

UNRAVELLING THE EXISTENTIALIST IMPLICATIONS OF O. HENRY'S THE LAST LEAF

Nazeef Ullah

MPhil Scholar Department of English Linguistics and Literature Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology, D.I.Khan

nazeefullah28@gmail.com

Dr. Ahmad Naeem

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature Gomal University, D.I.Khan

anaeemk@hotmail.com

Abstract

This research paper explores the existentialist implications of O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* through a qualitative analysis of Johnsy's character development, framed within Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy. The study examines Johnsy's existential crisis, her initial refusal of freedom and retreat into quietism, and her ultimate transformation through self-cognizance. The analysis of the short story reveals three key findings: Johnsy's struggle to find purpose and meaning in her existence, her inability to accept freedom due to the burden of responsibility leading to despair and quietism, and her eventual realization that she has the power to create her own meaning in life despite its absurdity and the threat of death. These findings illuminate the existentialist themes of freedom, responsibility, and self-awareness in *The Last Leaf* and demonstrates the enduring relevance of O. Henry and Sartre's philosophy in understanding human experience.

Keywords: Existentialism, O. Henry, The Last Leaf, Sartre, Self-Cognizance

Introduction

In existentialism, human existence is dictated by absurdity and lack of any predefined purpose. This absence of meaning necessitates action and acceptance of freedom on one hand, and on the other hand, it creates the danger of quietism and bad faith leading to inauthentic existence (Palitsky et al, 2021). Although the absence of a predefined purpose provides freedom and opportunity for a subjective meaning of existence, but that freedom comes with the cost of responsibility, anguish and even

despair leading to existential crisis (Reynolds, 2022). However, the only path available to an individual is self-cognizance where he comes across the realization that he must reconcile to the absurdity of existence and make it subjectively meaningful through his own choices and action (Sartre, 2007). This research paper undertakes a rigorous examination of existential growth through the character of Johnsy in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry within the framework of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism. The short story illuminates human anguish where individuals confront their existence and the absurdity therein. The character of Johnsy is faced with existential despair at the face of absurdity, mortality and insignificance of existence.

During the course of this short story, the seeds of existential growth are sown through the character of Johnsy as she grapples with fundamental questions of her existence and the need for individual agency. Through a meticulous analysis of character development and narrative trajectory, in this paper we aim to expound Johnsy's transformative journey within the framework of Sartrean existentialism. By exploring Johnsy's existential dilemmas, we uncover the potential for self-cognizance and authentic living which illuminates the thematic richness of O. Henry's short story and contributes to the discourse on existentialism in literature. Ultimately, this analysis testifies to the enduring relevance of existentialist philosophy in understanding the human condition.

Literature Review

O. Henry's short stories, grounded in keen observation and connection to real life, have been extensively analyzed by scholars. Research works on the short stories of O. Henry including *The Last Leaf* has yielded valuable insights into his craft. Talking about *The Last Leaf*, Arisa (2010) discovered that the story masterfully weaves together themes of friendship, responsibility, selflessness, and determination, resonating with readers' psychological impressions. Zhang (2018) noted that O. Henry's characters, despite facing hardships, exhibit remarkable kindness and pure consciousness as seen in *The Last Leaf* where Mr. Behrman's selfless act of painting the last leaf embodies his pure and kind heart.

Akhter (2014) delved into the subconscious and unconscious aspects of O. Henry's genius through psychoanalytical analysis. In *The Last Leaf*, Johnsy's fantasy, as per Freudian view, serves as a coping mechanism and wish fulfillment amidst harsh

realities. In contrast, Mr. Behrman's fantasy, aligning with Jungian perspective, fuels his imagination and creativity which ultimately leads to his masterpiece, though at a fatal cost. The study demonstrates O. Henry's skill in crafting characters that embody both the human struggle and the transformative power of imagination.

