

# A Relevance Theoretic Analysis of O. Henry's 'The Last Leaf'

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**Abstract—** The current research is intended to explore, with the aid of Relevance Theory, how characters in Henry's 'The Last Leaf' interact and comprehend each other's intended messages, or a message conveyed by an image, via the contextual effects produced in the process of communication. Analyzing some extracts from 'The Last Leaf' reveals that relevance is behind the characters' capability of interpreting messages, images, and any other communicative signals. That is, their understanding of the intended meaning, behind an utterance or an image, mainly depends on the contextual effects caused by that utterance or image. Apart from the introduction, the paper exhibits three sections to dwell on topics such as: pragmatic competence, as the study tackles a pragmatic issue in a literary work; an overview of Relevance Theory; and a relevance-perspective analysis of 'The Last Leaf'. Some of the conclusions the paper has arrived at are: apart from utterances, images and imageries can function as ostensive inferential acts via which literary writers can unravel their intentions; The Last Leaf shows how communication usually involves more than just explicit words; according to Relevance Theory principles, even nonverbal means of communication, such as the use of silence or a landscape, can sometimes be utilized by short story writers to reveal the communicative and psychological aspects of characters in a given literary work, they can sometimes communicate even much richer meaning than the verbal ones.

**Index Terms—** Relevance theory, Last leaf, Ostensive, Interpretation, Perspective.

## I. PRELIMINARIES

### A. Introduction

The pragmatic study of literary works is a new trend that dwells on studying and analyzing literary texts in the light of pragmatic theories and approaches, of which Relevance Theory (henceforth R.T.) is one. The significance of it is that it relates literature to linguistics, and consequently brings literary and language specialists together. Further, it facilitates readers' understanding of literary texts and considers the whole process as a collaborative activity between the reader and the author. Enkvist (1991), in subjects related to literary interpretation, states his own viewpoint. He believes that homo-sapiens is preprogrammed to seek knowledge in anything they anticipate

to be the message, whether that message is expressed via verbal or nonverbal means of communication.

As for the role of the reader and his/her collaboration with the author in the pragmatic analysis of literary texts, and the potential validity and explanatory significance of pragmatic mechanisms for literary texts, Mey (2001: 237) has his own point of view. He claims that the reader acts effectively in the production and consumption of literary texts; and the role pragmatics plays in the analysis of given texts must broadly be taken from the speaker's own way of thinking. To him, it is the reader who obtains the outcome of a literary act, and by internalizing it, meets a personal demand. In this way, the work that the writer has conducted is supported and accomplished by the reader. To quest the validity of this, the present research attempts to study a literary work, namely 'The Last Leaf' by O. Henry, from a relevance-theoretic view, i.e., it attempts to verify to what extent R.T. can be utilized in the process of interpreting and comprehending literary works.

### B. Previous Studies:

The Last Leaf, by O. Henry, has been widely studied from various literary perspectives, including themes, narrative style, symbolism, and moral implications. Below is an account of previous studies on the story (Ravanes, 2022):

#### 1) Themes and Moral Lessons

The central themes of The Last Leaf, particularly sacrifice, hope, friendship, and the power of art, have previously been analyzed by scholars. They have noted how the story conveys the idea that true art and selflessness can inspire life and hope in others. The character of Behrman, the old artist, is often discussed as a symbol of artistic dedication and sacrifice.

#### 2) Symbolism

Symbolism in The Last Leaf, has been a major area of focus in academic analyses. The leaf itself represents hope, resilience, and the will to live. Studies have explored how O. Henry uses natural imagery to emphasize the emotional struggles of Johnsy, the sick protagonist, and how Behrman's final act changes the simple leaf into a metaphor for life-saving art.

### 3) Narrative Style and Literary Techniques

O. Henry, as a short story writer, is known for his signature twist endings, and *The Last Leaf* is no exception. Literary critics have investigated his use of irony, foreshadowing, and third-person omniscient narration. Research has shown that the unexpected conclusion enhances the emotional impact of the story, making it a hallmark of O. Henry's storytelling.

### 4) Psychological and Feminist Readings

The characters and their psychological status have been analyzed by critics, particularly Johnsy's despair and her belief that her fate is tied to the falling leaves. Feminist readings have explored the representation of female characters in the story, focusing on the friendship between Johnsy and Sue and their struggles as independent women in an early 20th-century setting.

