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Exploring Binary oppositions in O. Henry's "The Last Leaf": A Structuralist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of binary opposition in O. Henry's "The Last Leaf" through the structuralist framework. The researcher aims to identify the binary opposition within the text and its collaboration in character development and their roles in structuring the story. By applying Claude Levi Strauss's model of binary opposition, this research explores how the contrasting elements like life and death, hope and despair, illness and health played a vital role in creating the meaning within the text. The research argues that these opposition not only drives the plot but also reinforces the broader thematic progression in the story. Through this analysis, the research highlights the significance of binary opposition in literary discourse and how it develops the reader's interpretation. It also reinforces how meaning is created through oppositional relationship in literary texts.



Introduction

With the emergence of structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s, our way of studying a piece of literature changed awfully and focus was shifted from the author to structure of the text. Structuralism is a critical theory that focuses on the structure of the text to uncover the hidden meanings in a text, offering a valuable research framework for analyzing O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf". As per structuralism, the meaning of a text cannot be understood in isolation and the true meaning is unfolded when we read it in a larger context and understand their relationships with other elements (Sanusi, 2012). For structuralists, text is a linguistic construct and by understanding the structure of that construct the true meaning is brought to light. Ferdinand de

Saussure gave the concept of signifier and signified associated with the sign, language and parole, syntagmatic and paradigmatic meaning, and study through diachrony and synchrony. These are a few aspects that can be kept in mind to understand the text wisely.

Another concept of binary opposition which is central to structuralism was given by Claude Lévi-Strauss which is the central framework of this research. Binary opposition is actually a pair of two opposite words and human understanding is shaped through this concept of opposition. According to Saussure, human mind comprehend the meaning of a word by understanding the relationship and distinction between opposite elements (Putri and Sarwoto, 2015). Binary opposition plays an important role in the underlying meaning of this short story and by understanding these oppositions the true meaning could be brought to light. Searle in Madison (1993) gives the importance of binary opposition and conveyed that a deconstructionist should first and foremost find the binary oppositions that have been constructed in western intellectual history. Searle in Madison (1993) explains binary opposite (light /darkness) where the left hand word or element is dominant on the right one. People understand a word because mainly they understand the opposite of that word (Fromkin 2003). So if we take this as ground, it means that is quite hard to understand the meaning without understanding the opposite of that word. For structuralist the binary opposite is universal and embedded in human mind from primitive thinking in human mind (Levi-Strauss is Berthens, 2001). Getting the binary oppositions in “The Last Leaf”, we could unfold the deepest concept being conveyed in the story. It is because our knowledge about the things depends on our knowledge about what we know in opposition to them (Caddon, 1999). Ghazali in one of his writing exclaimed that if we had not known about darkness and devil, we would not have been aware of the light (Ghazali, 2001).

O. Henry, the pen name of William Sydney Porter, remains one of the most celebrated short story writer in American literature. Henry lived a life filled with adventure, controversy and hardship and was convicted to prison in 1898 due to embezzlement and was sentenced to 5 years prison. He wrote over 381 short stories during his lifetime. Some of his famous short stories *The Gift of Magi*, *The Last Leaf*, *The furnished room*, *The cop and the anthem* etc earned him a worldwide success. His works are known for irony, metaphor, surprise ending, humorous language, slang, metonymy and is master in using paronomasia (Gulmira Kaljanovna, n.d.). His writing style also possesses *Tearful smile* as evident in *The Gift of Magi*. Both husband and wife sacrifice their most precious thing in life for the other and in the end those gifts become useless but they still go on with a happy life as they both possess the most precious gift which is love for the other half (Tong, 2016). The readers are not sure to smile or cry at the end of the story which shows the inclusion of *tearful smile* in Henry's stories. Luo Ling considers O. Henry master of surprise ending, writing about the life of common people in New York city showing the life of poor people criticizing American government having a sympathetic corner for the poor and having enmity for the rich (Ling, 2016). By examining O. Henry's distinct narrative techniques and thematic concerns, this study applies Claude Lévi-Strauss's binary opposition model to “*The Last Leaf*” offering a structural interpretation of the story's deeper meanings.

Research Objectives

This research aims to identify the binary opposition present in O. Henry's “*The Last Leaf*” through structural lens. It examines how these binaries shape the narrative and play a vital role in character development, shaping story depth and thematic progression. Furthermore, it aligns with structuralism principle that how contrasting element in the story contributes to the text's overall

interpretation. By analyzing these elements, this research critiques how structuralism helps in understanding literary meaning and narrative construction.

Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the key binary opposition present in “The Last Leaf” by O. Henry by analyzing their roles in structuring the narratives. It also aims to investigate how these binaries shape the character development and influence the action within the story. Additionally, this research examines how the use of binary opposition aligns with the principle of structuralism in creating meaning within the text.

Significance

This research is significant as it contributes in understanding the short story “The Last Leaf” through a structural lens focusing primarily on the role of binary opposition in constructing the meaning within the text. By analyzing the oppositional structure such as life vs death, hope vs despair, illness vs health, it helps in understanding the story’s complexity. This research also expands the scope of existing literary analyses that can be found on this short story and discusses it in a new paradigm showing universal human struggle and emotions. It highlights how these oppositions mirrors social and cultural attitude of the time, offering an insight to human condition and societal values.

Literature Review

O. Henry’s short stories have been examined through various critical lenses such as realism, symbolism, transitive analyses, psychological perspectives etc. (Qatrin Aisha & Hikmat, 2024) explores the role of hope and sacrifice in O. Henry’s “The last leaf” by applying the romanticism theory by William Wordsworth by portraying how Behrman sacrificed his life by drawing an artificial leave for giving hope to Johnsy, attracting romantic ideals that exceeds reality and giving hope in hopeless winter.(Khan et al., n.d.)uncovered the theme of hope, death and pessimism using the transitive theory of language in systematic functional linguistic. Moreover, Syahada Nurul Ummah, Eripuddin, Pipit Rahayu researched about the moral values in “The Last Leaf” using sociological theory with the help of descriptive qualitative method (*329500-an-Analysis-of-Moral-Value-in-Short-Stor-219f5a8f*, n.d.) Meanwhile, Dr Shamim Ara Shams and Zia Ul Haq Anwar analyzed the difference in the portrayal of male and female character in this short story using Fairclough’s CDA model by focusing on depiction of characters through lexicalization, nominalization, modality, transitivity and cohesive devices (Ara Shams et al., n.d.).

Researchers have examined the short story through different perspective including the analyses of short story through social communication relation for fostering empathy, selflessness and social communication values among students in era of growing individualism (Gulnar, n.d.).Additionally, researcher explored the themes of hope and sacrifice using romanticism model of William Wordsworth (Qatrin Aisha & Hikmat, 2024). Concerning the short story, another research finds out the psychological aspect of characters in “The last leaf” using discourse analyses supported by Psychoanalytic and Russian formalist theories (McKerahan, n.d.) likewise, Dr Arpana Beniwal analyzed it in relation to the psychological resilience, cognitive distortions and altruism emphasizing the role of hope and compassion (Beniwal, 2022). An Indian researcher, Abhishek Tiwari studied the psychological and therapeutic impact of art on human mindset using O. Henry’s “The Last Leaf” as work of art (Tiwari, n.d.) Similarly the researcher has compared the eastern and

western thoughts of death and dying by applying structuralist approach to analyze “The last leaf” and “Sonagi” examining use of language and symbolism (ARETE•283 ARETE•285, n.d.)

Existing researchers have broadly discussed the short from different perspective including stylistic analyses, psychoanalyses, theme of hope and resilience, discourse analyses, symbolic and transitive analyses of the short story also but little attention has been given to the structural approach particularly binary opposition model. This research aims to fill the gap by exploring the short story through structural approach particularly through binary opposition model and how these opposition led to the development of the story and in raising the emotions and feelings among the readers. The Last Leaf constructs meaning through opposition like life vs death, hope vs despair and reality vs allusion and through these opposition an in depth analyses of the short story would be made.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research approach to analyze O. Henry short story “The Last Leaf” through the lens of binary opposition as conceptualized by Claude Levi Strauss. Claude Levi Strauss worked on myths that were kind of language that could be broken down into individual units known as phonemes and true meaning could only be found by combining them in a particular way and were already inherent in human mind (Chinade, 2012).