Similarly, Patel (2015) conducted a psychological study of *The Last Leaf*, and maintains that O. Henry attributed childlike behavior to Johnsy to showcase the impact of nature on our psyche and the objectification of wishes in external objects. The study also highlighted the pacifying effect of art on our psyche, as seen in the painted leaf's impact on Johnsy's hope and desire for survival. This unique blend of children's psychology, nature's impact, and art's role sets *The Last Leaf* apart from other short stories.

O. Henry's keen observation and sensitivity also extended to the plight of women in his society. Glory (2019) explored this aspect through a study of *The Skylight Room* and "*The Last Leaf*", revealing the diverse representation of women in his works. The characters of Miss Elsie and Johnsy embody opposing aspects of womanhood - optimism and pessimism, self-love and disinterest. The stories also highlight women's tendency to seek external inspiration, rather than focusing on their inner selves. Through his works, O. Henry chronicled the struggles of the marginalized, including women, with a peculiar sensitivity that sets his stories apart.

Thapliyal and Chelliah (2016) analyzed *The Last Leaf* to explore O. Henry's use of symbols and literary techniques. They found that the story skillfully employs symbolism to represent the strength of human relationships, with the triangle of sobs, sniffles, and smiles enduring through life's hardships. The green leaf symbolizes life and soul, while the dry leaf represents a departed soul. Sue's care and inspiration for Johnsy, as well as Mr. Behrman's painting, demonstrate the triumph of human bonds over fear and decay. The story shows that meaningful relationships can be developed at any age.

Similarly, Gadge (2018) examined the themes of love and sacrifice in O. Henry's works, concluding that true love is depicted as dedication and service, reinvigorating hope in difficult times. Meanwhile, Dirda (2021) argued that O. Henry's representation of life extends beyond common people's issues, showcasing a colorful mosaic of society. Through realistic and fantastic depictions of the local, O.

Henry transformed New York into a vibrant "Baghdad on the Hudson" (Dirda, 2021, p. 9), with his short stories becoming a mournful ballad of life's beauty and pathos in the Old West. O. Henry's works continue to captivate readers with their rich tapestry of human experiences, relationships, and the transformative power of art.

On the other hand, Vildanova et al (2020) conducted a stylistic analysis of O. Henry's short stories, revealing his mastery of syntactic, phonetic, and lexical techniques to achieve foregrounding. This technique clarifies meaning, develops plot and characters, and establishes irony and the unexpected. O. Henry's expertise in plot construction is also noteworthy, as he skillfully crafts stories with unexpected twists. Alphonso (1941) identified four stages in O. Henry's narrative style: an abrupt beginning that grabs attention, rising action that conditions the reader's expectations, a climax that subverts those expectations and creates irony, and a resolution that leaves the reader amazed at the author's skill. Through his unique style and plot construction, O. Henry continues to engage readers with his unexpected and ironic storylines, solidifying his place among the greatest short story writers.

In conclusion, O. Henry's literary legacy is a testament to his mastery of the short story form. Through his keen observation of human nature, skillful use of symbolism, and expert plot construction, he crafted tales that continue to captivate readers with their timeless themes, unexpected twists, and poignant character studies. As a chronicler of the human experience, O. Henry's works remain a vibrant tapestry of love, sacrifice, hope, and resilience, set against the backdrop of everyday life. His stories continue to inspire and delight readers, solidifying his place as one of the greatest short story writers of all time. The review of the above research papers highlights the gap of any existentialist study in the works of O. Henry, indicating a need for further exploration of his stories through the lens of existentialist philosophy.

Research Method and Theoretical Framework

This research is qualitative in nature and the collected data was descriptively analyzed. The primary source of data for this research paper was taken from the short story "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry. The secondary data was collected from Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, *Existentialism is Humanism*, research articles by other scholars, magazines, journals, and philosophy specific websites like Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy etc. The

researchers used Thematic Analysis and Content Analysis methods for the analysis of the collected data.

The term 'existentialism' was first used by Gabriel Marcel to describe Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas, and Sartre later accepted the label in his 1945 lecture "Existentialism is Humanism". Existentialism is a philosophical approach that explores human existence, emphasizing subjective experience, authenticity, and individual relationships (Warnock, 1970). It investigates the purpose, meaning, and value of human existence, considering diverse possibilities and relationships with objects and others. The definition of existentialism is rooted in intellectual history, closely tied to Sartre's work and the postwar writings of his associates (Barnes, 1967).