### 5) Influence and Adaptations

Scholarly articles also subsumed the impact of *The Last Leaf* on literature and popular culture. It has been adapted into plays, films, and illustrated works, demonstrating its lasting influence. Scholars have noted how the story's themes have been reinterpreted in various artistic and cinematic forms.

### C. Research Questions:

As mentioned above, O Henry as a short story writer, and his work '*The Last Leaf*' have been studied and investigated by many scholars worldwide. They tackled the themes of sacrifice, hope, friendship and true art embodied in the story. Besides, they critically studied the style of the writer and his way of representing the psychological state of his characters; and his charisma in unravelling his hidden agenda to his readers, and meanwhile conveying the moral lesson behind his works to his audience.

However, the current research approaches the analysis of the story from a relevance theoretic perspective. The research questions it endeavors to answer are: to what extent can certain instances in the story be regarded as ostensive inferential acts? are those instances capable of providing enough contextual effects? Are the instances analyzed optimally relevant to help interlocutors understand the message conveyed? To what extent can Relevance Theory be utilized in analyzing literary works in general and short stories in particular.

### D. The Story:

*The Last Leaf*, is written by the American short story writer William Sydney Porter (1862–1910), better known by his pen name O. Henry. Porter's stories are known for their naturalist observations, witty narration, and surprise endings. The story portrays the value of life, and the inevitability of faith to tackle the obstacles faced in life. So, the value of life is the essence of the story where all things go back and revolve around it.

The story opens with Johnsy, a young girl battling pneumonia, lying in bed and gazing out her window at an ivy vine clinging to a brick wall. She notices the leaves dropping one by one and becomes fixated on the idea that her own life is tied to the vine. Convinced that when the last leaf falls, her time will come to an end, she grows increasingly hopeless about her recovery. Apart from verbal expressions, instances of sight and

sound imageries are also employed in "*The Last Leaf*". They go hand in hand with the theme of death and dying. Thus, the present work is an endeavor to analyze those instances in the light of R.T., with the aim of showing their communicative value in communication, as well as the applicability of R.T. to literary work interpretations.

## II. PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE:

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively in a contextually appropriate fashion. It is a fundamental aspect of a more general communicative competence. The term was introduced first by the sociolinguist Jenny Thomas (1983) in which she defined it as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand a language in context.". This is distinguished from a speaker's linguistic competence (grammatical competence), i.e. the abstract or the decontextualized knowledge of intonation, phonology, syntax, semantics, etc. This is also parallel to Leech's (1983) division of linguistics into 'grammar' (by which he means the decontextualized formal system of language) and 'pragmatics' (the use of language in a goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer). Several principles contribute to define the nature of pragmatic competence (Balconi & Amenta, 2010):

- *“variability*: the property of communication that defines the range of communicative possibilities, among which is formulating communicative choices;
- *negotiability*: the possibility of making choices based on flexible strategies;
- *adaptability*; the ability to modulate and regulate communicative choices in relation to the communicative context;
- *salience*: the degree of awareness reached by communicative choices;
- *indeterminacy*: the possibility to re-negotiate pragmatic choices as the interaction unfolds in order to fulfill communicative intentions;
- *dynamicity*: development of the communicative interaction in time."

Noam Chomsky, in his later writings, introduced the term pragmatic competence—knowledge of how language is related to the situation in which it is used. To him, pragmatic competence 'places language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand'. To Chomsky, it is the province of pragmatic competence to explain whether the speaker who says: 'Why are you making such a noise?' is requesting someone to stop, or is asking a genuine question out of curiosity (Cook and Newson, 1996). Enkvist (1991), in discussing interpretability of texts, entails that we are in desperate need of a conceptual matrix above that of traditional grammar. The terms he proposes to discuss interpretability are: intelligibility, comprehensibility and

interpretability. He believes that a given literary text is 'comprehensible' to interlocutors who are capable of identifying its syntactic, phonological, and lexical features. A discourse is 'understandable' to speakers who are able to attach a definite meaning to it, i.e., a semantic component. Besides, a text is said to be 'interpretable' to communicators who can intermingle a given text with a scenario. Taking the above three components together, one can conclude that 'intelligibility', 'interpretability', and 'comprehensibility' are interconnected and are complementary to each other; i.e. together they express the syntactic, semantic, and the pragmatic aspects of any piece of literary message. However, he confesses that "the process of analyzing any given literary genre does not confirm that it proceeds sequentially from the first to the second and third aspects, but in a complex manner involving bottom-up and top-down processing".

