Deciphering The Last Leaf: A Barthesian Approach to O. Henry's Short Story

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Abstract

Structuralism is a critical approach that seeks to uncover the underlying systems and structures that shape human perception, particularly through language, literature, and culture. Within this framework, Roland Barthes introduced the theory of five narrative codes, which he argued are embedded in all literary texts. These codes the Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, and Cultural work together to create meaning and engage the reader. Although many scholars have applied Barthes' narrative theory to various literary works, there remains a noticeable gap in research focusing specifically on the application of these five codes to O. Henry's renowned short story The Last Leaf. This study addresses that gap by employing Catherine Belsey's method of textual analysis to qualitatively examine the presence and function of Barthes' narrative codes in The Last Leaf. The analysis reveals that O. Henry's narrative skillfully incorporates all five of Barthes' codes. The Hermeneutic code generates suspense and curiosity, while the Proairetic code drives the action forward. These interwoven codes not only enhance the thematic complexity of the story but also intensify the reader's engagement. By highlighting how Barthes' codes function within The Last Leaf, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of structuralist analysis in literary interpretation and affirms the enduring relevance of Barthes' theory in understanding narrative structure and meaning.

Keywords:

Structuralism; Roland Barthes Five Narrative Codes; The Last Leaf; Narrative Structure; O. Henry.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literary theory is defined as a set of concepts and methods used to interpret literary works. According to Brewton (2005) it is a collection of ideas that are utilized in the practical reading of literature. It provides tools for understanding and looking into the realm of literature. Literary work is not neutral but a realistic expression of ideology and hidden agendas (Zi, 2000). Literary theory plays its role in unveiling these hidden ideologies and themes woven in a text. There is a wide range of literary theories providing different ranges to analyze a text, including Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, Post Structuralism, Feminism, Marxism and Psychoanalytical theory. Structuralism is a literary theory which emphasizes analyzing basic structures of a text to find meanings. Tyson (2006) defined structuralism as a systematic human science which studies fundamental structures underlying in all human experiences and behaviors. Every text is comprised of linguistics elements which play their function in conveying meanings. In literary theory, structuralism focuses on the text and uses textual aspects to explain meaning, ignoring the author's life and environment (Amin, Rasul, & Hamakarim, 2023).

Roland Barthes is a French theorist renowned for his work on philosophy, linguistics and Structuralism. He identified five codes while analyzing Balzac's story 'Sarrasine', the codes are hermeneutic code, proairetic code, semantic code, symbolic code and cultural code. These codes define a network that creates a space of meaning through which the text flows (Malik, Zaib, & Bughio, 2014, p. 242). However, many researchers applied this theory to different texts but there is no research available on application of this theory on *The Last Leaf*. This research aims to explore the application of Barthes five codes in The *Last Leaf* by O. Henry to see how far the theory can be used to uncover narrative structures within the text. The following section will introduce the research by discussing its background, followed by the problem statement, aim, research questions and objective, the significance and the limitations.

1.1. Background of the Study:

Structuralism is defined as an "intellectual movement" which roots lies in anthropology. The concept of structuralism originated with the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in France in the 1950s, when he described the basic structures of human society. This movement revolved around the idea that things need to be considered in the context of the larger structures of which they are part of. A renowned French literary critic, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) is known as a Structural theorist. As a cultural anthropologist he examined the modern French culture and wrote his book *Mythologies*. He rejected the traditional way of interpreting a literary text. He claims that "a text (narrative) is a galaxy of signifiers which can produce multiple meanings by the participation of the reader in a meaning producing phenomenon (Barthes 1974).

1.2 Problem Statement:

A text is a complex structure containing hidden ideologies and deep meanings which can lead readers to miss subtle perspectives and underlying narratives while reading a text. *The Last Leaf* contains a complex underlying narrative structure and deep meaning. Despite this, there is no research available on the application of Barthes' five narrative codes on *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry. Therefore, this study aims to apply five narrative codes on O. Henry *The Last Leaf* to find their presence and function within the text.

1.3 Aim:

The research aims to explore the application of Roland Barthes' five narrative codes in the short story *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry.

1.4 **Research Gap:**

There is inadequate research available on the application of Barthes' five narrative codes on *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry.

1.5 **Research Questions:**

1. How are Roland Barthes' five narrative codes exhibited in *The Last Leaf?*
2. How do Roland Barthes' five narrative codes help to create meaning in *The Last Leaf*??

1.6 **Research Objectives:**

1. To explore how Roland Barthes' five narrative codes are applicable in *The Last Leaf.*
2. To examine how Roland Barthes' five narrative codes function in creating meaning in *The Last Leaf*.

