

## *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." <sup>1</sup> 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

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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".<sup>2</sup> 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".<sup>3</sup>

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.

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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”.<sup>4</sup> 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

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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".<sup>5</sup> 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

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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".<sup>6</sup>

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

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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"<sup>7</sup>. 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

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

whose ways he could not reproduce with absolute fidelity”<sup>8</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>9</sup>

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

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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"<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> 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*.

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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"<sup>12</sup> 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

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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.