

HOPE AND SACRIFICE IN THE SHORT STORY "THE LAST LEAF" BY O. HENRY

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Abstract

This research explores the themes of hope and sacrifice using William Wordsworth's romanticism theory to analyse the themes of hope and sacrifice in O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf". An ill young woman named Johnsy believes she will die when the last leaf on the ivy vine outside her window falls in this short story. The main characters of the story are her close friend Sue and their elderly neighbour Behrman, an artist who eventually sacrifices his life to keep Johnsy from losing hope by painting a realistic leaf. This research looks at Romanticism, which emphasizes emotion and nature, shaped the story's structure and development of characters in "The Last Leaf". This research examines how the characters' emotional experiences connect with Romantic ideals through a textual analysis of the short story. Based on the findings, it can be considered that Wordsworth's Romanticism is reflected in "The Last Leaf", which portrays the remarkable act of creating art, the strength of hope, and human sacrifice. Behrman's last act of kindness, painting the leaf, is seen as a romantic gesture that exceeds reality and captures the hope that is present in the hopelessness of winter. The research concludes that O. Henry's short story represents Romantic ideals and emphasizes the capacity for selflessness in the human spirit.

Keywords: Hope, Sacrifice, The Last Leaf, Romanticism, Short Story

INTRODUCTION

A short story by O. Henry titled "The Last Leaf" is a story that explores the concepts of hope and sacrifice. The story, set in the early 20th century, takes place in Greenwich Village, New York, and centres on a young artist, Johnsy, suffering from pneumonia. Her friend Sue and their elderly neighbour Mr. Behrman start to worry a lot about her because of her worsening health and lack of will to live. The story focuses on the emotional and psychological struggles that the characters face as Johnsy becomes obsessed with the falling leaves outside her window and believes she will die when the final leaf falls. The story highlights how sacrifice and hope are possible during hard times.

A major problem in literature is the exploration of human emotions and interpersonal relationships, which often leads to deep insights into the human condition. Despite appearing simple, this story perfectly captures the spirit of Romanticism,



emphasizing intense emotional experiences, the ability to transform art, and the selflessness of gestures. "The Last Leaf" is significant because of its moving narrative and its ability to communicate difficult emotional realities through character interactions (Gea, 2024). Though there has been a lot of literary study done on O. Henry's works, there continues to be the need to investigate how this specific narrative fits in with William Wordsworth's definition of Romantic ideals, especially when it comes to the story's emotional depth and the significance of nature and art in human existence. Through an analysis of the character's experiences and the symbolic application of the last leaf, it will be discovered how O. Henry combines themes of sacrifice and hope to produce a story that embodies the ideals of Romanticism.

O. Henry often portrays the everyday life of New Yorkers in his short stories. The sudden opening and unexpected finish of his short stories are well-known. O. Henry's 1906 collection *The Trimmed Lamp, and Other Stories of the Four Million* included the short story "The Last Leaf." Johnsy, Sue, Behrman, and the doctor, —are the characters in *The Last Leaf*. As fellow artists, Johnsy and Sue share a flat and are close friends. Johnsy was diagnosed with pneumonia, and she lies on her bed in her room (Asyhari, 2022). She notices an ivy vine on the wall as she peeks out the window. The wind causes the ivy vine's leaves to fall. Johnsy believes that she will pass away after the final leaf falls. Sue, her optimistic friend, offers her hope, however, as she pursues painter Behrman to get an ivy leaf painted on the wall. Behrman uses paint to create what appears to be a real leaf that clings to the ivy vine stem. When Johnsy wakes up the next day and sees that the last leaf hasn't fall yet, her health gets better. However, Behrman dies of pneumonia after painting the leaf on the wall (Henry, 1907).

