

O' Henry: The Master Behind the Master-Piece "The Last Leaf" and "The Gift of the Magi" as Model Short Story

Jayanta Banerjee, M.A., M.Phil.

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English;

West Bengal State University, Barasat

Guest-Lecturer, Sri Ramkrishna Sarada Vidya Mahapitha Hooghly, West Bengal, India

Abstract: *Beginning from the days of the Bible short story remains very popular till date. With the modern age fast life coupled with widening circulation of magazines and the skilful practitioners throughout few centuries, this short prose narrative has established itself as a definite genre of creative literature. The awarding of the Nobel Prize in 2013 to Canadian Alice Munro for her mastery over the modern short story and the Japanese short story writer Haruki Murakami's enlisting in the 'shortlist' for Nobel Prize award-2013 qualify the argument in favour of the genre. In the introduction to The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story (2006), Martin Scofield, quoting the famous Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor, has commented that, "The short story in America has for almost two centuries held a prominent, even pre-eminent place in the American literary tradition. For the Americans the short story had become 'a national art form'" (Scofield: 2006). This short story, carrying close affinities with many novelistic elements, is perfect in the hand of New York based O' Henry¹. Taking two of his most celebrated stories "The Last Leaf (2007)" and "The Gift of the Magi"² (2006)" this short paper attempts to see him as a master of masterpiece in the field of 'the art of storytelling'.*

Keywords: *Short Story, Christian Virtues, Love, Compassion, Reciprocity, Will Power, Art Vs Science, Art for life's sake, Master Piece.*

1. General Introduction to Short Story:

A short story is a story that is short in length. But one may be confronted with tricks, as J.A. Cuddon has raised the question in his entry to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1998) that 'how long (or short) is a short story?' The volumetric instability of the genre has invited the critics, theorists and the practitioners of short story to debate over it. And because of its diversity, short story or short fiction has given rise to surprisingly little theoretical criticism. One of the earliest and best attempts to define the genre was Poe's, in his two reviews (1842 and 1847) of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales: 'short story is a prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal.' It still remains a catchy yardstick for short story. In the preface to *Complete Short Stories*, Somerset Maugham remarks, 'the shortest item runs to about 1,600 words and the longest to about 20,000 words.' However, with the modern fast life's curtailing our creative leisure time and growing our impatience to Tennysonian 'great stile books', short story, the peculiar product, has become the most coming form of fiction which has threatened the wide circulation of the novels. Though short story has its ancestry in the most

ancient literary forms like fable, folktale, myth, legend, parable and fairy tale, it is only in the beginning of nineteenth century that this genre came into its own and attracted skilled practitioners.

To begin with, in England, Chaucer scattered the elements of 'short' story in the travelling pilgrims to while away the boredom of the journey. In that sense *The Canterbury tales* (1385-1400) showed for the first time in England, the story elements in the form of verse. Chaucer's partly-predecessor and contemporary, Boccaccio was a more successful case in his '*Decameron*' (1349-51). The stories of the Bible, though, remain as the originary reservoir always. In 18th century England, the 'artist couple' Joseph Addison and Richard Steele popularized their 'tale with a purpose' mode of writing short story. The most decisive step came in making this art form a big issue, after Walter Scott's *Wandering Willie's Tales* (1824), from two Americans. Not only in changing the game from the originality of materials to the art of the story teller but also in terms of precept and example, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe still are regarded as the originator of modern short story, the present day tale of "impression" and "idea". In the review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe commented critically regarding the artists and the art of writing a short story. He says, 'A skilful artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out. He then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.' It is again Poe who, for the first time, said that plot alone was not important. A 'final impression' is also the very soul of a short story. The short story has got its worldwide establishment through many of its skilful practioners. In England there are Lawrence, Maugham, A.E. bates, Conrad and H.G. Wells. Famous French story tellers are – Merimee, Gautier, Daudet and Maupassant. Pushkin, Gorki, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gogol and Turgenev are few Russians and Paul Heyse is the most celebrated German short story writers.

