" one can realize with the least effort how women are ill-treated and disregarded in society. Initially Mr. Peters, as presented in the story had an eye to getting possession of his wife's hard-earned money by subterfuge. Mr. Peters' cruelty and inhumanity towards his wife get fully exposed when he speaks of his preference for "a little choking" to put an end to Mrs. Peters' life only to get a dollar from her. The story shows that women's dignity and worth are often underestimated in society. In "A Departmental Case" O. Henry seeks to relate quite convincingly how women are persecuted both physically and mentally in the hands of men. It is a touching story of a wretched woman deprived of her dignity. The author estimates her husband in the following manner: "brutal, conscienceless husband, a robber, a spendthrift, a moral coward and a bully who failed to

provide even the means of the barest existence".¹⁰ One can hardly expect decent behaviour from such a heartless man to his wife. How precarious was the position of women in society during O. Henry's time can be inferred from Mrs. Sharp's moving words uttered about her husband: "But for the last six months he has done everything but kill me. I often wish he had done that, too. He got out of money for a while, and abused me shamefully for not having anything he could spend. Then father died, and left me the little home in Goliad. My husband made me sell that, and turned me out into the world. I've barely been able to live, for I'm not strong enough to work. Lately, I heard he was making money in San Antonio, so I went there, and found him, and asked for a little help. This, "touching the livid bruise of her temple", is what he gave me".¹¹ "How She Got in the Swim" is yet another instance of neglect and humiliation to women. George St. Bibbs was fond of fashionable societies. But he was opposed to his domestic wife, Mrs. Bibbs' participation in a ball. With an eye to his personal enjoyment he left his wife neglected at home. Perhaps he was diffident of her competence to adapt herself to a fashionable society. His attitude hints at how grossly he disregards his wife. The story, "Lost on Dress Parade" makes it clear how women are often instigated to fall a prey to temptations. In the story Mr. Chandler endeavours to tempt Miss Marian with a series of pleasure to persuade her to agree to his suggestion. What he dares to do is

10. P.J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.190.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

certainly a gross insult to her dignity. That women have their own capabilities is not often recognized in a male-dominated society. Hence they are treated as playthings in the hands of men.

Undeniably O. Henry shows keen insight into the psychological development of female characters. His proficiency in painting the characters in minute details primarily with his keen observation and great analytical power was beyond question. His female characters are not merely stereotyped. They are diverse in form and multihued in look. Harshness is sometimes a very common trait in the characters of women. But sometimes of course, the women appear remarkably softhearted and modest. While reading O. Henry's short stories one may observe how his female characters occasionally tend to grow harsh and impatient. They talk and behave with unusual toughness of spirit under certain circumstances. They even seem to lack modesty in their expressions as we find in the story, "Hearts and Crosses". In the story when Webb, the prince consort wanted a "bunch of beeves to go to Zimmerman and Nesbit" Santa, his wife reacted quite sharply and impatiently. The utterance of harshness in her speech to her husband lacks propriety. She reprimands her husband in the following manner: "Nonsense!" "You'd better start on, Bud, so as to noon at the Little Elm Waterhole. Tell Barber we'll have another lot of culls ready in about a month."¹² In "The Memento" Rosalie is quite harsh and bitter in her tone. She is thoroughly disgusted with the life of an actress she is

12. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. 570.

leading. The misbehaviour of men whom she hates heart and soul induces her to give up her profession. One may notice the outburst of her bitterness and the extreme abhorrence towards men in the following words: "But what, I hated most was the men—the men leering, blathering at you across tables, trying to buy you with Wurzburger or Extra Dry, according to their estimate of your price".¹³ "The Whirligig of Life" is another well-known story in which one's notice may be drawn to the use of harsh words on the part of a woman towards her husband. When Ransie told the judge that all the means of adjustment between he and his wife, Ariela failed and divorce was inescapable she reacted to her husband harshly: "When he's a no-count varmint," "a-traipsin' along of scalawags and moonshiners, and a-layin' on his back pizen 'ith co'n whisky and a- pesterin' folks with a pack o' hungry, triflin' houn's to feed!"¹⁴ Despite being basically a softhearted woman Mrs. Peters shows her sternness towards her husband owing to his maltreatment to her in the story, "The Harbinger". When Mr. Peters plans to grab her hard-earned money to misuse it she reacts it in a very harsh tone: "I rubbed the skin off both me hands washin' jumpers and overalls to make that dollar. Do you think it come out of them suds to buy the kind you put into you? Skiddoo! Get your mind off of money".¹⁵ The reference reminds us that men's ill-treatment towards women often

13. J. Donald Adams, *O Henry's New York* (Pawcett World Library, New York, 1964), p. 134.

14. P.J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.299.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 778.

makes the latter harsh and tough in their manners. Of course, in most of O.Henry's stories women are usually simple, softhearted, modest and compassionate. In "The Gift of the Magi", one of the most popular short stories of the world O.Henry presents Della as a very simple and softhearted woman. With her hair disposed of intentionally for buying a Christmas gift for her husband Della was extremely frightened of his possible adverse reaction. According to her usual practice she began to whisper her prayer to God: "Please, God, make him think I am still pretty."¹⁶ Her words demonstrate her simplicity and softness. A comprehensive study of female characters in the stories like "Lost on Dress Parade", "An Unfinished Story", "A Service of Love", "The Romance of a Busy Broker", "The Pint Flask" and many others will show that the heroines in these stories often behave modestly and softly. As for instance, in "Lost on Dress Parade" Miss Marian expresses her gratitude to Mr. Chandler for his help and pleasant company. After dinner, while leaving him she makes a display of her modesty in the following words: "Thank you for a nice time", "I must run home now. I liked the dinner very much, Mr. Chandler."¹⁷ In "The Pint Flask" the colonel's wife is a sympathetic and modest woman. She behaves softly towards her husband. When the colonel refuses to take his dinner and wants to go out for a walk her treatment towards him is undoubtedly cordial. Her modesty becomes manifest in her speech: "Oh, James, to think that you would act this way! I know you haven't been drinking, but what is the matter with you? Come in and lie down. Let me pull off your

