

In *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1963) Frank O' Connor, the prominent Irish writer considers the short story to be "a national form" for the Americans. Undeniably it is the form of art that plays a dominant role in the American literature in an age when people are "talking faster, moving faster, and apparently thinking faster".¹ Significantly, in the twentieth century the short story enjoys a prominent position because of its capability to embody and express the American attitude to life. While emphasizing the pre-eminence the short story enjoys in the American literary tradition the noted critic, Adrian Hunter comments : " ... the form has remained a vital and valid one in the twentieth century, and has served as the medium for much that has been new or innovative in modern fiction".² It is noteworthy that the lightness and mobility of the short story made it easily adaptable to the fast changing scenario of the varied American Society in the wake of the great Civil War (1861-65). This genre of literature began to be increasingly popular because of its association with magazine publications and its uncommon appeal to busy readers. It also became a very popular medium to portray the life and ethos of common people – the episodes and crises typical of their ordinary and humdrum existence hardly

1. H.E. Bates , *The Modern Short Story : A Critical Survey* (London : Thomas Nelson , 1941) , p. 21.

2. Adrian Hunter , *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge University Press, Parangat offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi-20, 2008), p. 3.

demanding the developed treatment of the novel. Incidentally, the short story turned out to be a very effective form in the hands of a number of gifted writers such as Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, Jack London, O. Henry and some others.

O. Henry and Jack London are long considered to be very significant among the outstanding American writers representing the growth of the short story at the outset of the twentieth century. O. Henry dealt with a variety of subjects in his stories particularly touching on the panorama of city life. One of the most striking features lending a distinctive character to his stories is his treatment of women afflicted with urban poverty and distress. It can hardly be denied that it is his chivalrous, sentimental romanticism that led him to sympathize with the poor, ill-fated working women of his time. In this context one may refer to Martin Scofield's comment: "It is characteristic of him that most of his stories of poverty and urban distress focus on women, and bring out in him a kind of chivalrous sentimental romanticism which, despite elements of shrewdness, leads him to pity working women."³ Jack London considered the short story ideal as a form of literature. He chose this popular literary form as a very effective medium for dealing

3. Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 2011), p.118.

4. James Mc Clintock, *Jack London's Strong Truths: A Study of the Short Stories* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997),

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with human crises. He followed the principles of story-writing and understood that "the short story is a rounded fragment from life, a single mood, situation, or action."⁴ Apart from his treatment of various themes, he took up, like O. Henry, issues of urban poverty and social division in his stories. His Northland stories are chiefly concerned with the laws of physical survival. While writing his South Sea stories London counts on his own experiences in his South Pacific tour of 1907.

In the arena of American literature O. Henry emerged as a humourist, as a craftsman and also as a social historian and, to the uninitiated his meteoric rise to eminence in the literary circle of America may appear almost incredible. However, popularly known as the American "Caliph of Bagdad", O. Henry had a chequered career and was gifted "with a brilliant mind, and a frighteningly fertile imagination".⁵ Significantly, whatever he attempted to write was mostly based on his varied, practical experience coloured with his own imagination. The stories he wrote are replete with his own experiences in the major phases of his life—his childhood in North Carolina, his youth in Texas and his maturity in New York. Within the short span of a decade or so the stories O. Henry produced caught the fancy of the millions the world over.

An interpreter of the contemporary society and also a keenly sensitive observer, O. Henry, during his long stay in New

5. E. Hudson Long, *O. Henry, The Man and His Work* (A. S. Barnes and Company, Inc., New York, Perpetua Edition, 1960), p.4.

