
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Implications of Human Values and Ethnicity in O Henry's the Last Leaf, Oscar Wilde's the Selfish Giant and the Rattrap by Selma Lagerl

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses themes related to human values and ethnicity in O. Henry's The Last Leaf, Oscar Wilde's The Selfish Giant, and Selma Lagerlöf's The Rattrap. This paper is symbolic in describing these narratives as routes to empathy, selflessness, and transformation across cultural and social boundaries. Each story focuses on a protagonist who, due to moral dilemmas experienced, undertakes acts that could be described as kindness, sacrifice, or redemption. While in the case of The Last Leaf, the self-sacrifice of Behrman turns out to symbolize resilience and hope as a reflection of the struggle of immigrant communities. Wilde's Selfish Giant underlines love's redemptive power when it transforms because the giant finally shows a huge need for other people and compassion. In Lagerlöf's The Rattrap, the transformation of the peddler has happened from cynicism to redemption through human kindness amidst the criticizing materialism. These two tales together show how, behind ethnically and culturally diverse covers, universal human values-compassion, pardon, and benevolence-indeed bond people and inspire their growth.

KEYWORDS

Human Values, Ethnicity, O. Henry's, The Last Leaf, Oscar Wilde's, The Selfish Giant, Selma Lagerlöf's, The Rattrap, Empathy, Selflessness, Transformation, Cultural, Social Boundaries, Kindness, Sacrifice, Redemption, Fostering Connection and Growth, Cultural Divides, Generosity

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1. Introduction

Human values and ethnicity are pretty great tools in literature, mostly showing how the moral fabric of society and its cultural diversity stand off from each other. The themes on human values and ethnicity are very well intertwined in O. Henry's The Last Leaf, Oscar Wilde's The Selfish Giant, and Selma Lagerlöf's The Rattrap, where these themes in the stories will unravel insights that probe deep into empathy, selflessness, and transformation. Every story features characters against moral dilemmas or crisis circumstances that impact a significant message associated with compassion and kindness (Aisha, 2024). These stories of sacrifice, redemption, and introspection create experiences that transcend mere stories of people into broader universal human values that transcend all cultural and ethnic barriers. The journeys of the protagonists-from despair to hope, isolation to connectedness-beckon readers into the maze of emotions and experiences that challenge them to reflect upon their own beliefs and biases.

Human values and cultural nuances underpin each of these stories' emotional and ethical centers, which forge how characters relate to themselves and others. At one point in the story The Last Leaf, painting a leaf actually becomes an act of grand hope and self-sacrifice, making the forces of resilience and care for others all that much deeper. Wilde's The Selfish Giant is a redemption story where an erstwhile selfish character is redeemed through his experiences with innocent children, exemplifying the purity of love cutting across social lines. In The Rattrap, Lagerlöf presents the redemptive quality of kindness as an isolated and cynical hero is redeemed by the unexpected kindness of a stranger. Combined, these stories best portray how values such as empathy,

forgiveness, and generosity can bridge and transcend different backgrounds and ethnicities. This is because, in the ultimate analysis, such actions brighten the understanding of shared moments that come with being human (Banerjee).

2. Literature Review

Eripuddin (2019) examined the moral lessons presented in *The Last Leaf*, a short novella. In order to determine the moral ideals, sociological theory was used. The short narrative "The Last Leaf" served as the main tool in this descriptive qualitative study. To get a deeper understanding of the moral values in the short narrative, the researcher also used a theory of moral values and borrowed material from other sources. Three viewpoints were taken into consideration based on the sociological approach: the conflict perspective, the symbolic perspective, and the functional perspective. The researcher found a number of moral qualities after doing the investigation, such as responsibility, compassion, belief, justice, tolerance, and honesty.

Gea (2024) technique of discourse analysis was used to examine spoken or written language. The purpose of this study was to identify the theme development patterns in O. Henry's short tale *The Last Leaf*. A qualitative approach was used in this study. O. Henry's short novel *The Last Leaf* served as the research's source of data, with 29 excerpts taken from the text. The findings of data analysis demonstrated that O. Henry's short fiction *The Last Leaf* used every thematic development pattern. 39 patterns were discovered, including 19 occurrences of the continuous theme pattern, 10 of the linear theme pattern, 6 of the split rheme pattern, and 4 derivative themes. This suggested that O. Henry's short work *The Last Leaf* used every thematic development pattern. Nonetheless, in order to structure the short narrative, the author blended patterns for some sections. The consistent theme pattern was used as the predominant motif. As a result, it was determined that the text's thematic progression pattern was crucial to the development of its phrases. In order to profit from this study, it was recommended that readers use the findings as references to expand their vocabulary and expertise, particularly in the area of theme development, which helps readers develop ideas in paragraphs.