1.7 **Significance:**

The current findings of this study are an addition to literary discourse. These findings can be used to analyze different texts by applying these five narrative codes in a systematic way. Furthermore, in the light of these findings and analysis readers can interpret many perspectives from *The Last Leaf*. These findings provide a fresh lens to examine the narrative structure, revealing insights hidden in the depths of the story.

1.8 **Limitation:**

This research is only limited to O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*, which restricts the generalizability of findings to O. Henry's other works. The five narrative codes provide a space for interpretation, making the analysis subjective in nature and open to alternative readings. Furthermore, the study does not include psychological or feminist perspectives, which could provide a deeper understanding of this text. Practical constraints, including time and scope, also limit a more comprehensive analysis.

1.9 **Structural Outline:**

In Chapter one, there is an introduction of the study. The aim, research questions, research objectives, and gap have been identified, and the significance of this study discussed. The limitation of this research is also argued.

In Chapter two, previous works have been reviewed to overview the work of scholars on Structuralism and application of Barthes' five narrative codes on different literary works.

In chapter three, a detailed view on methodology has been provided. Textual analysis along with qualitative approach has been used in this study. Furthermore, five codes of Roland Barthes have been applied step by step in the selected text. In the chapter, theoretical framework also has been discussed, which helps in exploring main aspects of Roland Barthes theory

In chapter four, a detailed analysis of the selected text has been done. The discussion has been made on the analysis to further explain the presence and function of the five narrative codes.

In chapter five, the conclusion of the whole study is given.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Structuralism" became popular in early years of 1930s by the works of Roman Jakobson (Robey, 1976). According to Robey (1976) the other colleagues of Roman Jakobson from Prague Linguistic Circle including Mukarovsky also play their role in the development of structuralism. They worked on

uncovering different methods for understanding the structure of texts. These texts are almost literary in nature, but the methods and ways they introduced can also be used to analyze any type of text.

Runciman (1969) stated that scholars wrote many definitions of structuralism which make it impossible to stick with any specific definition. He defined structuralism as a way to analyze and understand social patterns, myths and language patterns within society. Hawkes (1977) described it as the concept of 'structure' within a language and the contributions made by various structuralists.

Taghizadeh (2013) applied structuralism to Henry James' works and stated that prose literature can be effectively analyzed through the theoretical framework of structuralism. Based on Roland Barthes' structural activity,' Taghizadeh explored the text's underlying structure, highlighting the distinction between 'text' and 'work.' He described 'text' facilitates open-ended signification, whereas 'work' conveys the author's intentional messages to the reader, with fictional characters serving as 'participants' in this dynamic. Furthermore, he justified his focus on Henry James by highlighting the author's unique qualities presented in his work.

Zaib and Mashori (2014) analyzed *A Pair of Jeans* written by Qaisra Shahraz by applying Barthes' five narrative codes. They found enigma in the title, hidden meanings in Mariam's clothes and cultural references throughout the text. They concluded by making clear that all the five codes are utilized in the text.

Ummah, Eripuddin, and Rahayu (2020) analyzed the moral values in O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* using a sociological theory given by Mooney, Knox, and Schacht (2007). Their analysis identified the key aspects of morality, including kindness, fairness, tolerance, honesty, belief and responsibility. Using sociological perspectives such as functionalism, symbolism, and conflict theory, the study shows how these values are infused into the narrative, emphasizing the morality and societal sacrifice in the text.

Akbar et al. (2021) analyzed Zaibunnisa Hamidullah's *The Bull and the She Devil* by utilizing Barthes' five narrative codes, uncovering the complex use of suspense, symbolism, and cultural references in the text. The study confirms the presence of all five codes, and their function in *The Bull and the She Devil* and confirming the application of Barthes' theory to Pakistani literature.

Roland Barthes' five narrative codes have been widely used to analyze narrative structures of any text (Ali, Iqbal, & Ajmal, 2022). In their study of Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone*, Ali et al. (2022) demonstrated how these codes dominate the novel, mostly enigma and action code driving its action and suspense. The cultural code is reflected through language, while the semantic code is minimally utilized.

