

# SIMILARITY OF THEMES AND STRUCTURES IN W S HOUGHTON'S ONE-ACT PLAY AND G B PRABHAT'S SHORT STORY

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**ABSTRACT:** Drama has been considered to be an effective medium of information since its origin. The latter form of it is a one-act play, a much lauded form recently. A small play of some duration with a touching storyline, prompting the reader to ponder over the issue is remarkable about this genre. This one-act play appears similar to the short story form in its characteristics. The purpose served by both the genres is the same almost. Both contribute their share in mobilizing the readers towards contemporary issues raised on the scene. The sociological and ethical issues are dealt in brief with simple and witty manner in these forms. Hence, the idea of bringing out similarity between these two genres is experimentally worked out in this paper, wishing for the multi-genre study of the various forms of literature in the future.

For making a comparative study of theme and structure in these two different genres, a British writer, W S Houghton's 'The Dear Departed', a one-act play, and a budding Indian writer, G B Prabhat's 'Highway to Heart', a short story, are taken and analysed in the facets of structure, plot, theme, values projected, issues raised and climax determined. The resemblance in such aspects is highlighted apart from the critical study of the works.

**KEYWORDS:** One-act play, short story, similarity, comparative study, genres, structure, Houghton, Prabhat, Departed, Highway)

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Drama', to any Indian, means a stage, some actors, different colored costumes, a message to be followed, a gathering at certain place and a story taken from the Epics.

In the olden days, drama was the only entertainment to the people. The public encouraged the drama both in visual and written forms. The written form was for the literates and the plays in the streets were for the illiterates, mostly, to mobilize them towards certain issues. The puppet show, *Veedhi Naatakamu*, *Ranga Sthala Naatikalu*, *Nataka Pradarsanalu* were the various visual forms of dramas existed in India previously. Now, all these forms are replaced, at maximum extent, by the movies, Television serials and the short films. Coming to the written forms, plays are followed by short plays, one-act plays and short, short plays recently. Yet, keeping track of short plays and one-act plays is an uphill task. As K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar said,

Short plays and one-act plays of varying quality appear in journals and magazines, and it is impossible to keep track of them; it is likely a few good playlets, along with numbered bad ones, have been covered up by oblivion. It is very seldom that plays appear in book form. And of the plays lying buried in old books and magazines, few seem to have had a chance on the stage. ( Iyengar 247)

As many of the contemporary audiences are too busy and economic, not only to allocate their valuable time but also to pay attention to lengthy shows, the short films are gaining reputation today. When compared with that of the olden days, one-act plays are produced in large number today, in written forms, So, the duration of a drama is condensed from some days to some minutes; the length of a drama is reduced from five acts to one-act with a few scenes and the story lines are changed from a period of life to a situation of life.

A lover of drama is well aware of Shakespeare, the Miracle plays, the Mystery plays, the Morality plays and the Interludes. The drama of Shakespeare received the audience. The Miracle, Mystery and Morality plays reached the illiterates to be educated. The Interludes appeared for the festival guests. Likewise, the one-act plays were the 'curtain raisers' initially. They developed in the nineteenth century to cater the late comers for the main play. These used to follow the main play mostly. Now, these are used by

amateur theatres, as they require limited resources and limited number of characters with fairly prominent roles.

The features of one-act play are quite different from a full-size, lengthy play. These plays have one-act with one or more scenes that can be performed in about 40 minutes. A situation or an event from a life is focused leaving a message to the group concerned. The character does not get scope to be developed, as there is not much passage of time allowed. A well-knit plot with economically drawn action under a single setting is the prominent characteristic of these plays. Brevity of expressions, ironic reversals, revelations and twisted endings are the striking traits.

This genre is similar to short story form that developed in twentieth century. The short story also contains 3000 to 6000 words, with less number of characters. The characters do not get scope for the development, as a stage of life, like childhood, old age etc., or a situation or an event is projected in a limited span of time, conveying a message or making a particular group of people think on the situation. Brief narration with economy in details, ironic reversals, revelations and twisted endings under a single setting are other distinctive features.

Like a barometer, the short fiction ... faithfully registers the strain and stresses, the peculiar flux and gradation, the obvious and the not so obvious features of the social milieu (Mehrotra 195).

Both one-act play and short story, the two different genres, have similar structures. The themes they project are comparable. The purpose they serve is alike. The contemporary readers encourage and enjoy them equivalently. As the function of literature is to analyze and criticize, guide and rectify, motivate and mobilize, entertain and educate the things in society, these two genres obey this rationale within their limitations. These are trying to amuse and instruct the readers on current issues in a flexible and witty way.

