Specific Teaching Suggestions

“The Last Leaf”
By O. Henry
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About the Author

O. Henry (1862—1910), born William Sidney Porter, in Greensboro, North Carolina. When he was a young man, O. Henry moved to Texas and worked on a ranch for three years. Later, he moved to Houston, worked for a newspaper for a year, then bought a newspaper of his own in Austin, Texas for $250. He was not pleased with his newspaper's title; so he renamed it The Rolling Stone. For a while, he did the writing and even the illustrations, but couldn't keep it up. The Rolling Stone apparently gathered moss and failed.

O. Henry worked in the General Land Office and later as a bank teller (1891-94). While at the bank, he was accused of embezzling $5,000. At first, he was cleared of the charges, but later they were brought up again. Before he could be convicted, however, he ran away to New Orleans and eventually to Honduras. O. Henry spent several months moving about Central America in the company of the notorious outlaw, Al Jennings. They lived on the money ($30,000) taken by Jennings in a robbery. After a year, O. Henry returned to the U.S., where he was convicted of embezzlement, and served three years in a penitentiary. It was from prison that he sent out his first stories.

On June 5, 1910, after a long illness, O. Henry died of diabetes mellitus complicated by cirrhosis of the liver.

The Original Story

The read-along play is an adaptation of O. Henry's short story “The Last Leaf.” Limited changes were made in the original story.

a. The scene in which Sue meets Johnsy is not part of the original.
b. Some details were added to the opening narration about the village.
c. Greenwich Village is not named in the adaptation, but simply referred to as “the village.”
d. The exact year of the setting—1899—was added.
e. Some updating was made in language: “nirth” became “north,” “pharmacopoeia” became “field of medicine,” etc.

The Adaptation

Synopsis

In May of 1899, in a small Greenwich Village restaurant, Sue and Johnsy meet. They become friends and rent an apartment together to share expenses. In November, Johnsy becomes ill with pneumonia. Her illness lingers. She becomes frail and loses hope of recovering. Outside her window is an old ivy vine on which only a few leaves remain. Johnsy has become so disheartened that she refuses to fight her way back to health and convinces herself that when the last leaf falls off the vine, she will die.

It is the day of “house calls” for doctors, and the doctor tells Sue that if Johnsy is to get well, she must get her mind on something other than her sickness. Sue is worried; she goes downstairs and reveals her fears to Mr. Behrman, a grizzled, unsuccessful artist who dreams of one day painting a masterpiece. Only one leaf remains on the vine now, and even Mr. Behrman is worried that tonight it will fall victim to the wind and rain.
The next morning, when Sue and Johnsy look out the window, the last leaf is still there. Johnsy thinks about her situation and convinces herself that fate caused the leaf to stay on the vine so that she would not die. With this change in attitude, Johnsy gradually gets well. The doctor comes and verifies Johnsy's recovery. The doctor also tells Sue that Mr. Behrman has pneumonia and is beyond help. He dies that same day.

Later that day, Sue discovers how Mr. Behrman became ill. She tells Johnsy that on the stormy night when the last leaf was about to fall, Mr. Behrman took a ladder, climbed the wall, and painted a true masterpiece—a picture of the last leaf on the brick wall.

