

Moments (Lesson - 7): - The Last Leaf (IX)

HANDOUT

Synopsis

"**The Last Leaf**", a short story, was written by an American short story writer, O. Henry. It was published in 1907 in his collection *The Trimmed Lamp and Other Stories*. The story is set in Greenwich Village, New York during a pneumonia epidemic. It tells the story of an old artist by name Behrman, who saves the life of a young neighboring artist by name Johnsy who has pneumonia and has no willingness to live. The old artist, in the rainy night, paints his masterpiece, an ivy leaf, on the wall and gives her the willingness to get cured and live. In the process of painting that hoping-giving ivy leaf, he catches pneumonia and dies after two days. Such was his sacrifice to save the life of a young artist.

The Author: You may look at the **slide no. 2** for information on the author and his works.

General View

This story is a symbolic story in which the characters and situation are representative of either optimism or pessimism. Optimism is to have positive thinking and pessimism, negative thinking.

Students, wherever you are, wherever you go, whatever circumstances you are in, you will basically find two types of people, optimist and pessimist. Optimists look at the positive sides of the situations and circumstances, and pessimists, at the negative sides of everything. You and I will also fall in either of the categories. Let us not separate ourselves from this.

Thus, I think the lesson, ‘The Last Leaf’, written by O. Henry, is an eye-opener for us to strive to become an optimistic person to live a happy and joyful life.

In the lesson, there are two friends, Sue and Johnsy, who represent these two qualities. Johnsy becomes pessimistic when she is down with pneumonia and thinks that she would die when the last leaf on an ivy creeper falls. Her negative thoughts bring her closer to ruining her life. Sue, on the other hand, is an optimistic person who tries her level best to wipe off the negativity in her friend’s mind and to infuse it with positive thoughts.

The doctor, who treats Johnsy, is also an optimistic person in the end, as he strongly believes in the power of positive thinking and says that Johnsy will not die but live.

A-60-year old, Behrman, a painter, also represents optimism. He is past sixty but has never been quite successful at painting. Still, he does not lose hope and hopes to paint his masterpiece someday. He has been so positive in his life; he becomes a success before his death as he paints a life-like ‘last leaf’ which saves Johnsy’s life. So, the well-known statements, ‘What you think, you become’, ‘Where there is will, there is a way’, ‘Willingness to live is better than medication’ and ‘Thoughts can either build you or kill you’, are proved once again in this lesson.

Characters in the Lesson

Johnsy

Johnsy is a nickname for Joanna. She is a young painter from California. She falls ill with pneumonia. With the sickness, pain and negative thoughts she becomes pessimistic and believes she will die when the last leaf drops from the ivy creeper which she sees out of her window.

Sue

Sue is Johnsy’s roommate. She takes care of Johnsy during her illness. Sue is also an artist, and earns a living by drawing illustrations for magazines.

Behrman

Behrman is an old painter who lives in the basement apartment of the building Johnsy and Sue live in. He is over sixty years old; he is small and weak and has a long grey beard. All his life he has spoken of painting a masterpiece, but he has never started work on it as he is looking for an opportunity. Behrman feels that the girls' safety is his responsibility. To save Johnsy's life, Behrman paints an ivy leaf on the brick wall that she believes to be the last leaf. Behrman contracts pneumonia while painting and dies two days later.

The Doctor

He is a busy, and an old man who attends to **Johnsy** and **Behrman**. The doctor comes to Johnsy's bedside to assess her condition. He is pessimistic in the beginning about Johnsy's chances of survival, as he concedes (admits) that a patient's willingness to live is integral to their survival. The doctor returns later in the story to confirm that Johnsy has regained her health. He also informs Sue that Behrman died in the hospital.

D. Themes of the Lesson

Friendship, Sacrifice, Hope, Negative thoughts (pessimism), Importance of Optimism etc. are the themes in the lesson. **But the key theme is HOPE.**

We will understand the story and themes in detail, and difficult words in the next module.
