

A Critical Study of the Techniques in O. Henry's 'The Last Leaf' and 'The Gift of the Magi'.

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Abstract

A short story writer has to adopt effective techniques, lest his art should be eclipsed. O. Henry's major techniques are theme, moral, plot, characterization, narration, scene, setting and language. These techniques make the short stories quite interesting, appealing and successful. This study has analyzed two short stories based on the aforesaid techniques, and the analyses will establish how the stories are artistically reliable, and how interesting the experience of the reading of O. Henry's short stories.

Key Words: *theme, moral, plot, characterization, milieu or setting, narration and rhetoric. Suffering and Endurance, the fictional conflict, treatment of language.*

Introduction

William Sydney Porter alias O. Henry (1862-1910) is a prolific American short story writer whose stories are in the great American literary tradition. O. Henry has written two hundred and seventy short stories which reflect his experiences in life. He has a genuine sympathy for the down-trodden and the oppressed people in the American society. Many of his stories show how life was lived in America at a time when slavery and the Indian wars were only a generation or so in the past. The variety of O. Henry's short stories is amazing. A short story writer grabs a moment in the life of a character and focuses on it completely so as to sustain interest in the reader. The scope of the short story writer is limited, for he has to delineate everything in a limited space unlike the novelist. He cannot ramble in his narrative, and his message, if there be any, should be overt or covert.

O. Henry's stories are rarely realistic, but their combination of tight plotting and reliance on outrageous coincidences creates a juxtaposition of obsessive order and randomness within human experience that challenges the reader's normal assumption that events are predictable and logical from causes to effects. O. Henry has carved a niche for himself in the world of short stories, and he is renowned for the techniques he has used in his stories. The major techniques of O. Henry are theme, moral, plot, characterization, narration, scene, setting and language. The techniques make the short stories quite interesting, appealing and successful. A short story writer has to adopt effective techniques, lest his art should be eclipsed. It is these techniques of O. Henry which the present researcher has explored in this paper and article. This study has analyzed two short stories based on the aforesaid techniques, and the analyses will establish how the stories are artistically reliable, and how interesting the experience of the reading of O. Henry's short stories.

In the realm of American short fiction, O. Henry is a major writer. Many critics have expressed views about his works. Henry James Forman, a popular critic of O. Henry, conveys his article published in the book entitled *O. Henry A Study of the Short Fiction (1993)*, that the stories (of O. Henry) have a flashing wit, abundant humour and quick observation (152). E. Hudson Long, in his book, *O. Henry the Man and His Works (1960)* observes that the art of O. Henry is "more than factual" (118).

Suffering and Endurance

Suffering is part of human life and every man suffers. Suffering makes man understand the meaning of life. It develops endurance in him. This is the common theme found in many of the stories of O. Henry. Two stories are selected and securitized in this paper. The first story taken up for analysis is "The Last Leaf." It is a fine story of O. Henry which deals with the impact of death on man in general. At Greenwich Village situated west of Washington square, there existed a colony of artists and Sue and Johnsy were living there, and they were also artists. Unfortunately pneumonia fever stalked about the colony and Johnsy was one among the affected. Sue nursed her. The doctor who treated Johnsy conveyed to Sue that Johnsy's condition was quite critical. Johnsy was lying in bed and she could see through the window an old ivy standing near her bed-room, Sue looked solicitously out of the window. What was there to count? There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen, and the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old, old

ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half away up the brick wall. The cold breath of Autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine until its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks. (310)

The plant had withered and the roots were dying. Johnsy, as a patient, started counting the leaves of the ivy one by one and the ivy was shedding its leaves. Johnsy conveyed to her friend Sue that she (Johnsy) would die when the last leaf fell.

Sue was extremely upset and she comforted Johnsy. Old Behrman was a painter living on the ground floor of the same building where Johnsy and Sue lived. Sue reported Johnsy's diffidence to Behrman and he ridiculed it. He visited Johnsy when she was asleep. The next morning Johnsy could see only a lone leaf on the vine, and she contended that with the fall of the lone leaf, she would die. Time passed by and Johnsy went on watching the lone leaf, but it had not fallen. It was miracle that Johnsy did not die and she recovered herself from pneumonia. On the other hand, Behrman died. Risking the severe chilly cold, in the night before his death, he combed the wall opposite Johnsy's bed-chamber and painted on it the lone ivy leaf which in was highly realistic. The last leaf of the ivy had fallen and Johnsy should have died, but the painted leaf looked real, and on seeing it, Johnsy revived hope within and she survived. But Behrman died, for he exposed himself, while painting the leaf, to the chilly weather which killed him. Hope helped Johnsy overcome death. Behrman died as sacrificer.

