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The Stylistic Analysis of the Short Story “The Last Leaf” By O. Henry

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ANNOTATION

This thesis studies the analysis of syntactic stylistic means in the short story of “The Last Leaf” by American writer O. Henry.

KEYWORDS: Stylistic analysis, irony, surprise ending, epithet, metaphor, periphrasis, personification, repetition, simile, oxymoron, zeugma, antonomasia, hyperbole.

Introduction. We tried to analyze the story which is titled “The Last Leaf” by American short story writer William Sydney Porter (1862-1910) who wrote all of his stories by pen name O. Henry. “*O. Henry was the master of surprise endings. He loved twists that are privy to only the omniscient third-person narrator.*”¹ He is considered the literary master of surprise ending. Almost in all of his short stories we may come across with the author’s use of plot twist. By reading the stories of O. Henry one may feel the inner feelings and the psychology of the characters profoundly. His stories make the readers think and conclude deeply. His writing style is very simple and comprehensible for each reader, because O. Henry in most cases uses American slang and colloquial language expressions in his stories. He did not address only to the wealthy layer of the society, but lightened the life of the people who were in a poor condition. He wrote about the waiters, artists, engineers, even thieves. The main characteristics of his literary work is the usage of surprise ending in his short stories. His stories are famous for its twist endings all over the world. While you reading the stories you begin to predict the end of that story, but at the end you will be shocked reading the last lines. Sometimes it seems that, you missed some important part of the story. The events in the story “The Last Leaf” are set in Washington.

The themes of the story are hope, faith in life, friendship and the human willpower. There are two main key points in this story. The first one is a sick Johnsy’s belief that the last leaf of the ivy vine is the symbol of her impending death, and the second main detail of the story is an old Behrman’s belief that he will produce his

¹ <https://in.mashable.com/culture/6664/remembering-o-henry-master-of-surprise-endings-and-og-teller-of-tiny-tales#:~:text=to%20you%20straight-,O.,full%20effect%20is%20seldom%20lost>

masterpiece one day during his life and it turned out that the belief of Johnsy which he considered ridiculous gave him an opportunity to paint his masterpiece.

Analysis. When it comes to stylistic analysis of a literary work, first of all, we should possess opinion about stylistics itself. What is stylistics and what is stylistic analysis? *Stylistics, a branch of applied linguistics, is the study and interpretation of texts of all types and/or spoken language in regard to their linguistic and tonal style, where style is the particular variety of language used by different individuals and/or in different situations or settings.*² Stylistic analysis focuses on the stylistic uniqueness of the text, how literary information is conveyed through language elements, and the functionality of the used stylistic tools. *Stylistics is instrumental in generating sensitivity in students by analyzing feature of a text. Stylistics is available to a writer that is concerned with choices and reasons why a particular form and expression is used. It is concerned with the study of language of literature and basically with the style and study of language of literary works. Stylistic analysis is a part of literature in which understanding the possible meaning in a text and reveal the good qualities of writing.*³

There are two most important aims of stylistic analysis: firstly, it aids readers in comprehending the text and second one is, in general, enlarge the understanding and recognitions of the language. In most cases these aims are beneficial for students to read and study literature with perfect language practices. When it comes to the literary studies, stylistic analysis is typically done for the intention of analyzing quality and meaning of a literary text. The study of stylistics helps researchers investigate the hidden meanings in a literary text. There are diverse tools of stylistic analysis to analyze the literary works. These stylistic tools can be used in teaching field and also in language classrooms. Style itself is the presentation or expression of thoughts in a particular way. Every person has own style to express his thoughts through the use of language. O. Henry's writing style and his language are simple to the readers. Mostly he used colloquial expressions and American slang in his short stories to describe his characters more believable. The reason that, O. Henry is considered to be a great master of irony and humour. The endings of his all stories are always confusing, twisted, unexpected, and surprising. Stylistic devices refer to **any of a variety of techniques to give an additional and/or supplemental meaning, idea, or feeling**. Also known as figures of speech or rhetorical devices, the goal of these techniques is to create imagery, emphasis, or clarity within a text in hopes of engaging the reader.⁴ Having read the story we can easily understand how this story is full of stylistic devices. Analyzing the story we have found that the author had a colorful and vivid language of writing. In order to help the readers to reveal characters' nature and imagine the atmosphere and mood of the story O. Henry brilliantly used stylistic devices such as: epithets, similes, metaphors, interjections. The type of speech in this story are narration and dialogues.

The story begins with the narrators description of the city, its streets: *“In a little district west of Washington Square the streets have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called “places.”. “Mr. Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman.” (p:142).* We know that the personification is giving human attributes to the things, ideas and thoughts and can easily understand that the author used **personification** in order to show the state of the city and street. Pneumonia we know as a serious disease which Johnsy falls sick with and an old Behrman dies of.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stylistics>

³ <https://xournals.com/journal/stylistics-study-in-literature-and-language>

⁴ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/stylistic-devices-definition-examples.html#:~:text=Stylistic%20devices%20refer%20to%20any,hopes%20of%20engaging%20the%20reader.>

Epithets express the quality of the person or the thing. We can come across the wide use of epithets in this story. For instance: *a fierce little old man, a horrid old – old flibbertigibbet, the lone ivy leaf, a confounded vine, silly ivy leaves, skeleton branches, an old, old ivy vine.*

We have found the only **oxymoron** in this story “*magnificent scorn*”. **Simile** is comparing two different things with the help of “like” or “as” in order to describe: “*lying white and still as a fallen statue*”, “*go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves*”, “*light and fragile as a leaf herself*”. By these similes the writer tried to indicate Johnsy’s inner feelings and state. “*She is very ill and weak,*” said Sue, “*and the fever has left her mind morbid and full of strange fancies.*”- in this example, as we see, three sentences are connected with the help of conjunction “and”. “*Didn't you wonder why it never fluttered or moved when the wind blew?*”, “*What would I do?*”, “*Who said I will not bese?*”, “*What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well?*”, “*Paint? - bosh!*”- these **rhetorical questions** expresses the characters’ emotional feelings. “*Behrman, his name is - some kind of an artist, I believe.*”, - in this sentence as we understood **ellipsis** – the omission of a word did not effect the meaning of a sentence. Also there are **metaphors** such as: “*The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves*” and “*An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall.*”. In Behrman – old, german artist’s speech we may find some german expressions: “*is dere*”, “*mit*”, “*bose*”, “*der*”, “*vill*”, “*vy*”. Besides we analyzed some **interjections** in his speech: “*Vass!*”, “*Ach!*”, “*Gott!*”.

The author used **hyperbolic metaphor** in order to make that word more emphatic. For instance: “*The loneliest thing in all the world is a soul*”. **Zeugma** is a stylistic device which a word applies to two other words in different senses. In the story we have found such zeugma: “*found their tastes in art, chicory salad and bishop sleeves so congenial that the joint studio resulted*”. In the story the fate of the artists are changed. An old Behrman fell ill because of painting of an ivy vine leaf to give hope to live to Johnsy. The writer used situational irony in this part.

In conclusion, in the analysis of the story we can say that the great short story writer O. Henry excellently using metaphors, epithets, symbols with his surprise endings artfully reveals the crucial idea of the story and impresses the reader to make his optimistic conclusion.

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