Aisha and Hikmat (2024) analyzed The Last by employing Romanticism theory by Wordsworth to navigate the themes of hope and sacrifice. The research shows how emotions, nature connectivity and other romanticism ideals are reflected in the story. It sheds light on Behrman's self-sacrifice through art as a gesture of hope, embodying Romanticism's spirit of human emotion transcending despair. The article concludes that *The Last Leaf* symbolizes the human tendency for kindness and creativity while aligning with Wordsworth's notion of nature as a moral and emotional guide.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The textual analysis employs in this study for discussion on *The Last Leaf*. Textual analysis is a method used for interpretation by focusing on a text. This method will help in analyzing different codes present in the selected text. Catherine Belsey describes the use of textual analysis as a way for interpreting literary texts (Almas, 2022). Along with this, qualitative research design is used to analyze the text. Qualitative research is carried out without prioritizing numerical values, instead it emphasizes a deep comprehension of the interaction between the concepts being examined. (Semi, 2012). The study is followed by literary analysis shown in Barthes's book S/Z published in 1970. In his book, he performed

a step-by-step analysis to examine Balzac's story Sarrasine. This study will apply five narrative codes step by step on the text to identify their presence and function within the story. The text of the story is taken from O. Henry's short stories collection, *The trimmed lamp,* available on the internet.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research is taken from the Roland Barthes theory of five narrative codes. He describes these codes in S/Z as "a mirage of structures … the sign of virtual digression… one of the voices that can take over the text … one of the voices out of which the text is woven" (20-21). He asserted that all the texts have at least one of these codes. He argues that all narratives contain one or more of the five codes that serve as the story's "weaving of voice" (20). According to Barry (2002), these codes form the fundamental framework for all narratives.

3.1.1 The Hermeneutic Code

The Hermeneutic code shows the puzzles, mysteries and unexplained narratives within a text. Selden, Widdowson & Brooker (2005) called the hermeneutic code as the Enigma code, this code raises the readers' curiosity, and they raise different questions to unveil the hidden details in a story.

Barthes explained the terms, mystery, puzzles and suspense as: "snare", "equivocation", "jamming" and "suspended answers". These hidden elements are sometime answered in text and sometimes they remain unanswered. The readers used their mental abilities to find answers to these unexplained questions in a story (Felluga, 2014).

3.1.2 The Proairetic Code

The first code of Barthesian theory identified by Eagleton (2011) as "narrative code" The Proairetic code. This Code is also called the Action code, it shows the sequence of action throughout the plot. A plot is a sequence of different events arranged in chronological order. The elements of action engage readers into a text by creating suspense in the plot. Every action of suspense raises the curiosity that what is coming next. This code helps in understanding the conflicts and contradictions which proceed in raising the major events in the text.

3.1.3 The Semantic Code

The third component of Barthes theory is the Semantic Code, also known as the Connotative Code by Barry (2002). The elements of a text that give additional meaning rather than sentence meaning are lie under this code. Every text is coated with many layers of meaning and this code helps in uncovering these layers of meaning in a text. The hidden meanings are also sometimes aligned with the themes of the story (Barry, 2002 & Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005). According to Zaib and Mashori (2014) the semantic code is essential for interpreting the narrative.

3.1.4 The Symbolic Code

The fourth code of the Barthes theory which is also labelled as antithetical code is Symbolic Code. This code is like semantic code, but it performs more complex functions. This code identified the symbols within the text and aligned them with the narrative to find meanings in these symbols. As its close resemblance with semantic code, sometimes it is difficult for readers to tell the difference. According to Felluga (2014), this ambiguity is a failure on Barthes part to distinguish two.

3.1.5 The Cultural Code

The Cultural Code is used to interpret cultural elements in the narrative. This code is recognized as referential code as it pertains to culture, language usage, and shared knowledge within a story. The readers can get a wide range of physical, psychological, medical, literary and historical knowledge

by identifying these codes in a story. A close analysis of this code helps readers to get multiple meanings out of a text.

4. ANALYSIS

The first code is **the Hermeneutic/Enigma code**. This code refers to the mystery inherent in a text. Clues are dropped, but no definitive answers are provided. The audience is intrigued by the narrative's enigmas. Unanswered enigmas frustrate the audience. In *The Last Leaf,* this code is used twice. First, in these lines at the start of the story:

 "Toward winter, a cold stranger entered Greenwich Village. No one could see him. He walked around touching one person here and another there with his icy fingers. He was a bad sickness."

It was a mystery that who is this invisible stranger with icy fingers until the writer said that it is *Pneumonia* (the disease); otherwise, it is considered as maybe some person from a reader's perspective. Secondly, in the last:

"The day slowly passed. As it grew dark, they could still see the leaf hanging from its branch against the wall. And then, as the night came, the north wind began again to blow. The rain still beat against the windows. When it was light enough the next morning, Johnsy again commanded that she be allowed to see. The leaf was still there."

In these lines, there is another mystery that how does the leaf survive as it is near to end? But at the end, the writer described that this leaf was painted by Behrman to save the life of Johnsy.

The second code is **the Proairetic/Action code**. This code includes sequential aspects of action in the text. Proairetic components create anticipation in the text. The first suspense/action that Doctor describes in the story:

 "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?"

 It refers to an action that she doesn't want to live, or something is troubling her, and in the following lines, when Sue asked Johnsy what is the reason which caused her to leave hope in life? And the writer described the situation in these lines.

