

*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!"<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>" 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 ageold 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

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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."<sup>3</sup>

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

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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".<sup>4</sup> 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?"<sup>5</sup>

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

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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".<sup>6</sup> 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

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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."<sup>7</sup> 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

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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".<sup>8</sup> 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

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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".<sup>9</sup> 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

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

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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."<sup>12</sup> In "The Memento" Rosalie is quite harsh and bitter in her tone. She is thoroughly disgusted with the life of an actress she is

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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".<sup>13</sup> "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!"<sup>14</sup> 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".<sup>15</sup> The reference reminds us that men's ill-treatment towards women often

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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."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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

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16. Ibid., p. 762.

17. Ibid., p.413.

coat".<sup>18</sup> 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

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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.