The wholesome 'definition' or a typically qualifying generic specification of short story came from William Henry Hudson in his *An introduction to the study of Literature* (2002). He pointed out combining the magnitude and altitude of the genre that 'a short story must contain one and only one informing idea, and that this idea must be worked out to its logical conclusion with absolute singleness of aim and directness of method' (Hudson; 2002). This very definitional statement summarizes Robert Louis Stevenson's insistence on an 'initial impulse' and its execution to Poe's 'Unique and single effect to be wrought out.' It reminds us of A.H.Upham's statement, "He (*the story writer*) can see the end in the beginning." So, similar to the spirit of the metaphysical poetry, a short story rather a good short story should 'arrest' us in the beginning and end up much before our level of expectation slashes down. Then for its best impact, both the length and depth are prerequisites. It is short but complete. It is slim but quick. Murfin Ross has distinguished a short story from an anecdote and a novel. He says, "The short story may be distinguished from the even briefer prose narrative form we call the anecdote by its meticulous

and deliberate craftsmanship, which may involve definite plot structure, complexity of characterization, and often a point of view from which the story is told. It may also be distinguished from the longer novel form by its relatively simple purpose, which is generally to reveal essential aspects of a character or characters, not to show character development over time. Unlike novels, short stories usually have a single focus and produce a specific dramatic revelation or effect toward which the story builds and to which everything else in the story is subordinate” (Ross, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms:2003*)

Regarding the formal aspects of this genre, a short story, instead of strictly adhering to the prescribed ‘three unities’ of time, place and character focuses on the ‘unity of impression’. Unity of impression is the *motto* of a short story. short story must be exemplary and representative, a world in brief compass; that it establishes unity of impression and a feeling of totality, by concentrating on few characters, event or emotion, and by compression and the avoidance of digression or repetition; that it satisfies our craving for paradox and shape, our longing to perceive a dramatic pattern and significance in experience, even if this means sacrificing plausibility to effect. The plot of a short story usually has no subplots; the story is restricted to the ‘essential’ only. Characters are few; only the most indispensables get entry into the screen. Setting is also confined to a single geographical location. It is, as if, all are reduced to the minimum in the interest of the impression intended to convey. In its means and course, all take a shortcut route towards the ‘pre-conceived effect’ and the one ‘pre-established design.’ The language of a story should be ‘the model of economy’ (Hudson: 2002). Every word should contribute to its total effect. Usually, descriptive passages are shunned. In case of our two short stories, O’ Henry allows description only when he himself intrudes in the omnipotent third person point-of-view. It is through this intervention, the story teller let loose of his philosophical analysis. Few cases are there where; readers can have O’ Henryian philosophy served with sugar coated humour.

2. “The Last Leaf” and “The Gift of the Magi”’: An Analysis:

Billie Travalini in his essay “Wholeness and the Short Story” in *Writers on Writing:The Art Of The Short Story edited by Maurice A. Lee* says, “As an emerging short-story writer, I have studied O’ Henry and O’ Connor with great interest. Each contributed to my view of the writing process. O’ Henry wrote formula stones that relied on literary convention and happy endings” (Lee: 2005). The two short stories of O’ Henry are half an hour’s read but that is all. It has, with a single setting, few incidents and fewer characters impressed the readers absolutely clear in outline, well proportioned, full enough for the purpose yet without the slightest suggestion of crowding. O’ Henry has the rare gift of combining ‘a smart beginning is to half win the game’ and ‘all’s well that ends well’. In “The Last Leaf” (1907) and “The Gift of the Magi” (1906) the central characters are ties to each other with the invisible bond of love, sympathy, care and reciprocation. Whereas Love, care, friendship and sacrifices are playing against poverty and

