

**19. O. Henry's The Last Leaf: A Psycho-Analytical Study of Internal v/s External Nature.****ToC****RAMESH B. PATEL**

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**ABSTRACT**

There are very few writers who are endowed with the art of storytelling and O. Henry is one among them. The purpose of literature is to portray faithfully all the complexities and intricacies of the society. Man, being a very complex creation of God, has been a very fascinating subject of the majority of writers. It requires great deal of patience and understanding to delve deep into the human psyche. The present research paper aims at analyzing literature's established relationship with psychology.

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**Keywords:** Human psyche, identification, pathos

Porter William Sidney known by his pseudonym O. Henry was one of the prominent American writers. His craftsmanship as a writer has the touch of the compassion of man which won him fame all over the world. He started his literary career by writing stories to magazines. His literary output consists of volumes of stories set in many parts of the U.S. which are best known for his observation on the diverse lives of everyday Americans. His short stories abide all the good characteristics of a short story. He had a fine gift of humour. His depiction of ironic circumstances is superb. The plots are dependents upon co-incidents. The characters are simple plain people. His most popular stories are full of humour, ironic twists and co-incidents. O Henry is prone to mystery and unexpected climax in almost all his stories which keeps his readers bewildered and musing what is next to come. It has been rightly commented:

*O' Henry earned his popularity not only through his lucid, humorous and ironical narrative style or sentimental themes but the understanding of the reader's psychological yearning to be surprised or shocked by sensing the reality they did/could not think of.*

*(Akter)*

O Henry's much praised story 'The Last Leaf' delineates the story of two budding women artists Sue and Johnsy and a past sixty German painter Berhman. All of them live by their common passion in love of art in creating

beauty. Though their art has nothing to offer them as it usually happens with the artists, they keep on musing over creating a master piece someday. All of them have their individual hard reality in material world. They live in a three storied building in a very low coast area of Greenwich village, a cheap lane of New York. Sue and Johnsy met each other and their common interest makes them close friends. Sue came from Maine and her friend Johnsy came from California. Both loved art and started a studio together.

The narrative of the story '*The Last Leaf*' tells us a lot of the dream of Johnsy and its effects that it had on the life of her. The author had interwoven the story of Johnsy with the nature and her dream. Johnsy is the central character in the story. She is suffering from illness. There is nothing very serious about her illness but the girl has taken it very seriously with a peculiar maniac disposition of her mind. It happens so that in the month of November there breaks out the epidemic of pneumonia which fatally affected Johnsy.

Johnsy has developed to her mind the obsession of death. She believed that she would never recover and die soon. The doctor was called who advised that there was nothing serious about it. The doctor also asked if there was something in her mind or had been in love with any man. She replied that there was nothing

like that she told that Johnsy wanted to paint the bay of Naples someday. The doctor tried his best to cure her of the disease. The girl continued to think about her death and the carriages in her funeral procession.

The story attains a very serious stage when Johnsy begins to equate the remaining days of her life with the falling leaves of an ivy vine outside the window. Johnsy constantly looked at the window producing low painful sound several time. Sue was very much worried about her friend's condition. She went near to her bed and saw:

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.

To her surprise, Sue finds that she was counting the falling leaves of an old Ivy vine like the days passing one by one. Sue is shocked to learn that Johnsy had developed a kind of wrong notion in her mind that the falling of leaves of ivy vine symbolizes the last remaining days of her life. The following conversation between both of them brings forth the stream going on in Johnsy's mind:



"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?"

Sue tries her best to get her rid of the nonsense thoughts going on in her mind by saying her that the ivy leaves has got nothing to do with her getting well. The doctor had said that the chances of her recovery were ten to one and the girl mistook the doctor's word. She again said:

I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark.  
Then I'll go too.

Johnsy's obsession of death reaches to a much intensified stage when she desperately waits for the moment to come. Sue tries her best to divert her mind from the thinking. She also advises her to close her eyes without paying any attention to the ivy vine but Johnsy only stick to her notion and tells Sue:





"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."

Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor of the same building. He had always longed to paint a masterpiece. He was not a successful painter but earned some money by serving as a model to some young artists. Sue told him about the illness of Johnsy and that she was waiting for death. On the request of Sue, Behrman painted a beautiful picture on ivy vine with its last leaf. He placed the painting at the same place where the last leaf had fallen. Johnsy kept on looking on it. Then thought that something had made that last leaf stay there to show how wicked she was. She confesses after realizing her silly morbid notion:

"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."

The last leaf on the ivy wine brings a positive effect on the mind of Johnsy. It also gives her a new hope for life and her art. Once again she comes back to her earlier life of an artist and her obsession of creating a master piece of art.





She says to Sue "Sudie, someday I hope to paint the bay of Naples."

The painting of ivy vine had saved the life of Johnsy. The psychological effect of the painted leaf treated an idea in the mind of Johnsy that the last leaf will not fall and therefore she would not die. Johnsy said in the end "Ah darling, its Behrman masterpiece- He painted it there the night that the last leaf fell." Behrman painted the ivy leaf on the stem of vine in a cold rain night, risking his life. Next day the doctor informs Sue that Behrman also had severe attack of pneumonia. After two days illness, he died of pneumonia. His masterpiece which he wished to create for the whole of his life has come into being at last but at the cost of his life. It has been rightly attributed:

Berhman is a man with a dream of a child, courage of a chivalric knight and love of father. He attests that people who are dreamer are dreamer throughout the life. He had lost his health, age and aptitude to paint his master piece. What he retained was his attitude and altitude. He teaches us that master piece comes at the cost of life and a master piece is life consuming as well as life saving. The painted 'last leaf' becomes Berhman's master piece...( Banerjee)





O. Henry has artistically presented the child psychology. Johnsy's illness was not alarming but she had taken to her mind that she would die after the last leaf had fallen from the ivy vine. Mr. Behrman understood the girl's psychology and painted a leaf on ivy vine. It cured her of her disease and her life was saved. Thus Behrman's painting a 'Last Leaf' proved a masterpiece.

The survival of Johnsy through psychological optimism makes it very clear that strong will power can help a person to survive in any circumstances. At the same time it also makes clear that nature has great effect on the life of human beings. Nature has both life giving and life taking force. The author here gets the central character to equate her life with the falling leaves of ivy wine to suggest that passing days of the human life are nothing but the falling leaves of our life. But at the same time he tries to establish the value of art in human life.

Though the concept of linking ecology with literature has been introduced very lately, O. Henry has exploited this device adroitly in this story. The readers are very much moved by depicting both the human nature and natural world. O. Henry has penned down this story with psychological insight. The dictum of psychology refers that mind creates the situation we are strongly obsessed with and this is very much true in the case of Johnsy. It has been rightly noted:





O' Henry portrays the character Johnsy and the Ivy leaf with equal importance and he represents that the natural things have a lot of value in affecting and in effecting the lives of individuals. (G. Sivasamy)

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### About the Author

**Ramesh Patel** has been serving as an I/C Principal in M.A.Parikh Fine Arts College, Palanpur. Earlier he joined this college as an Asst. Professor in 2007. Prior, he worked as an assistant Lecturer in U.H.Chaudhary Arts College, Vadgam. His total teaching experience as a lecturer is of 16 years. He has been working as a P.G.Teacher in G.D.Modi College of Arts Since 2007. He has three books to his credit. His articles have been published in national and international journals and books. He has also attended many national and international conferences and presented papers in them. At present he is pursuing his doctoral studies.

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