Crowell (2011) notes that existentialism became associated with a cultural movement in 1940s-1950s Europe, involving philosophers like Heidegger, Jasper, and Buber. However, this movement label was problematic, as scholars like Khawaja (2016) pointed out. Khawaja (2016) argues that considering existentialism as a movement creates confusion about who belongs to it, as some labeled existentialists didn't know or rejected the term. Instead, she sees existentialism as a tradition where ideas and notions are passed down and modified between generations, influencing each other.

Webber (2018) views existentialism as an ethical theory that prioritizes freedom and considers it the source of all values. This perspective enables existentialism to contribute to various fields like social psychology, moral philosophy, and psychotherapy. Crowell (2020) reconciles Webber's stance with Khawaja's by noting that both emphasize authenticity as central to existential thought. Existentialists argue that human existence requires new categories beyond traditional thought, rejecting understanding humans as substances or subjects. Instead, they seek to understand human existence through a phenomenological approach that goes beyond scientific truths.

In the philosophical tradition of existentialism, Sartre's existentialism is based upon the foundational argument that 'Existence precedes Essence,' which means that individuals exist first, and later on their purpose and meaning are created through their choices and decisions, not predetermined by a preconceived essence (Sartre, 2007, p. 2). Sartre explains this concept by using the example of a paper-knife, which is

created with a purpose in mind, unlike human existence, which is not predetermined by a divine or natural essence (Sartre, 2007, p. 3). Traditionally, religion was seen as the guide for human existence with God as the creator who knew the purpose of human existence. Later, philosophers shifted focus to human nature but still assumed that essence precedes existence. Sartre argues that this perspective is flawed as human existence is not defined by a predetermined essence, but rather by individual choices and experiences (Sartre, 2007, p. 5).

Sartre out rightly reject the idea of God or universal human nature dictating human existence. Instead, he believes that human existence comes first and then subsequently individuals must create their own meaning and purpose through their own choices and actions. Only through their deeds and actions can individuals define themselves and create their own meaning. Sartre concludes that there is no fixed human nature or divine plan, and that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself," emphasizing individual freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 2007, p. 7).

Webber (2018) clarifies that Sartre uses 'essence' in a teleological sense which means that it is a property that enables something to perform a specific function. He illustrates this with a house example, where its essence is to provide shelter, which is achieved through its parts (roof, walls). In contrast, humans exist without a predetermined essence or purpose and are free to choose and create their own meaning, shaping their essence through their existence (Crowell 2020). This is the core and foundational argument of Sartre's existentialism.

Discussion and Analysis

O. Henry's short story *The Last Leaf* is the study of existentialist absurdity, the freedom and opportunity to change that absurdity into something meaningful, and the subsequent anguish and quietism that result from the burden of responsibility in the face of freedom of choice. The story is about a young lady named Johnsy who was faced with the burden of responsibility to create her own meaning and purpose. However, she was a weak and timid soul who could not shoulder that responsibility and succumbed to Quietism. Thus, the story becomes a three-way study of an existential crisis. One path is the path of Inauthentic existence, where an individual succumbs to Bad Faith and seeks solace in a false identity. The other path is a more reckless and frustrated one, where individual considers ending his life and views

suicide as the only possible way to end the absurdity of existence. The third and favorable path is to accept the absurdity of existence and make it meaningful by recognizing and accepting freedom along with all its burden and consequences and make it meaningful through one's own subjective and conscious efforts.

During the course of the story, the main character, Johnsy, passes through all these stages and eventually reaches self-awareness. She realizes that the only possible and meaningful way of changing the absurdity of existence is to make it meaningful through her own efforts. Although Patel (2022) is of the opinion that Johnsy's behaviour is the result of her immature psychological development as she still possesses a childlike psychology that tries to find meaning through associations, her realization toward the end of the story reveals that it was actually existential angst, not psychological immaturity. She realizes that the absurd nature of existence is to be celebrated, not lamented, because it provides her an unconditional opportunity through which she can become anyone she wants and can attribute any purpose to her existence through her own freedom of action. That is why she comes to the idea that the solution is not to end life but to live life meaningfully and responsibly.