Furthermore, Levi Strauss suggest that these opposition are not naturally created but actually one thing in pair is created naturally and the other is created by culture or society (Binary Oppositions and Spatial Representation: Toward an Applied Semiotics 1 Efraim Sicher, n.d.). From the very childhood we are subjected to binaries like right and left, white and black, ruling class and working class etc. Levi Strauss in his book “The Raw and the Cooked” discusses binary opposition and refer them as the basic of all human cultures, their ways of thinking and how their signifier and signified system works. He further clarifies that one of the term in binaries is favored over the other like cooked is favor over raw in cooked and raw binaries, good is preferred than evil and light is better than dark (Levi-Strauss, n.d.). Theory of binary opposition suggests that our understanding of the world is based on the binary pairs and Myths often uses these binaries to create the meaning and these binaries shapes the way we as a human see and perceive the world around us (Narzary, 2024)

Roman Jakobson was colleague of Levi Strauss and he drew his concept of binary contrast from his works. The paradigm of binary opposition suggests that human mind understands things by the phenomenon of contrasting like light is understood in contrast to the light, life is understood in contrast to the death, Pace would be understand in contrast to slow and so on (Pundir et al., 2019). Furthermore for a binary opposition to exist, the two element must not only be in direct contrast but also completely separate from each other (MAULANA MALIK IBRAHIM MALANG 2021,). Binaries thinking are basic to human cognition, but its presence in a narrative does not automatically make it a myth. Meaning is shaped culturally and is reinforced through recurring binaries, which influences interpretation and uphold dominant ideologies by favoring one concept over the other (Decreus, n.d.). Levi Strauss brings to light a universal mental structure based on binary opposition shaping how the mind interprets the world by illustrating the healer-sufferer duality, showing how cultural variation exists within fixed cognitive frameworks (Filiz, 2020a)

Levi Strauss views culture as a well-organized system where binary distinctions gives meaning to the things and being fundamental to human cognition a universal mental framework is created that

shapes our understanding and perceiving of this world (Duche-Pérez & Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 2024). Moreover Strauss believed that meaning and existence arise from natural binary relationship with the human mind involuntarily seeking their settlement (Atwood, 2015a). From an alternative perspective, it could be argued that the idea of qualities based on binary opposition presents a simplified representation of a world that's in reality more complex. Furthermore the role of this model is to examine the process of meaning making, where Levi Strauss explored the concept of meaning by examining the concept of binary opposition shaping the semantic field (Salazar, 2024). Binaries play a crucial role in understanding the world and if we take cultural studies under consideration, binary opposition helps us in understanding the dynamics between variety of groups and how social boundaries between upper and lower class causes prejudices among them leading to the fact of seeing the other as threat to them (Zidan, 2023).

Levi Strauss proposes that by analyzing the binary contrast submerged in language and culture, one can disclose the underlying structures of human thoughts that shapes the creation of cultural phenomena. This standpoint highlights the interconnectedness of cognition, language and the multiple ways in which human creativity manifest in culture (Novitasari & Widyaningrum, 2024). Binary pairs are inherently interconnected where each term derives its significance in contrast to the other by its denial, giving one element a positive or dominant status over the other being negative or subordinate (Şeĭa et al., 2023). Additionally Claude Levi suggests that the opposing components in a system are linked to one another and every literary text consists of opposing concepts highlighting contrasts like virtue and vice, wealth and poverty or darkness and light and so on (Dahl Neda Nourpishah Ghadimi Student et al., n.d.)

Anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss illustrated how binary oppositions organize into structure groups shaping identifiable patterns within cultural frameworks. The kinship analyses done by him showed that the basic kinship unit consist of four opposing units that are brother/sister, husband/wife, father/son and mother's brother/sister (Danesi, 2009). Levi Strauss explains how myths as stories links how the world and humanity began naturally explaining the contrasting relationship between existence and non-existence connecting it to opposition of life-death which became the main theme of his well-known trilogy, *Mythologique- introduction to the science of mythology* (Atwood, 2015b)

Levi Strauss believes that the ideas in stories are connected logically, but deep down they often filled with contradictions. If we take the example of binaries of complete vs incomplete, some parts of the story are included while a lot is being left out and this gap creates cultural dilemma. He believes that these contradictions working on the principles of binary oppositions are the bases of all cultures (Samar et al., 2018). Binary oppositions are more than a stylistic device, it creates tension, depth and dynamic plot development in literature across culture and areas but their meanings shifts with cultural and historical context shaped by socio-cultural factor, history and author unique style and version (Aimukhambet et al., 2024).