### III. RELEVANCE THEORY:

Following Grice, linguists attempted to improve and modify his theory in a number of ways; Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory is one example. One could consider their idea to be an alternative to Grice's method of studying human communication. Their view is founded on cognition, in contrast to Grice's.

One could argue that Sperber and Wilson's theory is grounded on human cognition. Although it is mostly mentioned in their 1986 book, it first surfaced in the 1970s and early 1980s as an alternative to Grice's theory of communication in general. Since then, it has proven to be a successful theory, leading to several studies, some of which have defended it, some of which have challenged it, and some of which have applied it to different areas of study. According to this view, the degree of relevance is connected to cognition. Therefore, if new knowledge complements existing information to provide sufficient situational implications, it is considered relevant. The more the new information is pertinent to the point, the more contextual impacts it causes. This theory maintains that:

‘all communicative events carry a guarantee of optimal relevance;  
a guarantee that they have enough contextual effects, that they require no unnecessary processing effort, and that they are interpreted in the light of this guarantee’  
(Crystal, 1991, p. 297).

Relevance Theory is interpreted as an attempt to unify Grice's four cooperative principle maxims under the umbrella term "relevance." It nevertheless supports one of Grice's arguments, according to which the utterance and its intents are the essential elements of human communication.

Certain points need to be illustrated in relation to R.T:

#### A. Models of communication:

In general, there are two models of communication: the classical code model, which was put forth by Shannon and Weaver in 1962, and the inferential model, which was put forth by Grice in 1975. According to the coding model, an

interlocutor must convert his or her message to a signal, which the addressee must then reconvert using a comparable procedure. That is, according to this model, communication incorporates two types of coding known as (encoding and decoding), and the audience's mental process of comprehension is depended on a process dubbed 'decoding'. Whereas the inferential model assumes that an interlocutor shows his intention to impart a given meaning, which is deduced by the addressee according to what is shown. So, an inferred message is a message that is linguistically coded, and this means that the verbal understanding includes an item communicatively called 'decoding'. Yet, the inference obtained by this method is merely a hint in the analytic process which introduces the utterer's meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 2004, P. 2).

Relevance theorists do not deny the affiliation of RT to Grice's opinion of the inferential mode of communication; and that pieces of language, ostensibly communicated, automatically provide assumptions which instigate the listener's attempt to arrive at the intended meaning. But, whereas Grice accounts for the assumptions on the part of the hearer's understanding that the speaker is taking into account the cooperating maxims, RT maintains that the assumptions are illustrated in conceptual terms, i.e., they are principally suggesting the availability of a principle of understanding (called cognitive), without resorting to a co-operative rule.

#### B. The notion of 'relevance'

The code and inferential models marked the ongoing debates among linguists. Consequently, R.T. emerged, supporting Grice's notion that communication is not simply about 'encoding' and 'decoding' but, more importantly, involves drawing inferences along with the context.

However, proponents of relevance suggest that a speaker, by urging the hearer's attention, shows that his utterance is pertinent to the hearer's desire, as is conveyed in the following cognitive principle: 'comprehension is bounded by the level of relevance', and that this relevance is the core of the communicative event (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p.260).

#### C. Level of relevance

Determining the relevance of a given message is a relative process. Typically, there are multiple inputs that may hold some significance to us, but it is impossible to address them all simultaneously. R.T. maintains that what renders an input worth choosing from a group of rival instincts is not its relevance only, but that it is more pertinent than other alternative inputs. By intuition, 'an input is regarded relevant to a person when it combines with the past information he has to produce results that mean to him'. And 'when having things equal, the more the positive conceptual effects obtained by approaching an input, the less the processing effort required, the more its relevance will be'. This is tantamount to saying that the level of relevance is bound to two main criteria: the 'cognitive effects' and the 'processing' effort. An assumption is taken to be relevant in a context when it has some contextual effects. Given messages are less relevant than others when their relevance is evaluated by their effect and the effort that is needed to get the effect. The hearer must try his best to obtain the knowledge that satisfies his view of the level of relevance of the message he conveys, i.e. that it is at the maximum level. And this is in accordance to

the rule which states: 'a communicative act usually expresses an assumption of a maximum relevance' (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p.260).