In line with the starting point of Sartre's existentialism that the existence of man precedes his essence, the short story echoes the idea that, unlike other Being-in-Itself, human beings lack any predefined purpose of existence. There is no God, no religion, no rational human nature, or any branch of philosophy that can determine and pinpoint the original purpose for the sake of which this earthly life came into existence. On the contrary, O. Henry propagates that man exists and appears on the scene of the world first, and only after that, he can define himself. Man is what he conceives himself to be and what he wills and struggles to become after his existence. In the light of this purposeless and directionless start, the world becomes completely chaotic and absurd, where man has to struggle himself and create his own identity and purpose.

This idea of existence is suggested in the opening paragraph of *The Last Leaf*, where the streets have gone wild and turned in different directions and broken into small pieces called places. Here, the exposition and setting of the short story are used to convey the basic idea of existence without any purpose. According to Alphonso (1941), the exposition part of O. Henry needs special attention as it not only

Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

Print ISSN: 3006-4716

Online ISSN: 3006-4724

<https://socialworksreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Vol. 2 No. 1 (2024)

introduces the readers to what is coming ahead but also serves as the foundational premise for his major argument. The story opens in “a little district west of Washington Square,” where “the streets have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called places” (Henry, 1953, p. 1455). The wild, twisted, broken, and directionless streets symbolize the utterly absurd world full of different religions and philosophies, but they only add further to the confusion where one cannot find any direction or purpose of existence. The image of the physical characteristics and appearance of the city is exactly a symbol for the mental condition of a person who comes into existence but without any specified purpose, prior knowledge, or direction for his existence. Furthermore, it is also stated in the opening paragraph of the story that there was nothing significant about the world unless it was perceived and discovered as something possible and valuable by a painter. Unfortunately, the painter has no means to buy the colour to paint the world, signifying that what really matters is how you perceive your existence and that there is no meaning at all, or every type of meaning of our existence depends on how you conceive of it. This echoes the existentialist belief that man has to carve himself out through his actions and the selection of choices in order to create identity and generate a purpose for his own existence.

Similarly, the short story offers a very strong existentialist criticism of Western civilization and its idea of universal human nature. According to Ostrofsky (1982), O. Henry’s characters show diversity even among his stereotypical characters too. He believes that this diversity among his characters of the same backgrounds shows that O. Henry was not a champion of universal human identity. This is in direct contrast with the belief that there is some kind of universal human nature present in everyone, which suggests the presence of some kind of a priori. From Diderot to Voltaire and to Kant, all emphasized human nature, which they asserted to be the same across humanity and considered each individual as a particular example of a universal man (Sartre, 2007). In *The Last Leaf*, the idea of civilization based upon rational human nature is mocked when the two female characters, Johnsy and Sue, had discovered that they have the same taste in art, food, and clothes and so decided to work and live together. “They had met at the table d’hote of an English Street and found their taste in art, chicory salad, and bishop sleeves so congenial that the joint

studio resulted” (Henry, 1953, p. 1455). The selection of insignificant things as common factors for bringing them together instead of any other rational factors becomes, when viewed in the existentialist context of the story, extremely ironic.

