

Tribhuvan University

Class Struggle in O. Henry's "The Coming-Out of Maggie", "A Service of Love" and
"Ransom of Red Chief"

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Introduction

Class refers to a social grouping of people based on job, wealth, etc. or a group of persons of the same economic and professional condition. People are mainly divided into three class according to their status i.e. upper class, middle class and working class. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, defines class as “a system of ordering society whereby people are divided into sets based on perceived social or economic status”. It also refers to a group of people of similar status, commonly sharing comparable levels of power, wealth and influence. *Encyclopedia Americana* defines class as follow:

Social class refers to categorical differences among clusters of persons when material inequality constitutes the categorical boundaries or a likely cause of differences among bounded categories. Social class by no means exhaust human inequality. The Latin word *classis* referred to a vertical division of the Roman population according to property and entered English with that meaning during the sixteenth century. Over the next century the English word “class” applied increasingly to categories of the population; but “development of class in its modern social sense with relatively fixed names for particular classes (lower class, middle class, upper class, working class and so on) belongs essentially to the period between 1770 and 1840, which is also the period of the Industrial Revolution and its decisive reorganization of society”.

William Sydney Porter, who wrote under the pen named O. Henry, established himself as one of the most popular realist writer of nineteenth century. He is universally acknowledged as a Modern master of short stories, he succeeded in presenting the social reality of America in the early twentieth century. Through the truthful description of the society of his time, he strongly conveys sharp criticism and satire towards the socio-economic system and class conflict in that society. O. Henry frequently pictures the lives of the poor and the ordinary working class people of early twentieth century. His characters are mainly the struggling working girls, the unsuccessful artists, the poor couples, etc. “The Coming-Out of Maggie”, “A Service

of Love” anthologized in *The Four Million* published in 1906 and “The Ransom of Red Chief” published in 1910 in *Whirligigs*, belonging to the same category with the description of the same kind of characters from the low social and economic class, unravels the socio-economic and class conflict between the ordinary working class people and serve as a mirror of the social reality of the time.

The story “The Coming-Out of Maggie” is a story of a factory working girl Maggie, who doesn’t have a fellow yet in her life. She is tired of going to the dance club with her friends. So, she picks a fellow and presents him as her partner. It doesn’t matter to her whether the guy she picked as her partner was an unsocial element or a wanted by police, it was enough for her that he was a sturdy fellow to be the partner of life. And Maggie instantly agrees the proposal when Dempsey, the owner of the club, ask her if she likes to go with him next weekend at the last of the story. Henry, in this story wants to present the condition of a working girl and how difficult was for a lower class people to get a perfect life partner and how the people of upper class used the innocence and problems of the people of lower class.

Likewise, in the story “A Service of Love”, Henry presents the economic crisis and consequences resulted from it. The story tells the story of two young couples who are in economic crisis and sacrifice their own dreams for each other. Secretly, Delia and Joe work in a laundry to prevent their partner from dropping their own lessons. This story depicts that it is difficult to achieve their dreams for the lower class people due to poverty. Similar theme is depicted by the story “The Ransom of the Red Chief”. It is a story of two kidnappers, Bill and Sam, who kidnap a ten years old boy for the ransom of two thousand dollars but instead of getting the ransom they pay two hundred and fifty dollars to the father of the boy to leave him back to his home. They were troubled so much by the boy that they couldn’t bear. This story tries to present the reality how the upper class people trouble the people of lower class and instead of helping them, they create problems for them.

The present research work attempts to deal with the class struggle and class conflict of O. Henry’s selected stories. It depicts the socio-economic and class conflict of the period as a backdrop of American Civil War and Industrial Revolution. The characterization of Red Chief, Ebenezer Dorset and Dempsey reflects the people of

upper class and the troubler and Maggie, Delia, Joe, Bill and Sam are the perfect examples of lower and working class people and the sufferer.

Statement of Problem

This thesis seeks to study the daily problems, sufferings and the class struggle of the ordinary and the working class people of nineteenth century through the Marxist point of view. The problems of socio-economic and class conflict and struggle are created by the American Civil War and Industrial Revolution. Based on these ideas the researcher would like to raise the following questions: What is the cause of the conflict between the upper and the lower or working class people? How did the Civil War and Industrial Revolution influence the life of working class people? How was the relationship of the people of different classes? What role did the economic crisis play in the life of the people? How was it related with the life of O. Henry?

Hypothesis

In the last phase of nineteenth century to the initial phase of twentieth century, many people were poor and felt the economic crisis. After the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution, many people migrated from Ireland and Italy to Scotland and America to find a better living opportunities which resulted in the economic and class conflict among the people. People were ready to commit crimes and take a short cut for earning money. The lower working class people were always dominated and suppressed by the upper class. The lower class people were obliged to sacrifice their dreams due to poverty and live a miserable life. But still somewhere in the heart of ordinary people there was a feeling of love and sacrifice, they still enjoyed their happiness defeating their poverty.