16. Ibid., p. 762.

17. Ibid., p.413.

coat".¹⁸ In O. Henry's stories sometimes women are as prudent as they ought to be in practical situations. Working girls are often conscious of their social position. They are wise enough to choose lovers. They can understand when they should refrain from acting on the spur of the moment. Hence they know how to judge the pros and cons of an initiative to fall in love with a suitor. In "Brickdust Row" Florence, a poor working girl has all the sense of formality to spare her time in company of Blinkers, a well-to-do young man. She is actually a tenant of the housing property of the man. Despite Blinkers' candour to fall in love with Florence she estimates that the match may be incompatible because of her lower social status. This is why she hesitates to accept his offer of love. In "Lickpenny Lover" the disparity in social status is also the same reason behind Masie's disapproval of Carter's proposal for marriage to her. The lure of riches and the prospects of marriage with a man of high social status can not affect her mental strength and stability in the least. In "The Ferry of Unfulfillment" O. Henry shows how Miss Claribel Colby, the working girl from Sieber-Mason's remains indifferent to the overture of love from the "man from Nome". Her daily struggle and her direct experience with the hard realities of life made her so practical in outlook that she could hardly trust the man's ardour. She preferred to stick to her independent living as a working girl in stead of leading a married life. Her passive attitude to Blayden's ardent approach shows her prudence and practical outlook. In the story, "How She Got in the Swim" there was hardly any understanding

18. Ibid., p. 778.

between the wife and the husband. But the rapport was not snapped because of the wife's sincere endeavour. Had she not been prudent and capable of proving her ingenuity their relationship might have crumbled. It is the wisdom that saved the family from disintegration. Mrs. St. Bibbs succeeds in her attempt to prove that she is quite fit for proper behaviour in the society of fashionable people. It is her discreet role that finally normalized the strained relationship between the wife and the husband.

O. Henry's women sometimes seem to get plunged into an ocean of frustration and failure. The monotonous course of day-to-day occupations blots out enormously the pleasures of their lives. Often unfavourably circumstanced, they fail to enjoy the panoramic varieties of life. Poverty strikes them so hard that they hardly find any real meaning of life. To such depressed women life becomes quite bereft of taste and variety. Rosalie in "The Memento", Florence in "Brickidust Row", Mrs. Sharp in "A Departmental Case", Delia in "A Service of Love" and Elsie in "Elsie in New York" are a few instances of women upon whom poverty came as a hard blow.

Despite living a life of hard struggle O. Henry's women are not insensitive to the conquering spirit of love. They know how to love genuinely as in the cases of Della in "The Gift of the Magi" and Delia in "A service of Love" and of course, how to be worthy of love as in "The Romance of a Busy Broker" and "An Unfinished Story". They also know how a touch of real love may bring in a plenty of pure happiness in their lives despite their daily

struggle against crises and miseries. Often they show the depth of wisdom to differentiate a deceitful lover from a genuine one. Miss Rosalie found in Reverend Arthur Lyle a man "different from the men in the audiences". Despite her deep disgust and disillusionment about men she loved Arthur heart and soul as a genuine lover. At the same time women can also be held guilty of jealousy. A woman grows jealous quite naturally when she finds another woman standing in the way of her courtship with her suitor. It is a very common trait of human nature. In this sense O. Henry's women are essentially akin to those familiar faces whom we encounter in our practical life.

O. Henry's sympathy for shop girls in particular and working women in general is quite evident in many of his stories. But however low their financial status may be in society they are fully conscious of their dignity. They are hardly prepared under any circumstances to compromise with their self-respect. This is absolutely true so as Miss Marian in "Lost on Dress Parade," Rosalie in "The Memento", Dulcie in "An Unfinished Story," Florence in "Brickdust Row", Masie in "A Lickpenny Lover" and others are concerned. This characteristic of theirs bears out without any doubt their intrinsic moral strength and stability raising them far above the average women.

Significantly contemporary American writers like Bret Harte (1836-1902), Mary Wilkins (1852-1930), Edith Wharton (1862-1937), Richard Harding Davis (1864-1916), also took up the issues of women and their problems more or less in their works. In this context one may refer to Mary Wilkins' fictions and

stories in which she represented the uncompromising courage, self-respect and honesty of women as O. Henry did. In her well-known story, "A Humble Romance" she presents the life of Shally, a poor household drudge who finds an escape from her life of drudgery after marrying a peddler. Rather similar is the plot of "The Memento", a famous story of O. Henry. Essentially a realist, O. Henry delved deep into the lives of the unfortunate, neglected and struggling women of the contemporary society. This is why he could portray the convincing picture of their struggle in many of his stories while most other writers of his time chiefly highlighted the romantic aspect of the contemporary women. Herein lies the basic difference of O. Henry's style from that of the most other contemporary writers.

In the wake of the industrial revolution (1848) sociological atmosphere was enormously transformed in America. Despite rapid progress in the standard of living the disparity between the haves and the havenots was escalated. With this, discrimination between man and woman became increasingly widespread. In the perspective of the prevailing sociological backdrop O. Henry grappled with the problems of working women in his stories. Adept in characterization of women O. Henry has touched upon their multifaceted lives. He saw with his own eyes the agonies and misfortunes of the working women and shop girls. His direct experience concerning their pathetic conditions in society made him extremely sympathetic to them. Naturally the women and their problems in the contemporary society become highly contextual in his stories.

Treatment of Love in O. Henry's Short Stories

In a bid to define love Maupassant writes in his story, "Our Hearts": "It is a short word, but it contains all; it means the body, the soul, the life, the entire being. We feel it as we feel the warmth of the blood, we breathe it as we breathe the air, we carry it in ourselves as we carry our thoughts. Nothing more exists for us. It is not a word; it is an inexpressible state indicated by four letters..."¹

Love is undeniably an all-pervasive and all-permeating emotion. It manifests itself almost in every form of life. Tremendous is its role in every form of literature irrespective of time and space. A champion of the common man and an interpreter of the contemporary society, O. Henry cannot be apathetic to the universal appeal of love. With his power of keen observation, Henry paints real life with all its sorrows and sufferings. He also expounds life in the perspective of its master passion i.e. love. He exploits his utmost capabilities to show how love affects human life in diverse ramifications. Many of his stories diverse in form, style and content deal with multi-faceted aspects of love. With O. Henry love is

1. Georgina Hammick, *Love & Loss* (Virago Press Limited, 20-23 Mandela Street, Camden Town, London NW 10HQ, Oct 1992), p. vii.

invariably a major potent force in shaping the social milieu. That love is a guiding force in human life is unquestionably brought home in many of his stories. His habit of lounging brought him ample scope to study human life in its varied dimensions. He witnessed both the moments of crises and those of well-being in human life.

