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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall study

- The famous short story *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry.
- The characters' analysis of the story.
- An introductory information about the present Poem and Poet
- The text of the story
- The critical analysis and tone of the story
- The diction and style of the story
- The plot, setting and characters of the story

4.1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

O. Henry (1862-1910) was born under the name William Sydney Porter in North Carolina in 1862. His father was a physician. He lost his mother when he was only three years old. After his mother's death he and his father went to live with his paternal grandmother. As a student, he was an avid reader and read classics. He was also a skilled guitar and mandolin player. He began to work in a drugstore of his uncle in 1879. Then in 1881, he became a licensed pharmacist.

O. Henry moved to Texas in 1882 hoping to get rid of persistent cough that he had developed. He began to live in a sheep ranch, learned shepherding, cooking and baby-sitting. He tried different jobs from pharmacy to drafting, journalism and banking. In 1891, he joined the First National Bank in Austin

as a book-keeper and teller. In 1894, he was charged with embezzlement of funds and he lost his job.

After losing his bank job, he devoted full time to the weekly *The Rolling Stone* that published his sketches and short stories. He relocated to Houston with his family in 1895 and began working as a columnist, reporter and cartoonist at *The Houston Post* drawing monthly remuneration of 25 dollars. In 1896, he was arrested for embezzlement at the First National Bank. He took an impetuous step and escaped on July 6, 1896 a day before his trial to Honduras.

Sydney Porter stayed in a hotel in Peru and wrote *Cabbages and Kings* which was published in 1904. It is one of his notable works that included his short stories that displayed facets of life in a crippled town of Central America. He had coined a word 'banana republic' to depict unstable Country of Latin America. In 1897, he heard the news of his wife dying of tuberculosis, so he returned to Austin to be with his wife and family. His father-in-law posted a bail so that he could remain with his wife until her death in 1897. Then he was sentenced to five years imprisonment. At the prison hospital, he worked as a pharmacist and he did not have to live in a cell in the jail.

During this period, he wrote stories which made him quite popular. In 1902, he was released from the jail and went to New York City where he began writing short stories under the pen name O. Henry. He wrote one short story every week for a newspaper in addition to other stories for magazines. His popular collections of short stories include: *The Four Million* (1906) *Heart of the West* (1907) *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907) *The Gentle Grafter* (1908) *The Voice of the City* (1908) *Options* (1909) *Whirligigs* (1910) and *Strictly Business* (1910).

O. Henry's representative collection of short stories was *The Four Million* which stood for New York City and its people. Many stories of this collection depict the everyday lives of the Manhattan inhabitants. O. Henry was skilled in plotting short stories writing in humorous, witty style with surprise endings. Even after his death, O. Henry's stories continued to be collected under the following titles.

1. *Sixes and Sevens* (1911)
2. *Rolling Stones* (1912)
3. *Waifs and Strays* (1917)
4. *O. Henryana* (1920)
5. *Letter to Lithopolis* (1922)
6. *Postscripts* (1923)
7. *O. Henry Encore* (1939)

O. Henry's stories are witty and often lightly humorous. They have twisted endings, life-like characters and realistic setting. His famous story *The Gift of the Magi* is about a young married couple who want to buy Christmas gifts for each other. The wife sells her long beautiful hair to buy a nice chain for her husband's watch. The husband sells the watch to buy lively combs for his wife. *A Retrieved Reformation* is about a safecracker Jimmy Valentine who saves the life of a girl by using his safe cracking expertise. *The Cop and the Anthem* is about New York City hobo who attempts to save himself from

terrible cold by getting arrested and sent to jail. He hears the Church anthem that makes him decide to get out of criminal life. But the police officer arrested him for his suspicious wandering near the Church gate. The court sends him to jail for three months the very next morning.

O. Henry's writing has vivacity, variety and interest. He employs simple, day-to-day speech patterns and rhythm of common folks. His diction is pungent and glittering with an eccentric symbolism. His vocabulary contains a lot of slang words and phrases. His was the most original talent. There is a fine blending of technical excellence, sparkling, wit, abundant humour and fertile imagination.

Towards the end of his life, things began to fallout. His last years were darkened by alcoholism, ill-health and financial problems. In 1907, he married Sara Lindsay Coleman but the marriage was not a happy one and they separated after one year. O. Henry died of cirrhosis of liver on June 5, 1910 in New York. The funeral was held in New York city but he was buried in North Carolina, the state of his birth.

The 'O. Henry Award' is given every year for remarkable short stories in his memory. The federal court house where he was convicted is named as O. Henry Hall. A film was made in 1952 featuring his five stories called *O. Henry's Full House*. The episode based on *The Cop and the Anthem* earned high critical acclaim. It was started by Charles Laughton and Marilyn Monroe. The other stories included in the films were, *The Clarion Call*, *The Last Leaf*, *The Ransom of Redchief* and *The Gift of the Magi*.