#### D. Relevance and models of communication

As previously mentioned, there are two models of communication: the code model and the inferential model, each based on distinct principles. However, these models are not mutually exclusive; they can be combined in various ways and both play a role in the communication process. It is claimed that discourse incorporates both ideational and mutual understanding intentions. The former is to impart an idea to the addressee, and the latter is showing him the speaker's own intention (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 52).

According to R.T., comprehension occurs when the speaker's intention is fulfilled. This means the listener successfully grasps the intended message. This process requires the listener to infer the message beyond merely relying on linguistic "encoding and decoding". It is also one of the prerequisites to internalize even non-verbal signals, like the use of 'an image' in *The Last Leaf*. The interpreting process is said to subsume:

1) 'Perception of the signal' (an utterance or an image, for instance)

2) 'understanding the meaning of the signal' to establish a link between new

and old information by the addressee instigated by the stimulus.

3) 'Deducing a series of inference through comprehending the contextual meaning of a signal

after involving the cognitive context'.

4) 'Obtaining the speaker intention: picking out some assumptions and infer the intended meaning controlled

by the pragmatic competence'. Among the above steps, number one is physical, the remaining are all

cognitive (Weidong & Xueyan 2003).

#### E. Relevance and Human Comprehension

Principles of R.T. state that utterances convey relevance, not because speakers follow cooperative maxims, but because the pursuit of "relevance" is a fundamental aspect of human understanding. A message, such as 'an utterance or an image', for instance, is intuitively taken to be maximally relevant to an interlocutor when there is a link between this message and another in his mental store to raise relative assumptions. Thus, if an individual succeeds in getting enough cognitive effects, he will need less processing effort, and will achieve more relevance. Hence, we can say that cognitive effects and processing efforts are two indispensable criteria required for an optimal communication.

Advocates of relevance aim to evoke a sense of relevance in their interlocutors. They view an idea as relevant to a situation if it aligns with existing assumptions, and carries principles that are contextually beneficial, i.e. when they subsume the following points (Jia, 2013, P. 2047):

- a. When a new assumption is combined with an existing one to produce new conclusions, this process is referred to as a "contextual implication".

- b. When a new assumption strengthens an existing one.
- c. When a new presumption is contradicted or entirely eliminated.

#### IV. DATA ANALYSIS IN TERM OF RELEVANCE THEORY:

Apart from utterances, nonverbal signals like 'images' for instance, have effective impact on human communication. Such signals are often utilized, especially by literary writers, to convey the hidden agendas behind their works (Jia, 2013, P. 3). In 'The Last Leaf', apart from utterances, images and imageries are rendered to express what the person has to convey and communicate, and this is not only for characters, but also for the readers.

This section explores the advantage of R.T in interpreting specific instances of utterances, images, and imageries in the story under study. The analysis ascertains the positive applicability of this theory to the interpretation of literary works in general, and short stories in particular.

##### Situation (1)

Johnsy: When the last one falls, I must go too.

Sue: Oh, I never heard of such nonsense

This exchange takes place in Johnsy's Room in the presence of her roommate Sue. Johnsy likens the fall of the vine leaves to death; and she is so sick that she believes, that with the fall of the last leaf, her life will also come to an end, and she will die.

In R.T. perspective, Johnsy's speech is regarded as an *ostensive inferential act*; its function is that Sue considers it to be *optimally relevant* to her. Since she is aware of Johnsy's miserable state of mind, Sue looks at the utterance as a *marked* form, entailing her misconception that she will die with the fall of the leaf. This relevance of the utterance, provides enough contextual effects, and simultaneously requires less processing effort on the part of the addressee (Sue), and, hence, her instant reply: "what you say is ridiculous".

##### Situation (2): (A nonverbal case: silence)

Behrman (the painter) and Sue peered out the window fearfully at the ivy vine. Then, they looked at each other for a moment without speaking.

In this situation, a persistent cold rain was falling, mingled with snow. This scene, in R.T perspective, is taken to be an *ostensive inferential act* utilized by the writer to tell the characters and the readers that this is a relevant message; relevant to Johnsy's case. They remain desperately silent, because the heavy rain indicated that the last leaf would surely fall that night, and most probably cause the death of Johnsy.

##### Situation (3)

Sue: Try to take some broth now, and let Sudie buy port wine for her sick child.

Johnsy: You needn't get any more wine.