While assessing O. Henry's treatment of love, it will be pertinent to make a brief reference to the handling of the same emotion by the contemporary writers. O. Henry's contemporaries like Bret Harte (1836-1902), Mary Wilkins (1852-1930), Hamlin Garland (1859-1945), Cambel Deland (1857-1945), George Egerton (1859-1945), Richard Harding Davis (1864-1916), Edith Wharton(1862-1937), Stephen Crane(1871-1900), Edward Everett Hale (1822-1909) and some others attempted to highlight the importance of love theme in their stories and novels. While depicting the vicissitudes in the lives of women particularly during a period of growing social discrimination Mary Wilkins Portrayed the role of love in their lives with utmost ardour and sincerity. In pieces like "Two Old Lovers", "A Humble Romance", "Madelon", "The Love of Parson Lord" her treatment of love has undeniably attained a fair measure of excellence. Hamlin Garland's "Among the Corn Rows" is a wonderful love story, universal and timeless in its tone and tenor. His stories usually have a happy ending as is the case with this one. In the story Garland's deep insight into Julia's romantic fervour for a happy union with her lover is revealed very nicely. It is virtually the emotion of love that makes her free from a disgustful life of arduous toil. Equally deserving of mention is the handling of love theme in the stories of Edward Everett Hale. His "Love by the

Way” is a well-known love-tale with a surprise ending. Likewise Bret Harte’s “Jeff Briggs’ Love Story”, “Maruja”, and “The Crusade of The Excelsior”, Richard Harding Davis’s “Soldiers of Fortune”, Stephen Crane’s “The Third Violet” are yet other striking instances dealing with the emotion of love in its diverse expositions against the backdrop of the contemporary situations and crises. George Egerton’s short story titled “Virgin Soil” presents an anecdote of unhappy marriage thrust upon Florence at an early age of seventeen. Here the writer portrays no common aspect of love that unifies two souls with charm and sweetness. Florence’s mother felt satisfied to give her daughter in marriage to Philip, a person of considerable standing in the society. But to Florence marriage meant nothing less than torture and humiliation from her husband who maintained an illicit relation with another woman. With its emphasis on the flagrant lack of rapport between the couple the story is a sort of social document revealing ill treatment and injustice done to women of the times they belonged to, reminding one of O. Henry’s presentation of the similar theme in pieces like “A Departmental Case”, “The Harbinger”, “The Memento” and others.

Various and diverse are the presentations of the passion of love in world literature. While attempting to paint the contemporary society, the famous Russian writer, Anton P. Chekhov handles the love theme quite deftly. His handling of triangular love is especially remarkable in his story, “The Chorus Girl” where Chekhov fictionalizes the complex and amorous relationship of the protagonist with Pasha, a beautiful chorus girl, despite being married to another woman. In this connection one may remember Chekhov’s

“A Happy Ending”, “Love”, “The Happy Fellow”, “The Mirror” in which he handles the theme of love in its varied aspects.

Maupassant (1850-1893), the legendary story writer of France, explores the manifold issues of love in many of his stories. He presents the unsuccessful sequel of love in such stories as “A Widow”, “Growing Old”, “Bed No.29”, “A Bad Error”, “A Family” etc. Often he portrays the common aspect of intense love. But such wild impulse in love hardly brings about a natural union between the lover and the beloved. Maupassant excels in vivid portrayal of the psychological and sociological barriers often resulting in the eventual failure in love affair. Well aware of the emotional relationship developed incongruously between a man and a woman, Maupassant suggests there lies no steadfast rule in love making. His stories often abound in the minute details of the beloved’s feminine physical aspects. He attempts to demonstrate the points of attraction causing the lover’s obsession for a woman. Significantly, in O. Henry’s stories such minute details are often lacking.

It is difficult to ascertain definitely how far O. Henry was influenced in his treatment of love by his contemporaries. But there is no denying that he depicted, with a lot of care and sympathy indeed, the sorrows, sufferings and misfortunes of the women and their struggle against social injustice and humiliation in a male-dominated society. While presenting the account of their struggle for existence O. Henry like his contemporaries was not slow to realize the impact of love on their lives and a detailed examination of

his stories will reveal that he was equally adept at portraying the diverse aspects of love.

An interpreter of the contemporary society, O. Henry based his stories on the real life as he viewed it at first hand. Naturally what primarily concerned him in these stories are the basic passions of human life, and love being the master passion has a very important role to play in many of his stories. According to O. W. Firkins, a famous O. Henry critic, O. Henry had rare but precious insights into human destiny and human nature and of all the types on which O. Henry usually structured his stories, love is a very dominant one. The point is well evidenced in such stories as "The Trimmed Lamp", "The Gift of the Magi", "Hearts and Crosses", "The Marquise and Miss Sally" and "An Afternoon Miracle". Presumably O. Henry's life of a hard struggle allowed him little scope for introducing love and romance in his stories; nevertheless, remarkable is his adroitness in dealing with the emotion of love in its various expressions.

Before looking into the details with regard to O. Henry's treatment of love let us take a look at personal life and try to understand how much he was influenced with this passion in his own life. He was a man of bashful nature. Extremely introvert, he could hardly articulate his emotional responses when he fell in love with Athol and eventually eloped with her against heavy odds, particularly the strong opposition from her parents. Of course, his conjugal bond lasted for merely ten years because of Athol's sudden and untimely death in 1897 after her prolonged suffering from tuberculosis. He married again his childhood sweetheart, Sara

Lindsay Coleman in 1907. But his normal family life could hardly be restored because his abnormal alcoholic addiction made his married life bitter and disgusting. His unhappy conjugal life has its occasional reflection in his stories. "The Green Door" is a striking instance to this point in which he makes no secret of his bitterness about marriage and romance.

The romance of O. Henry's own life is distinctly reflected in his story entitled "No Story". When Mr. Chalmers pours out his feelings to Miss Lowery in the following speech, it markedly resembles O. Henry's own experience. Chalmers breathes with a note of deep pathos: "Those whom we first love we seldom wed. Our earlier romances, tinged with the magic radiance of youth, often fail to materialize...But those fondly cherished dreams may cast a pleasant afterglow on our future lives, however impracticable and vague they may have been".² Truly the "fondly cherished dreams" had "cast a pleasant afterglow" on O. Henry's future life. Incidentally, after a decade of the passing away of Athol, his first wife, Athol's death in 1897 incidentally his former sweetheart Sara Coleman identified O. Henry on her reading his short story, "Madame Bo-peep of the Ranches" and wrote him a letter which received a warm response from him. The courtship between the two resumed and finally culminated in their marriage on November 27, 1907. However, the importance of the story in terms of O. Henry's personal life can hardly be denied here the narrative of the renewal

2. Ethel Stephens Arnett, *O. Henry From Polecat Creek* (Greensboro, North Carolina, Piedmont Press, 1962), p. 191.

of the shattered relationship between Teddy Westlake and Octavia has all the elements of a typical love story. Similar was the situation in the relation of love between O. Henry and Miss Coleman.