Akhmedova (2024) O. Henry's classic short tale "The Last Leaf" focused on themes of hope, sacrifice, and the strength of human resiliency. The story follows two struggling artists, Johnsy and Sue, and their elderly neighbor over a difficult winter in Greenwich Village. The characters demonstrated the human spirit's everlasting power and ability for altruism through their moments of resolve and sorrow. *The Last Leaf* was a masterwork that struck a chord with readers of all ages because of O. Henry's moving narrative and deep character development, which highlighted the transformational power of hope and the profound effect of sacrifice.

Ermatatova (2024) focused on the stylistic analysis of American short story author William Sydney Porter's (1862–1910) tale *The Last Leaf*. While incarcerated, the author penned all of his works under the pen name O. Henry. He was regarded as a master of his trade and was especially well-known for his unexpected conclusions. Reading O. Henry's books allowed one to experience the characters' inner psychological feelings on a deep level. *The Last Leaf*, the narrative under analysis, caused viewers to reflect deeply on the lives of the characters. His work was extremely straightforward and easy for readers to understand since he used American slang and colloquial language. Readers were often taken aback by the last words since their expectations of the tales' plots frequently did not match the actual conclusion. The reader could have felt as if they had missed a significant plot point. The story's primary themes, according to one analysis, were camaraderie, optimism, and the protagonists' willpower. The story's two main tenets were Behrman's confidence that his masterpiece will be created at some point in his life and Johnsy's idea that the final leaf of the ivy vine was connected to her imminent death.

3. The Last Leaf by O. Henry

O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* is one of the finest sentimental stories set against the great backdrop of Greenwich Village, New York City. A story so immersed in hope, friendship, sacrifice, and the power of art to inspire is a masterpiece indeed (Pirmanovna, 2023). The story revolves around two young women, Johnsy and Sue, artists staying together in a small studio. She also continues to suffer from pneumonia and becomes transfixed on a vine outside the window of her room, believing she will succumb to pneumonia when the last leaf from the vine falls. Her hopelessness over her illness is overruled by her obsession with the vine as she counts down the number of leaves she believes actually signify her fate.



Figure 1: LAST LEAF BY O. HENRY

Sue cares, but then she turns it all over to Behrman, the eccentric old aged neighbor, who is one of those gruff but compassionate artists with a bad dream of his having always died with an unwritten masterpiece (Gulmira, 2024). In a surprising act of sacrifice and love, Behrman paints a realistic leaf on the wall to make it appear as though the last leaf remained on the vine. Johnsy, now believing that the last leaf survived the storm, finds new motivation to live. Unfortunately, Behrman dies shortly thereafter from exposure to the cold, having painted the leaf on the stormy night.

➤ **Hope, Sacrifice, and Resilience**

In *The Last Leaf*, hope plays a central role, especially when intertwined with the theme of resilience in the face of despair. Its most pivotal act is the sacrifice embodied in Behrman. At the point when the young artist, Johnsy, becomes gravely ill and loses all hope of recovery, she believes that her fate is tied to the falling of leaves from a vine outside her window. With every leaf fall, she feels like leaving life. However, for Johnsy, Behrman, a failed but devoted artist since ever who had often dreamt of painting something wonderful, does the impossible by painting a leaf on the wall to keep hope afresh (Hanifa, 2023).

Behrman painting a leaf on the wall, though not a very simple act, symbolizes the great human spirit that will not give up before any adversities. He gives Johnsy the strength to live from the pulp of his chest. His last act was the greatest masterpiece-but world failed to recognize it; he died from pneumonia on a cold night spent painting the leaf. Therefore, in the end, the story highlights that sometimes the smallest actions of kindness and selflessness can influence profoundly but the world never acknowledges this fact. Behrman's sacrifice proves the resilience of hope and the human bond, as his acts of love and courage inspire strength in others during their darkest time.

➤ **Human Values and Symbolism**

The Last Leaf by O. Henry is saturated with symbolism: painted leaf symbolizes great strength and power in overcoming adversity, artistry, and transformation. What is merely a leaf painted over by Behrman becomes a symbol of endurance when she hangs it. It talks about the continuation of life but also the will to survive even with such huge odds against them. For Johnsy, the leaf symbolizes her decision to live, reminding her always to hold on to life, even when she is at her weakest.

