

The Themes of Love and Sacrifice in the Short Stories of O.Henry

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ABSTRACT

O. Henry wrote almost 300 short stories mostly took place in New York. He wrote stories on various themes. The unique quality of his stories is his sudden twist in the tail which is liked by the people. And this is probably one quality which compelled people to like his stories. The hero and heroines in his stories are not supermen and superwomen. On the contrary mostly they are common people. In some of his stories which are very popular we find the two popular themes; love and sacrifice. O. Henry's famous stories The Gift of Magi, The Last Leaf, The Loaves of Witches, After Twenty Years and The Furnished Room which contain the themes of love and sacrifice which not only entertain the readers but also the two valuable life-values to the humans. This research paper will focus on some of his stories to find out the said aspect.

Keywords: unique quality, supermen, superwomen popular themes, love, sacrifice, life-values, entertain.

Introduction:

There is no doubt that the short story is favorite form of present day writing and also reading. Many famous novelists like **Arnold Bennett** and **Hugh Walpole**, have treated it as a sideline and Elizabeth Bowen has described it as the obvious medium for the unsuccessful poet. Its popularity can be accounted for in many ways, perhaps the chief being the many other demands upon the leisure of the modern reader the development of magazines and periodicals which contain so many stories helped lot to the development of the modern short stories. When we think of the entertainment of the ordinary readers, we remember the most work of this decade appeared in a series quite outside their influence –the world famous Sherlock Holmes detective stories by Sir Arthur Conon Doyle. W.W. Jacobs has been credited of writing some delightful

humorous tales. Since 1900 John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and James Joyce have all written memorable short stories in addition to novels which was their real literary world. Walter de la Mare, A. E. Coppard, H.E. Bates and Rhys Davies have added the delicate touch and insight to the form, and are perhaps typical of all that is best in the short story of today. As Birjadish Prasad has said about the future and scope of short story, "There seems no reason to doubt that the Short Story will long continue to meet the needs of authors and readers alike, and to find new material for its special purposes inconstantly changing world."(Prasad 229)

In the history of the short story as a literary form, O. Henry occupies a major place. O. Henry is a major presence not only in the history of the American short story, but in general the history of the short story as a literary form itself. O. Henry whose name was William Sidney Porter was born on September 11, 1862.O. Henry saw life in the raw as it were and translated it into literary creation. It was not the upper-class, luxurious social life like that of Henry James or William Howells that O. Henry lived. On the contrary, his was a life characterized by the common man's struggle or survival leading him to strange experiences of people and places. In terms of life-style there is nothing great about O. Henry. All his fortunes and misfortunes were those of a common man. What is uncommon about this common life is the way in which O. Henry translated this into his powerful talent as a short story writer. The powerful individual talent of O. Henry as a short story writer has of course to be seen into the context of the general tradition of the short story in America. O. Henry widened the range of the short story, finding material in almost every aspect of common life. His brilliant narrative skill, innocent humor, skillful depiction of city type and dexterous use of ironical made his stories very interesting. A special feature of his stories was their unexpected endings which came to be regarded as the O. Henry's Twist. Most of O. Henry's stories are set in his own time. Many take place in New York City and deal for most part with ordinary people: clerks, policemen, waitresses etc. O. Henry had an inimitable hand for isolating some elements of society and describing it with an incredible economy and grace of language. His stories are known for their wit, wordplay, warm characterization and clever twist endings. O. Henry was called the American answer to Guy de Maupassant. Both the authors wrote with twist endings, but O. Henry's stories were much more playful and optimistic.

"A prolific writer, O. Henry turned out over 250 short stories between 1899 and 1910. These stories have been widely read and enjoyed throughout the world, and even though in the eyes of some they may not be considered first-rate literature, they have become a significant part of the short story genre. 'The Gift of the Magi,' collected in *The Four Million* (1906), stands as a clear example of O. Henry's mastery of the sentimental story with the surprise ending. "(Wilton Eckley 125)

O. Henry's Unique Quality as a Short Story Writer:

Every one of us knew that knew that O. Henry is famous for his unexpected and surprising ending which is known as O. Henry's twist. It is his unique style which compels a reader to read his stories from beginning to the end. No reader can guess as what would happen in the end of the story. it is only at the end of the story the readers come to the exposition. And the exposition off course startled the readers for it is against his expectations.