In order to ascertain the postulation mentioned above, a comparative study of W S Houghton's one-act play 'The Dear Departed' and G B Prabhat's 'Highway to Heart' is done with regards to their theme and structure.

## **II. SIMILARITY IN STRUCTURES AND PLOTS**

W S Houghton's 'The Dear Departed' has seven characters altogether, including the minor ones. The location of the story is the house of the elder daughter, Mrs. Amelia Slaughter. The play is based on the British family system. The situation projected in the play is the violent decision of Mr. Abel Merryweather, a seventy year old father. The play consists of one-act with two scenes. This play was first produced in Manchester in 1908.

G B Prabhat's 'Highway to Heart' has nine characters totally, with two major roles. This story goes on in the first person narration. The setting for the story is a middle class family of Tamilnadu. The short story projected is derived out of Indian family system. The condition highlighted is the decision of Sigappi, a fifty year old mother. This short story, which is a smooth narration of seventeen pages, is released recently.

Mr. Abel Merryweather is the protagonist of the one-act play, 'The Dear Departed'. He has two daughters namely, Amelia and Elizabeth married to Henry Slaughter and Ben Jordan respectively. The curtain rises with a shout of the vigorous lady, Mrs. Amelia Slaughter ordering her daughter, Victoria, to be in black dress as her aunt and uncle are coming there to attend the ceremony of Mr. Abel Merryweather, who is lying dead upstairs. Victoria, a precocious girl, pesters mother with many questions like why the aunt, who has not been there for ages, is coming that day suddenly; why they are trying to pinch grandpa's things like bureau and the clock and how the grandpa dies suddenly that morning etc. As Amelia is worrying very much about shifting things from father's room to her drawing hall, before the sister comes, Victoria does not get any reply and leaves to her room in the upstairs to change her dress. Meanwhile, the younger daughter, Elizabeth with her husband, Ben Jordan, reaches there. Both the sisters express sadness over what happens and get ready to have a cup of tea before doing the necessary things, like informing the piece of news to the relatives through news paper etc..

Suddenly, Victoria ushers in the room, indicating a ghost in the upstairs, follows by the appearance of the image of Mr. Abel Merryweather on the steps getting down. All of them are shocked and stunned. Contradictory to their expectations, in fact, Mr. Abel himself comes there, wishes all of them and inquires why all the other people are in black. Amid the argument of the two sisters about the unpaid insurance premium by father and for his things like his golden watch, clock and bureau, he comes to know that

Amelia, his elder daughter has taken his deep sleep for granted that he is dead and intimates the same to her sister's family.

As Mr. Abel is clearly aware of the nature of his daughters, he takes three decisions on that day - going to the lawyer to alter his will; going to the insurance office to pay his premium and to go to St. Philip's Church to get Mrs. John Shorrocks, the keeper of 'Ring-O-Bells', married at 12 O' clock, the following Monday.

G B Prabhat's short story 'Highway to Heart' is a narration of the stentorian behavior of an old *Thatha*. The honour given to his crude behavior by the family members and neighbours is well-appreciated. Such personality has a paralysis stroke, which prevents him from his daily chores. His noisy regular life has calmed down suddenly. His grandson's reflection over his behavior shows his exuberant nature.

The second night of *thatha's* return from the hospital, after Maran had left, Jayanth asked, "The noise has died down, hasn't it?"

"What noise?" I asked.

Jayanth pointed in the direction of *thatha's* room. "The noise this man made. Eating, talking, laughing, cursing, walking, and sleeping. Everything was so noisy." (Prabhat 5)

Maran, a school dropout, looks like more than twenty two, against to his claim. He loves sleeping more than anything in his life. He lives in nearby ghetto and whenever some urgency occurs, he attends *thatha* within no time. Such a person has slowly become victim to *thatha's* adulterated tales. Though he cannot comprehend fully, he listens to them patiently and sometimes he responds to some utterances.

Kuppan and Sigappi with Lakshmi are the construction laborers working on an apartment building in *thatha's* compound. As they know his condition, they visit him to inquire his health. Thus, they have been the regular visitors to *thatha*. More than that, as Maran and they belong to same place, the intimacy between all of them grows to such an extent that Maran's marriage with Lakshmi is fixed.