York, witnessed at close quarters the sufferings, misfortunes and agonies of the working girls who were confronted with the most unfavourable circumstances for just a bare subsistence wage. Since literature reflects social reality, it is natural that O. Henry's stories mirror the state and status of these women at various levels including social, economic and psychological. For example, in "The Trimmed Lamp", while depicting a realistic picture of the abject poverty with which Lou and Nancy, its two major characters, 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 where they were hardly paid according to their deserts. O. Henry's proletarian sympathy for the hapless women, of whom Lou and Nancy are the archetypes, 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 looked down upon the poor working girls like Lou and Nancy as "shop-girls". That O. Henry was adept at portraying the female characters may also be exemplified with reference to such other pieces as "The Memento", "An Unfinished Story", "Elsie in New York", "The Furnished Room", "A Service of Love" and so on. Importantly, it is a firm resolve together with a remarkable endurance and a zealous striving towards self-sufficiency and economic security that seems to be the driving force in the central characters of these pieces reminding us of the same in O. Henry's most other stories.

O. Henry painted life in its unvarnished character. Nevertheless, his main focus was on the poor, ill-fated women directly

affected by the challenges and problems of the contemporary society. What is striking in his portrayal of the deprived women of the contemporary American society is his compassionate, liberal and progressive attitude towards them at a time of the denied women's suffrage in America. Many of the stories present the hardships of working girls and career women and O. Henry became gradually the champion of their cause and a defender of their rights. He wrote about the period when unemployment, poverty and commercial rivalries were prevailing unabated in America.

The short stories of O. Henry have received attention from a host of reviewers and critics down the ages. There have been seminal works done by such eminent critics as C.A. Smith, E.H. Long, G. Langford, E.C. Garcia, F. L. Pattee and so on. Most of the important critical and scholarly analyses of O. Henry's life and work have dwelt upon the various facets of the development of the writer's mind and art. It is time to reassess and take a fresh look at his stories in the light of all the sophisticated critical work that has been done both during his lifetime and since his death. While highlighting O. Henry's unparalleled popularity and success as a short story writer during the first two decades of the twentieth century Richard C. Harris, an eminent O. Henry critic, comments: "Reviewers of the volumes of his stories regularly expressed amazement at his productivity and admiration for the humanity of his characters, the vividness of his setting and the

freshness of his humour and language".⁶ With regard to O. Henry's exceptional genius for dwelling on the life and times of his region in his stories Joseph Gallegly, a distinguished American critic, comments: "I have long believed that a reader could more fully appreciate the humour of O. Henry's stories of the Southwest if he would take time to gain better acquaintance with the people and the 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"⁷.

Although the critical literature on O. Henry includes many perceptive studies of his works from various angles of discussion, critics, however, seem to be less eloquent about the ways O. Henry gradually became a champion of women's right and empowerment in his stories. In a sense his treatment of and attitude to women seems to have received less than its due from the critics. Hence there still remains a scope to go into greater details in this respect so as to make a full-length study of this significant aspect in his short stories and project him as the eloquent spokesperson for the women of the

6. Richard C. Harris, *William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) A Reference Guide*(G. K. Hall& Co., 70, Lincoln Street, Boston, Mass, 1980), p.viii.

7. Joseph Gallegly, *From Alamo plaza to Jack Harris's Saloon*(Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1970), Preface.

American Southwest and New York—the regions which perhaps inspired O. Henry most to take up the case of the downtrodden and the deprived in his stories.

An “American Chekhov” and a “Yankee Maupassant” as he has been called by critics, O. Henry, once replied to an interviewer with regard to his reluctance to read more fiction: “It is all tame as compared with the romance of my life”.⁸ The reply in O. Henry’s terse and unique style gives a clue to understanding the man and his work. For, his own stories were not only the product of his vivid imagination but they stemmed from the events and circumstances of his life also. No less important are the people and the settings, ranging from the elegant South to the Wild West of Texas, from Honduras in revolutionary Latin America to the sophisticated metropolis of New York that contributed much to his keen perception.

O. Henry’s literary outpouring is primarily a product of the tumultuous situation prevailing in America in the wake of the Civil War (1861-65). After “One of the bloodiest conflicts fought by man” during this significant period there were positive signs of a change in society. With the American society passing through a process of metamorphosis the contemporary writers could not choose to be silent and passive onlookers; rather, they endeavoured to reflect the new situation in a realistic manner as they viewed it in the late nineteenth

8. P.J.Horowitz, *O. Henry, Collected Stories* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. xiii.

and the early twentieth centuries. Gifted with a rare literary talent, and keenly sensitive to the social ethos as he was, O. Henry was capable of presenting a faithful picture of real life of his day. What better evidence can one cite here than the story, "The Memento" in which the glimpses of his society have been reflected very aptly and significantly?

