

Treatment of Love in O. Henry's Short Stories

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. *Ibid.*, p.420.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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