Sue already knows Johnsy's miserable mindset and her constant thinking of death. She suggests to go and buy her some wine to make her feel better. Johnsy's utterance, which is a request not bring any more wine, is regarded, in relevance theoretic perspective, an *ostensive inferential act*. Along with the context, the utterance, to Sue, shows Johnsy's hopelessness and her decision to die with the fall of the last leaf.

#### Situation (4)

Sue: Think of me, if you do not think of yourself. What would I do?

Johnsy: didn't answer (silence)

Sue continues in her attempt to help Johnsy forget about her thought of dying. She beseeches her not to leave her alone. Johnsy's silence, in reply, comes out as a marked form and functions as an *ostensive inferential act* per the principles of R.T. It has its own communicative value; it tells Sue that Johnsy is still obsessed with the idea of death, and that she is too weak to get rid of it, and that she has consequently taken her decision.

#### Situation (5): (A nonverbal case: an image)

Narrator: The ivy leaf was still there.

Johnsy: It is a sin to want to die.

Johnsy is obsessed with the idea that, when the last leaf falls from the ivy tree, her life will also come to an end, and she will definitely die. When the painter Behrman is informed about this, he becomes deeply annoyed. He thinks of doing something to help this young lady come back to her normal life and forget about death. In the end, he makes his artistic masterpiece and draws, on the brick wall opposite Johnsy's window, the image of a green ivy leaf clinging from the tree trunk. The appearance of this image, which, to Johnsy, looks like a real leaf, can be regarded, per RT principles, an *ostensive inferential act*. Its function is that it exhibits the notion of continuity of life embodied in a green ivy leaf, which has relevance to an old information in Johnsy's mind; the idea of life associated with the ivy leaf. This has made Johnsy come back to her senses, get some hope, and believe that life deserves to be struggled for, and that 'it is a sin to want to die'.

#### Situation (6)

Johnsy: Sudie, someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples.

To Sue, apart from the linguistic meaning, Johnsy's utterance expresses an implicit meaning. As an *ostensive inferential act*, it functions to arouse the concept of 'hope and life' in Sue's mind (when there is hope, there is life). She realizes, with the relevance of this utterance, that Johnsy has restored the notion of 'hope' in herself; that she has abandoned the obsession of death and wants to live once more.

#### Situation (7): (imagery)

Narrator: ...beating rain and fierce gusts of wind... (an ivy leaf) with its serrated edges tinted with the yellow of dissolution and decay...

The above description represents an imagery made use of by the writer to show the readers how the character of Johnsy was looking, through her window, at the dreadful setting at that particular moment. The setting creates a gloomy atmosphere; it tickles the concept of *death* in Johnsy's mind. In relevance theoretic perspective, these imageries can be regarded as *ostensive inferential acts* that function as factors enhancing the idea of deterioration and death in the mind of this character. That is to say, it is the *relevance* of this setting to the concept of death that makes Johnsy adhere to this concept and feel the approach of her destiny.

## V. CONCLUSION

The present work has dealt with the interpretation of Henry's 'The Last Leaf' on the basis of the Relevance Theory principles. It has focused on the communicative value of utterances, images, and imageries utilized by the writer, especially in short stories. Analyzing the selected samples, the study has come out with the following conclusions:

- 1) According to R.T. principles, apart from utterances, images and imageries can function as *ostensive inferential acts* via which literary writers can unravel their intentions and communicative strategies in the speech of their characters.
- 2) From R.T. perspective, the artist Behrman's painting of the ivy leaf is directly related to the notion of 'maximizing relevance', i.e. it has a high *cognitive impact* which requires a *less processing effort* on the part of Johnsy to understand the message. This cognitive impact has consequently caused a *cognitive shift* in the mind of Johnsy; and she imagined the scene as a miraculous event.
- 3) 'images and imageries', as communicative devices, lie within the *inferential* model of communication. They can provide enough contextual effects and be optimally relevant for the readers to arrive at the writer's intended meaning.
- 4) Based on R.T., 'images and imageries' in literary works, can be utilized to convey the communicative psychological aspects of characters involved in a play.
- 5) The pragmatic principles of R.T. are applicable and usable in the interpretation of literary works and, particularly, in short stories.
- 6) Non-verbal means of communication, such as the use of *silence* and *images*, can, in relevance perspective, communicate meaning, similar to the verbal ones.
- 7) Per the principles of R.T., *The Last Leaf* shows how communication usually involves more than just explicit words and non-verbal cues; it is the relevance of the shared knowledge, context, and implicatures that shape meaning in the minds of interlocutors.

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