An important technique a writer treats in his work is the theme. The theme and the moral of a work go together. It is the theme of suffering which O. Henry has rightly treated in the story. Suffering is a universal phenomenon, and everyone suffers in life, in this world. Johnsy suffers owing to pneumonia and it is not owing to her fault. It is nobody else's fault. She is bound to suffer; she suffers; it is her destiny. Suffering purifies a person's character and so is Johnsy. Johnsy accepts her suffering and she looks at life with a stoic resignation. It is this factor which makes her to anticipate death, but she does not die, and it is God's will. It is not Johnsy alone who suffers in the story. Behrman also suffers.

Behrman's suffering is greater than that of Johnsy and it is meaningful. Johnsy's suffering crops up on its own whereas Behrman's is self-inflicted. Suffering is more intense in Behrman and it comes invited. It is suffering is more intense in Behrman and it comes invited. It is suffering of the sake of others. Behrman suffers for the betterment of Johnsy, but never does he expect that it would be too dear for him. Suffering ends in sacrifice in the life of Behrman, and sacrifice is the moral of the story. In a work of art the theme and moral go hand in hand. Suffering is the theme of the story and both the characters, Johnsy and Behrman suffer. The reader learns the moral that suffering will elevate man to greater heights in life, and sacrifice should be the purpose of man's existence in this world. O. Henry has wrought both the theme of suffering and the moral of sacrifice well in the short story.

The next technique analyzed in "The Last Leaf" is the plot. For the success of a short story, a well knit plot is a basic requisite. Aristotle's stipulation in *Poetics* is that in a good work of art, the plot should have a beginning, middle and an end. It is the fictional conflict which determines the nature of a plot. The fictional conflict is the core of a fiction which the writer presents either explicitly or implicitly at the very beginning of the story. In "The Last Leaf," the writer explicitly presents the conflict at the beginning through the mouth of the doctor, and it concerns the fate of Johnsy who suffers from pneumonia;

She has one chance in – let us say, ten,’ he said, as he shook down the mercury in his clinical thermometer. “And that chance is for her to want to live. This way people have of lining – up on the side of the undertaker makes the entire pharmacopoeia look silly. Your little lady has made up her mind that she’s not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?” (309) From this, the reader can understand the fictional conflict, and it is the suffering of Johnsy and her expected death.

The story has good element of beginning and the suffering of Johnsy and her counting the leaves of the ivy constitute the middle. The fictional conflict – the action – progresses and the reader is kept in suspense as to what is going to happen to Johnsy, whether she will recover from pneumonia or die. The denouncement is such that none has anticipated. Contrary to the reader’s expectation, Johnsy recovers, but Behrman dies. The fictional conflict progresses consistently in the story and thus it imparts a structural unity to the plot. Every event in the story has its significance and contributes to the growth of action. Johnsy’s affliction due to pneumonia, her expecting death, Sue’s help to Johnsy, the tree shedding leavers, Bhrman’s help to Johnsy and his death are the fictional factors which contribute to the evolution of the plot and the writer has contrived it artistically. O. Henry has exploited different types of fictional techniques in his short stories, and the treatment of the theme and moral and the evolution of plot are the dominant ones in “The Last Leaf.”

Narration is part of the craft of any novelist or short story writer. There are two modes of narration and they are first person narration and third person narration. Second person narration cannot be chosen by a writer, and if commences a story with second person narration, soon, he’ll have to switch over either to first person or third person narration. Depending on the nature of the subject matter, a writer will have to choose the narrative mode and if he rightly does it, surely, the work will be artistically successful and intersecting for the reader. In the story, “The Last Leaf,” O. Henry has employed third person narration and he has done it rightly. The author has created a second self of himself and the second self narrates the story. As a result, the reader does not feel the presence of the author at all when he (the reader) peruses the story. The writer commences his narration and immediately grips the attention of the reader.