In 1962, The Soviet Postal Service issued a stamp commemorating O. Henry's 100th birthday. In 2012, the US Postal service issued a stamp commemorating the 150th anniversary of O. Henry's birth.

4.2 ABOUT THE STORY

The Last Leaf by O. Henry is one of the most acclaimed and widely read short stories. The story begins with sketchy background of the old Greenwich Village where artists have their studios in crisscrossing streets. A traveller would lose his way in these mazy streets. The description of the streets reflects queer, psychological morbidity of the place.

Then the story focuses on the main theme of artist duo Sue and Johnsy. They had met at a hotel and found themselves sharing certain common tastes. Both were aspiring painters who had come to try their luck in New York. They decided to share the apartment living together. Then comes winter with extreme cold, rain and wind Johnsy becomes the victim of pneumonia. The doctor examines her and tells Sue that Johnsy won't have much chance of survival if she does not have a strong will to live, Johnsy had already lost hope to live. She awaited her death watching the falling leaves of an ivy vine on a brick wall nearby. She watched and counts the leaves thinking that she would die with the fall of the last leaf.

Sue scolds her for her stupid belief but Johnsy's mind is gripped by the falling of the last leaf and her death. Sue tells this to Behrman, an old painter who had nurtured the dream of painting a masterpiece. He was a frustrated artist who survived by painting ads and posters. To save young Johnsy, the old Behrman painted the last leaf on the wall after all the leaves had fallen. It was a rainy night and he climbed the ladder with a lantern in his hand and painted his masterpiece.

The painted leaf inspired Johnsy to live and she began to recover soon. Sue told Johnsy that old Behrman had died of pneumonia as he had painted the moveless last leaf on the brick wall on a rainy and windy cold night. She said that it was his real masterpiece.

Behrman sacrificed his own life to save Johnsy, proving that art triumphs over death. The ironical twist to the plot makes the story very interesting. It comes unexpectedly resulting into tragic-comic note.

The Last Leaf is a perfect short story with brevity compactness and neatness. All the elements of the story-plot, characters, dialogue, setting and description are organically connected with one another. There is an ironical twist at the end of the story which is both surprising and convincing. The story epitomizes the Christian parable of Resurrection and sacrifice. The story *The Last Leaf* displays O. Henry's writing skills compact plot, terse dialogues that suit the speakers and twisted ending. Behrman's chivalric action forms the main theme of the short story. Sue and Johnsy's close bonding represents true and sincere friendship. O. Henry has employed sound imagery and sight imagery very effectively. Howling wind and beating rain express sound imagery while Johnsy's watching of the falling leaves from the ivy vine through the window displays sight imagery. *The Last Leaf* is a story of passion, hope and sacrifice with a message that real art is human love and sacrifice.

4.3 TEXT OF THE STORY

In a little district west of Washington Square the streets have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called "places." These "places" make strange angles and curves. One Street crosses itself a time or two. An artist once discovered a valuable possibility in this street. Suppose a collector with a bill for paints, paper and canvas should, in traversing this route, suddenly meet himself coming back, without a cent having been paid on account!

So, to quaint old Greenwich Village the art people soon came prowling, hunting for north windows and eighteenth-century gables and Dutch attics and low rents. Then they imported some pewter mugs and a chafing dish or two from Sixth Avenue, and became a "colony."

At the top of a squatty, three-story brick Sue and Johnsy had their studio. "Johnsy" was familiar for Joanna. One was from Maine; the other from California. They had met at the table d'hôte of an Eighth Street "Delmonico's," and found their tastes in art, chicory salad and bishop sleeves so congenial that the joint studio resulted.

That was in May. In November a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called Pneumonia, stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy fingers. Over on the east side this ravager strode boldly, smiting his victims by scores, but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown "places."

Mr. Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman. A mite of a little woman with blood thinned by California zephyrs was hardly fair game for the red-fisted, short-breathed old duffer. But Johnsy he smote; and she lay, scarcely moving, on her painted iron bedstead, looking through the small Dutch window-panes at the blank side of the next brick house.

One morning the busy doctor invited Sue into the hallway with a shaggy, grey eyebrow.

"She has one chance in - let us say, ten," he said, as he shook down the

mercury in his clinical thermometer. “And that chance is for her to want to live. This way people have of lining-u on the side of the undertaker makes the entire pharmacopoeia look silly. Your little lady has made up her mind that she’s not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?”

“She - she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples someday.” said Sue.