Vis-a-vis the depiction of agonies, torture, neglect and humiliation to which the women were subjected in the contemporary society O. Henry handled very deftly the episodes involving their small joys in life, their manifestations of love, their moments of pleasure in the company of those who pleaded to woo them in diverse situations. While portraying the picture of hard struggle in the lives of shop girls in the stories such as "The Trimmed Lamp", "Brickdust Row", "A Lickpenny Lover", "An Unfinished Story" "The Memento", "Psyche and the Pskyscraper", "The Romance of a Busy Broker", "The Ferry of Unfulfillment" and many others, O. Henry also delineates the clandestine flow of their love though suppressed, but obviously apparent in certain circumstances. Their zest for life hardly appears exhausted even in the face of constant oppression and repression under which they are forced to live. Under challenging circumstances love and romance in the poor, neglected working girls are often subdued. Quite sympathetic to the depressed women, O. Henry depicts the moments of their life when the flashes of love appear gustily and also disappear quickly after leaving a temporal change over their dull and monotonous chore of daily life.

In "The Memento" O. Henry shows how love turns out to be an undeniable reality in Rosalie's life. Utterly frustrated and disgusted because of ill treatment and humiliation shown to her Rosalie gave up the profession of actress. Nevertheless, she discovered in Reverend Arthur Lyle a man 'different from the

men in the audiences' and considered him worthy of love. The overpowering and irresistible passion of love made her quite undaunted and unhesitating to fall in love with Arthur. Finally they got married and this was a sort of relief to Rosalie from the clutch of a number of lustful men. Significantly, the magnificent power of soothing, consoling love brought about a great transformation in her. Rosalie was capable of differentiating a true lover from a deceitful one by virtue of her prudence. Her wisdom prompted her to realize that the objects of allurements and temptations brought to her were but to lead her to perdition. Of course, O. Henry reminds us that jealousy is often a very familiar aspect in love. A woman can hardly tolerate another woman particularly when the latter poses a threat to the former's courtship. Rosalie grew quite jealous and diffident as soon as she heard of Arthur's another love affair. But Rosalie mistook his platonic love for his courtship with another woman.

In "Brickdust Row" O. Henry portrays the occasional moments of high spirits in Florence's life despite her tough struggle. Her reaction becomes perceptible when Blinkers, a well-to-do man approaches her with an offer of love. Quite hesitant, she makes no positive response though out of formality she spares her time in his company. Of course, eventually she resolves not to marry Blinkers in view of his high social status, absolutely incompatible with hers.

In the "Romance of a Busy Broker" O. Henry portrays the conquering power of love and its mighty impact on Maxwell Harvey, a typically forgetful broker. The profession of the extremely

absent-minded busy broker made him oblivious altogether of the patent fact that he got married with Leslie, his stenographer, the previous night. Dutiful, sincere, simple and soft-hearted as Miss Leslie was, her love for Maxwell was quite genuine though Maxwell had hardly any time and scope to reciprocate. However, finally came the moment when he spoke out open-heartedly: "I have but a moment to spare. I want to say something in that moment. Will you be my wife? I haven't had time to make love to You in the ordinary way, but I really do love you."³ Leslie was prudent enough to realize Harvey's problem and reacted in a soft and loving voice: "I know now. Its this old business that has driven everything else your head for the time".⁴

In "An Unfinished Story" O. Henry delineates very convincingly Dulcie's steadfastness in love for General Kitchener, her "ideal of a gallant knight". Dulcie shows a firm conviction that there is no room for foul play in the matter of love. The spirit of her genuine love to her lover, though away from her, precludes her from yielding to any temptation. She is determined not to violate the sanctity of love.

O. Henry's treatment of love is chiefly based on the sociological standpoint so far as his story, "Lick penny Lover" is concerned. Irresistibly attracted to Masie, the shop girl heroine of the story, Irving Carter, a millionaire, made an earnest request for her consent to marry him. Irving's strong pleading rather

3. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.420.

4. *Ibid.*, p.420.

puzzled Masie in the matter of choosing one of two options— either to pursue the career at the glove counter or to enjoy the luxurious fashionable cosy life with a millionaire. Finally she preferred to cling to her dull course of living at the “Biggest Store” without showing any interest in the possibilities of a better way of living. Like Florence in “Brickdust Row” she too realized that the wide gulf of difference in their “Stations” would stand in the way of their lasting relationship.

O. Henry focuses on the well-known topic of triangular love in “Psyche and the Pskyscraper”. Both Joe and Dabster had fallen in love with Daisy, the heroine of the story. The heroine perceived that it was Joe, the owner of “the smallest store of New York” who was the right person to be her suitor. She also felt that at Joe’s storey “it was cozy and warm and homelike” and finally she surrendered herself to him. In many other stories of O. Henry the heroines often refuse the offer of love made to them on the grounds of the incompatibility of social status. But Daisy understood with her prudence that it would be right to choose Joe as a lover in view of his position. Of O. Henry’s poor working girl heroines Daisey is one in whose life love had a real meaning.

Besides portraying the hard struggle in the lives of LNancy in “The Trimmed Lamp” O. Henry shows how love plays a vital role in their lives. Lou engaged as an ironer at a laundry falls in love with Dan in response to his offer of love .Her friend, Nancy, a worker at a departmental store is more ambitious than Lou. A bald young man with diamond cuff links proposes to marry her. But Nancy turns down his proposal on the plea that “his family only allows him 20000 dollars a year to spend.” Her decision displeases

Lou who too rejects Dan's proposal in order to live independently. Incidentally being attracted to Dan because of his certain qualities Nancy resolves to marry Dan. Three months later when two friends meet again, Lou is changed altogether with new looks adorned with costly furs and gems. She is greatly shocked to hear from Nancy that the latter is going to marry Dan. This revelation makes Lou realize her own tragedy for having chosen the path of ruin. Here O. Henry shows how in practical life sometimes a complicated situation arises when two women fall in love with the same man. Eventually what brings happiness to one turns just the reverse to another.

In "The Ferry of Unfulfillment" O. Henry demonstrates how Miss Claribel Colby, the working girl from Sieber-Mason's remains nonchalant to the overture of love from the 'man from Nome'. Attracted by her physical charms Henry Blayden attempted as ardently as possible to win her over. He exerted his utmost ability to convince her that he was not one of those whom she always fights shy of. Her day-to-day struggle and her direct experience of the hard realities of life made her so practical in outlook that she could hardly trust the 'man from Nome' and his earnestness to make her his sweetheart. Instead of responding to him in a positive manner, she preferred to stick to her independent living of a working girl. Her strange indifference to the sincere approach of Blayden suggests the prevailing social constraints to which women were subjected in a male-dominated society.