In the very opening page the writer introduces the protagonist, Johnsy, afflicted with pneumonia. She suffers extremely and the doctor who treats her tells Johnsy’s friend Sue that Johnsy has “one chance in ten” (309) for survival. Third person narrative mode is arresting and the way of narration creates expectancy in the reader. Suspense hangs in the mind of the reader and he is excited as to what the thing is going to happen next. A handful of people die of pneumonia in the locality and the author’s right narration intensifies the reader’s feeling that Johnsy would die soon. The narrative strengthens further the reader’s sentiment that with the fall of the last leaf of the ivy vine, Johnsy will die. The writer has adopted limited omniscient narration in the story and there is no authorial interference in the course of narration. Therefore the reader enjoys fiction progressing fast.

Objectivity in the fiction is absolute and it is quite explicit in the denouement. Everyone expects that Johnsy will die but not the contrary, it is Behrman who dies, and the author’s appropriate rhetoric brings out the sacrifice of the man and the pathos of the story. The narrative pace is consistent and it imparts a structural unity to the story. O. Henry’s handling of the narrative technique is in consonance with the subject matter of the story, and

narration makes the reader's perusal of the story quite interesting. The writer has used and appropriate language in the story and it is simple and direct. There is no verbosity and redundant descriptions which will mar reading. The literary devices are much limited and the title itself serves as the central device of the story. It is the last leaf and it is a metaphor. The central metaphor, the last leaf implies the sufferings of Johnsy and the sacrifice of Behrman. The doctor conveys to Sue that Johnsy's chances of survival are one in ten, but it is an irony that Behrman dies and Johnsy survives. In "The Last Leaf," O. Henry emerges as a successful short story writer and his fiction craft - theme, moral, plot, characterization, narration, language and literary devices like metaphor and irony - has helped him in his achievement.

The second story taken up for analysis is "The Gift of the Magi." It is a fine story and it is considered the master piece of O. Henry. This story and it is considered the master piece of O. Henry. This story begins with Della counting the sum she had with her. The next day was Christmas, and she wanted to present a valuable gift to her darling, Jim. She had only one dollar and eight seven cents. This much of money was not enough to buy a magnificent gift and therefore she was sad. Although she did not have sufficient dollar to purchase a gift, she thought that the gift should be a nice one. A similar thought stroke Jim also. Although they wanted to surprise each other by their receptive gifts on Christmas Eve, they were constrained by their bad financial position. Unfortunately they were in the clutches of poverty. Poverty plays a major role in this story. Suddenly an idea occurred in Della's mind, and it was that she came forward to sell her long locks of hairs in order to buy a gift for Jim.

Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fell to its full length. Della sold her locks of hairs for twenty dollars. Now she ransacked the stores to buy a gift for Jim. She thought that it surely had been made for her Jim and no one else. It was platinum fob chain, simple and elegant in design. She bought the fob chain for twenty one dollars. Now she had only eighty seven cents with her. Jim sold his gold watch in order to buy a gift for Della. Finally he sold his watch and bought an elegant comb for Della. When they opened their respective gift boxes, there appeared rays of disappointment on their faces. There was comb but there was no hair on Della's head, likewise, there was a platinum fob chain but Jim did not have a watch. Both of them had sacrificed their valuable treasures. Ultimately, they consoled themselves for their respective losses. People who gave and received gifts, such as Jim and Della were the wisest. They were the Magi.

An important technique a writer treats in his work is the theme. The theme and moral of a work run together. It is the theme of suffering from poverty and disappointment which O. Henry has magnificently treated in the story. No doubt, here poverty and disappointment are interrelated. Disappointment and suffering from poverty are the common phenomenon. Here, Della suffers a lot under the clutches of poverty. She is bound to suffer; it is her kismet. Although Della suffers a lot under poverty, she is quite confident to present a gift to Jim by hook or by crook. It is not Della alone who suffers in the story; Jim also suffers. In the initial part of the story, Della counts the money. From this, the reader can make out the fictional conflict, how she suffers a lot under poverty.

Although both of them do not have sufficient money to buy a gift, they come forward to sell their valuable possessions, which are locks of hairs and a wrist watch. This is the meaningful event in the story. Della suffers for the sake of Jim and the same thing happens in Jim's life also. Ultimately, suffering of poverty ends in disappointment in the life of Della

and Jim. But eventually they console each other for their ignorance. So one can simply say consolation and mutual love are the moral of the story. In a work of art, the theme and moral are interrelated. Suffering from poverty is the theme of the story and both the characters, Della and Jim suffer. The reader learns the moral that suffering from poverty will elevate man to greater heights in life, and consolation should be the purpose of man's existence in the world. O. Henry has treated both the theme of suffering from poverty and the moral of consolation well in the short story.