“Paint? - bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking twice - a man for instance?”

“A man?” said Sue, with a jew’s-harp twang in her voice. “Is a man worth - but, no, doctor; there is nothing of the kind.”

“Well, it is the weakness, then,” said the doctor. “I will do all that science, so far as it may filter through my efforts, can accomplish. But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession I subtract 50 per cent from the curative power of medicines. If you will get her to ask one question about the new winter styles in cloak sleeves I will promise you a one-in-five chance for her, instead of one in ten.”

After the doctor had gone Sue went into the workroom and cried a Japanese napkin to a pulp. Then she swaggered into Johnsy’s room with her drawing board, whistling ragtime.

Johnsy lay, scarcely making a ripple under the bedclothes, with her face toward the window. Sue stopped whistling, thinking she was asleep.

She arranged her board and began a pen-and-ink drawing to illustrate a magazine story. Young artists must pave their way to Art by drawing pictures for magazine stories that young authors write to pave their way to Literature.

As Sue was sketching a pair of elegant horseshow riding trousers and a monocle of the figure of the hero, an Idaho cowboy, she heard a low sound, several times repeated. She went quickly to the bedside.

Johnsy’s eyes were open wide. She was looking out the window and counting - counting backward.

“Twelve,” she said, and little later “eleven”; and then “ten,” and “nine”; and then “eight” and “seven”, almost together.

Sue look solicitously out of the window. What was there to count? There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen, and the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall. The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine until its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks.

“What is it, dear?” asked Sue.

“Six,” said Johnsy, in almost a whisper. “They’re falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It made my head ache to count them. But now it’s easy. There goes another one. There are only five left now.”

“Five what, dear? Tell your Sudie.”

“Leaves. On the ivy vine. When the last one falls I must go, too. I’ve known that for three days. Didn’t the doctor tell you?”

“Oh, I never heard of such nonsense,” complained Sue, with magnificent scorn. “What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well? And you used to love that vine so, you naughty girl. Don’t be a goosey. Why, the doctor

told me this morning that your chances for getting well real soon were - let's see exactly what he said - he said the chances were ten to one! Why, that's almost as good a chance as we have in New York when we ride on the street cars or walk past a new building. Try to take some broth now, and let Sudie go back to her drawing, so she can sell the editor man with it, and buy port wine for her sick child, and pork chops for her greedy self."

"You needn't get any more wine," said Johnsy, keeping her eyes fixed out the window. "There goes another. No, I don't want any broth. That leaves just four. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I'll go, too."

"Johnsy, dear," said Sue, bending over her, "will you promise me to keep your eyes closed, and not look out the window until I am done working? I must hand those drawings in by to-morrow. I need the light, or I would draw the shade down."

"Couldn't you draw in the other room?" asked Johnsy, coldly.

"I'd rather be here by you," said Sue. "Beside, I don't want you to keep looking at those silly ivy leaves."

"Tell me as soon as you have finished," said Johnsy, closing her eyes, and lying white and still as fallen statue, "because I want to see the last one fall. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking. I want to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves."

"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call Behrman up to be my model for the old hermit miner. I'll not be gone a minute. Don't try to move 'til I come back."

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor beneath them. He was past sixty and had a Michael Angelo's Moses beard curling down from the head of a satyr along with the body of an imp. Behrman was a failure in art. Forty years he had wielded the brush without getting near enough to touch the hem of his Mistress's robe. He had been always about to paint a masterpiece, but had never yet begun it. For several years he had painted nothing except now and then a daub in the line of commerce or advertising. He earned a little by serving as a model to those young artists in the colony who could not pay the price of a professional. He drank gin to excess, and still talked of his coming masterpiece. For the rest he was a fierce little old man, who scoffed terribly at softness in any one, and who regarded himself as especial mastiff-in-waiting to protect the two young artists in the studio above.

Sue found Behrman smelling strongly of juniper berries in his dimly lighted den below. In one corner was a blank canvas on an easel that had been waiting there for twenty-five years to receive the first line of the masterpiece. She told him of Johnsy's fancy, and how she feared she would, indeed, light and fragile as a leaf herself, float away, when her slight hold upon the world grew weaker.

Old Behrman, with his red eyes plainly streaming, shouted his contempt and derision for such idiotic imaginings.

"Vass!" he cried. "Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off from a confounded vine? I haf not heard of such a thing. No, I will not bose as a model for your fool hermit-dunderhead. Vy do you allow dot silly pusiness to come in der brain of her? Ach, dot poor leetle Miss Yohnsy."

"She is very ill and weak," said Sue, "and the fever has left her mind morbid

and full of strange fancies. Very well, Mr. Behrman, if you do not care to pose for me, you needn't. But I think you are a horrid old - old flibbertigibbet."