A core belief of Wordsworth's Romantic theory is that poetry should result from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." He believed that genuine poetry is the result of feelings recollected in a calm state, which enables the poet to interpret and translate these emotions into artistic expression. Wordsworth thought that imagination was essential to this process because it allowed poets to reach into the depths of human experience and transcend the ordinary. In his poetry, he uses very simple words. He stated that "a selection of language really used by men" should be used while speaking (Liu, 2021). His goal was to make the simple lives and experiences of rural people worthy of poetry. He thought that ordinary people's lives had deep significance and that universal truths might be learned from their experiences.

The purpose of this journal is to explore the themes of hope and sacrifice in "The Last Leaf" by analysing these themes are conveyed and how they affect the characters and story as a whole. It specifically aims to reveal the ways in which O. Henry expresses broader concepts on human sacrifice and kindness through the behaviours of the characters and the symbolic imagery of the final leaf.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Themes in “The Last Leaf”

In the short story, O. Henry explores a variety of themes. It discusses an exploration of friendship journey, devotion, self-sacrifice towards one another, art, hope and pessimism, and death. This research mainly focuses on two themes, which is hope and sacrifice. Throughout the short story, the two characters Johnsy and Sue stick to the bond of friendship. Sue takes care of Johnsy when she suffers from an illness, pneumonia (Asni Asmawati & Isma Khoiriah, 2022). Johnsy makes up her mind that whenever the last leaf of the ivy vine that hangs on the wall outside their studio falls, she will die. However, Sue does not let her have this thought and tells her that leaves have nothing to do with Johnsy’s life. She gives her hope, and she is committed to taking care of her friend. Similarly, Mr. Behrman takes care of the two friends for they are fellow young artists and that he himself is a painter. So, he considers it his responsibility, and he sacrifices his life while painting the ivy leaf on the wall in the rain so that Sue’s life can be saved, but unfortunately in the end, he dies of Pneumonia after the heavy rain.

Themes of Hope

Hope is one of the two main themes this research discusses. This dialogue highlights and provides context for understanding Johnsy's struggle with her sickness and the mental and physical impact on those close to her, including Sue and Behrman's sacrifices. It begins with the doctor's remarks, which emphasize the struggle within Johnsy as well as the sacrifices and help from other sources that will eventually determine how she will live.

Doctor: “She has a very small chance,” he said. “She has a chance, if she wants to live. If people don’t want to live, I can’t do much for them. Your little lady has decided that she is not going to get well Is there something that is troubling her?” (page 13).

The line, “She has a chance, if she wants to live” points that there is hope. It suggests that even with such a terrible outcome, recovery is still possible given Johnsy has hope and a will to live. This demonstrates how hope plays an important part in overcoming hard times. The statement “Your little lady has decided that she is not going to get well”, highlights how important mental and emotional health is in order to be in a progressive healing process. It implies that having hope and being positive in these situations can have a big influence in one’s physical health. This dialogue also hints at the emotional work and the people that care for Johnsy. The doctor’s concern about whether something is troubling Johnsy portrays dedication and emotional empathy in Johnsy’s health. The line “If people don’t want to live, I can’t do much for them...” shows that even someone as professional as the doctor couldn’t help much if Johnsy doesn’t have the hope to live and requires a huge sacrifice.

Doctor: “...But when a sick person begins to feel that he’s going to die, half my work is useless. Talk to her about new winter clothes. If she were interested in the future, her chances would be better.” (Henry, 1907, p. 13).

Through this dialogue, the doctor once again emphasizes the importance of the mental aspect of the recovery. A positive outlook and a sense of control over one's situation can contribute to better physical outcomes. On the other hand, negative emotions like anxiety and depression can worsen physical symptoms, prolong recovery times..." (Bender, 2023). By having a sense of hope and Sue encouraging Johnsy to talk about exciting future plans, like new winter clothes, the doctor tries to influence a sense of hope and will for Johnsy to live and overcome her illness. This line also implies that if Johnsy has something to look forward to, she might gain the will to fight her recovery. As Johnsy's friend, Sue follows the doctor's advice to talk and uplift Johnsy's mood by discussing future events, devoting herself to take care of her friend, having Johnsy's needs over her own, showing how she's sacrificing to keep Johnsy alive.