**Discussion/Writing Activity**

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<tr>
<th>Writing Activity = {W}</th>
<th>Structure Item = UPPERCASE TERM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. {W} The ending of “The Last Leaf” was meant to surprise. [Answers will vary.]</td>
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<td>a. Did you think it would end differently?</td>
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<td>b. How did you think it would end?</td>
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<td>c. Why did you think it would end this way?</td>
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<td>d. If you knew it would end as it did, explain how you knew.</td>
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<td>2. The author of a story has the power to create his CHARACTERS any way he wishes.</td>
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<td>a. Why do you think O. Henry made Behrman a pathetic, old, unsuccessful artist? [O. Henry wanted to arouse our sympathy for Behrman. Also, he could insure a surprise ending by insinuating that the failed, old artist would never really create a masterpiece.]</td>
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<td>b. Is there a contradiction in Behrman's CHARACTER? [Yes.]</td>
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<td>(1) What is the contradiction? [Our first impression of Behrman is quite negative. He seems to be a disagreeable and unlikable man. Later, however, we discover that his crankiness is really a cover-up for his soft heart.]</td>
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<td>(2) Why do you think O. Henry created this contradiction? [This contradiction in Behrman's character heightens the impact we feel when he suddenly and unexpectedly sacrifices himself for Johnsy.]</td>
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<td>c. Why do you think O. Henry cast Sue and Johnsy as struggling, naive artists? [Again, to arouse sympathy. In an age of cynicism and bitterness, we tend to sympathize with youth and idealism. Such contrasting themes engage the reader and make for a more rewarding story.]</td>
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<td>3. Do you think Mr. Behrman would have painted the leaf on the wall if he had known he would catch pneumonia and die? [Probably. His life was nearly over anyway, whereas Johnsy's was just beginning.]</td>
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<td>4. Who are the main CHARACTERS? [Johnsy, Sue, Mr. Behrman]</td>
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<td>5. What is the SETTING of time and place of “The Last Leaf”? [Greenwich Village, 1899.]</td>
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<td>6. Is it easy to determine the SETTING? [Answers will vary.] How is the setting revealed to you? [The reader is told it is New York City, but the author assumes the reader knows something about the city—its history, and various neighborhoods, such as Greenwich Village, where the artists lived.]</td>
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<td>7. What is the period of time that the story covers? [May to November or December.]</td>
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<td>8. What is the MOOD of the story? [The overall mood is of despair and sadness, but the power of tenderness and love are also an important part of the mood.] List some examples of mood development in “The Last Leaf.” [“...and she lay, scarcely moving, on her painted iron bedstead, looking through the small Dutch windowpanes at the blank side of the next brick house.” “An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall.” “The lonesomest thing in all the world is a soul when it is making ready to go on its mysterious far journey.” “That leaf is Mr. Behrman's masterpiece. He painted it there that night—the night the last leaf fell.”]</td>
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<td>9. Identify some instances of PERSONIFICATION in “The Last Leaf.” [(1) “...the narrow, irregular streets have run crazy and broken themselves into short strips called places.” (2) “In November, a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called Pneumonia, stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy finger.” (3) “Over on the east side this ravager strode boldly, swiftly, smiting his victims by scores, but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown places.” (4) “Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman.” (5) “A mite of a little woman with blood thinned by California zephyrs was hardly fair game for the redfisted, short-breathed old duffer” (6) “The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine...” (7) “...its skeleton branches clung ... to the crumbling bricks.”]</td>
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| 10. {W} Discuss THEME in “The Last Leaf.” [The meaning of this story can best be identified by looking at the outcome. If you look at the outcome from Mr. Behrman's view, you might conclude that here is a man who, after almost a lifetime, is a failure—he has no family and he has accomplished nothing that will live on when he is dead.}
Behrman probably viewed his sacrifice as worthwhile. From Behrman's view, the theme is: Love of another can be stronger than love for self. If you look at the outcome, from Johnsy's view you might conclude that Johnsy is a very foolish and silly young woman. She caused her friends a great deal of worry and concern. From Johnsy's view, the theme is: Foolish and immature solutions to serious situations can result in tragic consequences for those who love us.

Visualization

1. Draw the restaurant where Sue met Johnsy.
2. Draw a street in “The Village.”
3. Draw the last leaf on its vine.
4. Draw Mr. Behrman.
5. Draw something or someone from your favorite scene from the story.

Beyond the Story

{W} In the beginning of the story, we find out that the setting (The Village) was once a rural, suburban village, and that in the 1820's an epidemic forced people to it from the city. What is this village called today? Research the circumstances surrounding the epidemic.

Answer Keys

“The Last Leaf”

Key to CLOZE ACTIVITY

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>ivy vine</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>restaurant</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>die</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>share</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>doctor</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>pneumonia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>sickness</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>covered</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>downstairs</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>die</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Johnsy</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>recovery</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>night</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mr. Behrman</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>fall</td>
<td></td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>dies</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>ladder</td>
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Key to SEQUENCE ACTIVITY