"You are just like a woman!" yelled Behrman. "Who said I will not pose? Go on. I come with you. For half an hour I have been trying to say that I am ready to pose. Gott! this is not any place in which one so good as Miss Yohnsy shall lie sick. Someday I will paint a masterpiece, and we shall all go away. Gott! yes."

Johnsy was sleeping when they went upstairs. Sue pulled the shade down to the window-sill, and motioned Behrman into the other room. In there they peered out the window fearfully at the ivy vine. Then they looked at each other for a moment without speaking. A persistent, cold rain was falling, mingled with snow. Behrman, in his old blue shirt, took his seat as the hermit miner on an upturned kettle for a rock.

When Sue awoke from an hour's sleep the next morning she found Johnsy with dull, wide-open eyes staring at the drawn green shade.

"Pull it up; I want to see," she ordered, in a whisper.

Wearily Sue obeyed.

But, lo! after the beating rain and fierce gusts of wind that had endured through the livelong night, there yet stood out against the brick wall one ivy leaf. It was the last one on the vine. Still dark green near its stem, with its serrated edges tinted with the yellow of dissolution and decay, it hung bravely from the branch some twenty feet above the ground.

"It is the last one," said Johnsy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall to-day, and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear, dear!" said Sue, leaning her worn face down to the pillow, "think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?"

But Johnsy did not answer. The loneliest thing in all the world is a soul when it is making ready to go on its mysterious, far journey. The fancy seemed to possess her more strongly as one by one the ties that bound her to friendship and to earth were loosed.

The day wore away, and even through the twilight they could see the lone ivy leaf clinging to its stem against the wall. And then, with the coming of the night the north wind was again loosed, while the rain still beat against the windows and pattered down from the low Dutch eaves.

When it was light enough Johnsy, the merciless, commanded that the shade be raised.

The ivy leaf was still there.

Johnsy lay for a long time looking at it. And then she called to Sue, who was stirring her chicken broth over the gas stove.

"I've been a bad girl, Sudie," said Johnsy. "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was. It is a sin to want to die. You may bring me a little broth now, and some milk with a little port in it, and - no; bring me a hand-mirror first, and then pack some pillows about me, and I will sit up and watch you cook."

And hour later she said:

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

The doctor came in the afternoon, and Sue had an excuse to go into the hallway as he left.

“Even chances,” said the doctor, taking Sue’s thin shaking hand in his. “With good nursing you’ll win. And now I must see another case I have downstairs. Behrman, his name is—some kind of artist, I believe. Pneumonia, too. He is old, weak man, and the attack is acute. There is no hope for him; but he goes to the hospital today to be made more comfortable.”

The next day the doctor said to Sue: “She’s out of danger. You’ve won. Nutrition and care now— that’s all.”

And that afternoon Sue came to the bed where Johnsy lay, contentedly knitting a very blue and very useless woolen shoulder scarf, and put one arm around her, pillows and all.

“I have something to tell you, white mouse,” she said. “Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was ill only two days. The janitor found him on the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes and clothing were wet through and icy cold. They couldn’t imagine where he had been on such a dreadful night. And then they found a lantern, still lighted, and a ladder that had been dragged from its place, and some scattered brushes, and a palette with a green and yellow colors mixed on it, and—look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. Didn’t you wonder why it never fluttered or moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it’s Behrman’s masterpiece—he painted it there the night the last leaf fell.”

- O. Henry

4.4 KEY WORDS

Quaint	: odd strange and attractive.
Greenwich Village	: District of Lower Manhattan borough in New York City, the home of painters and writers
Tabled ‘note	: Meal at fixed price.
Gables	: triangular part of the house below the roof.
Chicory salad	: Dish of uncooked herbs quite popular in America.
Bishop Sleeves	: Full Sleeves in lady’s dresses.
Mite	: Very small in size
Zephyr	: Gentle wind
Undertaker	: A person who arranges funerals and burials.
Pharmacopeia	: Book of medicinal prescriptions and directions for use
Ivy Vine	: Every green plant with dark shiny leaves.
Goosey	: Foolish person
Satyr	: Greek god of woods, represented as partly man and partly goat.
Juniper Berries	: Berries that give its characteristic flavor to gin.
Serrated	: Having a toothed edge like a saw.
Janitor	: A person hired to take care of a building.
Palette	: A painter’s dish for mixing colours.
Crazy	: mad, passionate

