Chapter 5

The Last Leaf

O. Henry

(William Sydney Porter)

5. You will also see generally used a microwave. Do

2. Literary Term

The surprise ending unexpected. O. Henry "the O. Henry end especially American Prepare yourself"

3. Idioms and

Note the following

fair game sometime
dunderhead stupid

B The Story

About the Author

William Sydney Po born in Greensboro drifted off to Texas marriage, Porter was a Fearful of being con man. There he gathered material that he seriously ill, Porter and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. He adopted that name warden, whose first name was

While he was in prison, O. Henry enjoyed literature and was noted for their surprise endings, which is part of a co
5. You will also see references to items that are no longer used very often. People generally used a *chafing dish* to warm up food, whereas now we have the microwave. Do you know what *bishop's sleeves* are? Have you heard of *ragtime*?

2. **Literary Term: Surprise Ending**

The *surprise ending* is, as the term indicates, an ending that is totally unexpected. O. Henry is so famous for this type of ending that it is often called “the O. Henry ending.” Other short-story writers have followed his example, especially American authors like Shirley Jackson and Edith Wharton.

Prepare yourself for a shock when you get to the conclusion of “The Last Leaf.”

3. **Idioms and Expressions**

Note the following idioms and expressions that appear in the story:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>fair game</strong></th>
<th>something easy to conquer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>dunderhead</strong></td>
<td>stupid person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>fibbertigibbet</strong></td>
<td>lightly, frivolous person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>make up her mind</strong></td>
<td>make a decision</td>
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</table>

**B The Story**

**About the Author**

William Sydney Porter (1862–1910) lived a tragic but adventurous life. He was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he worked as a pharmacist. Then he drifted off to Texas, where he met and eloped with his future wife. After their marriage, Porter worked as a bank teller but was accused of embezzling funds. Fearful of being convicted of a crime he said he did not commit, he fled to Central America. There he met other fugitives, worked on ranches as a cowboy, and gathered material that he later used in his short stories. Learning that his wife was seriously ill, Porter returned to the United States to stand trial. He was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison. While in jail, Porter wrote and published twelve short stories under the pen name O. Henry. There are many versions of why he adopted that name. The most popular one is that he overheard the wife of the warden, whose first name was Henry, call out to her husband, “Oh, Henry.”

While he was in prison, O. Henry’s wife died. On his release, the bereaved husband decided to begin a new life in New York and settled in Greenwich Village. O. Henry enjoyed life in the city and became a famous writer. His short stories are noted for their surprise endings, as you will see when you read “The Last Leaf,” which is part of a collection called *The Trimmed Lamp*, published in 1907.
The Last Leaf

IN A LITTLE DISTRICT west of Washington Square the streets have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called "places." These "places" make strange angles and curves. One street crosses itself a time or two. An artist once discovered a valuable possibility in this street. Suppose a collector with a bill for paints, paper and canvas should, in traversing this route, suddenly meet himself coming back, without a cent having been paid on account!

So, 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. Then they imported some pewter mugs and a chafing dish or two from Sixth Avenue, and became a "colony."

At the top of a squatly, three-story brick Sue and Johnsy had their studio. "Johnsy" was familiar for Joanna. One was from Maine; the other from California. They had met at the table d'hôte of an Eighth Street "Delmonico's," and found their tastes in art, chicory salad and bishop sleeves so congenial that the joint studio resulted.

That was in May. In November a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called Pneumonia, stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy fingers. Over on the east side this ravager strode boldly, smiting his victims by scores, but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown "places."

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 the red-fisted, short-breathed old duffer. But Johnsy he smote; and she lay, scarcely moving, on her painted iron bedstead, looking through the small Dutch window-panes at the blank side of the next brick house.

One morning the busy doctor invited Sue into the hallway with a shaggy, gray eyebrow.