12, 11, 6, 8, 3, 4, 1, 9, 7, 13, 5, 2, 10

Key to LISTENING SKILLS ACTIVITY

2. Eighth Street 5. Los Angeles 8. a man 11. blue 13. two days
3. Joanna Gaines 6. 4 months 9. twelve

Key to LITERARY COMPREHENSION ACTIVITY

1. Where does the story take place? [It takes place in an artist's colony in New York City—Greenwich Village.]
2. What kind of people were attracted to this place around the turn of the century? [Artists, actors, musicians, dancers, and writers were attracted to this “village.”]
3. Where did Sue and Johnsy first meet? [They met at a restaurant by the name of Delmonico's.]
4. When did Sue and Johnsy meet? [They met in May?]
5. Where was Johnsy from? [Johnsy was from Sebastopol, California.]
6. What time of the year did Johnsy get pneumonia? [Johnsy got pneumonia in November.]
7. When Sue first learned about Johnsy's feeling that she would die when the last leaf fell, what excuse did Sue give Johnsy for going downstairs to get Mr. Behrman. [She needed him to be a model for the old hermit miner.]
8. What was Behrman's occupation. [He was an unsuccessful artist. He did modeling for other artists on the side.]
9. Johnsy had a dream of painting a particular scene someday. What was this scene she dreamed of painting? [Johnsy dreamed of painting the Bay of Naples.]

10. Where did Behrman die? [He died in the hospital. He was taken there to be made more comfortable.]

11. What was the evidence that told them that Behrman was the person who painted the last leaf on the wall? [His shoes and clothing were wet. They found a lantern, still burning. A ladder had been dragged from its place. In his room, they found brushes and a palette with green and yellow colors on them.]

12. What was Mr. Behrman's masterpiece? [It was the last leaf that he painted on the wall for Johnsy.]

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**Key to VOCABULARY ACTIVITY SHEET 1**

1. irregular [pg 2, col 1, para 1] [... the narrow, irregular streets have run crazy and broken themselves into short strips called places.] irregular, uneven

2. quaint [pg 2, col 1, para 1] [... quaint, continental atmosphere ...] charming, unique, unusual

3. epidemic [pg 2, col 1, para 1] [... an epidemic forced people from the city ...] an out of control outbreak of disease

4. clusters [pg 2, col 1, para 1] [... we find clusters of colorful restaurants, theaters, and shops.] groups, bunches, a collection

5. gables [pg 2, col 1, para 1] [... hunting for north windows and 18th century gables and Dutch attics and low rents.] the upper part of the end of a house formed by a ridged roof

6. scoffed [pg 5, sc 4, para 1] [... scoffed at softness in anyone ...] mocked, ridiculed, scorned

7. economics [pg 3, sc 1, Narr] [... their economics of shared rent so demanding, that a joint studio resulted.] careful use of money

8. pneumonia [pg 3, sc 2, para 1] [... whom the doctors called Pneumonia, ...] a disease characterized by inflammation of the lungs

9. ravager [pg 3, sc 2, para 1] [... this ravager strode boldly, swiftly, smiting his victims by scores, ...] one who ruins, wrecks, spoils

10. zephyrs [pg 3, sc 2, para 2] [... blood thinned by California Zephyrs ...] warm winds

11. smote [pg 3, sc 2, para 2] [But Johnsy he smote; ...] hit, smack, clobber

12. curative [pg 3, col 2, last para] [... the curative powers of medicine.] to cure as from a disease

13. dreary [pg 4, sc 3, para 3] [There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen, and the blank side of the brick house forty feet away.] bleak, cheerless, gloomy, dismal

14. persistent [pg 5, sc 5, para 1] [A cold persistent rain was falling mingled with snow.] regular, steady, constant

15. sill [pg 5, sc 5, para 1] [Sue pulled Johnsy's shade down to the window sill, ...] the bottom of the window

16. eaves [pg 6, sc 5, last para] [... the rain still beat against the windows and pattered down from the low dutch eaves.] the overhang of a roof

17. port [pg 6, col 2, last para] [You can bring me a little broth now, and some milk with a little port in it ...] a sweet red wine usually fortified with alcohol

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**Key to CROSSWORD PUZZLE**

**ACROSS**

1. GABLES
6. BRICK
7. CA
9. BED
11. NAPLES
14. SATYR
15. ARTIST
16. MAY
17. PORT
20. EPIDEMIC
21. SUE
26. LEAF
28. TWILIGHT
30. IRREGULAR

**DOWN**

1. GIN
2. BIC
3. SEBASTOPOL
4. ECONOMICS
6. BRICK
8. ATTIC
10. ILL
12. SCOFF
13. EASEL
18. PERSIST
22. GALLANT
23. SMOTE
24. MAT
25. YEAR
29. LAST

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**Key to DISCUSSION/Writing Activity**

[Answers are with questions in the Specific Teaching Suggestions section.]