Traverse	: Travel across, go across
Prowl	: move about restlessly, slink, sneak
Congenial	: like-minded, kindred, compatible
Ravager	: Destroyer, destructive
Smite	: Strike with a firm blow
Chivalric	: Characteristic of the time of chivalry and knight hood.
Shaggy	: long, thick and unkempt
Pulp	: soft, wet, shapeless mass of material, mash
Illustrate	: to serve as an example, show demonstrate, adorn
Solicitously	: Carefully, attentively with concern
Bare	: open, uncovered
Dreary	: dull, drab, uninteresting, wearisome
Gnarled	: Rough, twisted and knotty
Imp	: a small, mischievous devil or sprite
Fierce	: ferocious, vicious, and untamed
Confounded	: confused, perplexed, befuddled
Flibbertigibbet	: frivolous, excessively talkative, chatterer
Peer	: look minutely with concentration.
Persistent	: continuous, tenacious, untiring, and unrelenting
Endure	: suffer, undergo, and remain in existence
Dissolution	: Ending an assembly or partnership
Decay	: decompose, rot, perish, and deteriorate.
Acute	: severe, drastic, dreadful, grave, serious.
Nutrition	: nourishment, sustenance, food.
Contented by	: satisfied and happy, gratified.
Dreadful	: terrible, frightful, appalling, horrible.
Drag	: haul, pull, tug.
Scatter	: throw in various random directions, toss, fling.
Flutter	: flap, fly unsteadily, quiver, hover.

4.5 SUMMARY OF THE STORY

The Last Leaf takes place in Greenwich Village, a place where artists live in New York City. The story centers around two young women artists-Sue and Johnsy who share a studio at the top of an old apartment building. When winter comes Johnsy becomes seriously ill with pneumonia. The doctor who examines her says that Johnsy will not survive if she does not have a will to live. He says that Johnsy has already left hope for life and she awaits death. The doctor asks Sue if Johnsy has any unfulfilled ambition or a passion for a man. She says that Johnsy wanted to paint the Bay of Naples but the doctor says that it is not a great cause that would inspire her to live.

Johnsy watches leaves falling from the ivy vine that clings to the brick-wall nearby. She begins to count leaves thinking that she would die with the fall of

the last leaf. It was a stormy and rainy night. Leaves keep falling and Johnsy is waiting for her death. Sue is deeply worried and she tells their old neighbour Mr. Behrman who was an unsuccessful artist about Johnsy's illness and her obsession about imminent death. Behrman always hoped to paint a masterpiece which he never did. However, Behrman stays out on a rainy, chilly night to paint a realistic-looking leaf on the wall. Seeing the unmoved leaf, Johnsy gathers courage and hope and begins to recover. Behrman catches pneumonia from exposure to the rain and cold and dies a few days later. She tells Johnsy about the cause of Behrman's death and remarks that Behrman's masterpiece was the last leaf that saved her life.

4.6 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STORY

The Last Leaf is one of the most appealing short stories by O. Henry. Its setting is Greenwich Village which is a heaven of aspiring artists and bohemian people. O. Henry depicts the place as the vibrant colony of artists who live in poverty and starvation. Many of them are starving artists who suffer from shortage of food and expose to sickness, cold and hunger. Greenwich Village had been a home for lesbians and gay people in New York a fact which becomes significant in the story as two female characters are romantically involved like true lovers.

The story centers around two young women artists Sue and Johnsy. They meet in a restaurant and discover that they had some common interests in art and food. They decide to work together and share an apartment at the top of a run-down old building. The basis of the friendship of Sue and Johnsy was a shared interest in art and creativity. They soon became emotionally attached. O. Henry describes the dreadful visit of Mr. Pneumonia to the neighbourhood and Johnsy becomes the victim of the fatal disease. O. Henry describes pneumonia as a strange male visitor to depict man as an antagonistic presence in the lives of Sue and Johnsy.

A doctor visits and tells Sue that Johnsy had a one in ten chance of living. He adds that only her passion to live will help her to survive. If she loses hope to live, no medicines will help her in recovery. The doctor asks her if Johnsy is depressed over a man. She tells him that there is no man in the Johnsy's life. The doctor's diagnosis reveals the fact that there is always a strong link between hope and health. She firmly rejects the doctor's suspicion about Johnsy's involvement with any man. She knew that Johnsy was focused only on travelling and developing her talent as an artist. She was quite sure that Johnsy was not interested in man, marriage and children.

Sue sits beside Johnsy's bed and works on an illustration for a magazine. She notices that Johnsy looked out of the window and counted falling leaves from an ivy vine on the brick wall nearby. When she asks her what she was counting, she replies that she would die when the last leaf would fall to the ground. Sue tells her that it was a silly thought as the doctor had already told her that there was a good chance of her recovery. Sue promises Johnsy to buy more food and wine after she sells her illustration for the magazine. However, Johnsy remains unaffected and she says that she wants to turn loose "her hold on everything and go sailing down, down just like one of those poor, tired, leaves".