The final act of love and altruism by Behrman is the very essence of human selflessness. The whole course of the story portrays Behrman as a person who has not been successful with his art (Ummah, 2020). Still, his last masterpiece is an expression of unconditional care for another person. Such an act shows the powers of human beings who can give and offer, even from an empty hand. In that sense, this is much, much more than just art-the leaf gives deeper value of humanity and depicts how people will go to reach hope and give comfort to others. This story is highly central to the theme of human values; in fact, to the theme of values itself, where the message refers to that even the smallest act of kindness leaves the most permanent mark in the minds of others.

➤ **Social and Ethnic Implications**

The Last Leaf also has its own subtlety because it defines the social and ethnic context of characters, especially in the framework of the multicultural Greenwich Village in New York. This locality, highlighted by a very strong artistic community and a multiple variety of immigrants, provides an implicit commentary on the struggles experienced by immigrant societies. Many of these experiences are reflected in the characters of the story, most pointedly Behrman, who seeks life in the United States for a better future but is struck by severe economic and social hardships after immigrating to America (Henry, 2005).

Probably a German or Eastern European, an old immigrant who makes a living through his art because he has not find his livelihood. His characterization can be thought of as representative of the generation of immigrants that came to America with dreams of success but met bitter realities, in most cases working in isolation or under no recognition. In Behrman's story, O. Henry refers to

the larger immigrant experience: how communities unite then coalesce into tight-knit groups where solidarity and camaraderie are necessary for survival.

O. Henry depicts Behrman's altruism in his situation of poverty and failed artistic aspirations with deep sympathy for workers and immigrants. The story suggests people of all backgrounds do have more in common than their differences, relating in the same unifying ways of struggles and, dreams and desires for a human bond. The empathic attitude toward the lower class and other slighted groups underscores the even broader message O. Henry presents about the universal need for kindness and the strength human bonds carry above ethnic and social differences (KAVITA THAPLIYAL).

4. The Selfish Giant by Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant*, is the change-of-heart tale of a giant who must learn to be compassionate and selfless through means of interaction with children. At first, the giant selfishly erects a wall around his beautiful garden, keeping all of the children out, and thus, the garden falls into a cold, endless winter. However, upon allowing the children back into his garden, it blooms warm and beautiful once more to portray the change of heart in the giant. As days turn into years, the giant grows old, and in one winter, he encounters a small boy who has wounds on his hands and feet, like the Christ figure, inviting him to a heavenly garden. Through vivid symbolisms and Christian undertones, the above-mentioned story still points to the importance of love, community, and redemption as the giant, in effect, found peace through selfless love and compassion.

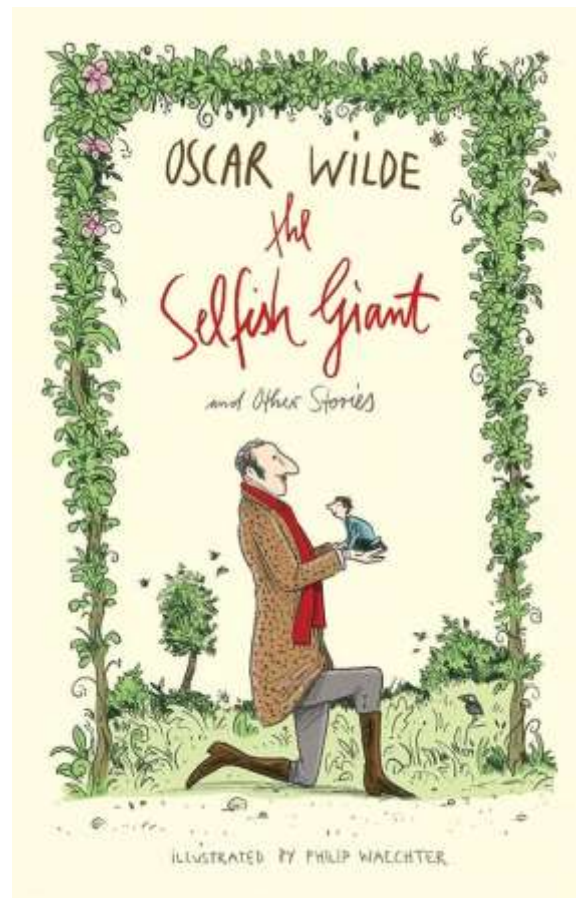


Figure 2: Selfish Giant by Oscar Wilde

➤ Transformation and Redemption

At its heart, *The Selfish Giant* is a touching tale of self-transformation and redemption which finds all its strength in love and human bonds. The story starts with the Giant representing selfishness and loneliness. He builds a wall around his stunningly beautiful garden and does not let anyone enter it, especially children. This act of egocentricity puts the garden in perpetual winter, which simply means the emotional chill and moral slumber inside the Giant's heart. He initially is happy about his isolation from the rest of the world (Pulatova, 2022).

