
Repression in O. Henry's "the Last Leaf": a Psychoanalytic Principles

Abdukarimova Nodira

Master's graduate of Linguistics in Foreign philology faculty, National University of Uzbekistan, @abdukarimovanodira16@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of repression as depicted in O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf". Drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the paper examines how characters suppress painful realities and desires, allowing unconscious motives to influence their behavior. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals how repression operates both as a defense mechanism and as a narrative device, shaping the story's emotional depth and thematic resonance.

Keys words: Repression, Psychoanalysis, O. Henry, The Last Leaf, Freud, Defense Mechanism, Literature

INTRODUCTION

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, a groundbreaking approach to understanding the human mind. His work focused on exploring how unconscious thoughts, desires, and memories influence behavior. He developed techniques like free association and dream analysis to uncover unconscious processes, also described repression as a fundamental defense mechanism in which unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or desires are pushed out of conscious awareness into the unconscious mind. In literature, repression often manifests when characters avoid confronting painful truths, yet these suppressed emotions shape their actions indirectly.

"The Last Leaf" is a short story by O. Henry that is published in 1907. It tells the story of two young artists, Sue and Johnsy. Johnsy falls seriously ill with pneumonia and becomes convinced she will die when the last ivy leaf falls from the vine outside her window. Their elderly neighbor, Behrman, a failed artist, secretly paints a realistic leaf on the wall during a stormy night so that Johnsy will believe the last leaf never fell. Inspired by the "last leaf," Johnsy regains the will to live, but Behrman catches pneumonia from painting it and dies—his final act becoming his masterpiece. Sacrifice, hope, friendship, the power of art, and the will to live. O. Henry's "The Last Leaf" provides an exemplary case, as the main characters navigate illness, despair, and self-sacrifice through layers of unspoken emotion.

ANALYSIS ON REPRESSION IN "THE LAST LEAF"

1. Johnsy's Repressed Fear of Death

Johnsy's initial belief that her fate is tied to the falling leaves is an irrational projection of her internal despair. Instead of directly acknowledging her fear of death, she channels it into a symbolic belief:

“When the last one falls I must go, too.”

Here, the leaf becomes a repressed embodiment of mortality. Johnsy avoids openly articulating her dread, instead transferring it onto an external object—a classic sign of repression in psychoanalytic terms (Freud, 1915).

2. Sue’s Emotional Repression to Protect Johnsy

Sue consciously hides her distress to maintain hope for Johnsy:

“She talked about clothes and fashions... only to keep her mind off her illness.”

This illustrates conscious suppression but also deeper repression, as Sue pushes her anxiety into the background to focus on a façade of optimism. According to psychoanalytic theory, this is an example of protecting the ego by avoiding threatening truths.

3. Behrman’s Repressed Altruism

Behrman, the aging artist, masks his deep compassion under gruffness. His final act—painting the leaf in the storm—reveals a long-hidden desire for significance. Until this moment, his repression of vulnerability and kindness prevents open expressions of care. His death is the tragic outcome of a self-sacrifice driven by an unconscious wish to leave a legacy.

Narrative Function of Repression

Repression in *The Last Leaf* serves both psychological and structural purposes, operating as a unifying force that deepens the reader’s engagement with the narrative. Psychologically, it functions in line with Sigmund Freud’s theory of repression, whereby distressing thoughts or desires are pushed out of conscious awareness to protect the individual from emotional overload. Johnsy’s fixation on the ivy leaves acts as a form of symbolic displacement, diverting her fear of death into an external image; Sue’s restrained manner exemplifies emotional suppression, masking anxiety with outward composure; and Behrman’s long-concealed yearning to create a masterpiece is transformed through sublimation into an act of sacrifice. Structurally, repression fuels narrative tension by creating dramatic irony—the reader becomes aware of the hidden emotional undercurrents long before they are revealed within the story world. This tension culminates in the revelation of Behrman’s act, a moment that recontextualizes earlier events and releases the emotional pressure built up through omission and restraint. Such a pattern aligns with Peter Brooks’s (1992) argument that narrative suspense is often sustained by what remains unsaid or hidden, compelling readers to interpret silences, symbols, and subtle gestures as integral elements of the unfolding drama.

CONCLUSION

In *The Last Leaf*, repression emerges as a central psychological force, aligning closely with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious. Johnsy’s fixation on the falling ivy leaves can be read as a form of symbolic displacement, where her fear of death is repressed and projected onto an external, tangible image. Sue’s calm exterior, despite her inner turmoil, reflects the operation of emotional suppression and reaction formation, masking anxiety with composed care. Behrman’s long-suppressed desire to create a “masterpiece” manifests through a self-sacrificial act, illustrating Freud’s notion of sublimation, in which unconscious impulses are transformed into socially or morally valuable actions. Each character’s behavior demonstrates how repressed thoughts and desires influence conscious decisions, often without full awareness. By embedding such subtle yet potent psychological dynamics, O. Henry transforms a simple narrative into a layered exploration of human emotion, inviting readers to uncover the hidden truths and unconscious motivations that give the story its enduring power.

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