"Sue looked out the window. What was there to count? There was only the sidewall of the next house, a short distance away. The wall had no window. An old, old tree grew against the wall. The cold breath of winter had already touched it. Almost all its leaves had fallen from its dark branches.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Johnsy, in a voice still lower. "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."

"Five what, dear? Tell your Sue."

"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?"

"Oh, I never heard of such a thing," said Sue. "It doesn't have any sense in it. What does an old tree have to do with you? Or with your getting well? And you used to love that tree so much. Don't be a little fool."

In these lines, there is a sequence of action and suspense that what is the relation of falling leaves with the life of Johnsy? This gives a hint for the next twist in the plot of the story, and it builds rising action in the story.

The third code is **Semantic code**. This code refers to sections of the text that indicate extra meanings. Semes are the semantic code's constituent elements. The seme plays a connotative role in the text. It has an additional layer of meaning beyond its plain definition. In this line,

"*And then I'll go back to work. And then I can sell my picture, and then I can buy something more for you to eat to make you strong*."

This line contains a layer of hidden meaning which refers to poverty. Sue and Johnsy both lived in the same room, and they sold their paintings to earn money and get food to eat. Simply these lines stated that due to poverty, Sue doesn't have enough money to buy something healthy for Johnsy. In another line:

Is there anything worth being troubled about? A man?

Doctor asked from Sue about anything which troubles Johnsy like being in any close relationship with a man. This line shows the mental and physical torture on a woman during relationships with a man. In a male dominant society, a woman suffered both mentally and physically from a man which leads to a significant decrease in her health. This line also reflects the infidelity of men in relationships as they are not loyal to women most of the time. The ignorance, infidelity or harsh behavior of a man toward a woman can hurt her.

The fourth code is **Symbolic code**. This code indicates symbols from a text. It employs opposites to demonstrate difference and produce deeper meaning, creating tension, drama, and character development. There are two symbolic codes in *The Last Leaf*; the first is Vine leaves, and the other is Soup. The vine leaves that circle throughout the story are a *symbol of life.*

"*Leaves (vine 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?*"

At the start of the novel, Johnsy sees the quickly falling leaves as foreboding signs of her death, and she grows to believe that she will die when the last leaf falls. When the last leaf remains attached despite violent gusts and heavy rain, Johnsy sees it as a sign that she should enjoy her life, because wanting to die is wicked. Finally, the loss of the vine leaves is metaphorically linked to a loss of life, but Behrman, not Johnsy, dies after painting the final leaf.

Soup is the second symbolic code in the story. Sue provides Johnsy soup as a symbol of health. Though Johnsy initially refuses to sip the soup, she eventually requests that Sue bring her some later in the story. With these pleas, Johnsy has moved over to Sue's side and will now commit to overcoming her disease. The painted leaf also symbolizes the hope of Johnsy, the masterpiece and the sacrifice of Behrman. The symbolic code also refers to the binary oppositions in a text. In this story there is many examples of binary oppositions including life, death, day, night, sickness and health.

The fifth code is **the Referential/Cultural code.** This code refers to everything in the text that relates to an external body of scientific, historical, and cultural knowledge. There is a Cultural code in this story:

"*Sue, someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples.*"

This line refers to the Gulf of Naples, also known as the Bay of Naples, which is about 15 kilometers wide and located on Italy's southern coast. It flows westward into the Mediterranean Sea. This line also refers to the interest of painters of that time, or maybe Bay of Naples was the most challenging painting

to paint. The setting of the story is in "*Greenwich Village*", which is famous for artistic expressions. It is one of New York's most lively areas.

5. CONCLUSION

On the concluding note, it is stated that this study demonstrates the application of Barthes' five narrative codes within O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*. By utilizing textual analysis as a research methodology, the study has done a step-by-step analysis of the text to find the presence and the function of five narrative codes in the story. This research reveals how these codes function to weave a complex narrative and create layers of meaning that enhance the story's emotional depth. The Hermeneutic code builds the reader's curiosity through enigmas, while the Proairetic code runs the plot with suspense and action. The Semantic and Symbolic codes uncover deeper connotations and contrasts in the narrative with symbols like the vine leaves and soup. Lastly, the Cultural code situates the story within broader historical and artistic contexts, connecting the narrative to external realities of the world. The Application of Barthes' theoretical framework on *The Last Leaf* highlights how the text transcends its surface simplicity to engage readers on multiple levels of meaning. It shows the interplay between text and reader, inviting multiple interpretations that make the story both timeless and universal. This study not only proves Barthes' claim about the universality of narrative codes but also validates their relevance in analyzing classic literary works.

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