However, he soon starts to notice the delights and innocence of the children as they redeem his garden. It is this state of realization, created by their presence, laughter, and play, that enlightens him and will eventually change his life. This garden, locked inside winter, blooms again inside the heart of the frozen Giant; it represents the change that had taken place within him. The turning from selfishness to compassion shows that redemption cannot come from isolated thoughts or selfish desires but from love, kindness, and acceptance of others. It is the last, benevolent act of the Giant to allow the children into his garden which sets underway his redemption on spiritual as well as moral grounds. It is from Wilde's representation that it has been demonstrated how one can find harmony and enjoy peace with oneself if love, openness, and selfless giving are demonstrated; and how redemption happens only through loving selfless giving and sacrifice for others.

➤ **Love and Innocence**

Using such subtle themes, the Selfish Giant postures love and innocence. Here, love and innocence are portrayed as elements of purity, goodness, and change. Comparing the nature of the Giant with that of the children underlines the power of redemption provided by love. In innocence, the children symbolized a natural mode of love untouched by selfishness, greed, or pride (Tulei, 2021). They spread joy and life everywhere with them, and their presence alone in the garden revives it. On the other hand, this Giant begins the story consumed by greed and the desire for solitude, rejecting the children and, thus, the purity and warmth of love.

It is through interaction with the children that the Giant learns the value of love and innocence. Laughter and playfulness are shown to him, demonstrating the joys of selflessness, of giving rather than taking. The garden now comes alive with vibrancy as it opens its gates to the children; just like the Giant's heart does, he too becomes a man of kindness, generosity, and care. Then Wilde applies the innocence of the children to transformative purpose. It is obvious that true love in its pure form is just the balm that heals and brings new life even to the most hardened hearts.

➤ **Christian Symbolism and Moral Lesson**

Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* is replete with Christian imagery, primarily as the protagonist himself, the small boy with the wounded hands and feet. Evidently, this character is going to typify Christ, and his visit in the novel should make the Giant realize the selflessness, sacrifice, and changing power of love. The boy, maltreated and ignored by the Giant at first, comes to symbolize ideals of Christian love and forgiveness. He sports wounds similar to Christ's, and his presence in the garden suggests the presence of salvation and redemption for the Giant.

The Giant is taught by the boy's words and actions that it is not the gratification of one's ego and isolation that truly define a human being, but rather selfless concern and care for others. The revelation at the end that the boy was a figure of Christ emphasizes the moral lesson: love, selflessness, and forgiveness beget redemption. Above all, the actions of letting his heart open up to the children and even allowing them into his garden reveal the Christian virtues of charity, humility, and sacrifice on the part of the Giant. Thus, the story reveals redemption and salvation that are open for all, achieved through the selfless act of loving others. The lesson is clear: love is giving, and so happiness is in giving-not in taking-and love is the path to salvation.

➤ **The Role of Nature and Seasons**

Nature has a significant symbolic role in *The Selfish Giant*, reflecting the Giant's emotional and moral states. The garden, with all its changing seasons, becomes symbolic of the change within the Giant. When the Giant first locks himself off from the children, his garden remains locked within an eternal winter, a state which reflects the coldness of his emotions and his isolation. The coarse frozen landscape is, in itself a direct reflection of the Giant's heart; icy, frozen, and selfish.

And with the opening of the Giant's heart to the children, spring returned to the garden in quite the same manner as love restored warmth. The flowers in bloom, the birds returning, and the grass alive symbolized not only the physical transformation of the garden but also the spiritual and moral rebirth of the Giant. His preparedness to open the door for the children reflected his own opening heart. Thus, the seasons offer an extremely poignant metaphor for the journey of the Giant emotionally and morally-from winter into selfishness to springtime into selflessness and love. Natural creations illustrate, for Wilde, the importance of human activities and emotions entwined with the patterns of life and how acts of kindness could make a huge transformation both in the individual and on earth.

