

Disease, Despair and Compassion: A Medical Humanities Perspective on The Last Leaf

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of medicine and literature through the framework of Medical Humanities in The Last Leaf. The short story portrays the illness of Johnsy, who suffers from Pneumonia, and reveals how psychological and emotional factors influence medical recovery. The study analyzes the relationship between illness, patient psychology, and healing through concepts such as psychosomatic response, prognosis, empathy, and narrative therapy. The story illustrates how hope and compassion can function as therapeutic elements alongside medical treatment. By examining Johnsy's mental state and Behrman's sacrifice, the paper demonstrates how literary narratives provide insights into patient experience, caregiving ethics, and emotional healing. This research contributes to the field of Medical Humanities by highlighting how literature can deepen our understanding of illness and recovery beyond biomedical perspectives.

Keywords: Medical Humanities, Narrative Medicine, Illness Narrative, Pneumonia, Psychological Healing, Patient Experience

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and medicine has become an important area of interdisciplinary research within the field of Medical Humanities. Literary texts often portray illness, suffering, and healing in ways that reveal the emotional and psychological dimensions of disease.

The Last Leaf presents the story of Johnsy, a young artist suffering from pneumonia, whose declining mental state worsens her physical condition. The narrative demonstrates that illness is not only a biological disorder but also a psychological and social experience. The story highlights the importance of hope, empathy, and caregiving in the healing process.

This study analyzes the representation of illness, psychological distress, and narrative healing in the story using the theoretical framework of Medical Humanities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars in Medical Humanities emphasize the importance of illness narratives in understanding patient experiences. Research in Narrative Medicine suggests that storytelling helps healthcare professionals understand the emotional and psychological struggles of patients.

Several literary critics have examined *The Last Leaf* in terms of symbolism and sacrifice, focusing on the painted leaf as a representation of hope. However, limited research

has explored the story through a medical perspective, particularly regarding the interaction between psychological resilience and clinical recovery.

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the story through medical concepts such as psychosomatic illness, patient psychology, and therapeutic empathy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Medical Humanities, which integrates medical science with literary analysis.

Medical Humanities explores themes such as:

- illness narratives
- patient experience
- emotional dimensions of disease
- ethics of caregiving

The concept of Narrative Medicine highlights the importance of understanding patients' stories in medical practice. Through narrative interpretation, literature provides insight into the human aspects of illness that are often overlooked in clinical medicine.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach.

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Methods used include:

- Close reading of the literary text
- Interdisciplinary analysis combining literature and medical theory
- Examination of medical terminology and illness representation

The study focuses on how medical concepts such as diagnosis, prognosis, psychological resilience, and healing are represented within the narrative structure.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

REPRESENTATION OF ILLNESS

Johnsy's illness, pneumonia, represents a serious respiratory infection affecting the lungs. The story describes symptoms such as weakness, fever, and respiratory distress, illustrating the physical impact of disease.

However, the narrative emphasizes that Johnsy's declining **mental state** significantly worsens her condition.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND PSYCHOSOMATIC ILLNESS

Johnsy develops a fatalistic belief that she will die when the last ivy leaf falls. This belief reflects symptoms associated with Depression and demonstrates the influence of psychological despair on physical health.

In medical terms, this can be interpreted as a psychosomatic response, where emotional distress contributes to physical deterioration.

HOPE AS THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

The painted leaf created by Behrman acts as a symbolic therapeutic intervention.

When Johnsy believes the leaf has survived the storm, her psychological outlook improves, leading to renewed hope and motivation to recover. This demonstrates how mental resilience can positively affect the healing process.

ETHICS OF CARE AND COMPASSION

Behrman's act of painting the leaf represents the ethical dimension of caregiving. His sacrifice ultimately results in his own death from pneumonia, highlighting the role of compassion, empathy, and altruism in the healing process.

The story thus emphasizes the humanistic values that are central to Medical Humanities.

FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that:

- Illness in the story is both biological and psychological.
- The patient's mental attitude influences medical recovery.
- Hope and compassion act as therapeutic forces.
- Literature can provide valuable insights into patient experiences and medical ethics.

CONCLUSION

The Last Leaf demonstrates that healing is not solely dependent on medical treatment but also on emotional support, empathy, and hope. Through the framework of Medical Humanities, the story reveals the complex relationship between physical illness, psychological resilience, and human compassion.

The study highlights the importance of integrating literary perspectives into medical discourse, as narratives of illness offer deeper insights into the human experience of disease and recovery.

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