According to Akhter (2014), the character of Johnsy represents the Freudian view of fantasy as a disease when she develops her fantasy into symptoms, and her fantasy provides her with a wish-fulfilment resort amid the harsh realities of life. However, in existentialism, the idea that man is nothing but what he struggles to carve himself out implies subjectivity. Therefore, the very first move of existentialism is to realize every man for what he is and where he stands and then to trust him fully with the responsibility of his existence (Sartre, 2007). The problem of Johnsy is not fantasy but Bad Faith, where she wants to find solace and refuge from the sheer burden of responsibility. In *The Last Leaf*, this realization is introduced as a cold stranger who walked here and there, touching people with his icy fingers and eventually entering into the life of Johnsy. Here, the realization of existence without any purpose and the responsibility for giving it meaning and identity is represented in the form of the disease of pneumonia, which is introduced after preparing the scene for an absurd world devoid of meaning in the opening scene of the short story. This realization symbolized as a disease brings all the subsequent existential crises in the life of Johnsy such as anguish and despair due to responsibility, isolation and alienation, curtailment of freedom due to bad faith, hesitation to create values in life due to meaninglessness, and the feelings of absolute nothingness due to death, etc.

According to Glory (2019), Johnsy represents the pessimistic aspect of a woman who has lost heart, hope, and the will to live due to her illness. However, here, the main stressing point that O. Henry tries to convey at this stage is that the idea that a man has to shape his identity and make his existence meaningful implies a complete freedom and the possibility of choices. It is not ordinary pessimism but an existential angst, helplessness, and fear of responsibility due to which she lurches into quietism. Existential freedom has its own cost in the form of a great responsibility. A person must make his choice with the idea that it is suitable and reasonable for all other individuals living in all ages because every single action of a particular individual involves the entire humanity, regardless of that particular individual’s wishes,

circumstances, and desires. Hence, an individual who chooses a particular image of a person for himself chooses it for all other human beings (Sartre, 2007).

It is this high magnitude of responsibility that brings despair and anguish. When Johnsy is faced with the realization of existence, she is not willing to accept it and bear it due to this sheer responsibility. The physician clearly tells her that he cannot do anything unless she herself musters up her courage and decides to live her life. When he inquires with Sue about the possible troubles of Johnsy, he reaches the conclusion that “it is the weakness” (Henry, 1953, p. 1456) in Johnsy which has deteriorated her condition. In fact, the weakness to shoulder the responsibility of existence in the form of making choices on behalf of the whole humanity leads her to anguish and despair, which compels her to remain detached from life. Here, O. Henry also suggests the idea of suicide as a solution to end absurdity and cast away the responsibility. The physician clearly indicates that unless she herself decides to shoulder the responsibility, nothing else could be done. He says that “I will do all that science, so far as it may filter through my efforts, can accomplish. But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession, I subtract 50 per cent from the curative power of medicine” (Henry, 1953, p. 1456).

In existentialism, anguish is the logical corollary of responsibility which comes with freedom. The feeling that an individual is not only a doer but a maker and establisher of something valid for the entire humanity generates extreme pain, anxiety, and distress in the individual. Faced with such grave responsibility, individuals tend to find an escape. The character of Sue is a source of such distraction in the story who tries to recover Johnsy by encouraging her to eat more and be strong. Sue is a painter who sells her pictures to other people. This is very much significant from an existentialist point of view. As a painter is someone who conceives the world and human existence and then sells his/her version of it to others. Her exclamation that once she is able to sell her picture she will be able to buy more food, which will make Johnsy strong, is an existentialist criticism against all those philosophers and their philosophies who discourage humans from exploring options in order to realize their subjective existence. This traditional approach to human existence in the form of merely explaining the already defined and set purpose is strongly rejected when Johnsy asserts and tells Sue that she does not have to do anything for her and firmly

resolves that she does not want anything to eat from her since she has realized that external help is of no importance in solving her anguish.

The central argument of existentialism that develops at this stage is that a person plunged into this pool of anguish and despair must face responsibility courageously and must not lurk into inaction and Quietism. Anguish is the result of making decisions and does not signify that one should refrain from it; rather, it is the very condition that encourages one to be active (Sartre, 2007). However, in this moment of despair, some abstain from accepting their freedom and reject exercising the options available to them. The same is the case with Johnsy too. Once faced with an existential crisis, she succumbs to the anguish of the burden of responsibility and withdraws from the world and life, leading to her Quietism. She lies in her bed and has lost hope and interest in everything. At this stage, she lacks the will, courage, and the realization that are necessary to come out of Quietism and accept her freedom to shape her life.

