

# O. Henry's The Last Leaf and the Therapeutic Function of Art

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## Abstract:

Art and aesthetics have always been considered as a means to elevate the ways of the world. Life is short, yet art plays an indispensable role in immortalizing life. It helps a person elevate one's mind to experience aesthetic blissfulness. Art, when mingled with intelligence, serves as a model of curative force. O Henry's *The Last Leaf* is an exclusive composition exploring the psychological and therapeutic impact of art on individual mindset.

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"Tonight a searingly hot breeze is blowing,  
Tonight on this footpath there will be no sleep  
Come let us arise, you and I, and you too, and you  
A window in this wall will surely find an opening."

--- Kaifi Azmi, "House" (Selected Poems 3)

An eminent authority on the evolution of art and aesthetics, Ananda Coomaraswami in his chapter titled "That Beauty is a State" of his magnum opus *The Dance of Shiva* asserts, "Different artists are inspired by different objects; what is attractive and stimulating to one is depressing and unattractive to another, and the choice also varies from race to race and epoch to epoch. As to the appreciation of such works, it is the same; for men in general admire only such works as by the education or temperament they are predisposed to admire. To enter into the spirit of an unfamiliar art demands a greater effort than most are willing to make" (Coomaraswami 35). The above consideration proposed by Coomaraswami enunciates the very relationship between art and personal choice and the inherent subjectivity working at the back of the creative/artistic inspiration. Undoubtedly, art and aesthetics have always been considered as a means to upgrade the ways of the world. Life is short, yet art plays a vital role in immortalizing and elevating life. Having a feel of hope and despair, anxiety and enthusiasm, vitality and dullness does not make a person inhuman, rather it tends to make a person human, all true to basic human nature.

There is no denying the fact that one's life is guided by the personal belief one carries, and truly, for the making of a copious and prolific living, it is imperative to take care of one's individual assumptions and certitude. If ever one believes in the phenomenal miracle of one's hope and conviction by way of manifestation and affirmation, then it brings about incredible outcome. Nobody can approximate the extent of human being's capacity to reflect upon. It can be as overly optimistic as unduly skeptical. As regards the power of one's subconscious, Joseph Murphy says in his book *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*, "I have seen the power of the subconscious lift people up out of crippled states,

making them whole, vital, and strong once more. Their minds made them free to go out into the world to experience happiness, health, and joyous expression. There is a miraculous curative force in your subconscious that can heal the troubled mind and the broken heart. It can open the prison door of the mind and liberate you. It can free you from all kinds of material and physical bondage” (Murphy 23). Of course, when a person fails to address his/her subconscious faculty in view of supplying it with a sanguine visualization and tremendous enthusiasm, it’s likely to take a depressingly unproductive way of thought that renders the life of a person wearisome and pitiful. As happened in the case of Johnsy in O. Henry’s *The Last Leaf*, art emerges as a sagacious medium to touch upon the individual sensibility and bestows upon life to a depressed soul. The therapy of moral trust and empathy acts faster than any medicine to overcome any physical/mental malady. Henry’s scintillating account in *The Last Leaf* is the justification of the restorative power of art against the backdrop of societal and moral pressures that a person is subject to.

Highly imaginative and meticulously artistic author William Sydney Porter who wrote a number of appealing short stories got his fame with the pseudonym “O. Henry” and he emerged as one of the leading short story writers of his period. Menand observes regarding Henry’s ever adventurous writing style, “The writer’s signature style of ending--- a final, thrilling note--- has the touch of magic that distinguishes the form at its best”(Louis Menand <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/05/are-all-short-stories-o-henry-stories>). Virtually perceived as the “Encyclopedia of American Humour” and the “Father of Modern American Short Stories”, O. Henry holds the distinction of having written the classic tales like *The Duplicity of Hargraves*, *The Ransom of Red Chief*, *The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Gift of the Magi*, and *The Last Leaf*, etc. that have got him worldwide renown as an author who could bring about a change in one’s perceptions and approach with his sharp telling, naturalistic portrayal and well articulated themes.