Review of Literature

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Marxism is defined as

A socialist ideology of the followers of Karl Marx; a radical, revolutionary political philosophy that aims to capture state power,

introduce a dictatorship of the proletariat and then progress to communism.

Marxist critics foreground the economic reality of human culture. Karl Marx classifies the society into the different groups according to their economic standard. *Critical Theory Today* analyzes the differences between the classes of people from the Marxism theory as:

A Marxist point of view, differences in socio-economic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity or gender. For the real battle line are drawn, to put the matter simply between the “haves” and “haves-nots”, between the bourgeoisie- those who control the world’s natural, economic and human resources- and the proletariat, the majority of the global population who live in substandard condition and who have always performed the manual labor, the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railway building- that fills the coffers of the rich. (54)

The theory of class struggle is a result of the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War. The difference between the classes and the conflict and the miserable condition of the working people raised due to the revolution is clearly depicted by Gary Q. Arpin in *The Rise of Classism: The Civil War to 1914* as:

The French Revolution in conjunction with the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century, had profound effects on political thinking. Liberty swept the land and equality became the cry. Though the standard of living went up and there was no material to go around and less work needed to create it, work days for factory workers were seemingly endless and the conditions horrendous. Women and children worked for low wages and were easier to control. Towns’ became crowded as people looked for work in factories. Their needs, housing and sanitation were ignored. Slums sprouted up everywhere. It was this poverty and

dissatisfaction that made people think that was not the best economic and political option. (56)

O. Henry concerned himself with the work of his own time, dealing with common people and also with the socio-economic presentation of the period. He often depicted the theme of class conflict and struggle by comparing the living standard of the poor and middle class with upper class in urban as well as rural societies. Many scholars have reviewed and criticized the work of O. Henry. Henry James Forman in his review of *O. Henry's short stories* writes:

Mr. Sidney Porter, the gentleman who, in the language of some of his characters, is “*denounced*” by the euphonious pen-name of O. Henry, has breathed new life into the short story. Gifted as he is with a flashing wit, abundant humor and quick observation, no subject has terrors for him. If it be too much to say, in the old phrase, that nothing human is alien to him, at least the larger part of humanity is his domain. The very title of one of his books, *The Four Million*, is a protest against those who believe that New York contains only four hundred people worthwhile. Henry backs the census-taker against the social arbiter. The rich and the fashionable are, in his tales, conceived much in the spirit of similar characters in melodrama, except that the ingredient of humor is put in to mitigate them. Indeed, they figure but seldom. But the poor and the lowly, the homeless lodger of the city park, the vagabond of the "bread line," the waitress, the shop and factory girl, the ward politician, the city policeman, the whole "ruck and rabble" of life, so meaningless to the comfortable, unobservant bourgeois, are set forth always with keen knowledge, with a laughing humor, and not infrequently with a tender, smiling pathos. As this panorama of the undernoted faces of the great city passes before the reader, he becomes his own Caliph Haroun-al-Easchid, and New York a teeming Bagdad, full of romance and mystery.

O. Henry in his every story presents the struggle, conflict, poverty among the poor and ordinary people of the nineteenth century. He also depicts the problems

created in everyday life due to poverty, how the people are affected and bound to live a miserable life. In his story “A Service of Love” from *The Four Million* he mentions the reality as “they were mighty happy as long their money lasted” (17). In his another story “An Unfinished Story”, he presents the same reality as, “I wonder if you’d be so superior and snippy if you had to live on six dollars a week” (31).

Limitations/Delimitations

The researcher takes upon the theory of Marxism to analyze the short stories of O. Henry. The study will be limited to the reality of class conflict and class struggle of the period seeking the help of Marxist writers Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, etc. However, for the theoretical and textual analytical support, references will be provide from other theories and scholars.

Research Methodology

This study mainly limits itself to the Marxist reading of nineteenth century America. It is not concerned with the primary data collection based on field visit, questionnaires, etc. This proposed research work is mainly based on a thorough textual reading, library consultation and a wide range of other pertaining reference materials for the justification of the hypothesis. Guidance and more information are expected from the instructor of this research paper.

Timeline and Schedule

Appropriate chapter division and allocation of time for this dissertation will be as follows:

Introduction	2 weeks
Discussion of Theoretical Tools	2 weeks
Textual Analysis	2 weeks
Conclusion	2 weeks

The researcher will submit the thesis within the tentative period of two months from the acceptance of the research proposal.

Works Cited

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