The central question that arises here is why one should come out of Quietism? According to Sartre (2007), one should come out of Quietism because of Forlornness, which implies that God does not exist, and now human beings have to deal with the consequences of their existence and existential crisis on their own. In other words, there is no holy script or heaven of ideas, nor anything else in human nature to cling to. According to Hamilton (2017), the seclusion of Johnsy can be attributed to the fact that she realizes she has been side-lined in terms of space, time, and money by society. However, from existentialist perspective, this forlornness signifies that one has to come out of Quietism and exercise their freedom with courage and responsibility. In the case of Johnsy, the doctor asserts this idea when he observes the condition of Johnsy and tells her that she has a chance to live only if she wants to live. If people do not want to live, then he cannot do much for the alleviation of their condition. In her condition of Quietism, she cannot expect any help from the external world unless she herself makes a decision and accepts it with responsibility because otherwise, she has no option and no justification to hide behind.

When Johnsy succumbs to Quietism, O. Henry tries to develop an argument that the real source of meaning and identity lies inside, not outside. Therefore, the search for external guidance and help is a futile and precarious attempt. Here, Patel's

argument (2022) is that Johnsy was not mentally strong enough to make sense of objects herself. For her, the only explanation for events was their association with other objects. But in existentialist terms, this association of meaning with external objects means objective existence, which is nothing more than inauthenticity. As Sartre (2007) also asserts, human beings cannot regulate and conduct their lives in accordance with some Omen, as every person will interpret the message and meaning of that Omen in their own peculiar way. In the context of *The Last Leaf*, the term Omen could be extended to mean anything in the phenomenon of nature, the supernatural, or some divine revelation and exhibition that could be interpreted as meant for the guidance of human action. The logic is that there is no God sitting in heaven who has determined our future or who will guide our lives in deciding what is best for us.

During her moment of utter despair, Johnsy notices the tree and its falling leaves and considers this as an omen for her own decline. She associates the falling leaves with the end of her life itself and loses all hope, believing that when the last leaf falls, it will be an indication that she must also go. This interpretation of the falling leaves omen curtails her freedom and paralyzes her attempts to establish some purpose of her existence. The bottom line is that any attempt to seek help or dictation from external sources will inevitably lead the individual to surrender their freedom in return and the ability to create their own meaning of existence through their own actions.

In Johnsy's retreat from actively involving in her life, O. Henry has presented his belief about a person in action who actively utilizing his freedom and responsibly constructs his identity out of the available options. Here, he tries to highlight the dual aspect of action: that not taking an action is also an action, and not accepting your freedom is also an exercise of freedom. In this sense, individuals are nothing else but a sequence of the undertakings they take in their life, which becomes their destiny, identity, and the purpose of existence. The character of Johnsy shows that beyond this, there is no meaningful existence except lame excuses, complaints about circumstances, and attempts to find solace for our wretchedness. Johnsy falls ill and succumbs to it by making no efforts for her recovery. She has made up her mind against every kind of undertaking and wants to descend like one of those falling

leaves from the old tree. Her circumstances are harsh, but she is not free from blame since she makes no effort to come out of it. In fact, she takes action in refusing her ability to take action. It is only towards the end of the story when she realizes that she was at fault for not fighting against the circumstances. This eventual triumph of Johnsy in the face of Facticity and Situatedness shows O. Henry's firm belief that human beings have the freedom as well as the ability to achieve what they aspire to in their pursuit of creating meaning.

The world, as represented by O. Henry in *The Last Leaf*, is occupied with death and loneliness where immense courage is needed to keep oneself emotionally alive while marching towards an uncertain future in this absurd world. The illness of Johnsy and her subsequent seclusion shows that human existence is attacked by the realization of Nothingness primarily in three ways. First, it attacks our freedom of choices, which results in Bad Faith. Secondly, it affects our ability to create values in our existence due to the sense of meaninglessness. Thirdly, nothingness threatens human existence in the form of death which makes human life and all its labor and toil absurd.