In "The Furnished Room" O. Henry points out how the intensity of passionate love may lead one to the extreme point of self-immolation. This is exactly what happens in the life of

the young man searching frantically his sweetheart, Miss Vashner, among the lodgers of the lodge. It is an irony of fate that he boards the same room where his beloved too boarded. He smells her perfume and gropes in the room. Finally in a frenzy of frustration he commits suicide in the room where Miss Vashner also killed herself.

From a critical and analytical study of O. Henry's stories it will appear that he portrays love in its varied aspects. Love is often presented as a common passionate feeling in his stories. While bringing out the common aspects of love O. Henry deals with the complexities that love often entails. He demonstrates the common problem of triangular love in such stories as "The Love-Philtre of Ikey Schoenstein", "The Harbinger", "Cupid a la Carte", "The Handbook of Hymen", "Psyche and the Pskyscraper" and so on.

Love in O. Henry's eyes is not always merely a passionate feeling. He also portrays love as enduring passion, intense and varied in its scope. Sometimes it becomes self-negating and sometimes ennobling. It is O. Henry's conviction that love has a tremendous power to work wonders as reflected in Jimmy's letter to Billy, his friend, after the former's resolution to give up the sinister profession of a thief in the story, "A Retrieved Reformation". O. Henry presents the effects of ennobling and selfless love in the stories such as "The Gift of the Magi", "The Last Leaf", "A Service of Love" and so on. The intensity of love between Jim and Della, a poor couple in "The Gift of the Magi" is what seems to have added a touch of nobility to their souls. It is the intensity and the depth of the mutual flame of love that prompts the couple to part with, without

the least hesitation, their respective dearest personal treasures for the pleasure of the other. In "The Last Leaf" Behrman, an old painter had certainly a kind of altruistic love for Johnsy Who was obsessed with a strange fancy that she was going to die with the dropping of the last leaf of the ivy vine. Behrman was finally successful in saving the life of Johnsy at the cost of his own life. In "Lost on Dress Parade" Miss Marian holds the similar view of altruistic love that inspires people with a spirit of self-sacrifice. That love can elevate individuals above meanness and ennoble them profoundly becomes evident in the story, "A service of Love". The extraordinary power of love is highlighted in the story. Both Joe and Delia, the couple, dared to welcome the dreaded circumstances in their lives just for the sake of deep and genuine love for each other. It is the intense passion of love, once again, that inspired them to sacrifice themselves for each other reminding us of Jim and Della in "The Gift of the Magi". Similar instances may be multiplied to exemplify the ennobling spirit of love in O. Henry's stories.

Aspects of O. Henry's style in his short Stories

Like a meteor O. Henry appeared in the American Literary arena. He disappeared also like a meteor with the same suddenness as he had appeared. He got his ideas from the great, common, throbbing heart of humanity as he termed New York. Unfortunately he lived barely a decade after his arrival in New York; nevertheless, he wrote stories during that period at a very hectic pace. The enduring legacy he left came to be dissected rather abruptly in the wake of his death and he was duly revered as a true artist of international stature during the period from 1911 to 1918. Incidentally, although O. Henry's works did not attract much critical attention after the First World War, he continues to enjoy a wide readership throughout the world.

A variety of settings characterize O. Henry's stories. Most of them are either laid in New York City or Texas. One may encounter characters of different idiosyncrasies and a variety of people such as shop girls and millionaires, cowboys and tramps, policemen and burglars, confidence men and gentlemen in his stories. He feels quite at home while narrating tales in his distinctive, lucid, lively and glib style. He has a special fascination for the application of puns, malapropisms and big words in his stories for the purpose of humorous effect. Often literary allusions, examples, ornamentations, explanations become part and parcel of his style. Another striking characteristic of his stories is the use of coincidence

with surprise twists and endings. Sometimes unabashed sentiment, comedy and burlesque figure strikingly in his fiction.

In his days O. Henry was often obliged to cater to the needs of his editors and readers. This is why he had to write stories like "Blind Man's Holiday", "Georgia's Ruling", and "A Fog in Santone" to gratify the tastes of different readers. His distinctive literary talent is reflected in his parodic, comic and picturesque stories in which witty dialogue, irony and surprise ending abound. Besides, his effective use of language and structure is yet another notable aspect of these stories reminding one of Mark Twain's great narrative skill in his stories such as "A Dog's Tale", "A Curious Experience", "A Ghost Story", "My Watch", "A Curious Dream", "The Californian's Tale" and many others. Contextually like O. Henry Mark Twain also was keenly responsive to the social problems of his time. He was usually interested in using straight humour in his writings though O. Henry sometimes liked otherwise. He prefers the use of parody in his stories as a device commonly adopted in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

O. Henry often seems to have paid little attention to the selective use of words. Since he used to write stories in rapid succession in response to the growing demands of his editors, to him writing was an unpremeditated art. As soon as an idea occurred to him he started writing page after page without a break. And ideas like those of a born writer seemed to have come to him as naturally

and spontaneously as leaves to a tree as Keats suggests in his letters. In this context his letter written to John Taylor on 27th February, 1818 is worth remembering. Usually he avoided making preliminary drafts of his composition. Victoria Blake, a freelance writer of America, comments on O.Henry's style of writing : "Once he got his idea he would sit down immediately and write it out. To match the speed and efficiency of the composition, O.Henry developed a writing philosophy that was similarly streamlined, to say the least. "I'll give you the whole secret of short story writing", he told an interviewer. "Here it is Rule 1: Write short stories that please yourself. There is. No Rule 2."¹ According to Jennings, O.Henry's friend, the story, "The Halberdier of the Little Rheinschloss" was written within a whole night. Jennings writes about the experience: "At about 10 minutes after 12 he called me up. 'You're late. I am writing', he said. When I got to his room the big table where he did his writing was littered with sheets of paper. All over the floor were scraps of paper covered with writing in long hand."²

It is important to note that O.Henry's forte often lies in devising an excellent full-fledged story out of a very insignificant or trifling matter. He made this possible by virtue of his fecund imagination coupled with his remarkable descriptive

1. Victoria Blake, *Selected Stories of O.Henry* (George Stade, consulting Editorial Director, Barnes & Noble Classics, New York,2003), p. xxiii.

2. B. M. Ejxenbaum, *O. Henry and the Theory of Short Story* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1968), p. 13.

and narrative skill. In this connection one may note his extraordinarily innovative art to build a story on a flimsy or insufficient background hardly potentially resourceful for structuring the plot of a story. For instance "The Pint Flask" is a remarkable story of this sort. The principal theme of the story concerns a pint whisky flask that James, the Colonel, wanted to get rid of. One can hardly imagine how such a story can be structured on a mere flask.