The next technique analyzed in "The Gift of the Magi" is the plot. Plot is necessary for the success of any work of art. For the success of a short story, a well knit plot is a basic requisite. The fictional conflict is the core of a fiction which the writer presents either explicitly or implicitly at the very beginning of the story. In "The Gift of the Magi," the writer explicitly presents the fictional conflict at the beginning through the characters, counting money by Della. Poverty afflicts Della and Jim but it does not affect their love and affection for each other. It is this which makes the lovers buy gifts for each other without each knowing about the other's gift. The fictional conflict is strongly established and developed in the story.

The story has a good element of beginning, and the suffering of Della and her counting the money, and ultimately selling her locks of hairs constitute the middle of the story. Suspense is evolved in the mind of the reader as to what is going to happen to Della and Jim, whether they are going to present their gifts to each other on Christmas Eve. In this way a touch of anticipation is evolved. The denouement is such that nobody has anticipated. Contrary to the readers' anticipation, Della and Jim share their gifts with each other by selling their valuable possessions. Finally, although they share their gifts with each other, only disappointment remains in their life. Every movement in the story has its significance and contributes to the growth of action.

The next technique analyzed in "the Gift of the Magi" is the treatment of language. According to Dr. Samuel Johnson, high dictions are the hallmark of a work of art. So an appropriate language and good and high diction alone will make a work of art a perfect one. O. Henry has magnificently utilized the language in the story. Although some sort of slang expressions are used by the author, they do not make the readers feel boredom. The treatment of language adds to the glory of the story. Readers can easily understand the language at a single reading. When the readers try to read the reports between the lines, they will understand the implications of the story. In the middle of the story the author uses the expression,

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Mrs. Sofronie. "Take your hat off and let me look at it."

Down fell the brown waterfall.

"Twenty dollars," said Mrs. Sofronie, lifting the hair to feel its weight.

"Give it to me quick," said Della. (3)

It is highly poetic and metaphorical. The two metaphors are appropriate and they fit themselves into the fabric of story rightly. O. Henry is a master of short stories and in this story, he has used the techniques of theme, moral plot and language in an appropriate manner, undoubtedly the story establishes O. Henry as a great writer.

O. Henry is a master of short fiction and he stands as a towering personality in the American literary tradition, especially the short story tradition. He has proved his worth as short fiction writer in his roughly two hundred and seventy stories which portray the life much of the common man in the American society. Unlike the novel, the short story does not have of scope for the writer's "free rambling" because of the lack of space. Everything is jam-packed in short fiction and the writer has to say what all he wants to say in cramped void. It seemingly an impediment but a meticulous writer manipulates the fictional ingredients dexterously and makes out a fiction which will be a truthful reflection of human life. It is this which O. Henry has done in his stories. His works make a faithful reflection of life in the American society and there are many factors responsible for his success. The techniques of O. Henry in his short stories constitute the major reason for his being an effective story-teller.

Conclusion

O. Henry's techniques include theme, moral, plot characterization, narration, language, setting and so on, and this attempt has made an analysis of them in this study. The first technique analyzed is the theme of the short stories. The recurrent subject or idea which gives a unified impression to a work of art happens to be its theme. The basic theme of O. Henry's short fiction is a study of human nature as reflected in the life of the American people. O. Henry is known for his delightful short stories: sketches, tales and caricatures. All are written mainly with the purpose of pure entertainment. It is remarkable of O. Henry as a human being that inspire of living an adverse life throughout, he has never allowed the dark side of his life to be reflected in his works. On the contrary, he continues to delight his readers with a happy or tragic end. The reason for his success is the right choice of subject matter and its theme. Indeed every story of O. Henry has a strong theme presented overtly or covertly, and it reflects the essential dilemma in human life. No doubt, with the theme goes the moral of a story. The moral of a story is what it tells the readers about how people should conduct themselves in life. Suffering is inevitable in man's life and suffering assumes a meaning when it is made to rest on sacrifice. This is quite explicit in "The Last Leaf," and Behrman emerges as a great sacrificer. Suffering makes man's life meaningful and O. Henry has exploited the techniques of theme and moral in right manner. In the handling of fictional techniques in his short stories, O. Henry is at his best, and he has carved a niche for himself in the realm of American short story. This study has made a technical analysis of the short stories and his exposition includes a study of theme, moral, plot, characterization, milieu or setting, narration and rhetoric.

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