

A Psychoanalytical Study of the Gift of Magi

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ABSTRACT

Society and literature are closely connected with each other like two inseparable cords in a musical instrument. Short story, as a minor genre in literature, narrates the stories of people we are directly or indirectly connected with in relation to their nature. Short story has emerged as one of the powerful tools for making commentary on human life. O' Henry, an American short story writer, has written over 300 stories. His stories are featured by twists of plots and surprise ending. It is rightly stated in the preface in one of his books of stories by a critic that he (O. Henry) should always occupy a unique place in American fiction writing. He deserves to be rediscovered by each succeeding generation of readers and scholars. Readers can find variety of themes in his stories which bring novel perspective to the life. The Gift of Magi is one his stories that revolves around a husband, his wife and their devoted conjugal life. A very heart touching story which highlights delicate relationship between Jim, the husband and Della, the wife. The story can be studied in the light of psychology as both the characters are in dilemma about the gift to be presented each other on the occasion of Christmas. It reveals those corners of minds where unconditional love remains in its purest form.

The research paper is meant for unravelling the unexplored aspects of human mind in terms of Psychology and what Sigmund Freud refers to . To study spousal relationship depicted in the story is one more intention of the research paper.

Key words: The gift of magi, psychoanalysis, husband and wife relationship

INTRODUCTION

Literature and society are interconnected with each other since writing has been invented. If one wants to separate them, one can not. Short story, one of the minor forms of literature, though has some limitations of its own, has always reflected on the human life, human mind and its aspects. Human life, and various aspects of it, and permanent appeals of human beings and human values have remained the chief concerns of literature from the beginning. Literature encompasses many things from the life of a common man to the uncommon man, and conflicts- internal and external as well. Human mind itself is a puzzle for human beings, but like scientists the writers also take deep dive into it to make its readers understand the depth of its every aspect. Permanent instincts of human beings reside deep there in the mind. The emotions of envy, hate, love, affection are also the play of human mind. Psychology deals with this aspect of human life. And hence, Psychoanalysis refers to the study of characters from the point of view of psychology. However, the writers have always tried to touch these corners of human minds and the emotions therein stories which can be felt through the eyes of readers' mind.

O. Henry, one of the renowned short story writers of America has written more than 600 short stories out of which approximately 300 are published. 'The Gift of Magi' is a heart touching account of a poor husband, James and his wife, Della, their unconditional love, trust and eventual sacrifice of their dearly possessions. They both have their only possessives, gold pocket watch for Jim and Della's lustrous long hair up to the height of her knees. The Christmas Eve of this year remains the most remarkable moment for both of them. It is because they both sacrifice their most valuable possessions for each other, to offer them the gift of magi. The gift has been considered as a gift given to baby Jesus Christ by the three wise men in the Biblical stories. The gifts given by both the husband and the wife symbolize love and sacrifice. The gifts resemble in this way with the gift givens by the three wise men to baby Jesus Christ. Hence, the story has been entitled as 'The Gift of Magi'.

Objectives of the paper:

The main aim of the research paper is to unravel the unexplored aspects of human mind in terms of Psychoanalysis. To study spousal relationship depicted in the story is one more intention of the research paper. To study both the characters psychologically and human values infused amongst them is also the objective for this paper.

Hypotheses:

The characters in 'The Gift of the Magi' reflect Freud's structural model of the psyche, where the id (desire), ego (reality), and superego (morality) interact to shape their decisions of love and sacrifice.

The narrative illustrates how repression of personal loss (hair, watch) transforms into a deeper psychological gain, reflecting Freud's notion of sublimation.

The irony of the exchanged gifts demonstrates the dominance of psychological drives over material possessions, supporting Freud's idea that unconscious desires are stronger than external reality.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The primary source for the research paper is the book of short stories entitled 'O Henry 100 Selected Stories' and published by PROJAPOTI (2013). The book consists of one hundred selected short stories written by O. Henry. Apart from this book, research papers and other material has been referred for this paper. Though the book contains one hundred selected stories of O. Henry, the researchers has focused merely on the first short story 'The Gift of Magi'. Textual and descriptive analytical methods have been used for this research paper.

DISCUSSION

In modern times the short story, The Gift of Magi can be interpreted at various levels. The story can be interpreted by applying the psychoanalysis provided by Sigmund Freud. The story can be explored to study the hidden desires, unconscious motives and emotional conflicts of the characters. The story is based on the themes of love, sacrifice and the conflict between needs- material and emotional. To understand the psychological world of the characters, Freud's concepts of id, ego and superego and his idea of repression and wish-fulfillment is helpful for us.

Della's actions disclose the working of id and ego in conflict. Her desire to give Jim a Christmas gift emerged from the id, which seeks emotional satisfaction and fulfilment of love. Nevertheless, her financial condition limits her actions and makes her conscious about the reality. Here, the ego plays a role of mediator who guides her through this juncture. It comes with a solution which seems practical but painful too. She wants to sell her hair in order to obtain the amount of money for her present. The superego plays its role i.e. her personality has been shaped by moral values of sacrifice and duty as far as her husband is concerned. Here, in her character, one can notice Freud's structural model of id, ego and superego. Love, reality and morality all are intermingled together as id, ego and superego respectively.