➤ **Implications and Morality**

Kindness, generosity, and community are the central moral lessons that are conveyed in *The Selfish Giant*. Wilde's story contests the destructive forces of isolation and individualism that bring loneliness and misery only. Locked in a barren, cold world, is the Giant, who isolated himself from the world. His very liveliness is quenched by him, and children are rejected. On the other hand,

he finds exhilaration, warmth, and belongingness if he opens his heart to others. It suggests that people attain their fulfillment in life not in loneliness and individualism but in connection, love, and concern for one another.

The lesson that can be drawn from the transformation of the Giant is that happiness is achieved by human acts of kindness, selflessness, and love, as held by Wilde. Such could be said about the rewards of liberality and openness—the Giant's pleasure in the children's company and the reviving of warmth and life into his garden. The story of Wilde reminds of how love is not only a living key to personal redemption but also to the vibrancy and prospering of the societal community. Truly, it is through our care for others and embracing love in its absolute form, that it finds actual happiness and meaning in life.

5. The Rattrap by Selma Lagerlöf

The author of Selma Lagerlöf's novel, *The Rattrap*, depicts themes of isolation, redemption, and the magical power of kindness. The story revolves around an unnamed peddler who, wandering from town to town, believes the whole world is a vast rattrap—a trap that appears to present material riches but indeed leads to their downfall. He has spent much of his life in loneliness and cynicism. In that, he had found comfort in his pessimistic attitude towards others by believing that people are usually greedy. In fact, on one particular night, when coming to an elderly woman's house for shelter, he is unexpectedly welcomed to take food and insists that the young man must spend the night (Wilde, 2024). The next day, he is mistaken for some acquaintance by the ironmaster and is invited into his mansion where, though he hesitates, he is treated courteously and with care.



Figure 3: Selma Lagerlöf

This softens the peddler's heart as he begins to be touched with real pity, especially by the ironmaster's daughter, Edla, who treated him like a respected guest. He is touched by her sweetness and is deeply moved by it. In it, he transforms himself realizing that human connection and compassionate feeling are worth more than the material wealth that he longed for. Finally, he returns the money and valuables he had taken from the ironmaster, along with a letter of thanks, proving that his outlook has indeed changed. The story winds up with the redemption of the peddler, for it is kindness and compassion that will transform human beings and free them from alienation and pessimism.

➤ Isolation and Cynicism

At the start of the novel, the peddler lives in physical as well as emotional isolation. The fact that he thinks the world is a "rattrap" reflects his cynical, misanthropic view of society: rife only with human greed and manipulation in social relations. He does not live among them anymore as he thinks others are interested only in material things and selfish interests.

➤ Redemption Through Kindness

One of the themes here is redemption through human goodness. It all begins when the peddler is treated with kindness by the old woman and later by the ironmaster's daughter, Edla. In this way of generosity and respect, his cynicism is overcome and,

ultimately, the peddler rediscover self-worth. Lagerlöf hints that even the coldest of people can be changed if they are exposed to real acts of kindness.

➤ The Trap of Materialism

Lagerlöf also attacks the materialism in society through the rattrap itself. The peddler is convinced that this world is a trap which attracts people to the promises of wealth and power but then snatches them away into avarice and corruption. However, events in the tale teach the peddler that it is human connection and good virtues that are dearer to humans than the riches of this world and that man truly becomes free when emancipated emotionally and morally and not from material things.

➤ Transformation and Hope

The moral center of the story is that it's never too late to change. Just as redemption blooms in the journey of this peddler from cynicism and bitterness, so transformation underscores the facts—there is always hope that through these small kindnesses, empathy, and understanding, one can break the chains of confinement and tread upon a new path with purpose. There is, above all, the figure of Edla, and it is especially at this point that she deploys a real compassion for him to be able to discover himself in good.

6. Conclusion

In *The Last Leaf*, *The Selfish Giant*, and *The Rattrap*, O. Henry, Oscar Wilde, and Selma Lagerlöf describe the transformative power of human values like kindness, empathy, and selflessness in such a way that one can see how compassion can cross even personal and cultural boundaries. All the stories reveal, through the death of Behrman, the redemption of the Giant through innocence, and the transformation of the peddler through kindness, that there exists universal possibility of changed and healing human relationships. Hope themes of redemption and connection, underscored through ethnic and social contexts or character, show that no matter background, empathetic and generous behavior can bring personal and collective growth fosters mutual humanity across all divides.

kindness can save even the most cynical people.

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