O. Henry’s *The Last Leaf* is an impressive story about friendship, fretfulness, emotional annoyance, sacrifice and the enormous impact of careful nursing and positive mindset based in “a little district west of Washington Square” (Henry 149). Sue’s affection for Johnsy is dominated by a deeper sense of comradeship during pneumonia epidemic in Greenwich Village. Henry gives an overview of the setting as under, “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” (Henry 149). Quite spectacularly, Henry personifies the terrible disease that attempts to devour the lives of the people. As regards its nefarious influence on the psychological health of Johnsy, Henry narrates, “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 red-fisted, short breasted old duffer” (Henry 149). As the month of autumn came closer to winter, the view from the window of an old ivy creeper shedding its leaves speedily affected the sanity of Johnsy adversely who was not in fine fettle. Already afflicted with the pneumonia, she developed a complex thought that with the fall of the last leaf, she would also fall from the heaven of Life. Johnsy said, “They are 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...Leaves. On the ivy vine. Then I’ll go, too”(Henry 150). Johnsy kept on waiting for the last leaf to come down. Her pessimistic approach towards life developed a deeper sense of alienated loss and the absurdity of nothingness within Johnsy’s persona, “I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of thinking. I went to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves”(Henry 151). To Johnsy, leaf became a metaphor for life. She had developed the thought that she

couldn't survive after all the leaves fall. In fact that was an impediment behind her recovery. Mark Bender rightly observes, "The impact of mental health on recovery is multifaceted. Mental health can influence a person's motivation to take an active role in their recovery. If someone is feeling hopeless or overwhelmed, they may be less likely to follow through with recommended treatments or therapies. The opposite can be true when individuals are feeling hopeful and optimistic about their prospects for recovery, leading to increased engagement in self-care practices and rehabilitation" (Bender, *The Importance of Mental Health on Your Recovery*).

At this juncture of emotional turbulence, Sue consulted an old painter Behrman and confided him with the nervousness of her intimate friend Johnsy and the old painter showed his experienced disdain for her ungrounded and horrible imaginings, "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 to paint a masterpiece, but had never yet begun it" (Henry 151). Henry has brilliantly juxtaposed Behrman's optimistic desire to make a mark by painting a classic piece one day in future despite his multiple failures and Johnsy's inability to welcome the hopes, blessings and aspirations of life who broods over death and considers that as her last resort. She had perhaps deserted her longing to live. Henry observes, "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" (Henry 152). It is here at the point of existential crisis Henry makes the old painter Behrman paint the artful manifestation of the real leaf. Although merely an artefact, the inanimate mimesis of leaf turns much more powerful than the animate and lively leaf. The old painter by the power of art transcended the binary of life and death. R.A. Scott James says in chapter titled "Art and Morality", "The satisfaction of the artist in the work of art is complete in itself, and knows no perfection beyond its own perfection. Art cannot be determined by the needs of action but only by the imperative demands of vision. You can only see an image as it is, and if you attempt to falsify your vision in order to present an object "didactic to the people" you have been treacherous to your art" (James 283).

Creative mindset through art becomes an organic source of rejuvenation and sanguine vision on the part of Johnsy and finally towards the realization, "I've been a bad girl, Sudie. 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. Someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples" (Henry 152). The depiction of the leaf by Behrman had the potential to make Johnsy feel the joyfulness of what life is, and the sinning nature of death-wish. The final revelation of the death of Mr Behrman brings about a claustrophobic melancholy among the readers. What invites further sensation is the benevolent and nobly kind gesture of that old messiah in risking his own life to bless the young lady with life and a precious lesson towards earthly existence. A person who attempts to give life to someone is more manly and magnanimous and the art that bestows contentment and internal power is far superior to the inanimate colossus. Sue says to Johnsy, "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 that the last leaf fell" (Henry 153). Mathukutty Monippally observes in regard to Behrman, "When he heard about Johnsy's strange belief, old Behrman pooh-poohed it, but he understood its power. That is why he risked his own health to go up in the cold rain and paint a leaf. He framed his response in perfect alignment with Johnsy's fears and expectations. If her belief was that with the fall of the last leaf she also would

leave this world, a leaf clinging to the vine tenaciously and fighting the storm should persuade her to give up the thought of death and start thinking about the business of life” (Monippally *When the last leaf falls*, *The Economic Times*, Aug 19, 2011).

Life is a cherished means to attain the four *purusharthas* --- *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*. Art helps a person elevate one's mind to experience aesthetic bliss. Art, when mingled with intellect, serves as a model of curative force. In fine, it can be safely concluded that *The Last Leaf* is an exclusive study in the exploration of the psychological effect of art on individual mindset. As the great seer Dadhichi gave his life so that his bones could be used for making the heavenly thunderbolt - *Vajra* that would enable Indra to kill Vritra, similarly the old Behrman in view of painting the leaf didn't care about his life and consequently suffered massive pneumonia attack and died thereafter. Moreover, his classic painting gave the boon of life to Johnsy suffering from depression. Art lays its noble role when hope is little. It works as a therapy to the anxious and solitary mind and gives a deeper message that life has to be lived to the hilt despite the fatalities and frailties of human experience with its frets and fever.

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