As Sigappi is good at cooking '*meen kuzhambu*' (fish curry), she regularly supplies lunch to Maran, as he has to take care of her daughter well in future. Shockingly, the day before the marriage, both Maran and Sigappi disappear. Suspecting them, *thatha*

asks Kuppan if he accepts Sigappi on her return back. He meekly replies positively, for she is specialist at '*meen kuzhambu*'.

### III. SIMILARITY IN THEMES

The theme of 'The Dear Departed' is the degraded moral values and the human relations in the British middle-class. The sisters' relations are weak. Victoria's question about the arrival of her aunt makes it clear: "What are they coming for? They have not been here for ages." (Houghton 37). The attitude of the two sisters is unethical and commercial. Even Henry feels sorry to be observed by their daughter while they are replacing their bureau with the antique one of grandfather. Amelia is such 'a vulgar woman that she prepares to do any amount of straight talking to get her own way'. Besides, she charges her sister Elizabeth that 'She'll come fast enough after her share of what their father's left and she can be very hard when she likes'. Even the brothers-in-law do not condemn the wives and go to the extent of obeying them at the cost of their individuality. Henry Slaughter gets ready to shift the things as per the will of Amelia and Ben Jordan even scolds his father-in-law 'a drunken old beggar', when he knows that the insurance premium is not paid till then.

The theme of 'Highway to Heart' is the degenerated morals among the people. The human relations are influenced more by '*meen kuzhambu*' than the ethical values. Needless to say, *thatha* might have his impact on the poor Maran to be transformed so with his spoilt peroration.

"Another young mind being corrupted," muttered Mother.

The physiotherapist also became a victim of *thatha's* salacious accounts. She just smiled them away as if she secretly enjoyed them and returned to her peremptory orders, "Don't lean to the right," "Look straight when you walk" and "Lift your right hand more...yes, you can. Try harder." (Prabhat 9)

But, the allegation lies with '*meen kuzhambu*'.

#### IV. SIMILARITY IN THE ENDINGS

The twisted ending of ‘The Dear Departed’ is questionable issue. Though the play was written in the beginning of twentieth century, the story line is appropriate to the contemporary society everywhere. This can be considered a realistic play. Mr. Abel Merryweather’s decision of marrying another woman at such age is a point of self- analysis to the old people. The agony a father faces in the hands of daughters is transparent, but simultaneously, Mrs. John Shorrocks cannot assure him a selfless life. Besides, a rebellistic solution of Mr. Abel’s getting married with all his property seems drastic in a family system. Instead, some other alternative to bring change in the mindset of daughters would be more fruitful in the present context. Everyone is individual to take his choices, but, if everyone advances by taking sweeping decisions, breaking the family system, one day none will be there for any one.

The ironic reversal at the end of ‘Highway to Heart’ throws light on contemporary marital relations and family values. The decisions taken without estimating the consequences affect the people that are left behind at homes. This sort of situation leads the society, especially the youth, in negative direction.

#### V. SIMILARITY IN THE VALUES PROJECTED

Mr. Abel Merryweather, the protagonist, takes hasty decision of getting married to a woman of ‘Ring-O-Bells’, a restaurant, at the age of seventy years. As soon as he comes down, he searches for his slippers and asks why Mr. Henry has worn his things. His passion for his things is so strong that he thanks his daughter for shifting the heavy things like bureau from the upstairs to the hall, because that has made his work of taking his things to Ring-O-Bells easier the following Monday. All these indicate his selfish attitude. His impatience is genetically transmitted to his two daughters.

In ‘Highway to Heart’, the most unethical is the disappearance of Sigappi and Maran, which is suspected as their elopement together. Leaving Lakshmi, who is prevented from pursuing her graduation for the sake of marriage, is the ‘trump card’ in the hands of Maran and Sigappi. Kuppan is an honest husband. Sigappi, a married woman disappears leaving all the family members. She has taken a very selfish decision, leaving a thunderous image of motherhood and womanhood on her daughter. Maran, an orphan, has remained as ‘a spoilt child’.

In both the stories, the real life is projected. The elders of the two stories are supposed to counsel the younger ones. Instead, they escape from the situation for their own comfort. Though the British and Indian countries are far away from each other, the amount of degradation of values in the society looks similar in both the cases. That too, in countries like India, where family system is strong, such perversions are unwelcomed keeping the betterment of the future generation in view. Such issues are fit to be condemned and thrown for revised thinking, through this sort of literary genres, paving way for the refined thinking of present day Man.

#### VI. REFERENCE

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