"She has one chance in – let us say, ten," he said, as he shook down the mercury in his clinical thermometer. "And that chance is for her to want to live. This way people have of lining-up on the side of the undertaker makes the entire pharmacopeia look silly. Your little lady has made up her mind that she's not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?"

"She – she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples some day," said Sue.

"Paint? – bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking about twice – a man, for instance?"

"A man?" said Sue, with a jew's-harp twang in her voice. "Is a man worth – but, no, doctor; there is nothing of the kind."

"Well, it is the weakness, then," said the doctor. "I will do all that science, so far as it may filter through my efforts, can accomplish. By patient begins to cough, her funeral procession cent from the Cu medicines. If you w
one question about the style in cloak sleeve you a one-in-five instead of one in ten.

After the doctor had into the workroom Japanese napkin to staggered into John's drawing board, who was Johnsy. He, scarcel under the bedclothes toward the window whistling, thinking.

She arranged her pen-and-ink drawing, magazine story. You lay their way to pictures for magaz young authors write to Literature.

As Sue was sket elegant horseshow monocle on the figu Idaho cowbow, she li several times repes quickly to the beds.

Johnsy's eyes were was looking out tl counting – counting.

"Twelve," she said, "eleven"; and then "i and then "eight" are together.

Sue looked solicit window. What was There was only a bat be seen, and the blan
can accomplish. But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession I subtract 50 per cent from the curative power of medicines. If you will get her to ask one question about the new winter styles in cloak sleeves I will promise you a one-in-five chance for her, instead of one in ten."

After the doctor had gone Sue went into the workroom and cried a Japanese napkin to a pulp. Then she swaggered into Johnny's room with her drawing board, whistling ragtime.

Johnny, lay, scarcely making a ripple under the bedclothes, with her face toward the window. Sue stopped whistling, thinking she was asleep.

She arranged her board and began a pen-and-ink drawing to illustrate a magazine story. Young artists must pave their way to Art by drawing pictures for magazine stories that young authors write to pave their way to Literature.

As Sue was sketching a pair of elegant horeshow riding trousers and a monocle on the figure of the hero, an Idaho cowboy, she heard a low sound, several times repeated. She went quickly to the bedside.

Johnny's eyes were open wide. She was looking out the window and counting—counting backward.

"Twelve," she said, and a little later "eleven"; and then "ten," and "nine"; and then "eight" and "seven," almost together.

Sue looked solicitously out of the window. What was there to count? There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen, and the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall. The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine until its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Johnny, 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?"

"Oh, I never heard of such nonsense," complained Sue, with magnificent scorn. "What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well? And you used to love that vine, so, you naughty girl. Don't be a goosey. Why, the doctor told me this morning that your chances for getting well real soon were—let's see exactly what he said—he said the chances were ten to one! Why, that's almost as good a chance as we have in New York when we ride on the street cars or walk past a new building. Try to take some broth now, and let Sudie go back to her drawing, so she can sell the editor man with it, and buy port wine for her sick child, and pork chops for her greedy self."

"You needn't get any more wine," said Johnny, keeping her eyes fixed out the window. "There goes another. No, I don't want any broth. That leaves just
four. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I'll go, too."

"Johnsy, dear," said Sue, bending over her, "will you promise me to keep your eyes closed, and not look out the window until I am done working? I must hand those drawings in by tomorrow. I need the light, or I would draw the shade down."

"Couldn't you draw in the other room?" asked Johnsy, coldly.

"I'd rather be here by you," said Sue. "Besides, I don't want you to keep looking at those silly ivy leaves."

"Tell me as soon as you have finished," said Johnsy, closing her eyes, and lying white and still as a 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."

"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call Behrman up to be my model for the old hermit miner. I'll not be gone a minute. Don't try to move till I come back."