O. Henry's Selected Stories having the theme of Love and Sacrifice:

Some of his very famous short stories have the theme of love and sacrifice. According to O. Henry love and sacrifice show the exalted heart of a person. Every person born with these natural unique qualities. Here we have taken five stories; '**The Gift of Magi**', '**The Last Leaf**', '**The Loaves of Witches**', '**After Twenty Years**' and '**The Furnished Room**' in which we find the characters are ready to sacrifice each and everything, even their lives for the sake of love say it is for a lover, beloved and friend and above all it is a love of a human to a human. In these stories we find the very ordinary characters. We find they spend their lives in poverty but they are ready to sacrifice anything for his or her friend, lover and beloved. Although they are poor but the love among them makes them extremely rich. Their loving hearts magnify their philanthropic and magnanimous nature. O. Henry shows in these stories that the love is the richest thing in life. Those who are in love they don't need any material thing.

The Love and Sacrifice of Jim and Della:

"**The Gifts of the Magi**" first appeared in **The New York Sunday World** on December 10, 1905 and was later published in O. Henry's collection **The Four Million** on April 10, 1906. This story is the best and finest example of love and sacrifice. The story tells of a young married couple known as Jim and Della Dillingham. The couple has very little money and lives in a modest apartment. Between them, they have only two possessions that they consider their treasures; Jim's golden watch that belonged to his father and his grandfather, and Della's lustrous, long hair that falls almost to her knees. It's Christmas Eve, and Della finds herself running out of time to buy Jim a Christmas present. After paying all of the bills, she has left is \$ 1.87. She wants to buy Jim a chain for his golden watch. But she has no money. After a sudden inspiration, she rushes out again and has hair cut to sell for \$20.00. Then she buys the platinum chain for \$ 21.00.

When Jim comes from work, he stares at Della. She admits that she sold her hair to buy his present. However, Jim casually pulls a package and hands it to her. Inside, Della finds a pair of costly decorative hair combs that she had long admired, but are now completely useless since she's cut off her hair. Hiding her tears, she jumps up and holds out her gift for Jim: the watch chain. Jim shrugs, flops down onto the old sofa, puts his hands behind his head and tells Della flatly that he sold his watch to buy her combs:

'They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone. But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!" And then Delia leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!" Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit. "Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled. "Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep them a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on." (**Hansen 762 -763**) Thus we see that both the spouses sacrificed their greatest possessions only for the sake of love. Both they were obsessed with the feeling of love. And the love ever asks for sacrifice.

The love and Sacrifice of Behrman for Johnsby:

The other famous story in which we find the theme of love and sacrifice is '**The Last Leaf**'. It is one of the most famous stories which is full of irony and pathos. It is also the story of death and life, optimism and pessimism and moreover it is a story of great sacrifice. In this story there are four characters; including one abstract one which is personified by O. Henry called pneumonia. The leading character is Behrman and

Johnsy and Sue are other important characters. Here Johnsby has been shown as a pessimistic girl while Sue an optimistic. "It is the last one," said Johnsby. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall to-day, and I shall die at the same time." (Hansen 1458)

Old Behrman in this story was a friend of both the girls who sacrificed his life for Johnsby. All the three characters are artists. Old Behrman has never painted his masterpiece, but he says that, one day he would paint his masterpiece. And he did, he painted the last leaf on the vine, before he died and saved a life of an ill friend, Johnsby, who binds herself with a fancy that she would die with the fall of the last ivy leaf. The irony in this story lies in the fact that Johnsby has been attacked by pneumonia and the readers hope that she might die. But as we know O. Henry is famous for his ironical and surprising ending. It is not Johnsby but Behrman dies due to pneumonia in the end of the story. Everybody consider Behrman as a useless unsuccessful and foolish old man but he is the only person who could understand the psychological condition of Johnsby. When there is heavy rain and storm and there is no any leaf on the ivy vine he immediately goes to that lane and painted his

A real masterpiece picture of ivy leaf which saved the life of Johnsby. That time he never cares about himself, he just care of Johnsby his friend. Eventually he dies of pneumonia in place of Johnsby. His death is very pathetic for he dies for others. The last leaf of ivy vine is really a masterpiece of Behrman. Just look at the ironic and pathetic end of this story: "I have something to tell you, white mouse," she said. "Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was ill only two days. The janitor found him on the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes were wet through and icy cold. They couldn't imagine where he had been on such a dreadful and clothing night.