However, O. Henry shows a Sartrean optimism in pessimism, and that is why he believes that a limit like death should also not restrict a person as a conscious being. This sense of utter nothingness is incorporated into the character of Johnsy too. It curtails her freedom of choices as she lies on her bed waiting for the end of her life. Her ability to see alternatives in life and improve her condition is damaged by the feeling of nothingness. She can see her life symbolized in the old tree and its falling leaves. In her bad faith, she thinks that she has no other choice because nothing can stop the last leaf from falling, and with that, she must also fall. She is completely overwhelmed by the fear of death, which has brought her existence to virtually nothingness. "Leaves, on the ivy vine. When the last one falls, I must go, too. I have known that for three days" (Henry, 1953, p. 1457). This brings her to isolation, where she turns her face away from everything else and just counts the falling leaves.

According to Akhter (2014), the character of Mr. Behrman in the same story is in line with the Jungian view that fantasy could be a vital activity as his fantasy about painting a masterpiece triggered and refined his imagination to paint his masterpiece at last. However, the painting of the last leaf by Behrman signifies that one always has

Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

Print ISSN: 3006-4716

Online ISSN: 3006-4724

<https://socialworksreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Vol. 2 No. 1 (2024)

a choice to interfere and determine one's life. It also signifies that death may be a sudden, unexpected, and absurd end to our existence, but its fear should never stop us from giving meaning to our existence through our own actions. It is only after the painting of the last leaf that Johnsy realized that "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was" (p. 1459).

Existentialism is also a form of humanism where individuals, without any prior purpose of existence, make a decision to create meaning and purpose for their existence on behalf of the whole humanity. It is the highest form of humanism because every individual is required to go beyond his personal needs, requirements, wishes, desires, etc., and care for the conditions and situations of the entire humanity. According to Akhter (2014), Behrman shows the selfless aspects of humanity where the utility of an act is viewed from its impact upon others. In other words, the best utilization of freedom is that which not only shapes your own identity but is also beneficial for other human beings as well. The character of Behrman is an embodiment of this kind of existentialism. He was a presumed painter who always talked about painting a great masterpiece someday. When he came to know about Johnsy's condition, he spent the entire rainy night painting the last leaf and eventually died of pneumonia. His attempt is a reflection of how one has to take control of one's life in order to determine its course of action while keeping in view all other human beings. The painted last leaf, a choice made by Behrman, helped Johnsy to come out of her anguish, despair, and isolation and take command of the course of her life.

Towards the end of the story, Johnsy realizes that during the struggle to turn the absurdity of existence into something meaningful, a person cannot count on anything but themselves; they have to do everything in their power to bring about the change. It echoes the Sartrean resolution that an individual is nothing more than what their plans are, and they exist only to the extent to which they try to put their plans into action. It is this realization and self-cognizance that Johnsy arrives at. The painted leaf made her realize that the real meaning of life lies in how she perceives life and then plans for it by responsibly using her freedom to actively mould her life accordingly. This new realization brings her to her self-cognizance, which has transformed her from a weak and timid being into a courageous one. Now, she is not afraid to see and face the reality of this absurd existence because she knows that it

Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

Print ISSN: 3006-4716

Online ISSN: 3006-4724

<https://socialworksreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Vol. 2 No. 1 (2024)

does not matter what our existence is; what matters is what we make of it. That is why the first thing she says after arriving at this self-cognizance is “But first bring me a looking-glass, so that I may see myself” (p. 1459).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the existentialist implications of O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* through the lens of Sartre's existentialism by tracing the development of the character of Johnsy. The story is a powerful exploration of the human condition, grappling with the absurdity of existence, the burden of responsibility, and the freedom to create one's own meaning and purpose. Through Johnsy's character, we see the consequences of succumbing to quietism and the dangers of inauthentic existence. The story highlights the importance of authenticity, responsibility, and self-cognizance in the face of existential uncertainty.

