

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The present dissertation has sought to provide a comprehensive statement on the short stories of O. Henry. The statement has taken into account the important relationship between O. Henry's personal life and his creative talent as a short story writer. It is obvious that O. Henry's early childhood and experiences, his struggle for livelihood in his youth involving changing places in search of jobs and his three year experience of prison life - all these indicate the life of a writer whose self is shaped on the anvil of experience itself. O. Henry did not live the stable upper-class kind of life that Henry James or William Dean Howells lived. Ironically enough, his life was full of reversals of fortune so characteristic of his fictional world. In this sense, O. Henry saw life in the raw --the life of the common man full of struggle arising out of the mismatch between effort and aspiration. It is this common life which O. Henry translated into fictional terms.

The powerful creative individual talent of O. Henry relates itself to the tradition of the American short story from Washington Irving to the post Civil War writers like Bret Harte, Sarah Jewett, H. C. Bunner, Henry James and William Dean Howells. When he appeared on the literary scenario, O. Henry inherited a tradition of the

short story which was characterised by realism, local colour and which in the hands of Thomas Aldrich, H.C. Bunner and Brander Mathews paid great attention to the structural principles of the short story. It was at this moment that the basic tenets of the short story as a literary genre came to be defined in a much more precise manner. Aspects of the short story such as its structure, technique and point of view emerged into the foreground. With this, the short story as a literary genre differentiated itself from its narrative antecedents like the tale, the tall tale, fable etc. and emerged as a modern literary form capable of dealing with socio-moral, economic themes characteristic of the new social class structure which was emerging at the end of the 19th century in America. This was the well-made short story characterized by ingenuity in the contrivance of the situation, self conscious use of narrative technique, fine craftsmanship and vivid characterisation. It was this tradition of the short story which O. Henry inherited and which in his hands assumed new thematic and technical dimensions.

II

The present thesis has sought to provide a critical focus on the short stories of O. Henry. From this point of view, the stories of O. Henry have been divided into three groups, 1) The Southern stories, 2) The Western stories, and 3) The New York stories. Chapters 2,3 and 4 have dealt with these groups of stories respectively.

In the Southern stories of O. Henry, we have taken into account Eugene Garcia's typology based on tall tales, the local colour stories and the romantic stories. While recognising the significance of Garcia's typology, the second chapter, however, has undertaken a detailed analysis of Southern stories in terms of their thematic interconnections and affiliations rather than in terms of generic grouping. At the centre of this textual analysis of the Southern stories is the assumption that space here becomes a metonymic representation of the ethos and culture of the South in which the characters are embedded. This metonymic representation is seen in the characters O. Henry creates in his Southern stories -- characters who are outlaws, swindlers, dupes, embezzlers and fugitives from justice. By thus using space O. Henry creates a whole world of

marginalised characters and thereby provides a critique of the mainstream of American society. In addition, the Southern stories also display O. Henry's exploration of the mind of the South with all its nostalgia for the past, its relationship with the decadent present and the resultant human loneliness. The Southern stories of O. Henry are not meant to be just entertainers. We see in them O. Henry's deep concern for human freedom in a society ravaged by competitive economy and passion for money. We also find that O. Henry provides, though sometimes too strongly, an idealistic counterpoint to the material problems of money, poverty and social status. Sometimes this idealism has a strong Christian dimension. Many of O. Henry's Southern stories portray an encounter between materialism and idealism and bring out O. Henry's Christian perception of the human personality at a time when the powerful forces of materialism asserted themselves in American life and society.

III

The analysis of the Western stories undertaken in Chapter-III brings out some interesting and significant aspects of O. Henry as a short story writer. Given his long story in Texas and Austin during his period of apprenticeship, it was natural that O. Henry wrote a large number of stories based on his exposure to Western society and landscape. We have divided these stories into three groups. The first includes the stories published in *The Rolling Stone*. The second includes those stories which were published in *The Houston Post* and the third comprise the stories which deal with Western life but which were not published in these two journals.

The Rolling Stone stories testify to O. Henry's early engagement with the West as also to O. Henry's early development as a short story writer of the West. They capture O. Henry's youthful impressions of Western culture and society and in addition bring out the dimensions of satire, burlesque and sometimes even the farcical elements. A comparison between O. Henry's Southern stories and the Rolling Stone stories shows that by and large his Southern stories are concerned with an idealistic perception of the human personality, his

humanism and his creative involvement in the relationship between Southern past and present. But the Rolling Stone stories present a different kind of O. Henry who is capable of humour, satire, burlesque and sometimes even farce. In many of these stories O. Henry provides an expose of social hypocrisy in terms of humour and burlesque. Using appropriate stylistic strategies, quite a few of these stories provide a humorous comment on the basic falseness and vacuity of the sense of social class in Western society in the late eighties.