The intensity of Love and Friendship between Jimmy and Bob:

"**After Twenty Years**" is one of the very famous stories. It is story of two friend; Jimmy and Bob. The two friends, before parting to become something in the big bad world, made a promise to see each other again after twenty years, at exactly the same place and at same time. It is only for the sake of love that the two friends come to meet each other at the decided place and time. The special thing about this story is that they both meet after a long gap of twenty years. In this long gap both friends change lot by age, by appearance and even by profession. Say by it is by misfortune Bob becomes a smuggler and Jimmy becomes police inspector. Say it is by fate, Jimmy is given the responsibility to arrest the famous Smuggler, Bob. Jimmy is in a great dilemma as what to do whether he should arrest his friend or go to meet him as a friend for he had promised before twenty years. Jimmy goes meet Bob as a friend but Bob fails to recognize Jimmy, but Jimmy sees his face in the lighter's light. But that time he doesn't arrest him for he meets him as a friend. After sometime Jimmy sends another man to arrest him with a letter in which everything is written that he had come to him to meet him for the sake of their friendship and love. We can find the glimpse of love and friendship between Jimmy and Bob in the following words:

"I'll be on my way. Hope your friend comes around all right.

Going to call time on him sharp?"

"I should say not!" said the other.

"I'll give him half an hour at least.

If Jimmy is alive on earth he'll be here by the time. So long, officer." (**Henry 408**)

Martha's Love for Mr. Blumberger:

"**Witches Loaves**" taken from O. Henry's **Sixes and Sevens** collection. It is another story of the above type in which we encounter the ironic situation which not only creates humour but also pathos. Here we get a touching revelation of poor Martha Meacham's dreams she tries to realize by sympathizing with Mr. Blumberger a famous architect whom she mistakes to be a man of misfortune. The loaves and crumbs Mr. Blumberger purchases from her shop, give her the impression of his being too poor to be able to survive. The appearance and nature of the man is so gentle that Miss Martha is trapped unknowingly in her mistaken notion. By putting butter inside the loaves. In fact Miss Marta meets Blumberger everyday in her bakery shop. Graduallyshe becomes affectionate with him and also falls in love with this old man. So in order to express her love she applies little butter on his loaves in order to get the protein to the old man. Although her affectionate attitude proves to be a great disaster.

A Lover Suicide for his Dead Beloved:

"**The Furnished Room**" which first appeared in '**New York Sunday World Magazine**' on 14th August 1904. In this the two lovers commit suicide in the same room for they could live together. The very beginning of the story is quite bleak. Then we have an unnamed lover goes to the same house where his beloved had

stayed. The room the lover finds is filled with gloom which O. Henry so poetically describes. All of this gloom combined with the saga of the man's ongoing, seemingly futile search adds to the suspense. He also stays in the same room where his beloved had committed suicide, and unfortunately he also commits suicide in the same room. The incidents have been shown as if the characters are just puppets in the hands of God.

The lover rents a room in the same district, asks his landlady the same question and receives answer in the inevitable negative. His room although furnished, is sordid in appearance with a musty smell and containing some cast off lumber by previous occupants. In the midst of such dismal surroundings the lover smells the strong, sweet odour of mignonette, the odour his mistress loved. He reaches the room frantically to discover any sign showing that she had lived there but does not find it yet, he feels her presence, the odour producing the impression. The readers are left with bleak suppositions. If the lover finds who is looking for, will be a tragic discovery? Given the bleak mood, setting and situation, the suspense is heightened by the likelihood of something tragic to come. A mystical communion between the lovers seems to take place, "Oh, God! Whence that odour and since when have odors had a voice to call?" he asks himself. (**Henry 528**) The odour is not however, purely imaginary for the landlady tells Mrs. McCool about the suicide of the girl in the same room. She had deliberately suppressed the fact from the lover fearing that it would bring discredit to her house. The lover commits suicide in the same room by turning on the gas As he does this he senses the girl's presence as if she had come there to escort him to her new abode. By his self-chosen death, he hopes to be united, in Browning's words, with the soul of his soul.

Conclusion:

Thus we have discussed here five famous short stories of O. Henry in which we have found that all the stories are having the theme of love and sacrifice which we rarely find this feeling nowadays for the world has become selfish and self-centered. O. Henry has proved that this feeling of has made the whole world into one ball. In '**The Gift of Magi**' Jim and Della although poor but they are very rich by their intense love between them and sacrifice their precious belongings; the gold watch and the longest hair. In '**The Last Leaf**' Behrman understands the psychological condition of ill Johnsy and paints his masterpiece picture in the stormy and rainy night and eventually dies of pneumonia. In '**Witches Loaves**' Martha invites the wrath of Mr. Blumberger who is a painter only for the love of him she applies the fresh butter to his stale loaf. In '**After Twenty Years**' the two friends; Jimmy and Bob come to meet each at the exact time and place after a long gap of twenty years. It is only the feeling of intense love which compel both the friends to meet again. In the last story; '**The Furnished Room**' the lover dies when he comes to know that his beloved is no more in this world. He knows that this world is selfish and no one is going to love him as his beloved. Thus while writing these stories O. Henry has used all his literary devices and he never forget to give his surprising jolt at the end of his each story.

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