

Different Dimensions Of Women In The Short Stories Of O’henry’s *The Skylight Room* And *The Last Leaf*

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Abstract

American writers began by unique ways of expressing their experience. American literature demonstrated the basic characteristics of all kinds of literature such as characters, plots, settings, images and themes. In this way William Sydney Porter, better known by his pen name O’Henry, was an American short story writer. His stories were known for their surprise endings. The short story *The Skylight Room* was about a young woman, Miss Leeson and she stayed at one of Mrs. Parker’s parlour. During her outstayed, Miss Leeson happened to swim in hard stormy times and was later rescued by a star. Henry’s another short story *The Last Leaf* contained the theme of commitment, sacrifice, friendship, compassion, hope and dedication. In this story there were three painters mentioned Sue, Johnsy and Behrman who were committed to something. Very early in this story Johnsy suffered by Pneumonia and she abandoned any hope of living. She stared the vine leaves through the window and she herself concluded that her last breath is decided only by the last leaf of the vine. Sue, her friend made plans to make Johnsy come out of fear. With the help of Behrman she rebuilt hope in Johnsy. Behrman has paid his own life in order to save the life of Johnsy. The single leaf that he had painted on the wall became his masterpiece. The last leaf had given her hope of living and perished her pessimistic heart and made her to fight against the problem. Through these stories O’Henry sketched the different dimensions of women such as fear, judgement, selfish, kind-heart, virtue, perseverance, mystery, gay-heart, optimistic heart, confidence, good will and contentment.

Keywords: American Literature, poverty, broken-hearted, friendship, hope, masterpiece and Self-sacrificing love.

Introduction:

American literature originated with the orally transmitted myth, legends, tales and Indian cultures. The origins of the American short stories were more easily definable and pragmatic, based largely on the greater culture of the average American reader rather than some kind of artistic dictum. The modern short story grew out of necessity rather than luxury. A short story usually has a small cast of characters and revolves around one or two incidents, evoking a particular effect. It gives an edge over lengthy novels is that despite relatively limited scope, it provides a satisfying treatment to its characters and subjects.

Edgar Allan Poe and O’Henry considered as the greatest short story writers in the history of American Literature. The contemporary writers of O’Henry are Edith Wharton, William Golding, Pearl S. Buck, Mark Twain, Louisa May Alcott, Ray Bradbury, Kate Chopin, Henry Van Dyke, Patricia Polacco, Hisako Aoki, Philip van Doren Stern, Marie Hall Etc, Thomas s. Monsoon, Francis Pharcellus Church, Ellis Parker Butler, Alexander Shirvanzade, Oliver Herford, J.K. Rowling, Nodar Dumbadze, Paruyr Sevak, Raffi, hovhannes Tumanyan, Edgar Allan Poe, Mikhail Javakhishvilli, Saki and Hagop Baronian.

William Sydney Porter (1862-1910) known by his pen name O’Henry. He was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. He became famous for his twist endings. Simultaneously,

the twists and turns played in the early life of Henry. His life rounded and rounded with several numbers of jobs, from pharmacy to drafting, journalism and banking and then, he arrested for embezzlement in 1894. His wife was affected by tuberculosis and she died in 1897. Finally, he published his first collection of short stories, *Cabbages and kings* in 1904 and this title was inspired by Lewis Carol's poem, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*. O'Henry's literary career began in 1902 in New York City and there he had written around 381 short stories. Naturally, he was a lover of classic literature. His trademark laid upon in his witty, plot-twisting endings, warm characterization of the awkward and difficult situations and the creative ways people find to resolve them. His greatest works contained *The Gift of the Magi*, *Transients in Arcadia*, *The Cop and the Anthem*, *A cosmopolite in a Cafe*, *Between rounds*, *The Skylight Room*, *A service of Love*, *The Coming-Out of Maggie*, *Memories of a Yellow Dog*, *The Love-philtre of Ikey Shorenstein*, *The Furnished Room*, *The Last Leaf*, *The Poet and the Peasant*, *A Ramble in Aphasia*, *A Municipal Report*, and *Proof of the Pudding*.

O'Henry's most famous short story was *The Skylight Room* which was published in 1906. This Story centred on the character of Miss Elsie Leeson. One of the major important themes of the story was Hope. This striving hope helped to bright up the darkened life of Leeson. The story was a second person narration. Mrs. Parker, a woman known for her judgemental and angrier behaviour. She was the owner of boarding house which contained many expensive rooms and the bare necessities of the skylight room and all for rent. The skylight room was the cheapest and smallest in the house kept for the use of those with minimal income. When the heroine of the story, Miss Elsie Leeson came hunting for a room, Mrs. Parker welcomed her as unusual stare because she said that she was neither a doctor nor a dentist. Due to this disappointment, Mrs. Parker "gave her the incredulous, pitying, sneering, icy stare that she kept for those who failed to qualify as doctors or dentists" (p.21). It made it easier to identify the immature quality of Mrs. Parker.