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor beneath them. He was past sixty and had a Michael Angelo's Moses beard curling down from the head of a satyr along the body of an imp. 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 about to paint a masterpiece, but had never yet begun it. For several years he had painted nothing except now and then a daub in the line of commerce or advertising. He earned a little by serving as a model to those young artists in the colony who could not pay the price of a professional. He drank gin to excess, and still talked of his coming masterpiece. For the rest he was a fierce little old man, who scoffed terribly at softness in any one, and who regarded himself as especial mastiff-in-waiting to protect the two young artists in the studio above.

Sue found Behrman smelling strongly of juniper berries in his dimly lighted den below. In one corner was a blank canvas on an easel that had been waiting there for twenty-five years to receive the first line of the masterpiece. She told him of Johnsy's fancy, and how she feared she would, indeed, light and fragile as a leaf herself, float away, when her slight hold upon the world grew weaker.

Old Behrman, with his red eyes plainly streaming, shouted his contempt and derision for such idiotic imaginings.

"Vass!" he cried. "Ich der foolishness to die because leafs die drop off from a confused vine? I hav not heard of such a thing. No, I will not bose as a model for your fool hermit-dunderhead. Why do you allow dot silly business to come in der brain of her? Ach, dot poor leettle Miss Johnsy."

"She is very ill and weak," said Sue, "and the fever has left her mind morbid and full of strange fancies. Very well, Mr. Behrman, if you do not care to pose for me, you needn't. But I think you are a horrid old - old flibbertigibbet."

"You are just like Behrman. "Who sa Go on. I come mi hour I hav peen try ready to bose. Gott! in which one so ge shall lie sick. Some masterpiece, and ve Gott! yes."

Johnsy was asleep upstairs. Sue pulled the window-sill, Behrman into the or they peered out the the ivy vine. Then til other for a moment. A persistent, cold mingled with snow, old blue shirt, tool hermit miner on a rock.

When Sue awoke the next morning Behrman with dull, staring at the drawn. "Pull it up; I w ordered, in a whisper. Wearly Sue obeye. But, lo! after the fierce gusts of wind through the livelong stood out against the leaf. It was the last dark green near its serrated edges tinted dissolution and decay from a branch some the ground.

"It is the last one, thought it would sure night. I heard the v today, and I shall die a
"You are just like a woman!" yelled Behrman. "Who said I will not bore? Go on. I come mit you. For half an hour I haf been trying to say dot I am ready to bore. Gott! dis is not any place in which one so goot as Miss Johnsy shall lie sick. Some day I vill haint a masterpiece, and ve shall all go away. Gott! yes."

Johnsy was sleeping when they went upstairs. Sue pulled the shade down to the window-sill, and motioned Behrman into the other room. In there they peered out the window fearfully at the ivy vine. Then they looked at each other for a moment without speaking. A persistent, cold rain was falling, mingled with snow. Behrman, in his old blue shirt, took his seat as the hermit miner on an upturned kettle for a rock.

When Sue awoke from an hour's sleep the next morning she found Johnsy with dull, wide-open eyes staring at the drawn green shade.

"Pull it up; I want to see," she ordered, in a whisper.

Wearily Sue obeyed.

But, lo! after the beating rain and fierce gusts of wind that had endured through the livelong night, there yet stood out against the brick wall one ivy leaf. It was the last on the vine. Still dark green near its stem, but with its serrated edges tinted with the yellow of dissolution and decay, it hung bravely from a branch some twenty feet above the ground.

"It is the last one," said Johnsy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall today, and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear, dear!" said Sue, leaning her worn face down to the pillow, "think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?"

But Johnsy did not answer. The lonesomest 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.

The day wore away, and even through the twilight they could see the lone ivy leaf clinging to its stem against the wall. And then, with the coming of the night the north wind was again loosed, while the rain still beat against the windows and pattered down from the low Dutch eaves.

When it was light enough Johnsy, the merciless, commanded that the shade be raised.

The ivy leaf was still there.

Johnsy lay for a long time looking at it. And then she called to Sue, who was stirring her chicken broth over the gas stove.