Psychoanalysis

As it has been stated by Aayashi Yadav in her book, Literary Criticism: A new History that "Psychological Criticism uses psychoanalytic theories, especially those of Freud and Jacques Lacan, to understand more fully the text, the reader and the writer. The basis of this approach is the idea of the existence of a human consciousness- those impulses, desires and feelings about which a person is unaware but which influence emotions or behavior." (Yadav) The Freudian theory of id, ego and superego has been used a tool for psychoanalysis of both the characters. Apart from id, ego and superego the focus is on Freud's angle on wish-fulfillment.

In the theory of id, ego and superego Freud divides the human mind in three zones. As it is noted and observed by Dr. Ashok Thorat and others in the book, A Spectrum of Literary Criticism, "Freud divides the human mind

schematically into three zones. They are Id (unconscious), the ego (conscious personality) and the Super-ego (conscience). With the help of these divisions and classifications, Freud gives us scientific explanations to a number of psychic phenomena that remained unexplained for long.” (Thorat, Salunke, Nair, Iyer)

“Psychoanalysis is not simply a branch of medicine or psychology; it helps understand philosophy, culture, religion and first and foremost literature. In developing his theory of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud has often related it to art in general and to literature in particular.” (Mahroof Hossain)

While talking about Psychological Criticism D. H. Lawrence points out that “the knowledge of psychology has been of great use for interpreting fictitious characters in literature. Such puzzling and inexplicable characters have been explained away through a study of the subconscious repressions which motivate a character.” (Satish Kumar and Tayal)

Psychoanalysis of Jim and Della:

Jim, the central male character in the story is a loving and care-taking husband. In the opening scene of the story Della, the central female character counts money three times and remembers the upcoming day of Christmas. She sits silently on the couch which makes her think about her life which is “made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.” (Henry) She, in fact wanted to buy a present for Jim. “Her Jim”. The stress on the word ‘her Jim’ denotes possession and affinity. Her love for him is ego in terms of Freud. Even the description- “But whenever Mrs. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above, he was called ‘Jim’ and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young.” (Henry) shows that Della was a very loving wife. She was going through the poverty in her life. She was thinking about the present- fine, rare and sterling, she has to give on the occasion of Christmas.

Jim also faces the similar psychological trauma like his wife, Della. His desire to express love by gifting Della a precious comb reflects his id-driven wish. The reality about his financial condition forces him to sell his watch displays the working of ego. His moral responsibility and affection toward his wife (as his wife have for him) represents superego. Hence, the act of selling watch and cutting of hair makes meaningful rather than tragic.

The family of the two had only two possessions – ‘the gold watch from the time of Jim’s grandfather and Della’s hair’ for which they would feel mighty pride. The story may be seen as a case of wish-fulfillment. Both, the husband and wife unconsciously wish to prove their devotion. It is in one sense is a self-denial. The gifts which are now of no use for each other, become symbolic objects of desire that fulfill a psychological need. The paradoxical situation in the story doesn’t highlight loss but the unconscious victory of love over material concerns. Finally, her husband’s love wins over her physical possession, her hair. And she decides to sell her hair. The earlier half of the story highlights inner drama in Della’s mind.

The husband and wife give up their only valuable possessions for each other’s present. The words, “It was no anger, nor, surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.” (O Henry) When Jim reaches home in the evening, he finds Della’s head without long hair. He has not imagined that she will cut her hair to give him a present. Finding him in a strange situation, as he has got a mental blow, she moves him fast and says, “Jim, darling. Don’t look at me that way. I had my hair cut off, and sold because I could not have lived through Christmas without giving you a present.” (O’Henry) The sacrifice for Jim’s present by Della can be interpreted at emotional level as love- the unconditional love. Similarly, Jim’s present for his wife, Della brings the mixed emotion on her face. When he converses with her about the gift he has brought for her, she opens it. The narrator describes the situation. “White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy: and then, alas! A quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails.” It is because there was a comb, her long worshiped desire. He brought that pair of beautiful combs of tortoise shell by selling his watch, the only possession from his grandfather’s time.

CONCLUSION

The two characters, Della and Jim are loving and care-taking couple who sacrifices the greatest treasures of their own house. But they won the faith which is more than any precious present in the world. The story opens with

the question of Christmas present and ends on the wiseness of the magi. Finally, the reference to the three wise people makes distinction between the gifts offered by the magi to baby Christ and the presents offered by Jim and Della.

Thus, through psychoanalysis, 'the Gift of Magi' reveals itself as more than a sentimental tale. It is an exploration of human psychology, where unconscious drives, moral imperatives, and emotional attachments shape behaviour. Freud's theory helps us to understand that the sacrifices of Della and Jim are not only acts of love but also expressions of the deep psychological conflicts between desire, reality and morality.

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