Johnsy: "...They're falling faster now. Three days ago, there were almost a hundred. It hurt my head to count them. But now it's easy. There goes another one. There are only five now."

Sue: "Five what, dear? Tell your Sue."

Johnsy: "Leaves. On the tree. When the last one falls, I must go, too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you? (Henry, 1907, p. 14).

The dialogue captures the psychological effects of hopelessness on Johnsy. Her belief that her existence is dependent on the leaves shows the strength and devastation caused by losing hope. This concept is powerful because it shows how mental conditions may affect physical conditions and results. And Sue's participation highlights how important friends and family are to maintaining a sense of hope. In an attempt to distract Johnsy from her thoughts and be nearby, Sue represents the encouraging energy needed to fight hopelessness. It indicates Johnsy's perspective shifted and that hope, despite its weakness, can come back with proper treatment and support, highlighting how important human relationships are to maintaining hope.

Through Johnsy's connection with nature, one can understand Johnsy's observations of the leaves and her belief that they hold the key to her future. For her, the falling of the leaves is more than just an everyday occurrence; it's the disappearance of her life meaning. Wordsworth thought that emotions and human experience were intimately associated with nature.

Behrman: "...Do people die because leaves drop off a tree? I have not heard of such a thing. No, I will not come up and sit while you make a picture of me. Why do you allow her to think such a thing? That poor little Johnsy!" (Henry, 1907, p. 15).

Wordsworth highlighted the importance of emotion, the beauty of the nature, and each person's personal experience within it. Wordsworth believed that since it gives insight and intensity of emotions, nature has a great spiritual significance and the ability to deeply affect a person's soul. His poetry often reflected his view that there is a direct connection between the human experience and the environment, and he praised the power of nature's imagery to bring out strong emotions. Wordsworth's Romanticism often explored how individuals read nature metaphorically and how these readings

reflect their inner feelings. In this story, Wordsworth's romanticism theory mentioned that nature serves as a mirror for human emotions is supported by Johnsy's conviction that her existence connects with the falling leaves.

In this brief but significant conversation, Behrman learns about Johnsy's fascination with falling leaves as well as her belief that they are important to her existence. Behrman's selfless gesture of painting the last leaf onto the wall is set against the background of his concern and worried reaction. His determination to give Johnsy an idea of hope despite the extreme personal risk highlights the story's main subject of hope. Behrman's painted leaf takes on a new meaning as a representation of constant hope and the capacity of the human spirit to encourage and motivate others.

Behrman's worry in this symbolism becomes an example of the tension between rational thinking and emotive, illogical sentiments that characterize Romanticism. Even though at first Behrman does not believe Johnsy, he later makes a symbolic act of optimism by painting the last leaf. Eventually, this action demonstrates how emotional and symbolic interpretations of nature could lead to a miraculous self-awareness and healing, which confirms Wordsworth's belief that both nature and art are able to change.

Johnsy: *"Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was. It is a sin to want to die. You may bring me a little broth now, and some milk with a little port in it, and—no; bring me a hand-mirror first, and then pack some pillows about me, and I will sit up and watch you cook."* (Henry, 1907, p. 17).

This dialogue represents the turning point of the story. Johnsy experiences a significant change of perspective when she realizes that the last leaf has not fallen yet. She sees the persistent leaf as a warning that it is cruel to want for death and that she was mistaken to give up hope. She starts asking for meals and showing interest in life, taking care of herself again, motivated by this renewed feeling of hope. The painting of the leaf by Behrman highlights the significant influence of hope on human resilience by providing as an inspiration for Johnsy's renewed hope and will to live. This dialogue connects with Wordsworth's theory of Romanticism because it explores nature as a moral guide, shows how the character experiences an immense emotional shift, praises ordinary, simple living, and offers the outstanding feeling of discovering new meaning in a single leaf's determination. These components illustrate the incredible effects of emotion and nature on the human soul and spirit, they represent the foundation of Romanticism as defined by Wordsworth.