Sue's work for the magazine shows her poor economic condition. She struggled as an artist and earned a meager income from her work. However,

her promise to buy more food and wine shows her care and love for Johnsy. She looks after all household work in addition to drawing and painting. She tells a lie about the doctor's remark about her health and recovery to motivate her to live. However, Johnsy's desire to die like the falling of the last leaf shows her fading hope to live.

She then goes downstairs to visit her neighbor, Mr. Behrman who was an old, unsuccessful artist. He had tried to paint a masterpiece all his life but in vain. He was a frustrated artist who had turned alcoholic smelling of gin all the time. He was very protective of Sue and Johnsy and cared a lot for them. When Sue told him about Johnsy's crazy obsession about the falling of the last leaf connecting it to her death; he was a bit angry and called her foolish. Sue asked him to pose as model for her drawing; he agreed and came to Sue's studio. While Johnsy was asleep, Behrman kept looking solemnly at the ivy vine.

Behrman was a failure as an artist but he was a man with a milk of human kindness. His angry words about Johnsy displayed his profound concern for her. Under his gruff exterior, there throbbed a sensitive heart. His solemn look at the ivy vine made him worried about the fading life of a nice young Johnsy. He probably decided then to paint the last leaf on the wall that night.

It was a stormy, windy and rainy night. But the next morning, she saw that the last leaf clung tenaciously to the vine. Johnsy was sure that the last leaf would have fallen that night but she found it clinging to the vine bravely. Naturally she was surprised but she still believed that it would certainly fall that day. She was also convinced that pneumonia would take her away from Sue and the world.

Another night was also windy and rainy but the last leaf remained unmoved. Johnsy sat up and asked for soup and a mirror. She said that the last leaf showed her that it was a sin to want to die. She told Sue that she would soon paint the Bay of Naples. The doctor visits again and tells Johnsy that she would soon be all right. Her request for food and a mirror suggests her reclamation of desire to live. The mirror symbolizes her rebonding with herself. Her desire to paint the Bay of Naples demonstrates that her hope had returned with her health. This underscores the story's central idea that life and hope are inseparably intertwined.

The doctor tells Sue and Johnsy that he has to visit another patient Mr. Behrman. He has caught pneumonia and needs to be hospitalized. The next day, Sue tells Johnsy that Behrman has died. The janitor found him sick in his room with wet clothes as if he has been out on a stormy night. In his room, Behrman had a ladder, and painting materials which revealed that he had been out all night to paint the last leaf on the brick wall. The leaf that saved Johnsy's life was not real but it was the masterpiece painted by Behrman.

The story ends with surprising ending that the 'last leaf' was in fact a painting by Behrman who sacrificed his own life to save Johnsy. He knew that the survival of the leaf alone would rekindle Johnsy's hope to live. He always wanted to paint a masterpiece which he could never do but his selfless act of sacrifice made the painting of the last leaf his true masterpiece.

4.7 TONE OF THE STORY

The general tone of the story *The Last Leaf* is bit sarcastic and serious. Though the themes of the story are sickness, poverty and death, the author treats them in less serious manner. He makes fun of the residents of Greenwich Village which serves as the setting of the story. The story begins with sarcastic tone describing cross streets in Greenwich Village where poor artists struggle to survive. O. Henry makes fun of his characters and their shallowness and frivolous temperament. The story is an ideal example of the third person omniscient point of view in which the author shows the attitude thoughts and emotions of the characters clearly and realistically. The story depicts the mood of hopelessness as Johnsy abandons her hope to live waiting for imminent death with the falling of leaves from the ivy vine.

4.8 THEMES OF THE STORY

There are several themes in the story *The Last Leaf*. Let us discuss them in detail:

- (i) **Hope and Health :** Johnsy becomes victim of pneumonia during cold winter. She connects her life with the falling of ivy leaves on the brickwall nearby. It rained heavily and cold wind blew all the time. Leaves kept falling from the vine. Johnsy's obsession that she would soon die when the last leaf would fall down was quite obstinate. The leaf symbolizes life and death. The old artist Behrman paints the last leaf on the brick wall on a rainy night. It gives her hope to live but Behrman dies of pneumonia which he catches because of staying outside on a chilly, rainy night. The doctor tells Sue that the real problem with Johnsy was that she had lost the desire to live. He says that if she had some unfulfilled desires for future, her chances for life would be better. However Johnsy has already abandoned her desire to live and she wants to go sailing down like those poor tired ivy leaves.