Then, Clara represented as the women of Circumstances. She was a half-contemptuous as well as a half-kind hearted. She was a coloured maid in Mrs. Parker's parlours. Though she had no blood relationship with Leeson, there was an intimacy between Clara and Leeson. As Leeson came looking for a room, Mrs. Parker left Leeson with Clara. The skylight room was shown only by Clara. She described that it was a floor space with a dark lumber closet at the middle of the hall. She said, "Through the glass of the little skylight you saw a square of blue infinity" (p.21). In order to her minimal income, she accepted the deal without any hesitation. Likewise, When Leeson was dying from starvation, the maid found the next day that Leeson did not respond for knocking and so she asked them to call ambulance to take her to the hospital and then, she became the reason for Leeson's rescue. Therefore, the character of Clara portrayed as the women of circumstances, intentionally or unintentionally who paved the way in the broken part life of Leeson to overcome from all troubles. Moreover, Clara made a good turn in Leeson's life to meet the fantasy hero in person.

Next, the main heroine of the story was none other than Miss Elsie Lesson. She depicted as the women of Virtue, women of Preservance, women of gay-hearted, women of generous, women of contentment and women of optimistic heart. In this heart-warming

modern fairy tale, O'Henry used the character of heroine to use his mastery over of twist endings. Without any doubt, Leeson life concluded only with sufferings. *The Skylight Room* rendered as a metaphor of her life. Her life sunk in a pit of blackness and torn into broken pieces like the skylight room. Without any choice, she had to accept what she had in life. She had the heart with full of contentment.

Miss. Leeson was working in New York City as a freelance typist. She was a poor outcast who had to live in the skylight room. She accepted it with great contentment. Her lodgers were Mr. Skidder a playwright, Mr. Hoover a fat, middle aged man, Mr. Evans a young handsome boy with a boyish infatuation towards Leeson, Miss Long Necker a school teacher and Miss Dorn the sports obsessed. Even though, her lodgers were well settled in their life, Leeson did not get jealous upon them. She did not compare her fate with their fate. Unlikely, she made the lodgers to cherish. All lodgers especially men, were happy to be in her joyful company. Soon she became the centre of the lodge due to her, "gay-hearted and full of tender, whimsical fancies" (p.22). So, she made the lodge for recreation in evening. One night, Miss Leeson told the lodgers that she would look up at one of the stars through the skylight. She named a particular blue star Billy Jackson. For Miss Leeson, the star was the only friend in a wide world who's only shared her patch of black darkness. It was not just a ball of gas and heat for her; it was a friend who knew her distress and sorrows.

One day, she earned no money in her work. She returned to home in the exhausted state and even she could not afford food to eat. On that night, the fellow lodger Mr. Hoover, the one who proposed marriage with her? But Leeson neglected it and pushed him away from her and remained true to herself. Though she had the chance to seduce her virginity, she did not allow the man to take her for granted. Due to her never say die spirit, she stepped to room and fell on the bed and started to talk with Billy Jackson who was waiting for her. Leeson a woman, who still wanted to be loyal to her fantasy hero even without a real relationship with him. She considered Billy as the only light in her world of darkness. Whenever she lost hope, he was the only thing to boost her up. The next morning, Leeson did not wake up. Because of dying from starvation, she fainted. The maid Clara forced to open the door and then they called the ambulance. The ambulance doctor, ironically named Billy Jackson came to pick up Leeson to the hospital. Finally, the hopeful blue star of Billy arrived to light the darkened life of Leeson in person.

O'Henry's another soul stirring short story was *The Last Leaf*, which was published in 1907 in his collection *The Trimmed lamp and Other Story*. The setting of the story was in Greenwich Village in the time of pneumonia epidemic. The major themes of the story were commitment, sacrifice, friendship, compassion, hope and dedication. In this story, two women characters played a prominent role- Sue and Johnsy. Sue was a model for true friendship, hope and good heart. Johnsy, a pneumonia patient who was an ideogram of pessimistic and weak will. So that, she was ready to give up life too easily without a fight. Behrman described as "a failure in art" (p.46) but he was the emblem of sacrifice. Despite being an old man, he sacrificed his life to save the life of Johnsy. Though Old man's masterpiece of the last leaf seemed to be simple, he paid his life for it to achieve his goal. He behaved selflessly and he became the inspiration for every artist. The weather he faced that

used to point out the young generations that life was not as easy as it was for those who aimed at reach the Zenith. The path they used to walk was not a bed of roses but it would be full of thorns and pitfalls. But no one should ever stop trying. Though Old Behrman had waited for twenty-five years to draw the first line of the masterpiece, he tried at the last breath of his life. If he hesitated to go out in a cold weather, he would not have finished his masterpiece and he might be the role model for the failures. Due to his striving spirit, he used the obstacles to step the stone of success. The leaf of hope was not only rescue Johnsy from illness but also it boosted up physical and mental tiredness of Behrman. He embellished the model for self-sacrifice.