Theme of Sacrifice

The theme of sacrifice is another main theme in "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry. The story revolves around the idea of individuals giving up their own desires and well-being for the benefit of others. This theme is exemplified through the characters of Sue and Johnsy, who both make significant sacrifices for each other. Sue, who is trying to help Johnsy recover from her illness, makes a sacrifice by giving up her own artistic ambitions to care for her friend. She puts aside her own desire to paint the Bay of Naples and instead

focuses on helping Johnsy, even going so far as to paint a picture of Behrman to lift Johnsy's spirits (Kadwa & Alshenqeeti, 2020).

Sue: *Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call Behrman to come up here. I want to paint a man in this picture, and I'll make him look like Behrman. I won't be gone a minute. Don't try to move till I come back." (Henry, 1907, p. 15).*

Sue gives up her time and effort in this situation to keep Johnsy at ease and hopeful. Besides trying to maintain some sort of routine, Sue makes sure that Johnsy is not left on her own to dwell on her negative thoughts by setting up Behrman to pose for her artwork. This shows Sue's selflessness and her attempts to keep Johnsy from giving up. Johnsy's existence depends on these sacrifices. This line also connects with Wordsworth's Romanticism theory through its emphasis on common life, strong emotional attachment, and the artistic process of creation are connected. It demonstrates the romantic concepts of valuing ordinary human experiences and emotions, which are the essential to Wordsworth's romanticism theory.

Behrman: *"Who said I will not come? Go. I come with you. For half an hour I have been trying to say that I will come. God! This is not any place for someone so good as Johnsy to lie sick (Henry, 1907, p. 16).*

This line demonstrates Behrman's effort to offer support despite his rough personality. Given his condition and the bad weather, Behrman's willingness to sit for Sue's painting indicates his greatest sacrifice. It shows his genuine concern for Sue and Johnsy. But then he dies from pneumonia after painting the final leaf on the wall outside Johnsy's window during a storm. Behrman makes a literal as well as a symbolic sacrifice. Painting the leaf symbolizes not just his last work of art but also his attempt to save Johnsy. As he eventually produces a work of art with a significant effect, it captures his unfulfilled hopes of making a masterpiece. This intellectual act carried out in extremely difficult circumstances, illustrates the Romantic ideal of the artist as a person who suffers hardships for their art and focuses their artistic abilities towards the benefit of society.

Sue: *"Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was ill only two days. Someone found him on the morning of the first day, in his room. He was helpless with pain." (Henry, 1907, p. 17).*

This illustrates how much Behrman sacrificed. Behrman does one final act of kindness by risking his life to paint the leaf and give Johnsy hope. The fact that his clothes were freezing and damp reveals the difficult circumstances he had to endure to make sure Johnsy wouldn't give up. This last sacrifice emphasizes the concept of self-sacrificing affection and the lengths people would go to in order to save someone they care about. Sue's ability to care for Johnsy and maintain her own dreams is greatly supported by his sacrifice. In the end, this short story's theme of sacrifice emphasizes the value of human relationships and how willing people are to put the needs of others over their own.

CONCLUSION

This short story, "The Last Leaf" explores fundamental moral principles including hope, sacrifice, and relationships between people. Through Johnsy's desire to watch the final leaf fall, the narrative highlights the need of holding onto hope throughout difficult times. This determination and hope for a better future is symbolized by Johnsy. Johnsy was finally motivated to keep going by Behrman's generous act of painting the final leaf, which demonstrates the strength of human connection. The story also emphasizes the significance of relationships in our lives, because Johnsy finds hope and persistence in Sue's love and support. The falling leaves in the story serve as a metaphor for the process of life and death cycle, reminding us that each ending holds the promise of new beginnings. Moreover, Johnsy's obsession with wishes for the future serves as an illustration to us about the importance of being alive at the moment. Finally, Behrman's work of art serves as an example of the universal and united force of art, supporting Johnsy in her fight for survival.

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