There is yet another group of his stories which further bear evidence to his marks of excellence as a gifted literary stylist. For example in "The prisoner of Zemla", "The Romance of a Busy Broker", "A Strange Story", "Lost on Dress Parade", "Pendulum", "After Twenty Years", "How She Got in the Swim", one is struck by his markedly characteristic brevity. The stories are terse but not trite in the least.

While considering the characteristic features of O. Henry's style it is worthwhile to take a look at his fondness for foreign words and phrases. Besides English O. Henry had a command over many other languages such as French, Latin, German, Spanish and so on. Often he showed an inclination to use foreign words in his stories, whenever possible. He attained such a remarkable proficiency in Spanish that he dared to use his knowledge of the said language in his stories of the Southwest and Latin America. He has used a great many foreign words in the stories such as "Lost on Dress Parade", "The Higher Abdication", "The Caballero's Way", "A Night in New Arabia", "A Ruler of Men" and

many others. His apt use of a number of foreign words like “bonvivants”, “habitués”, “tabled hotes”, “beaumonde” and so on is a distinctive feature of the story, “Lost on Dress Parade”. Had he acquired no linguistic mastery he could not have used so many foreign words in this story and elsewhere. This tends one to believe the rumour that he always carried a dictionary with him.

Sometimes O.Henry’s self-revelation becomes quite transparent through the speeches of his characters as glimpses of his own life occasionally get mingled with his fictional creations. In this connection one may refer to the following speech of Mr. Garvey in, “A Blackjack Bargainer” which seems to suggest that O. Henry himself is talking about the incident of his own life: “Is that him? Why that’s the man who sent me to the penitentiary once!”³ The very term, ‘penitentiary’ is reminiscent of O.Henry’s imprisonment in the penitentiary of Ohio. He had to undergo indescribable sufferings when he was behind bars for serving five years for his alleged embezzlement of funds. The similar instance of self-revelation is traceable in the story, “The Higher Pragmatism”. O.Henry was too shy to articulate his feelings to his sweetheart, Miss Coleman. Despite his intense passion for her, his quiet and bashful nature prevented him from being vocal even in her presence. What the lover says in the story seems to be O.Henry’s own words. The lover in the story pours out his feelings in the following manner : “I hadn’t the courage to speak to her of my worship ... that in her

3. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O.Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.112.

presence I could only blush and stammer and that she looked upon me with a wonderful maddening smile of amusement.”⁴ The story, “Blind Man’s Holiday” closely resembles O.Henry’s own circumstances while in New Orleans and gives some insight into his feelings. The central character, Lorrison, an embezzler, in flight from the law, sometimes “appeared to himself to be the feeblest of fools; at another he conceived that he followed ideals so fine that the world was not yet ready to accept them. During one mood he cursed his folly; possessed by the other, he bore himself with a serene grandeur akin to greatness.”⁵

It is in the last decade of his life in New York that O.Henry produced his finest stories. His excellent accomplishments performed in his inimitable and almost unsurpassable style may be traced in such volumes as *The Four Millions*, *The Trimmed Lamp* and *The Voice of the City*. With regard to O.Henry’s distinctive style of this period of consummation Stephen Leacock, the eminent Canadian humourist and critic, observes: “Marvellous indeed they are. Written offhand with the bold carelessness of the pen that only genius dares use, but revealing behind them such a glow of imagination and such a depth of understanding of the human heart as

4. E.S. Arnett, *O.Henry From Polecat Creek* (Greensboro, North Carolina, 1962), p.187.

5. Richard O’Connor, *O.Henry: The legendary life of William S. Porter* (Doubleday and company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1970), p.56.

only genius can make manifest".⁶

Unexpected ending is one of the most striking features of O. Henry's stories. Sometimes readers can understand how certain details in a particular story act as a hint of the probable ending. While reading a story thoroughly a reader may guess its expected dénouement. Sometimes the reader is finally befooled with regard to the ending of the story. The ring in "Mammon and the Archer", the button in "A Municipal Report", the half of a silver dime in "No Story" are hardly any conspicuous details but they become highly suggestive and significant so far as the endings of these stories are concerned. In "The Gift of the Magi", to take yet another example, one can hardly have any anticipation about the conclusion of the story. Even after the knowledge of the disposal of Della's beautiful hair and purchase of a fob chain as a suitable Christmas gift for Jim, her husband one can hardly guess that the gifts meant for both Jim and Della would become useless for the Christmas festival. Cited below is the last part of Jim's speech, conveyed in a superb style, which ultimately unravels the mystery underlying the story: "Dell" said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs".⁷ In the story, "The Last Leaf", Behrman's death is also quite unexpected because the course of the story pre-eminently underlines Johnsy's

6. Stephen Leacock, "The Amazing Genius of O. Henry", *Essays and Literary Studies* (New York: John Lane, 1916), pp. 233-266.

7. See next page

imminent death, not Behrman's. Similarly in "A Service of Love" Joe and Delia had a genuinely sacrificing attitude to each other but till the end of the story it could not be guessed how each of them sacrificed for the other. Though O.Henry is not the first author to use surprise endings he used such endings very effectively and made his stories highly interesting and fascinating to his readers. While evaluating O.Henry's handling of surprise endings Eugene Current Garcia remarks: "One way to account for this mysterious afflatus is to recognize that at the core of O.Henry's being lies an element of surprise or wonder, as though everything his eye lighted on were sufficient cause for startled pleasure. Van Wyck Brooks has noted that New York City seemed to belong to O.Henry because of "the fresh curiosity with which he approached it, his feeling of wonder about it ... which made for a literary virtue transcending his occasional cheapness and coarseness, his sometimes unbearable jocularity and meretricious effects." No shrewder observation of O.Henry's art has been made, but it might also be extended to cover not only his New York stories but his entire approach to the problem of fiction. For the element of surprise is the key note of his technique aswell"⁸

7. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O.Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.763.

8. Eugene Current Garcia, *O.Henry (William Sydney Porter)* (Twayne Publishers, Inc., New Haven, Conn, USA, 1965), p.137.