Strauss believed that early humans relied on simple oppositions like Good and bad to understand the world due to their limited knowledge. Furthermore despite their difference these opposition are interconnected and they are the two sides of a coin and with the breakdown of obvious structure of literary text, a hidden and deeper structure emerges in readers mind (Akbari & Ashrafzadeh, n.d.). We define concepts through opposition, like dark and light, up and down extending to a broader level like male and female, day and night etc and Levi Strauss called this contrast based thinking the socio culture logic of human mind, shaping how we perceive the world and interpret the text (Dagoglu, 2023)

Butler took binary opposition under consideration while her work on feminism particularly on the sex/gender distinctions and presented these distinctions not naturally but socially constructed thus presenting Strauss binaries as rigid and external rather than internal mental construct (FİLİZ, 2020b). Lany Kristono in his work describes binary opposition as the foundation of culture shaping rituals, taboos, customs and social behavior shared by a wide society. Overtime these shared structures become deeply ingrained, appearing natural and unnoticed. Using this theory he worked on promoting understanding and tolerance towards the marginalized communities in a society. (Kristono, n.d.)

Discussion

While navigating the binaries in the short story we come up with the first and foremost binary opposition of Spring and winter in the short story. Spring, a season of symphony of blossom and renewal is marked by the meeting of Sue and Johnsy proceeded by their mutual interest of painting, food and clothes which eventually leads both of them to live together. Thus marking spring as a season of love and peace. On the contrary, winter a season of quiet decay consuming warmth and vitality brings a stranger to the city in the story. However, the stranger referred by doctors as Pneumonia is moving from door to door and affecting people causing the death of loved ones, leading to a never ending separation showing the exact opposite of what happened in spring where there was warmth and people were coming together as one (*O. Henry, n.d., p. 13*).

Another binary opposition of Life/Death is prominent in the story. Johnsy, suffering from pneumonia and losing her desire to live, completely relying on the leaves of the tree that is visible from the window. She believed that when the last leaf would fall, she would die. As explained in one of the line from the text *"When the last one falls, I must go, too"* (*O. Henry, n.d., p. 14*). Her pessimism reflects her surrender to the death. Despite her surrender, there is constant push towards life. Sue, her roommate did not let herself effected by the despair to become pessimist. Instead she tries to give hope to the Johnsy showing continuous optimism in contrast to Johnsy submissiveness to the death. This is represented through the text lines *"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?"* (*O. Henry, n.d., p. 14*). Moreover, the delicate leaves on the tree falling one by one shows the inevitable death while the painted leaf give image of life contrasting to death. Additionally, Behrman sacrificed his life while painting an artificial leave that gave life to Johnsy but lead to the death of him also shows binaries between life and death. The natural elements like falling of leaves and coming of winter shows the death is near while the use of art by human like the one done by Behrman gives the notion that death could be defied through human creativity and if not than at least we could show resilience against death instead of being submissive to it.

Furthermore, the binary contrast of Youth/Old is also prominent "The Last Leaf". Johnsy and Sue represent the youth, energy and the potential for life while giving light to the vulnerability and challenges faced by the youth. The frailty of youth is represented through the character of Johnsy as she prematurely surrenders herself to the death associating it with the fall of the last leaf. *"Twelve," she said; and a little later, "Eleven"; and then, "Ten," and, "Nine"; and then, "Eight," and, "Seven," almost together* (*O. Henry, n.d., p. 14*). These lines show the submissiveness of Johnsy to the death highlighting frailty of youth in life. Sue another youthful character demonstrates the qualities of hope, care and optimism as reflected in the youth. Now, if we move towards the second term in the binary which is old, it is reflected through the character of Behrman. His character embodies wisdom, resilience and a sense of sacrifice. His lines from the text as quoted here represent his wisdom and maturity towards the life that came with age. *"What!*

he cried. "Are there such fools? Do people die because leaves drop off a tree?" (O. Henry, n.d., p. 15). He sacrificed his own life while painting leaf in a snowy night for saving the life of Johnsy shows that how sense of sacrifice is prominent in old age.

Johnsy lost hope of living and tied her death to the fall of last leaf on the tree. Behrman painted an artificial leaf on the tree thus created an illusion in the mind of Johnsy that gave her hope to live. "Oh, my dear, it is Behrman's great masterpiece—he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell" (O. Henry, n.d., p. 18). The painted leaf itself was an illusion but it represents a reality in itself which is the enduring power of hope, resilience and human efforts to defy despair. This represent the binary contrast of Realty/illusion. The dying Johnsy got hope from the artificial leaf that created the illusion of real leaf in Johnsy's mind and she eventually recovered from the illness.