disease is the ruling theme of “The Last Leaf”, it is love, sacrifices and wisdom that are playing against poverty is in the centre of “The Gift of The Magi”. “The Last Leaf” tells the story of two budding women artists in the cheap lane of New York. They are poor, as artists usually are, and they live in a low cost area of Greenwich village, lodging in ‘Dutch attics’ and dodging in the ‘collector of bill for paints, paper and canvas.’ They live on the *table- d’hote*³ served on a fixed time in the American chain-hotelier Lorenzo Delmonico’s counter ‘Delmonico’s’. Their poverty did not allow them to ‘try’ the taste of the famous ‘Delmonico’s steak’ or an *a-la-carte*³ meal going beyond their cheap and best ‘chicory salad’. These art people of Sixth Avenue live a happy life of ‘may’ by somehow meeting the two ends by working either as a illustrator in advertising houses or in magazines (Sue and Johnsy) or by working as a model for young artists who cannot afford the price of professional model (Berhman). All of the them live by their common taste in love of beauty and of art in creating beauty. Johnsy from California and sue from Maine live in their common studio. In the ground floor of which ‘brick’ storeyed building lived the past sixty German painter Berhman. All of them have their individual hard reality in material world and dreams of painting master pieces in their imagination. In ‘November’, the additional antagonist with poverty, the ‘red fistied, short breathed’ pneumonia breaks out killing scores and fatally attacking Johnsy. Johnsy lies on bedstead with a peculiar maniac disposition of her mind. The tension of the story intensifies as Johnsy begins to equate the remaining days of her life with the falling leaves of an ivy vine in the series of cold, chill, wintry nights and evenings. She imagines that with the last leaf falling, she would also have her last day spent and would die. Thus, the last leaf becomes very crucial. Sue, day and night in constant concern for her friend Johnsy becomes the archetype of care, love, sympathy and patience. She takes meticulous care to keep up the graph of Johnsy’s falling will power to come round. It is ultimately the old painter Berhman who paints the last leaf in the ivy vine on the night when the original last one fell. In the university anthology of The University of Burdwan, the summary of this story runs such.

“The Last Leaf” (from *The Trimmed Lamp*:1907) is a touching story of self sacrifice of an aged German artist who catches fatal pneumonia while painting an ivy leaf in place of the last leaf fallen from an ivy vine up on a brick wall in his neighbourhood in an icy cool night. He performs the task secretly the same night so that his pneumonia affected neighbour, a young American artist woman, who has an obsession that she will die when the last ivy leaf falls, will see the leaf intact against the wall the next morning, and will regain her will to live, so essential to fight out her disease. The young artist survives while the aged one dies. The painted last leaf is the aged artist’s masterpiece.

(215: An Anthology: Poems, Plays and Prose, the university of Burdwan: University Press, 2005)

Thematically, the two stories are like same wine distributed in two cups. “The Last Leaf” concentrates on Christian virtues like care, fellow feeling, loving one’s neighbour, sacrifice and Samaritanism. “The Gift of the Magi” is a close love story based on family set up. In the first story Johnsy overcomes disease, disappointment and decay by the Santa Clause like intervention of Berhman coupled with great nursing rendered to her by Sue. The second story tells the beautiful and feelingly incidents of a husband and wife on the eve of Charismas. Whereas Berhman becomes the Christ figure by giving his life to paint the ‘last leaf’ on the ivy vine to give life to his neighbour Johnsy. On the other hand. “The Gift of The Magi” recounts the story of Jim and Della sacrifice of their best possessions for each other. Their possessions are, “Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim’s gold watch that had been his father’s and his grandfather’s. The other was Della’s hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.” On the eve of Christmas, each of the couple sells each one’s best thing to buy the best thing for their best possession. Jim would sell his watch tom buy an elegant comb for Della’s hair and Della would sell her hair to buy a chain for Jim’s watch. So, their story is of slackening of ‘pride’ and ‘prejudice’ of each other for each other, in smiling faces. Jim and Della’s case becomes a story of exchange. They exchange material things with that of divine and spiritual. They lose only to gain. Both the story veers around the theme of the power of love in the midst of utter hardship. “The Last Leaf” has the additional dimension of asserting ‘art for life’s sake’. Both the stories show the undercurrent of will power to do the best any time anywhere. It is the power of the will which made - Sue to camouflage her anxiety regarding the deteriorating condition of Johnsy, Johny to come back to her life and Della to keep a shiny face to ‘her Jim’.