O. Henry often resorts to punning and word-mutilation humorously in his stories. Keenly interested in mutilation of words, he distorts "Lotus" into "Lettuce", "Mount Olympus" into "Mount Catawampus", "Croesus" into "Greasers", "Scylla" and "Charybdis" into "Squills" and "Chalybeates" and many others. He also takes interest in reproducing the version of original speeches as uttered by people in real life in his stories. Such speeches replete with unsophisticated and ungrammatical expressions can be seen in his stories such as "Round the Circle", "Blackjack Bargainer", "Afternoon Miracle", "The Whirligig of Life", "Witches' Loaves" and so on. In these stories O. Henry makes the characters often speak their own crude language as they are usually accustomed to in their practical life. His dexterous treatment of original speeches lends a realistic appeal and humorous flavour to his stories. A great many contemporary authors like Hamlin Garland, Maurice Thompson, G.W. Cable and others followed the same device in their stories. Like O. Henry a keen sense of realism is often reflected in their stories. While going through O. Henry's story, "Round the Circle" one can understand his interest in using the unpolished language of common people in his stories. In the aforesaid story in reply to the query of Mrs. Webber, his wife Sam says in his exclusive manner: "At first I was about ter be a little reckless and kick 'cause ther buttons was all off, but since I diskiver that the button holes is all busted out, why I wouldn't go so fur as to say the buttons is any loss to speak of." ⁹ Mrs. Webber has a good sense of humour. Taking a

9. Paul J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.199.

look at her husband with his dress on, she comments humorously, "You look jest like one of them hayseeds in the picture papers' 'stead of a free and independent sheepman of ther state of Texas." ¹⁰

In the following speech of Mr. Garvey quoted from the story, "A Blackjack Bargainer" O.Henry uses the same language as Garvey would have spoken in the usual course of his domestic life. O.Henry shows how words are distorted in Garvey's speech: "The Rogerses, the Hopgoods, the Pratts, and the Troys hev been to see Missis Garvey, and she hev et meals to most of thar houses. The best folks hev axed her to differ'nt kinds of doin's. I cyan't say Mr. Goree, that sech things suits me fur me, give me them thar". ¹¹

There is hardly any room for doubt in O .Henry's success in blending romanticism with the modern, hectic urban life quite compatibly. Unlike Poe and Hawthorne he brings romanticism squarely into the twentieth century. The components of modern life—automobiles, commerce, industry—shape the fabric of his fiction. He thrusts the romantic ethos into the hurry-scurry of the big city, into the sordid state of the tenements, the squalid apartments of poor shop girls, into the meanness of urban life. Notwithstanding the negative aspects, the excitement and endless varieties of complex urban life provided him with a plenty of material for literary treatment.

O.Henry's elaborate word-play contrived by means of his ingenuity made his tales quite interesting and afforded

10. Ibid., p.199.

11. Ibid., p.111.

pleasure to his readers. Like Shakespeare and Sheridan O. Henry relished tampering with English and foreign words. Hence he was keenly interested in producing delightful malapropisms, word mutilations and distortions and misquotations in his stories. The following samples will demonstrate O. Henry's ingenuity in the unique use of language:

- 1) "Now, there was a woman that would have tempted an anchovy to forget his vows. A kind of welcome seemed to mitigate her vicinity". ("Telemachus, Friend")
- 2) "Our friend, Lee Andrews will again swim the Hell's point to-night." ("Hearts and crosses")
- 3) "He got three or four bullets planted in various parts of his autonomy." ("The Moment of Victory")
- 4) "I reckon in New York you get to be a Conniseer; and when you go around with the demi-tasse", you are naturally bound to buy'em stylish grub." ("Hostages to Momus")
- 5) "He was traveling impromptu like kings, I guess." ("The Halberdier of the Little Rheinschloss")¹²

That O. Henry was a prolific author can hardly be denied. Of course, there are traces of roughness in his stories that could be avoided had he cared to make proper revision. Incidentally, he wrung every phrase, paragraph and page from his very soul of an artist. Once finalized he had little time to look back and handed his product of art to the busy publisher with utmost promptitude.

12. E.C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (Twayne Publishers Inc., New York, 1965), pp. 145-146.

Contextually one may guess that he might have attempted to rewrite the pretty lengthy sentences in the stories like “A Departmental Case”, “Madame Bo-peep, of the Ranches” and some others had he made use of his scope for further revision. Like a romanticist he laid greater emphasis on content, rather than on form, in his stories. This explains his occasional roughness in the stories he wrote.

Of O.Henry’s short stories another distinctive feature is his thematic variety. Drawn on his varied experiences, his stories embody excellently the diverse issues concerning human life. Contextually Martin Scofield, a celebrated scholar and critic of American Literature makes the following estimate as to O.Henry’s treatment of diverse subject-matters: “The subject-matter of O.Henry’s stories, which the varieties of rhetoric serve to present and explore, covers a wide area: city life (shop girls, cops, vaudeville artistes, hobos, bank clerks and managers), South-American political shenanigans, the wild west, the Deep South.”¹³

Literary allusions culled from the works of classical writers adorn O.Henry’s short stories quite often and also form a significant component of his literary style. For example a very well-known source he was indebted to for his literary purpose was *Arabian Nights*. The literary references frequently used in his stories occasionally add to humorous effect. Incidentally, one of the

13. Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 2011), p. 117.

prominent features that have earned him fame as a popular short story writer is his excellent sense of humour. In this regard let us refer to F. L. Pattee's estimate of O. Henry as a humorist. Mr. Pattee says, "O. Henry stands first of all for manner, and the chief ingredient of this manner is humor. He should be rated first of all as a humorist, as much so as even Artemus Ward or Mark Twain. He was a born humorist: his biography is larded with Eugene Field like practical jokes, with cartoons and caricatures and outrageous drolleries."¹⁴ A few examples cited below show O. Henry's sense of humour:

1. 'Twill serve	'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so
'tis not so deep	wide as a church-door, but
as a lobster a'la Newburgh,	'tis enough-'twill serve
nor so wide as a	<i>(Romeo and Juliet,</i>
church festival dough	<i>III :I)</i>
nut; but 'twill serve.	
("The Third Ingredient")	

2. "I've noticed you,	Seeking, the bubble reputation. Sam",
says I "seeking	Even in the Cannon's mouth.
the bubble notoriety	<i>(As You Like It II : VII)</i>
in the Cannon's	
larynx a number of times"	
("The Moment of Victory")	

14. F.L. Pattee, *The Development of The American Short Story* (Biblo and Tannen, New York, 1970), p.360.

3. As for Tonia, though
 she sends description to
 the poor- house, let her
 make a millionaire of
 your fancy.
 ("The Caballero's Way")

For her own person, It
 beggard'd all description.
 (*Antony and Cleopatra*
 II : I)

4. Far better to linger
 there... than sit upon
 the horse hair sofa...
 and ... drivell in the ears
 of gaping neighbors sad
 stories of the death of
 colonial governors.
 ("The Head-Hunter")

For God's sake, let us sit upon
 the ground. And tell sad stories
 of kings. (*Richard II,II:ii*)¹⁵

Apart from ludicrous use of classical references, O.Henry uses them occasionally for serious purposes also. Of course, one should have adequate knowledge concerning the classical allusions incorporated in his stories so as to grasp the meaning of the context. The allusions are often used for the purpose of naming persons, places and institutions or symbolizing something. A few phrases and sentences quoted from his stories can hardly illustrate the depth of his humour. His humour is not like the boisterous sort of comic wit creating a guffaw and disappearing.