"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. 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."

An hour later she said:

"Sudie, some day I hope to paint the Bay of Naples."

The doctor came in the afternoon, and Sue had an excuse to go into the hallway as he left.
“Even chances,” said the doctor, taking Sue’s thin, shaking hand in his. “With good nursing you’ll win. And now I must see another case I have downstairs. Behrman, his name is—some kind of an artist, I believe. Pneumonia, too. He is an old, weak man, and the attack is acute. There is no hope for him; but he goes to the hospital today to be made more comfortable.”

The next day the doctor said to Sue: “She’s out of danger. You’ve won. Nutrition and care now—that’s all.”

And that afternoon Sue came to the bed where Johnsly lay, contentedly knitting a very blue and very useless woollen shoulder scarf, and put one arm around her, pillows and all.

“I have something to tell you,” white mouse,” she said. “Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was ill only two days. The janitor found him on the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes and clothing were wet through and icy cold. They couldn’t imagine where he had been on such a dreadful night. And then they found a lantern, still lighted, and a ladder that had been dragged from its place, and some scattered brushes, and a palette with green and yellow colors mixed on it, and—look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. 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.”

2. **Vocabulary**
In the following sentences Leaf.” From the way they mean, fill in the blank with the word in the space provided.

1. The hiker had a face and hands.
2. That quaint little it.
3. Cats often prowl
4. When we go to a
5. Frankenstein’s monster, widespread damage
6. An epidemic often
7. In medieval times
8. The conceited for winning touchdown
9. Sue’s care of Johnsly
10. People who are af
11. Johnsly had a from the vine.
12. Years ago, many im

**The Unexpected Twist**
2. Vocabulary

In the following sentences, the **bold** words have been selected from “The Last Leaf.” From the way the words are used in the sentences, try to guess their meanings. If you have trouble, consult your dictionary. Write a synonym for each word in the space provided at the end of the sentence.

1. The hiker had to **traverse** many paths before he found a stream to wash his face and hands. ____________

2. That **quaint** little house is a contrast to all the modern buildings surrounding it. ____________

3. Cats often **prowl** all night, looking for food. ____________

4. When we go to a party, we expect to meet **congenial** people. ____________

5. Frankenstein’s monster was a **ravager** who roamed the countryside, causing widespread damage. ____________

6. An epidemic often **smites** children and old people. ____________

7. In medieval times, knights were expected to be **chivalric**. ____________

8. The conceited football player **swaggered** off the field after having made the winning touchdown. ____________

9. Sue’s care of Johnsy showed how **solicitous** she was for her friend’s welfare. ____________

10. People who are afraid of being robbed sometimes have a **mastiff** to protect them. ____________

11. Johnsy had a **morbid** conviction that she would die when the last leaf fell from the vine. ____________

12. Years ago, many immigrants came to America thinking that the streets were **paved** with gold. ____________
13. A saw, like a leaf, has edges that are **serrated**.

14. Parents should never **scoff** at their children’s ambitions even if they seem ridiculous.

15. Most women like to look **elegant** when attending a dinner party.

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### 3. Grammar: Infinitives and Gerunds

In “The Last Leaf,” O. Henry uses many infinitives and gerunds. Here are some examples from the story:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infinitives</th>
<th>Gerunds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>want to see</td>
<td>tired of waiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>try to sleep</td>
<td>go sailing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hope to plant</td>
<td>without speaking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Infinitives are formed by using *to* + the present tense of a verb, for example, *to run*. Never form an infinitive by adding *to* to the past tense.

**Incorrect:** to walked  
**Correct:** to walk

Gerunds are formed by placing *-ing* at the end of a verb, for example, *running*.

Infinitives and gerunds are called *verbals* because they look like verbs but function as other parts of speech. Infinitives function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. Gerunds function as nouns. Certain verbs must be followed by infinitives – not gerunds. You cannot say, for example: I want *seeing* that film. You must say: I want *to see* that film.