The central theme in stories like "The Memento". "An Unfinished Story", "Elsie in New York" concerns the real picture of agonies, sufferings and misfortunes of women and social discrimination against them. While one can hardly deny O. Henry's amazing success in the artistic portrayal of women characters, what informs O. Henry's presentation is a strong note of humanism and deep sympathy for the downtrodden and the exploited. "The Memento", based on the contemporary social background, presents two women named Miss Lynnett D'Armande and Miss Rosalie Ray, who, are victims of harrowing social problems as they are, can hardly tolerate the severity of the humiliation and injustice they are subjected to. They abhor serving the men who make them puppets in their hands. They are forced to work hard under most unfavourable and inhuman circumstances until all their vitality is squeezed out only for the pleasures of men, but in return what they get is negligibly little for a decent living.

Uncompromising in temperament in the face of intolerable misbehaviour of men Rosalie gives up her profession as an actress. Least inclined towards any compromise or submissiveness O. Henry's

women are capable of displaying their endurance and courage to raise their loudest possible voice of protest against all sorts of injustice and herein perhaps lies the forte of O.Henry. Unquestionably O.Henry was a staunch advocate of feminism. Hence we hear unmistakably the vigorous voice of protest from his women against the rigours of a male-dominated society. In "An Unfinished Story" Dulcie, the most prominent female character, has been delineated as one highly imaginative, emotional and whimsical on the one hand and sincere, trustworthy, dutiful, unselfish and resolute on the other. The most striking feature discernible in Dulcie's character is her commendable steadfastness in love. "Elsie in New York" is yet another instance where the dismal picture of poverty is presented as realistically as possible. Quite convincing is the portrayal of Elsie who, with the sudden death of her father and thrown into a helpless condition, shows an undaunted spirit and strong urge for attaining self-sufficiency and approaches several persons for an employment, though to her utter frustration she is nearly misguided at every step.

It is important to consider the role and impact of some significant events and episodes on O.Henry's life and art in order to reassess the worth of his stories. One such episode is "the Shadowed years" during O.Henry's imprisonment (1898-1900) – the period he spent in Ohio Penitentiary for his alleged embezzlement of funds. Although the nature and extent of his guilt had never been definitely established, the experience he gained in these years in the penitentiary

was both remarkable and rewarding to him as a shaping force. It was in this period that he found useful materials for such stories as "A Retrieved Reform", "An Afternoon Miracle", "Money Maze", "No Story", "A Fog in Santone", "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking", "A Blackjack Bargainer", "The Enchanted Kiss" and some others. Equally relevant is the impact on O. Henry's writing of the widening economic disparity between the haves and have-nots and social discrimination against women in the days of male chauvinism following the American Civil War. Commenting on O. Henry's handling of the theme of social inequality – a burning issue of the day E.C. Garcia writes : "While portraying the horrors and pinched existence endured by his unpaid shop girls she 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".⁹

O. Henry spent a period of eight years in New York City and drew upon its colourful places and people. But many of his stories have other important locales. He was engaged in ranch work in Texas where he gained experiences to write stories on western settings. He had to remain behind bars for three years which provided him raw material for the vivid tales of grifters, conmen and rogues including

9. E.C. Garcia, *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, (College and University Press Publishers, New Haven, Conn, 1965), p. 109.

safecracker, Jimmy Valentine. His stay in Honduras also supplied him with ample material for a series of stories concerning a US consul in the backwater of a fictitious Central American country.

O. Henry entered American folklore as a model of the self-made man, both as a writer and a hero who struggled back after an imprisonment of three years to become the voice of "The Four Million"—the vast mass of ordinary people with no other chronicler to record their lives so sympathetically as he did. It is quite usual that a populist intellectual like Upton Sinclair made him almost a saintly figure in his play, "Bill porter: A Drama of O. Henry in prison" (1924) or his biographer, David Stuart cherished almost an obsession for clearing his name of any wrong doing. Because of the unique way he became a writer, O. Henry is a widely known name even among those who scarcely read his works or at best can dimly remember his stories like "The Gift of the Magi" or "The Last Leaf" from school level.