When Johnsy sees that the last leaf has remained moveless and clung tenaciously, she is motivated to live. She realizes that it is a sin to want to die. Johnsy begins to recover soon sitting on bed, eating food and hoping to paint the Bay of Naples. Behrman used his art to transfer his hope to Johnsy proving that the last leaf painted by him was his real masterpiece.

O. Henry suggests that physical health is always connected with hope for the future. For restoring physical health, hope is the most powerful cure. Thus hope and health are inextricably inseparable.

- (ii) **Death:** The title of the story *The Last Leaf* conveys the theme of death. The word 'last' signifies close to end or close to death. The life of a tree is connected with the growth and health of branches and leaves. In the story, ivy leaves keep falling due to autumn. Autumn is the season of death of leaves. Johnsy becomes the victim of pneumonia which symbolizes death. Johnsy regains her hope to live and restores her health but Behrman who painted the last leaf to save Johnsy died of pneumonia.
- (iii) **Optimism and Pessimism:** Life is made of dualities such as life and death, hope and despair, day and night, spring and autumn, hot and cold etc. Here there is a theme of pessimism and optimism. Pessimism

deals with gloomy aspects of life; optimism deals with positive aspects of life. Johnsy had plunged into deep abyss of pessimism, waiting for death. She counted the falling leaves. She thought that she would die when the last leaf falls down. However, when she saw that the last leaf clung to the wall moveless, she was inspired to live. Restoration of her hope makes her fill with desire to live and soon she begins to recover. O. Henry conveys the message that one should never lose hope and optimistic approach to life as it is a sin to want to die.

- (iv) **Self-sacrifice:** One of the important themes in the story *The Last Leaf* is self-sacrifice. Behrman risked his life to save Johnsy from death. He painted the last leaf on the brick wall on a rainy and stormy night. He caught pneumonia due to cold and rain and died in a few days. This alludes to Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice that epitomizes the noblest human deed. Behrman always wanted to paint a masterpiece which he could never do. However, the last leaf that he painted on the brick wall proved to be his masterpiece. O. Henry suggests that kindness and passion are far greater than art.
- (v) **Gender and Sexuality:** O. Henry depicts Sue and Johnsy as young female artists who struggle to make way in male dominated world of art. Their behaviour can be termed as feminist in the sense that they challenge accepted notions of women's roles in the society. It is generally believed that women are destined to marry, produce children and devote their energy to domestic duties. Sue and Johnsy thought out of the box and wanted to live independent life in the pursuit of art. They were aspiring artists who struggled a lot leading financially precarious life. They met in a restaurant and discovered that they shared common interests in art and food. They decided to live together in the same apartment confronting the disapproval of the prevalent society.

In the story, we come across several examples where men belittle Sue and Johnsy. For example when the doctor diagnoses Johnsy's pneumonia, he asserts that art is "not anything worth thinking about". The doctor asks Sue if Johnsy was upset over a man. Sue contradicts the doctor's view by saying that for Johnsy no man was so important as her love for art. This shows that both Sue and Johnsy were career-oriented and professional. During the 20th century women struggled to rise above their female sexuality and protested against gender bias and social norms fixed by male dominated society.

- (vi) **The Prevalent Condition of the Artists:** *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry is set in Greenwich Village, a bohemian neighbourhood in New York city. It was famous as a gathering place and residential colony of the painters and writers. The place had criss-cross streets with strange curves and angles. The artists who lived here led financially precarious life earning a very little income. The building in the area was old and dilapidated with low house rent. The place was overcrowded and with lack of proper sanitation. It was exposed to cold weather and outbreak of diseases like pneumonia.

Sue, Johnsy and Behrman tried to make a living by painting but could hardly make both ends meet. Poverty, alcoholism and diseases prevailed in the area making people weak and sick. Behrman always dreamt of painting a masterpiece but he never succeeded in doing so all his life. He made a small income as a model for the artists. Sue also earned a little by painting illustrations for magazines. Johnsy nurtured a dream of painting the Bay of Naples but her poor health and poverty made her trip to Italy almost impossible.

The Last Leaf suggests that even starving artists have stronger social bonding with their neighbours. For them, painting is not only a personal achievement and source of income. O. Henry suggests that a great art is always imbued with humanistic attitude, compassion and love. The friendship between Sue and Johnsy displays sincerity, love and loyalty. Behrman was careless about his health but he was profoundly concerned about Johnsy's deteriorating health. He painted the last leaf to save Johnsy's life which finally resulted into his true masterpiece.

