

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.