There is no denying the fact that the emotion of love plays an important role in O. Henry's short stories. Love, as portrayed in many of his short stories, is an enduring passion, so intense and varied in its scope that it becomes sometimes self-negating and sometimes ennobling. The majority of O. Henry's short stories, as B.M. Ejxenbaum, an eminent Russian critic, thinks, are built on the most traditional situations: two men love the same woman as is the case in "Cupid ā La Carte", and "The Handbook of Hymen". Obviously the critic touches upon nothing but the common feeling of passionate love.

But the fact that O. Henry can also present the effects of ennobling and selfless love on certain occasions has hardly been highlighted by the said critic. Hence there still remains ample scope to study how love becomes a dominant aspect in O. Henry's stories. As for instance, 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 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. Examples may easily be multiplied.

Circumstanced to drift into the jobs of a druggist, a book keeper, a draftsman and also a bank teller O. Henry has effectively and artistically too, harnessed the mine of his experiences to the varied presentation of his characters. From his own words quoted below it is evident that he refused to lead an ivory tower existence: "You can't write a story that's got any life in it by sitting at a writing table and thinking. You've got to get out into the streets, into the crowds, talk with people and feel the rush and throb of real life—that's the stimulant

for a story writer".¹⁰ In this context it is worth reminding one of Don Hauptman's comments: "O. Henry's curiosity and ingenuity were boundless. He could glance around a restaurant and find the premises of half a dozen stories"¹¹

Commenting on O. Henry's position in the world of literature Seth Moyle, his friend observes: "He seems to have occupied the best seat in the world's arena and to have pictured the passing show. No other could have made so indelible a record of the things he saw."¹²

O. Henry's stories were written in lucid style and with vivid details. They abound in examples, literary allusions, verbal trickery, explanations and ornamentations. His expressive power was rather remarkable. It is now an established fact that his stories not only present a vivid panorama of the contemporary society but also transcend the period of their writing and acquire a quality of timelessness. His lucid language, wealth of images and psychological development of characters make his stories highly appreciable and enjoyable. "England has her Dickens, France her Hugo, and America has O. Henry. In his book he will live through the ages"¹³

10. P. J. Horowitz, *Collected Stories of O. Henry* (Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel, 1993), p. xiii.

11. "A Surprise Tribute to O. Henry", The Daily Objectivist, Sept 11, 1999.

12. Seth Moyle, *My Friend O. Henry* (Norwood Editions, New York, 1978), p.14.

13. *Ibid.*, p.14.

While undertaking a critical study of O. Henry's stories I have endeavoured to demonstrate and elucidate that he was a great humanist as well as a realist at the same time. It is his keen sense of humanism and realism that awakened in him an overwhelming feeling of sympathy towards the oppressed, deprived and humiliated women of the contemporary American society. Efforts have been made to probe O. Henry's attitude to them on the basis of a study of female characters in particular. In the opening chapter an attempt has been made to highlight certain incidents of O. Henry's life that influenced him profoundly and even provided him with raw material for many of his stories. The aim of the second chapter has been chiefly to present the contemporary socio-economic scenario of the American Southwest so as to reveal what bearing it has on O. Henry's literary career. In the third chapter it has been my sincere effort to demonstrate O. Henry as a realist and a writer of the underdogs and the underprivileged. In the fourth chapter I have highlighted O. Henry's treatment of women in his short stories. Incidentally, the delineation of female characters in O. Henry's stories is perhaps one of the most significant phenomena of his literary art. So far as recent critical attention is concerned, this particular aspect seems to have received less than its due. The next two chapters are mainly devoted to a critical assessment of O. Henry's treatment of love and the characteristics of his literary style respectively. In the concluding chapter an attempt has been made towards a summing-up.