15. E.C. Garcia, *O.Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (Twayne publishers, Inc., New York, 1965), pp. 146-147.

Rather, his humour is positively characteristic of a smile at life itself mingling our laughter with our tears, sometimes reminiscent of the mode of Charles Lamb.

O. Henry is often estimated as a supreme storyteller gifted with the qualities of a master of tragedy as well as comedy. He is also adept at dealing with the themes of love, romance and the daily struggle of common people. A skilful artist in narrating mystery tale and the stories of the supernatural, he has a deep insight into the problems of common people and particularly the struggling women of his time. Significantly, the incidents, scenes and characters depicted in his stories concern basically the multihued experiences of his adventurous life. In this connection it is worth quoting the words of A. St. John Adock, a contemporary critic who evaluates O. Henry's style in the following manner: "The life he lived was the life that was best for him. Every phase of it had its share in making him the prose troubadour that he became. Half his books are filled with stories that are shaped and coloured by his roamings and the other half with stories that he gathered in the busy ways and, particularly in the by ways of 'Little Old New York'".¹⁶

O. Henry's experience as a druggist provided him with local colour and knowledge for some of his stories. Hence it was possible for him to describe the preparation of pills as precisely as possible though he cared not the least for technical accuracy. Here it

16. A. St. John Adock, "*O. Henry: An English View*" (Waifs and Strays, Garden City, New York, Double day, Page, 1917), pp. 196-204.

will not be out of context to quote the following lines from his story, "The Love- Philtre of Ikey Schoenstein" to show how his technical knowledge enriched his literary style. O.Henry describes: "To this day pills are made behind its tall prescription desk—pills rolled out on its own pill-tile, divided with spatula, rolled with the figure and thumb, dusted with calcined magnesia and delivered in little round pasteboard pill-boxes."¹⁷ As a literary artist it was never his objective to make a parade of his pedantry. Naturally readers should not necessarily examine how far the technical terms used in his literary product are correct. O.Henry's use of technical terms was meant for artistic effect in his stories. This is exactly what he aimed at. If this was achieved he would consider his purpose served.

Another remarkable characteristic of O. Henry's style is that many of his stories begin with preambles, sometimes lengthy ones. The preamble acts as his explanatory remarks with which he seeks to share his point of view with his readers. The preambles often seem to give a hint about the author's purpose behind a story. "Elsie in New York", "An Unfinished Story", "A Service of Love", "The Trimmed Lamp", "The Purple Dress", "Plutonian Fire", "A Night in Arabia" are some of O. Henry's well-known stories noted for preambles. For example in "The Trimmed Lamp" he does not support that the occupation of shopgirls should be treated as an adjective. In the preamble of "A Service of Love" O. Henry tends to show that the premise, "when one loves one's Art no service seems too hard" is incorrect. Similarly in many other stories O. Henry puts

17. P.J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p.546.

forward some proposition or other, either to plead for or against. Thus preambles have a definite role to play in O. Henry's stories so far as his literary style is concerned.

O. Henry's narrative and descriptive commentary is terse. The characters portrayed in his stories display their dynamism and concreteness in their expressions. The lively conversations put into the mouths of characters are rich in intonations. The use of incomplete utterance as in "The Third Ingredient" is a notable aspect of his style. In the following conversation quoted from the same story O. Henry uses incomplete utterance: "Give me the onion", she said. The young man set his jaw a trifle harder. "Give me the onion", she repeated. He grinned, and laid it in her hand.¹⁸ In "The Ransom of Mack" it appears to Mack's friend from Mack's words that he (Mack) is going to get married. But Mack actually meant to say that due to non-availability of a suitable person Mack was going to perform the marriage rites himself. This is how O. Henry often plays a verbal trickery in his stories. His use of irony and metaphor is also a noteworthy feature of his style. Often he uses metaphors in his writings for the purpose of amusing his readers with unusual comparisons. In the stories like "Compliments of the Season" and "The Plutonian Fire" ironical language has been adroitly used. Nevertheless, sometimes O. Henry is serious, sentimental and emotional as in the stories like "The Duplicity of Hargraves", "Roads of Destiny" and the stories incorporated in *The Four Million* (1906) written between 1903 and

18. Ibid., p. 954.

1905. Marks of transition, vacillation and evolution are strikingly discernible in his stories particularly written immediately after his imprisonment. A pronounced note of sentimentalism is evidenced in many of his stories that describe the shop girls of New York. There is an excellent blend of comic, satiric and sentimental aspects in his writings reminding one of that in Sterne, Dickens and Gogol.

With the advent of Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner in the literary arena of America to cater to the changing tastes of the new readers O. Henry type writings tended to become rather out of fashion. To certain readers his plot constructions seemed forced. But whatever fault there might be with his style or his language he was able to make up the deficiency with his extraordinary descriptive and narrative skill. One feels amazed at his excellent musical quality, romantic touch in his description of "the little voices of the night—the owl's recitative, the capriccio of the crickets, the concerto of the frogs in the grass" in the story, "The Renaissance at Charleroi".¹⁹

He knew very well the art of handling minute details in his stories. This would not have been possible, had he not possessed the power of keen observation and an amazing descriptive skill. But for his magnificent descriptive faculty he could hardly write in the following superb style in his well-known story, "Sisters of the Golden Circle": "The scent of the flowers, the booty of the bee, the primal drip of spring waters, the overture of the lark, the twist of the

19. Ibid., p. 184.

lemon peel on the cocktail of creation—such is the bride”²⁰

There is no denying the fact that O. Henry occupies a permanent and unique position in American Literature. His use of language is skilful and often gorgeous. He is a master of character and dialogue. Even the speech of his street people is romantic, witty and humorous. Nevertheless, he is often grossly underrated as a stylist. His intention has been subjected to adverse criticism, irrespective of his great achievement. But no hasty and ill-considered dismissal of his talent can be justified. His total literary accomplishment should be taken into account for an unbiased evaluation of his talent.

20. Ibid., p. 677.

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.¹ 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."² Nevertheless, O. Henry's fame has continued undiminished down

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".³ 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

3. F.L. Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story* (Biblio 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."⁴ (Italics mine)

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

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