Moreover, binary opposition of hope/despair is significant in the story. Johnsy becomes despair and hopeless regarding her life and completely submit herself to the death, watching daily the leaves of trees and counting the fallen leaves. To its opposite, we have Sue. She represents hope and is not affected by the despair of her friend. She continuously tries to bring the hope of life in Johnsy and always try her best to bring her to life. She advised Johnsy to stop looking at the tree and not tying herself to it. Also she closes the curtains in front of windows so that Johnsy can move her thoughts away from the tree. This all shows the element of hope that she was trying to insert in Johnsy's mind.

Failure/success is one of many binaries places in "The last leaf" This binary is most prominent in the character of Behrman. Behrman an elderly artist is a failure in the eyes of the society and himself. Despite years of ambition, he was failed to produce any master piece and most of his paintings were unsold while earning from being a mere model in others painting. He is also shown as a man who drinks excessively, talking about his aspirations without producing a meaningful work as evident from the textual lines. "For forty years he had painted, without ever painting a good picture. He had always talked of painting a great picture, a masterpiece, but he had never yet started it" (O. Henry, n.d., p. 15). Despite of all the failures he achieved an ultimate success at the end of the story when he painted the masterpiece of his life, an artificial leaf giving hope to a person for living. This fulfilled his purpose and ambition of life and became his ultimate success. However, Johnsy's initial submission to death and losing hope shows a sense of failure but her recovery at the end of story shows his success in life as she beat the despair and death and continued to live. Additionally, the falling leaves of tree shows the failure of nature to provide stability and permanence while the artistic creation of leaf painted by Behrman remains steadfast in rain and snow portraying the success of art where nature fails.

Furthermore, illness/ health is another dominant binary in the story. Johnsy is suffering from the pneumonia and becomes a lifeless body lying on bed waiting for the death to come and take her soul. Sue optimism and continuous care for the Johnsy alongside with Behrman's sacrifice bore fruit leading Johnsy on the track of recovery. Hence, a story starting from illness was concluded with the healthiness of the same character. Besides that, Action/inaction binary is also prominent in the story. Johnsy a victim of pneumonia portrays inactions as she become suppressive to the death and do not do anything to recover from it while waiting on the bed for death to come and take her. On the other hand, Sue tries her best to console Johnsy. She urges her to have the love for life and tries to move her thoughts away from the tree. Behrman also shows the action when he paints his masterpiece for the Johnsy so that she could have the hope for the life. At the end, Action wins the situation and bore fruit. Johnsy after seeing the last leaf still standing becomes hopeful and was set on the road to recovery.

Likewise, Reality vs perception is also used as binary in the short story. Often in life, our own perceptions overshadow the reality and we become pessimistic. The same happened with the Johnsy. Her condition was not so fatal but she tied herself to the falling of leaves which worsened her condition. In reality, the condition was not so bad but her perception made it more fatal and complex. Creation vs Destruction could also be seen as a binary dominating the narrative of the story. These two are opposite terms but occurred side by side in the story. Pneumonia is shown as a force of destruction, killing people and even Behrman also became a prey to it. On the contrary to it is the act of creation. When destruction was destroying the hope, creation saved the day. Behrman's act of painting is an action of creation. This action gave hope to the Johnsy countering with the decay of life.

Conclusion

The researcher explored Claude Levi Strauss theory of binary opposition to analyze the interplay of contrasting elements in the short story "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry. It examines how these oppositions like Life/death, hope/despair, action/inaction and reality/illusion contribute to the narrative development of the story and in creating the emotional depth as the story progresses. The study of these binaries highlights the transformative power of human connection, creativity and sacrifice and how these human emotions can defy the inevitable despair and death. The painting of leaf by Behrman shows how art can defy nature and raise hope among the people bridging a gap between life and death. Complexities of human emotions and resilience are portrayed through the binary pair depicted in the story. This study highlights the importance of examining the relation of binaries in the story for a depth thematic analysis. It also suggests that "The Last Leaf" could further be studied through other theoretical lenses like psychological or Formalism so that its scope of interpretation could be expanded. By implying Levi Strauss structuralism and binary opposition, this study provides insights to how binary opposition shapes the narrative, showing the delicate relation between these oppositions in our culture and thoughts. This study also shows that binary oppositions are not merely opposite elements but are interconnected forces that derive meaning and give depth to the literary works.

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