

The Last Leaf by O. Henry

from The Gift of the Magi and Other Stories

This Level 1 ELLSA lesson can be accessed on the internet at

http://www.rdlthai.com/ellsa_lastleaf1.html

Lesson plan and text: Jeffrey Taschner, 1999

Print and web-adaptation: John Morgan, 1999

© USIA, 1999. All rights reserved

1. SYNOPSIS

1a) 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.

1b) Vocab checkpoint

- **approaches (verb)** To approach is to move towards. It is often used with seasons and special occasions (New Year, Christmas, birthdays) as in the example here, as well as with people and moving objects (vehicles, etc).
- **becomes (verb)** In this example, becomes has the same meaning as "gets". With illnesses, we often use "to fall", or "to be taken": Johnsy fell ill/Johnsy was taken ill
- **pneumonia (noun)** Pneumonia is a serious illness of the lungs.
- **vine (noun)** A vine is like a branch (of a tree), but is actually a stem of a climbing plant (it may also be used to describe the climbing plant itself, e.g. grape vine).
- **braves (verb)** To brave as a verb, means to face an adverse or difficult situation, even though the person may not be brave (as in the meaning of the adjective: courageous).
- **survive (verb)** To survive something is to overcome a problem, illness or adverse situation. It may also be, simply, to stay alive. The noun is survivor.
- **masterpiece (noun)** A masterpiece is a great work of art, like a painting, sculpture or piece of music or writing (poetry, fiction, etc.)

2. PRE-STORY

2a) Seasons...

- How many seasons are there in your country?
- What are they?
- What time of year do they occur?
- Which season do you like best?
- In which season is it easiest to fall ill?

...and Settings

The Last Leaf takes place in New York City, the largest city in America. The location of the story is a small part of New York known as Greenwich Village (pronounced "grennitch", not "green-witch").

- Have you ever been to New York City?
- Have any of your family or friends been there?
- Did they like it there?
- How many seasons does New York have?
- Do you know another common name for Autumn?
- Why do you suppose Autumn has its other name?

Setting is an important element in any short story, and it is particularly important in The Last Leaf.

What are the two main parts of a story's setting?

T_____ & P_____

We can think of these aspects in terms of "where the story takes place" and "when the story takes place".

3. IN-STORY

- 3a) A **masterpiece** is the greatest piece of art an artist creates. The Mona Lisa, for example, is Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece. It is simple and beautiful and the painting shows great technique and use of color.

There are 3 painters in this story. What are their names?

S _____

J _____

Mr _____ N

Another main character is Mr Pneumonia, though he doesn't sound much like a painter. How would you describe Mr Pneumonia?

- 3b) If you have already read the Last Leaf try to remember the ending of the story. If you have not read the story yet, this would be good time to read it before trying this exercise.

Ten Lines from The Last Leaf

Here are ten lines from the end of the story. Put them into the correct order to find out how Mr Behrman created his masterpiece. Try to do this without looking at the book.

- a) There was a light he had taken outside. _____
- b) Mr Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. _____
- c) There was green and yellow paint. _____
- d) He was helpless with pain. _____
- e) He painted his great masterpiece before the last leaf fell. _____
- f) And they found some things. _____
- g) The night had been so cold and wild. _____
- h) Someone found him in his room. _____
- i) There were materials for painting. _____
- j) His clothes were as wet and cold as ice. _____

3b) The O' Henry Twist

O' Henry is famous for surprise endings or "twists" in his stories. In The Last Leaf, Johnsy seems to be dying of pneumonia when the story begins, but it is Mr Behrman who dies in the end, while Johnsy survives. Now we know how Mr Behrman died, think of these other points and discuss them with a friend:

- What did Mr. Behrman paint before he died?
- Try to describe his masterpiece.
- What did Mr. Behrman's painting do for Johnsy to help her survive?
- What feeling did it give her?
- Why does Sue call "The Last Leaf" Behrman's masterpiece?

4. EXERCISES

4a) There are 3 main types of art: Visual Arts (**V**), Literary Arts (**L**) and Performing Arts (**P**). You will find an example of each in the columns below. How would you categorize the other art forms listed here? Some might be able to go into two or even all three columns.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| • drama (acting) | V | L | P |
| • painting | V | L | P |
| • music | V | L | P |
| • fashion design | V | L | P |
| • cartoons (animation) | V | L | P |
| • film (cinema, movies) | V | L | P |
| • short stories | V | L | P |
| • novels | V | L | P |
| • photography | V | L | P |

4b) Art and Artists: suffixes

What do you call the people who perform or create these arts?
There are five suffixes that we commonly use for artists.
Be careful of spellings with some endings.

-ist -er -or -ian -ess

- sculpture _____
- dance _____

- poetry _____
- drama (acting) _____
- painting _____
- music _____
- fashion design _____
- movie making _____
- short stories _____
- novels _____
- photography _____
- cartoons (animation) _____

4c) What kind of artist is...?

- What kind of artists are the following people?
- What are they famous for?

Choose one of these artists, or one of your own favorite artists and describe what you think their "masterpiece" is.

Steven Spielberg _____

O' Henry _____

Ralph Lauren _____

Michael Jackson _____

Pablo Picasso _____

William Shakespeare _____

Mozart _____

Leonardo Da Vinci _____

Harrison Ford _____

5. FOLLOW-UP

Writing exercises

a) A Rainy Season Setting

Write a one page composition describing the following place and time: your home during the rainy season. Think of some of the sounds, smells and sights inside and outside your house, both during the day and during the night. Think of some of the real situations you have had to face.

Alternatively, you could use some experiences that friends or family have had and still use them with you as the main character.

b) A Sacrifice

A sacrifice is the act of giving up something, or not having something or doing something yourself, to help somebody else. We saw how Mr Behrman gave his life to help Johnsy in *The Last Leaf*. He made the greatest sacrifice anybody could make. But sacrifices are not always as great as Mr Behrman's. We make small sacrifices almost every day.

How about you? What is the greatest sacrifice you have ever made for your family or friends? An example of this may be when you have stayed at home to help your family instead of going out with friends. Write a short story about something you decided not to do, so that you could help somebody else.

ANSWER KEY

3b) Ten lines from *The Last Leaf*: answer key

- 1) Mr Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. (b)
- 2) Someone found him in his room. (h)
- 3) He was helpless with pain. (d)
- 4) His clothes were as wet and cold as ice. (j)
- 5) The night had been so cold and wild. (g)
- 6) And they found some things. (f)
- 7) There was a light he had taken outside. (a)
- 8) There were materials for painting. (i)
- 9) There was green and yellow paint. (c)
- 10) He painted his great masterpiece before the last leaf fell. (e)

4b) Art and Artists: suffixes—answer key

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • sculpture | sculptor, sculptress |
| • dance | dancer |
| • poetry | poet, poetess |
| • drama (acting) | dramatist, actor, actress |
| • painting | painter, artist |
| • music | musician |
| • fashion design | fashion designer |
| • movie making | movie-maker, director |
| • short stories | short story writer, author, writer |
| • novels | novelist |
| • photography | photographer |
| • cartoons (animation) | cartoonist, animator |