The Last Leaf serves as a poignant reminder that individuals must accept and embrace the absurdity of existence, taking ownership of their freedom and creating their own meaning in life. This analysis demonstrates the enduring relevance of existentialist philosophy in understanding human experience and the significance of *The Last Leaf* as a literary work that continues to resonate with readers today.

Furthermore, the paper reveals that *The Last Leaf* is not just a tragic tale of a timid soul and lost hope, but a powerful exploration of the human condition, encouraging readers to embrace their freedom and take responsibility for creating their own meaning in life. By examining the existentialist implications of the story, we gain a deeper understanding of the human experience and the importance of living an authentic and responsible life.

Finally, the implications of this analysis extend beyond the literary realm and offers insights into the human condition and the importance of existential awareness in everyday life. As Sartre's philosophy reminds us, human existence is characterized by freedom and responsibility, and it is up to individuals to create their own meaning and purpose in life. Through its exploration of existentialist themes, *The Last Leaf* encourages readers to embrace this freedom and responsibility, and to live a life that is authentic, meaningful, and fulfilling.

References

Alphonso, C. (1921). O. Henry biography. Doubleday & Co.

Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

Print ISSN: 3006-4716

Online ISSN: 3006-4724

<https://socialworksreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Vol. 2 No. 1 (2024)

- Akhter, S. (2014). Behind the surprised endings of O Henry's short fiction: Fantasy (Psychology) and O Henry's material reality. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 2(5), 1-10.
- Arisa, T. U. (2010). The reader responses to O. Henry selected stories: After Twenty Years, The Gift of the Magi, and The Last Leaf [Thesis]. English Letters and Language Department, The Faculty of Humanities and Culture, Andalas University Padang.
- Barnes, H. E. (1967). *An Existentialist Ethics*. Knopf.
- Crowell, S. (2011). *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crowell, S. (2020). Existentialism. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>
- Dirda, M. (2021, September 7). Review | Why O. Henry is so much more than those short stories you had to read in school. *The Washington Post*.
- Gadge, N. L. (2018). The themes of love and sacrifice in the short stories of O. Henry. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5(4), 1-10.
- Glory, J. (2019). Different dimensions of women in the short stories of O. Henry: The Skylight Room and The Last Leaf. *Think India Quarterly Journal*, 22(4), 472-476.
- Hamilton, C. (2017). The Role of Space, Money and Travel in O. Henry's New York Stories [PhD thesis]. Faculty of Humanities- Studies in Literature, The University of Texas at Dallas.
- Henry, O. (1953). *The Complete Works of O. Henry*. Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Khawaja, N. (2016). *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ostrosky, M. (1982). O. Henry's Use of Stereotypes in His New York City Stories: An Example of the Utilization of Folklore in Literature [Master's thesis]. Western Kentucky University.
- Palitsky, R., Schmitt, H., Sullivan, D., & Young, I. F. (2021). An Existential Analysis of Responsis to the 2020 Coronavirus Outbreak. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 61(2).

Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

Print ISSN: 3006-4716

Online ISSN: 3006-4724

<https://socialworksreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Vol. 2 No. 1 (2024)

- Patel, B. R. (2015). O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*: A psychoanalytical study of internal vs external nature. *International Online E-Journal*, 7(13), 1-10.
- Reynolds, J. (2022). Existentialism. In *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology* (pp. 1-10). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Sartre, J. (2007). Existentialism Is a Humanism. (A. Elkaïm-Sartre & A. Cohen-Solal, Eds.) (Annotated ed.). New York.
- Thapliyal, K., & Chelliah, S. (2016). O. Henry: Work of outstanding artistry in the story *The Last Leaf*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 4(2), 244-247.
- Vildanova, E. M., Bilyalova, A. A., & Shakirova, R. D. (2020). Method of foregrounding in O. Henry's short stories. Naberezhnye Chelny Institute of Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University.
- Warnock, M. (1970). *Existentialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Webber, J. (2018). *Rethinking Existentialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhang, L. (2018). A comparative study of death and human consciousness reflected by small characters in *Gui Zi* and O. Henry's works. *7th International Workshop on Arts, Culture, Literature, and Education*, Francis Academic Press, UK