4.9 DICTION AND STYLE OF THE STORY

O. Henry's style of writing is sarcastic and funny. He used diction with colloquialism and slangs. He used literary devices like metaphors, personification and similes. The story also contains symbolism and imagery. There is a lot of colour imagery in the story. O. Henry's stories have surprising ending with ironical twist. His dialogues have speech patterns and rhythms of the language of the common folks with vivacity, variety and vibrancy. His narration in the story is in third person omniscient narrator mode. His description is picturesque and colourful. His style is also humorous just like his plot and characters. In his plots, co-incidences play a very important role creating humorous situations. There is a beautiful combination of wit humour and irony in his writing style.

4.10 TITLE OF THE STORY

The title of the story *The Last Leaf* is quite appropriate as it is the last leaf painted by Behrman saves the life of a young artist Johnsy. Johnsy suffered from pneumonia losing hope to live. She thought that she would die when the last leaf from the ivy vine falls down. It was a stormy rainy weather and the leaves kept falling rapidly. The old painter who lived downstairs painted the last leaf on the wall when he saw that the last leaf (the real one) fell down. He caught pneumonia due to rain and chilly wind. Soon he died but the last leaf that remained unmoved filled Johnsy with a new hope to live. Behrman had a dream of painting a masterpiece which he could never do all his life but the last leaf that saved Johnsy's life proved to be his real masterpiece. The last leaf suggests both desire for death and hope for life.

Check Your Progress: 1

4.11 ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN BRIEF.

(i) Describe the visit of Mr. Pneumonia to Greenwich Village.

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(ii) What is the significance of ivy leaves in *The Last Leaf*?

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(iii) Describe the friendship between Sue and Johnsy.

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(iv) What is the twist in the ending of the story *The Last Leaf*?

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(v) How did Behrman catch pneumonia?

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(vi) Why is the last leaf painted by Behrman his true masterpiece?

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(vii) What does the title *The Last Leaf* suggest?

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(viii) How did Johnsy's hope for life revive?

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Check your Progress 2

4.12 CHOOSE THE CORRECT OPTION FROM GIVEN BELOW.

1. *The Last Leaf* is a _____
(a) poem (b) novel
(c) epic (d) short story
2. *The Last Leaf* is penned by _____
(a) O. Henry (b) Somerset Maugham
(c) Guy de Maupassant (d) Ruskin Bond
3. Greenwich village was inhabited by _____
(a) farmers (b) labourers
(c) teachers (d) artists
4. Sue was from _____
(a) Philadelphia (b) Florida
(c) California (d) Maine
5. Johnsy was from _____
(a) Maine (b) New York
(c) California (d) Canada
6. Sue and Johnsy shared common interests in _____
(a) poetry (b) clothes and fashion
(c) food and art (d) sports
7. "Mr. Pneumonia" is the example of _____
(a) simile (b) metaphor
(c) personification (d) climax

8. The doctor said that there was one chance in _____ for Johnsy's recovery from pneumonia.
- (a) 100 (b) 10
(c) 20 (d) 50
9. Johnsy wanted to paint _____
- (a) The Tajmahal (b) The Leaning Tower of Pisa
(c) The Bay of Naples (d) The Dal Lake of Kashmir
10. Behrman was a _____ artist.
- (a) successful (b) rich
(c) matured (d) frustrated
11. Behrman had a dream of painting _____
- (a) a masterpiece (b) a portrait of Sue
(c) a portrait of Johnsy (d) a natural scene of Italy
12. Behrman died of _____
- (a) pneumonia (b) cholera
(c) typhoid (d) cancer
13. The last leaf painted by Behrman inspired Johnsy.
- (a) to die (b) to live
(c) to work (d) to paint
14. The last leaf painted by Behrman proved to be his.
- (a) real masterpiece (b) passion for life
(c) monumental work (d) piece of art
15. O. Henry was famous for _____ in his stories.
- (a) figurative language (b) simple diction
(c) twisted ending (d) rustic characters

4.13 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have studied one of the most famous stories by O. Henry. The story depicts the important features of an ideal short-story such as single compact plot, small number of characters, realistic dialogues, twisted ending and universal themes. You should have realized how a novel differs from a short-story. A novel has detailed narrator, a large number of characters, multiple setting, dialogues and detailed description of characters and setting. A novel is like a movie while a short story is like a snapshot. O. Henry's short stories have twisted ending that makes his short stories very appealing and effective.

4.14 BOOKS SUGGESTED

Smith, C. Alphonso "The Strange Case of Sydney Porter And O. Henry". *The World's Work: A History of Our Time*, 1916.

<http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/LasLea.shtml#7>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/634>.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Leaf

<https://www.enotes.com>

<https://www.litcharts.com/>

Answers

Check Your Progress: 2

1.(d) 2.(d) 3.(c) 4.(a) 5.(c) 6.(c) 7.(b) 8.(c) 9.(a) 10.(a) 11.(a)
12.(b) 13.(a) 14.(c)