Hope played the major role in this story. Everyone should have a hope to tackle their all obstacles. Without hope, no one could reach the success. Otherwise, they might be ready to give up their life too easily like Johnsy in this story. In this story, Johnsy was the example of tired of dying spirit. Like others, she too had an ambition to paint the Bay of Naples. Due to her weak spirit, she did not want to keep on keeping reaching her goal. So, she said, "I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking. I want to turn lose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves" (p.46). So, Johnsy came to an conclusion that she will get well and she was going to die when the last leaf fell on the ivy vine. Her hopelessness and tired of striving spirit were more severe than the fatal of Pneumonia. Life was the journey between Light and Dark. Johnsy always wanted to travel in the safe side of the journey. She even did not want to think of the darkest side of the journey. When she moved from safe zone to danger zone, she was never ready to swim in the stormy situation. Without willingness to fight against fate, she accepted to end up her life too easily like the leaves that fell one by one from the vine. From this, the author insisted that life must have hope and hope was the treasure to overcome obstacles. Everyone must have the will to survive in mentally, spiritually and biologically. Moreover, the faith of life laid upon the religion what people worshipped in day-to-day life. This interwoven chain of faith and religion made Johnsy to realise that it was a sin to want to die.

Another noteworthy theme of the story was Love. Through this story, O'Henry fostered the love between three persons Sue, Johnsy and Old Behrman. Among them, Behrman's love upon Johnsy considered as the great monumental love as father's love upon daughter. On behalf Johnsy's life, he self-sacrificed his life. Then, Love of Sue towards Johnsy was full of hopeful and compassion. This stainless friendship, rather than medicine made easier to heal Johnsy come out of her sickness. Above all, Johnsy failed to love herself. According to Holy Bible, "Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance" (I Corinthians 13:7). As Johnsy loved herself, it would give new hope to endure all troubles and helped to overcome obstacles. On account of forgetting loving herself, she caused the death of Behrman as well as the anxiety of Sue for Johnsy. On the other hand, as Johnsy was not despair, the story would be immobile and Behrman could not finish his masterpiece. By using of O'Henry's twisted ending, helped the story to mobile and remained sad. Moreover, the Oxymoron incident of Behrman's death and Johnsy's survival again pointed out the familiar method of O'Henry's short stories: Everything has its own worth.

O'Henry designed the heroines of his two stories very sociologically who were the model for two 'isms'. Miss Elsie Leeson in *The Skylight Room* stood for Optimism and Miss Johnsy in *The Last Leaf* stood for Pessimism. The comparisons between these characters had an Oxymoron literary device. Elsie Leeson had no source for living. Like the skylight room, her life was also splintered into pieces. But she never revealed her situation to anybody. Her willingness to survive, gave her an optimistic heart. Due to her strong heart, she had not accepted her fate too easily. She fought hardly with the fate to overcome the obstacles. Whenever, she got despair, she was consoled by the blue star Billy Jackson. It must be sent by God to wipe out all sorts of sufferings. As a result, God changed her fate and made her a chance to meet Billy Jackson in person. Above all, she loved herself and she loved her neighbours as herself. This love made her to tolerate every Circumstance. This pure conditioning love gave her serenity at the end of the story. Unlikely, Johnsy in *The Last Leaf* had lacked in love herself and another. Due to her selfless love, she had no desire to fight for living in this world. After the death of Behrman, she learned "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" (Matthew 22: 39).

Conclusion:

O'Henry used lots of stylistic devices to make a peaceful story which was more interesting and picturesque and he painted the Blue colour for extra spiciness. According to the Holy Bible, blue represented the healing power of God, calmness and peace. Accordingly, the blue star healed the wounds of Leeson and sealed all holes in her broken life. In *The Last leaf*, Behrman who wore blue shirt, restored calm and peace into Johnsy's life. Thus, O'Henry through his mastery of twist endings, simplicity, and realistic details first hand experiences embodied the characters of women in different dimensions.

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