As is already stated, short story has many affinities with other genres namely novel but short story cannot exhibit life with all its varieties and complexities. Within the ‘prescribed’ limits, a short story can not usually handle subplots, many characters and their evolution. As we see, Johnsy, Sue, Berhman, the Doctor, Jim, Della and Mrs. Sofronie – none are fully drawn, we meet them for few minutes, in few relationships and on few occasions only. Most often their few particular dimensions are the locus of focus. Even after that how complete they are. A delicate humour marks the narration. The story teller’s sensitive and sympathetic eye catches every detail of the pathetic situation, the thoughts, feelings, and responses of the characters, and invites the readers to perceive the glow of human kindness, friendship, fellow feeling in the enveloping gloom of disease, despair, and death.

To mention few of the choicest stylistic excellencies of O’ Henry both structural and thematic – one can begin with O’Henry’s use of humour. The humour and bathos in the description of Della’s ways of savings, “One dollar and eighty – seven cents. That was all. And

sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two and a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied." Della's hopelessness with her meager savings of one Dollar and eighty seven cent to buy the gift has described such. "There was clearly nothing left to do but to flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it, which instigates the moral reflection that life made up of sobs, sniffles, with sniffles predominating." Next to this, his use of images, colours and symbols. The description of the ivy vine in "The Last Leaf" is a perfect example of objective correlative. The sick Johnsy and the leafless vine tree stand for each other. He describes Johnsy's looking out of the window pane such, "Sue looked out the window. What was there to count? There was only the side wall of the next house, a short distance away. The wall had no window. An *old*, vine tree *gnarled* and *twisted* in its root grew against the wall. The cold breath of winter had already touched it. Almost all its leaves had fallen from its *dark* branches." Della's confusion and sorrow is objectified by a brilliant image. The story runs, "Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a *grey* cat walking over a *grey* fence in a *grey* backyard" (Italics mine). Use of colours is another speciality of these two stories. The 'last' leaf has been described as green in the stem and yellow on the edges. The young/green artist and the old/yellow one are connected only through the last leaf. Old Berhman's shirt is blue in colour. We know blue is the colour of courage, conviction and sacrifice. The 'red carpet' on which two drops of Della's tears fell and Della's getting out of home on her "rosy wings" wearing "old brown jacket" and "old brown hat"-all are 'colourful' Inculcation of reciprocity is another soft virtue we most often miss. Jim and Della serve to the knowledge that gift is a thing which entitled magnanimity in giving as well as receiving too. O' Henry says at the end of the story "Of all who give gifts, these two were the most wise. Of all who *give* and *receive* gifts, such as they are the most wise. Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the magi" (my italics).

Another rare theme that has been very deliberately wrought out is eternal conflict between science and art; people of reason and people of emotion. The doctor of "The Last Leaf" and Mrs. Sofronie of "The Gift of the Magi" – stand in contrast for the 'poet, lunatic and lover' team of Johnsy, Sue, Berhman, Jim and Della. The 'clinical' doctor cannot understand how a woman can fall ill and get disappointed for not being able to paint a master-piece, nor can Mrs. Sofronie realize the true value of Della's hair by mere weighing it with her hand. The hand of a doctor only can lower the mercury of the thermometer and can affirm the condition of the physic of a patient. But it was the young artist Sue who performed all the hospitality needed for Johnsy much beforehand the Doctor asked her to do. The slightest turn to feminist approach oozes out when Sue says, - "Is a man worth?"