The Houston Post stories numbering about fifty nine, cover a fairly wide range of *mise en scene*, characterization and themes. They constitute a fictional world of journalists, gamblers, rougues, heroic tramps, lonely artists and rough but noble lovers. Some stories like *Georgia's Ruling* bring out an interesting creative contradiction in O. Henry's personality as a creative writer and establish a certain kind of thematic continuity with some of his Southern stories. The contradiction lies in the fact that to the stark economic realism of his times O. Henry provides a sentimental idealistic closure.

The Latin American stories, though few in number, are significant for two reasons. Firstly, they indicate O. Henry's passion for the creative use of space and, secondly they indicate a different kind of ideological angularity normally not seen in other stories. In the Latin American stories we find that the ridiculous overtakes the comic, contemptuous satire overrides generosity of mind. This is because the kind of political seriousness which these stories demand is certainly not O. Henry's *forte*. The stories seem to indicate certain limitations of O. Henry's creative genius in that they show serious ideological limitations on the part of O. Henry in coming to terms with Latin American politics.

IV

Chapter-IV of this dissertation offers an extensive analysis of the New York stories of O. Henry. One finds here that as a chronicler of the metropolitan New York life, O. Henry is a sophisticated continuation, with appropriate changes, of Washington Irving who was the first short story writer to capture the ethos and complexity of New York life. During his stay in New York while working for *The Sunday World* from 1904 to 1907, O. Henry wrote a large number of

stories dealing with New York life. Broadly speaking, these stories deal with the three important strata of American society in New York, namely, the upper class, the middle-class and the poor or the lowly class. Of course cutting across this group is the spirit of the place which informs practically every story. In these stories O. Henry appears sometimes as a direct commentator and sometimes as a masqued narrator and establishes a creative interface with the complex rhythm of metropolitan life. O. Henry's perception of New York life is a double perception. It includes an awareness of its beauty as also of its ugliness. It is a perception both of its glitter as well as its squalor. Many of these stories portray a real life situation by making use of reversals of fortunes. There are stories dealing with the fate of artists struggling to strike roots in the anonymity of urban space. There is also a group of stories dealing with working girls of the lower middle class. These stories show how O. Henry makes an appeal to the aristocratic and the bourgeois of the contemporary America to accept the relatively underprivileged class as a part of the social mainstream. The suffering of the shopgirls shows O. Henry's awareness of the hardening class structure of American society of his

times. These stories are the outcome of his social and moral concern for the kinds of problems the lowermiddle class had to face in the first decade of the 20th century. O. Henry tries to break the class barriers at times by using variations of the popular Cinderella formula in some of his stories of 'the boy meets the girl' situation. In so doing, he tends to be rather romantic but never devoid of a sense of social realism. O. Henry is not sarcastically critical of the wealthy. He records his dislike for the tight-fisted capitalists in terms of irony and understatement. A close study of O. Henry's New York stories shows that they constitute a world in which the rich and the noble do not necessarily despise the majority of the 'have nots'. On the contrary they are generous, sympathetic in playing their role of *noblise oblige*. Using devices like indirection, irony and pathos, O. Henry in many of his New York stories, condemns the aristocratic attitudes and many other factors such as bribery and misappropriation responsible for the violation of social morality.

O. Henry's New York stories dealing with a variety of social classes constitute a rich urban drama of human effort and aspiration, hope and disillusionment, romance and realism.

V

By way of summing up, how does one reassess O. Henry as a short story writer from the vantage point of 1990s? As we have seen in the first chapter, O. Henry's popularity in his own country as well as abroad was tremendous. As a short story writer O. Henry exercised influence not so much in his own country as abroad. Witness for instance his strong influence in Russia. The fact that O. Henry was an indirect influence in the making of a well-made short story in Marathi is another testimony of his popularity and influence. One of the major popular writers of the 1930s and 1940s in Marathi literature N.S. Phadke in his well-known book *Pratibha Sadhan* is all praise for O. Henry for his technical excellence, economy of structure and character as also for the kind of style O. Henry evolved for the short story form. O. Henry has thus elicited critical responses which range from excessive praise to outright condemnation. Avoiding both the polar opposites, it is possible to offer a proper reassessment of O. Henry.

It is obvious that we cannot equate O. Henry with absolutely great masters of the genre such as Gogol or Maupassant. At the same

time, it would be unfair to classify him as a popular writer of stories with surprise endings. As the present dissertation has sought to show, behind this established image of a writer of stories with surprise endings -- an image heavily popularized by frequently anthologized pieces such as *The Gift of the Magi* and *The Last Leaf*-- there is the other O. Henry who tries to deal with the dialectic of materialism and idealism in terms of a humanitarian attitude. Going beyond the constraints of the well-made short story, it is this O. Henry who offers a critique of the mainstream of American society by speaking in favour of the underprivileged class. It is precisely this other O. Henry the present thesis has modestly sought to project.