Here are some other verbs that require infinitives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hope</th>
<th>pretend</th>
<th>need</th>
<th>seem</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decide</td>
<td>refuse</td>
<td>offer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agree</td>
<td>expect</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Other verbs are always followed by gerunds, such as *go* (go swimming) and the verbs listed here:

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*The Unexpected Twist*
avoid  delay  consider  discuss
mind  quit  dislike
finish  enjoy  keep

Do not say, for example: I enjoy to dance. Use the gerund: I enjoy dancing.
Note: Although you must use a gerund with dislike, you may use either a gerund or an infinitive with like. You may say: I like to dance or I like dancing.

Application
Now try this exercise by using the correct form of the verbal (infinitive or gerund).

1. I lost my bracelet. Will you keep ____________ (look) for it?
2. Johnsy wanted ____________ (paint) the Bay of Naples.
3. Do you mind ____________ (turn) off the TV?
4. Both Sue and Johnsy enjoyed ____________ (live) in Greenwich Village.
5. Mr. Behrman offered ____________ (help) the sick Johnsy.
6. I dislike ____________ (stay) out late on week nights.
7. Many restaurants won’t allow customers ____________ (smoke).
8. I need ____________ (buy) a new chair for my living room.
9. Mr. Behrman hoped some day ____________ (produce) a masterpiece.
10. In fact, he expected ____________ (do) it very soon.
11. It seems ____________ (be) cloudy every day.
12. When you finish ____________ (work), let’s go out to the movies.
13. We decided ____________ (stay) home for the Thanksgiving holidays.
14. That way we can avoid ____________ (travel) in the heavy traffic.
15. I promise ____________ (go) on a diet soon.
16. Sue refused ____________ (believe) that Johnsy would die.
17. Shall we consider ____________ (hire) an artist to illustrate our book?
18. Why do you delay ___________ (make) a decision?
19. Let's agree ___________ (wait) until tomorrow before telling her the bad news.
20. Mr. Behrman promised ___________ (pose) for Sue's picture.

4. Editing
As a review, correct the misuse of infinitives and gerunds in the following paragraph:

I have always enjoyed to read stories with a surprise ending. I dislike to know what will happen before I finish to read the ending. I need having an unexpected twist, and I refuse selecting any more stories by authors who decide giving the reader too many hints. O. Henry was a master who delayed to tell the outcome of the plot until the very last sentence. I hope finding other authors like O. Henry.

D Thinking About the Story

1. Sharing Ideas
Discuss the following questions with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class:

1. Do you know of any cases in life or in literature in which a person lost the will to live? Do you think a desire to survive can overcome even a fatal illness?
2. Discuss the friendship between Sue and Johnsy. Give examples that prove Sue's loyalty.
3. In what way is the setting important to the story? Suppose Johnsy had become ill in the spring or the summer?
4. How does the ending prove that Mr. Behrman was a great artist?
5. What other examples in the story indicate Mr. Behrman's deep feeling for Sue and Johnsy?

2. Writing
Read the writing ideas that follow. Your instructor may make specific assignments, or ask you to choose one of these.

1. In the fourth paragraph of the story, O. Henry describes pneumonia as though the disease were a person. Write a paragraph in which you also use personification, falling leaves, or ______.
2. Write a dialogue: Mr. Behrman's ______
3. Write an origin: ______
4. Retell a story from making a sacrifice: ______
personification. You might wish to describe a season, an old house, flowers, falling leaves, or something else.

2. Write a dialogue between Johnsy and Sue a year later, on the anniversary of Mr. Behrman’s death.

3. Write an original story with a surprise ending.

4. Retell a story from your native country that contains the theme of someone making a sacrifice for another.

5. Compare Johnsy’s attitude toward her chances for survival with Schatz’s in “A Day’s Wait.” Cite specific examples from each story.