3. Conclusion: On Master-Piece

In a sense, both the stories relate a tale of 'love among the ruins' and concludes with 'great expectations' in the midst 'hard times' of people living in 'bleak house'. Structurally, the stories

began in on the 'rising action', speedily reaches the 'climax' and finally, in a light hearted banter the 'denouement' leaves the lasting final impression in the readers. As Tagore said about the ending of a short story '*ses hoyeo hoilo na ses*' (it doesn't end even after ending). Both the stories began in the text but end in the reader. H.W. Wells, regarding the course of a short story wrote that a short story is or should be a simple thing: 'it aims at producing one single vivid effect! It has to seize the attention at the onset, and never relaxing, gathering until the climax is reached.' Technically both the stories end with 'twist end', 'magic end' or with, most popularly known 'O' Henry ending'. (Quoted in *English Literature*: Reese: 1990). It is only for the nostalgia created in the two stories that even after hundred years, Bollywood looks back to o' Henry for film appropriation for the two ever green 'twisted end'. Rituparno Ghosh was inspired by "The Gift of The Magi" and ends his *raincoat*⁴ (2004) similarly. And a more commercial appropriation of "The Last Leaf" is seen in *Lootera*⁵ (2013)

O' Henry had both the craftsmanship of a writer and the compassion of a man. As a writer he constructs a clever plot with an unforeseen and an unexpected climax suddenly released so that the reader is kept guessing till the last moment what the outcome is to be. Both the stories successfully pertain to the comment made in this occasion by Roger Fowler and Peter Childs that, 'short fiction must be exemplary and representative, a world in brief compass; that it establishes unity of impression and a feeling of totality, by concentrating on a single character, event or emotion, and by compression and the avoidance of digression or repetition; that it satisfies our craving for paradox and shape, our longing to perceive a dramatic pattern and significance in experience, even if this means sacrificing plausibility to effect.' *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2006).

Berhman is a man with a dream of a child, courage of a chivalric knight and love of father. He attests that people who are dreamer are dreamer throughout the life. He had lost his health, age and aptitude to paint his master piece. What he retained was his attitude and altitude. He teaches us that master piece comes at the cost of life and a master piece is life consuming as well as life saving. The painted 'last leaf' becomes Berhman's master piece and the gifts of Jim and Della becomes the 'gift' of the 'Magi' and interestingly, the short stories, "The Last Leaf" and "The Gift of the Magi" become O' Henry's master pieces. Brevity of language and concentration of purpose is his hallmark. The moral content he drives into his readers and the willing suspension he creates to believe the love, care, sacrifice, sympathy and reciprocity of the characters from the world of imagination pass him as an exponent of the great saying by Pablo Picasso "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."

4. Notes:

1. O'Henry was William Sidney Porter's (1862-1910) *nom-de-plume*. He began publication of his own humorous weekly magazine, The Rolling Stone, which ran for a year in 1894.

This name, O' Henry, perhaps he took from the lonely penitentiary guard (Porter once was confined for a short time being accused of bank money forgery).

2. The Magi were the wise men who met the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Usually considered as three, they were Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. According to New Testament; the Gospel of Matthew (2.1), they were intimated by epiphany and guided by a star and they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the Redeemer of the world. Literally 'magi' means wise men. In this story, Jim and Della are equalized with them because of their sacrificial and pristine love for each other.
3. *Table d-hote and a-la-carte*: *Table d'hote* – is a fixed meal in fixed price usually served in a fixed time. *A-la-carte* is having unlimited choices of menu with a separate price for each item. The binarism of individual choices of meals on the basis of one's size of pocket is the fact of the matter.
4. *Raincoat*, a national award winning Hindi drama film (2004) directed by Rituparno Ghosh, and starring Ajay Devgan and Aishwarya Rai. It tells the story of two lovers, separated by destiny, who meet again one day. This encounter allows each to realize the truth about the lives they are living. It is an adaptation of the short story "The Gift of the Magi" (1906) by O' Henry. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raincoat_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raincoat_(film)))
5. *Lootera*, (English: Robber), is a 2013 Indian romantic drama film directed by Vikramaditya Motwane and partly based on author O. Henry's 1907 short story "The Last Leaf." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lootera>)

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