



INDIAN SCHOOL AL WADI AL KABIR

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

CLASS IX
2021-22

TOPIC: THE LAST LEAF

STUDY NOTES

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

"The Last Leaf" is a short story by O. Henry. It is set in Greenwich Village, New York City in the last part of the 1800s. The story takes us back to a time when the Village was populated by groups of newly arrived immigrants, bohemians and artists with modest and unreliable incomes.

SYNOPSIS

Johnsy and Sue are artists who move into Greenwich Village in New York City. As winter approaches and the weather gets colder, Johnsy becomes ill with pneumonia. She gets so sick that she believes that when the last leaf falls from the vine outside her window, she will die.

An old artist, named Behrman, who lives in the same building as the girls, braves a storm one night to paint a leaf on the wall — a leaf that will never fall. Cold and wet from painting in the icy rain, he catches pneumonia and dies. This gives Johnsy the hope to survive her illness, and it also creates the masterpiece Behrman had always dreamed of painting.

SOME IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER

Johnsy insists on monitoring the progress of the falling leaves outside her window. She insists on having the shade lifted to see if the leaf is still there. She is mercilessly pursuing her own death.

He never painted anything of note in his life, yet he uses his talent to save Johnsy's life. Behrman's leaf is realistic enough to fool Johnsy; however, it is a masterpiece in what it accomplishes as well as in its artistic worth.

The irony is that Behrman succumbed to pneumonia in the process of saving Johnsy from this same fatal illness.

Self-fulfilling prophecy means that people can bring about a situation or condition by predicting it for themselves. Because Johnsy has decided she will die when the last leaf falls, she has a tenuous hold on life. The sight of the "last leaf," clinging to the vine, encourages her to hold onto her own life. Friendship can give rise to devotion and even self-sacrifice. Both Sue and Behrman are dedicated to Johnsy and are willing to go to great lengths to help her. Some students may say that Johnsy is the main character since the plot revolves around her illness. Others may say that Behrman is the main character because his heroic action saves her. Sue may be considered the heroine because of her selfless devotion to her friend.

O. Henry is very affectionate toward his characters. He is sensitive to their ordeals and is protective of them. O. Henry tells us ordinary people are really not so ordinary and that we should appreciate their problems and efforts.

THEME / CENTRAL IDEA

The story is based on the theme that life is precious and faith and hope should never be lost. We come across many hindrances in life and they should be overcome by fighting back in high spirits. Depression can lead to disaster even when the situation is not bad. Another theme that runs through the story is that devoted friendship can be succour during times of crisis. A minor theme of the story is the importance of art in human lives. The old painter knowingly sacrifices his life in his urge to create a masterpiece. Very often, we find people having a negative attitude toward life. They lose interest in life and these causes suffering to people surrounding them. They are even ready to lose their life as life has lost all meaning for them. The story tells the need to have a positive attitude towards life so that we can make it as fruitful as possible. Sacrificing our life for the sake of others is also a theme in this story. Painter Behrman sacrifices his life for Johnsy.

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JUSTIFICATION OF THE TITLE

The title "The Last Leaf" raises the curiosity of the reader regarding a happening or an event towards some kind of 'end'. The word 'last' reflects the main idea of the story which is the last breath of Johnsy. The last leaf becomes the last hope of survival and keeps the reader hooked until the end. Throughout, the last ivy leaf remains the central point. In the early part of the story it remains associated with Johnsy's ailment and depression while later on, it conveys the message of courage, hope and optimism. The last leaf saves Johnsy's life and fulfils Behrman's lifelong dream to paint a masterpiece. However, it also turns out to be his last masterpiece, too. Hence the title is very apt. The leaves of the ivy creeper are falling fast. Johnsy, the sick girl, feels that she would die as soon as the last leaf would fall from the ivy creeper. One night, only one leaf remains on the ivy. It would fall the same night. The old artist, Behrman, decides to go out in the rain and paint an artificial leaf as soon as the last leaf fall. So, since Johnsy makes her life depends upon the last leaf, the title is appropriate. The last leaf on the ivy helps one person to survive but results in the death of another person.

MESSAGE

The chief message that this story gives is the spirit of sacrifice we need to have in our life. The old artist, Behrman sacrificed his life so that Johnsy could live. In this process, he also achieved his ambition of painting a masterpiece. The other message is that we should have a positive attitude in life. Johnsy was under depression and she felt her life was linked to the leaves on the ivy creeper. This prevented her from getting better from her illness. She was also causing harm to her friend, Sue. Had she adopted a positive attitude, Behrman would not have died. Our thinking and attitude affect the lives of other people too.

CHARACTER SKETCHES

Behrman: Behrman is a 60-years-old painter. He lived on the ground floor of the house where Sue and Johnsy lived. He had a lifelong dream to paint a masterpiece. Sue told him about the condition of Johnsy. Johnsy felt that she would die, once the last leaf fell from the ivy creeper. Behrman thought of a plan to save Johnsy. He went out in the rainy and stormy night and painted a picture of a leaf on the ivy. Johnsy saw the leaf the next morning and got back her will to live. But Behrman died of pneumonia because he had been out all night in the cold. Thus Behrman made the supreme sacrifice of giving up his life for the sake of another person. He was a great soul. In this process, he achieved his ambition of painting a masterpiece.

Johnsy: Johnsy was a young artist who lived with her friend Sue. She fell ill very seriously and had pneumonia. She had the fancy idea that she would die once the last leaf on the ivy creeper, outside her window, would fall down. The leaves were falling down very fast as the weather was stormy. Only one leaf remained. She felt that the last leaf will fall in the night and she would die. But Behrman went out in the cold night and painted a leaf on the wall. Johnsy saw this leaf the next morning and got back her will to live. But her foolish attitudes lead to the death of Behrman. She was a weak-hearted woman.

Sue: Sue was a young artist who lived with Johnsy. She tried her best to feel Johnsy better and help in to get over her illness. But Johnsy would not listen to her. She was adamant. Sue sought the help of Behrman to solve the issue. Behrman solved the problem by painting a leaf on the wall. So we find that Sue is a true friend of Johnsy.