

Stylistic Features of The Last Leaf

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Abstract: This essay displays several writing techniques that O’Henry used in his *The Last Leaf* to enhance the theme, to make the story touching, and the characters lifelike. With these special stylistic features, the two threads run through the whole story—love and hope, by which Johnsy resumed her desire to live.

Keywords: Writing skills; Stylistic features; Love and hope

1. Introduction

A poor woman painter, attacked by a serious illness, pneumonia, got to know that her hope of getting well was slim. She imagined herself as a leaf on the ivy vine outside of the window. Light and fragile as a leaf herself, the woman painter thought, when the last leaf floated away, she would die then. Nevertheless, the last leaf clung tightly to its stem against the wall in spite of the cold rain and gust of wind. Encouraged by this ivy leaf, the woman painter recovered eventually. As a matter of fact, it was another old man who painted a false leaf on the wall at that night when the last leaf fell. This poor old painter caught a cold as a result, got pneumonia and died. This is *The Last Leaf*, one of the most famous short stories by O’Henry.

2. The Theme of the Story

There are three main Characters involved in the story: Johnsy, an illness-tortured painter; Sue, another painter and her partner; Old Behrman, the two girls’ neighbor downstairs. And the plot is very simple and easy to understand.

In order to comfort Johnsy, make Johnsy to grasp her hope, Behrman died, so unselfishly lost his life. So great, so incomparable is Behrman’s love towards the two girls. Behrman was a failure in art, leading a miserable life. Can you imagine what failure means to an artist? But he served as a model to those young artists who could not pay the price of a profession. Seemingly as a fierce little old man, Behrman was very kind and helpful to the girls. Johnsy and Sue became friends after they found their tastes in art. They shared the studio, helped each other like sisters. Even though she was in great sorrow, because the doctor said the chances for Johnsy’s recovery from pneumonia was one to ten. Sue, like an elder sister, behaving bravely, loved Johnsy, comforted Johnsy and looked after Johnsy. Among these poor art people, despite the adverse circumstances and poor living conditions, exists a kind of priceless love. With this priceless love, life is more meaningful. So this is one point the story reveals to us. Another point is Johnsy’s hope for life. Johnsy thought of the falling leaves as her life, when the last leaf fell, she must go, too. The doctor also assumed Johnsy’s only chance was the hope to live. Johnsy placed her hope on ivy leaves. As long as the leaves did not flutter to the ground, her hope would maintain. Therefore, with the leaves falling, the hope became weaker and her health became worse. But when she found the last leaf still remained there enduring the cold rain and wind, Johnsy’s hope for life was flared again. Then resulted in her recovery.

Behind the story, O’ Henry reveals us a real picture of American capitalist society. Under such cruel, unfortunate situation, the poor people did not give up their desire for life, trying every means to make a living. With oppression and exploitation from the capitalist class, the poor people never lost their hope. They united as one and helped each other, loved each other. Without love, without hope, life is colorless. ^[1]

3. Stylistic Features

Johnsy resumed her desire to live because of the love and hope. Meanwhile, the two threads run through the whole story. In order to deepen the theme, O’Henry, however, uses his own special way to make the story vivid and touching. He shows his ingenuity in

three aspects: story inventing, descriptive details and rhetoric.

As we all know, a novel usually consists of setting, participants, events, conclusions and evaluations. So O'Henry spends efforts on conclusion part, especially on the invention of a surprising ending. When a reader supposes that he has got the conclusion with the development of story, most probably, it is beyond his expectation. When it comes to the ending, the story turns to another way round, making readers amazed and surprised. That is because O'Henry arranges the important plot till the end of the story without explaining it in the previous events. It is not surprising that readers guess Johnsy will die in the end. However, the ending is opposite to their prediction. Johnsy recovered, while Behrman died. But thinking it over, we find this ending is within our reasoning. Short as it is, the story is impressive, with the standard language and understandable expression. This is one characteristic O'Henry shows in his skill of inventing stories.

The second feature is in the descriptive details. In the story, there are two places describing ivy leaves in detail, first in paragraph 18 (part I), and second in paragraph 11 (part II). "... gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed halfway up the brick wall ...", "... its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks ...", "... there yet stood out against ... one ivy leaf ..., it hung bravely ...", these vivid descriptions display ivy leaves' indomitable vitality. In the first two paragraphs (part I), O'Henry pictures a poor, shabby, narrow, moss-grown environment. Under such cruel environment are living the poor art people, hard but bravely. Moreover, there is a detailed account for Behrman in first paragraph of part II. Behrman seems very rude and unkind, but he is careful, considerate actually. He regards himself as a 'watchdog' for the two girls. So this paves the way to his self-sacrifice in the ending. With these descriptions, the love between Behrman and two girls as well as the love between Johnsy and Sue is clearly presented. Johnsy's hope for life is conveyed by the description of ivy leaves, too.

The third feature, also the most striking one is the usage of figurative speech. O'Henry did not express the theme directly, but reflected it with the help of symbol. The ivy leaves symbolize the life—unyielding and immortal. Pneumonia, in the meantime, represents an attack against life. Johnsy is weak herself, but together with pneumonia and the cold rain, snow, gust of wind, which constituting severe threat to life, she is too delicate to stand a blow. But life is that. The weaker you are, the easier you are to suffer. Just because there was still hope existing in Johnsy's mind, otherwise, she could not escape this adversity. We can find the situation is so cruel, so cold for the middle-class and lower-class people, but yet they have displayed strong willpower in front of setbacks. In this way, the story is more touching.

Besides symbolic usage, the whole story is mixed with personification, simile, metaphor. This can be easily identified in paragraph 4 and 5 (part I). When describing how pneumonia is smiting his victims, personification and metaphor are used. The same as can be seen in paragraph 14 (part II). In paragraph 2 (part II) appears the simile. When describing the ivy leaves, personification is also put to use. With the use of the figurative speech, these non-alive things are displayed more vividly and sharply. The vague image becomes more distinct in readers' mind.

Another is the usage of euphemism. Instead of expressing Johnsy's death directly, there come the expressions like "go", "float away", "drop off", "go on its far journey", etc, showing their reluctance to accept the fact.^[2]

4. Conclusion

These are the writing techniques that O'Henry used to enhance the theme, to make the story moving, and the characters lifelike. Behrman died but he succeeded. He achieved nothing before his death, yet he produced a masterpiece after that. In comparison, O'Henry, however, created us a permanent literary work.

References:

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[2] Huang Ren. *English Rhetoric and Writing*. Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Publisher, 2012.