

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.