



Re-humanization of art / art for life's sake: A study of O Henry's *The Last Leaf*

Dhananjoy Mahaldar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sikkim University, Sikkim, India

Abstract

The paper starts with the notion that art has not only its aesthetic value but also its 're-humanizing principles which challenge the 19th century slogan of "art for art's sake" and propagate a new literary creed of "art for life's sake". Taking its illustrations from O Henry's short story "The Last Leaf", which reflects on the several issues of life like commitment, sacrifice, friendship, compassion, hope, and dedication, this paper purports that modern short fiction as a part of art/literature acts as a mirror to life by performing its moral values and didactic purposes.

Keywords: Art, life, re-humanization, art for life's sake, the last leaf

Introduction

What is behind this disgust at seeing art mixed up with life? Could it be disgust for the human sphere as such, for reality, for life?

Or is it rather the opposite: respect for life and unwillingness

To confuse it with art, so inferior a thing is art?

– José Ortega y Gasset, the Dehumanization of Art

In the nineteenth century, "art for art's sake" becomes a creed to establish art as pure and autonomous creative work detached from life, dealing only with aesthetic purpose bereft of any didactic, moral and utilitarian function. This creed gets impetus in the Decadent movement, particularly by the hands of Oscar Wilde and Algernon Charles Swinburne, inspired by French writer Walter Pater who propagates a poem should be "written solely for the poem's sake" (76). But in the first half of the twentieth century, a number of writers make a clear and sharp departure from the 19th century by rejecting the doctrine and propagate a new literary creed of "art for life's sake". A number of writers like Bernard Shaw, H.G Wells, and Rudyard Kipling are always on their stand to use art as a reflection of life and a mirror to society. Bernard Shaw stated, "'for art's sake' alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence" (42). Modern short story writers also give vent to all kinds of problems, complexities, and anxieties of life through the new literary genre, modern short fiction.

One such prominent short story writer from America is William Sidney Porter, better known by his pen name O Henry who in his stories like "The Furnished Room", "The Green Door", "Hearts and Hands", "Buried Treasure", "The Pendulum", "Twenty Years After", "The Gift of the Magi", etc. portray common issues and complications of life. His other important short story is "The Last Leaf", published in 1907, the very beginning of the modern age reflects on the several issues of life like commitment, sacrifice, friendship, compassion, hope, and dedication. Taking into consideration all these issues this paper investigates how O Henry uses short fiction as a form of art for life's sake as well as shows how the characters' knack or love for art determines their profession, relationship, subjectivity, aim, and identity.

Art for art's and Life's Sake

The short story "The Last Leaf" deals with the lives of three artists who live in wild, strayed street of Washington. The artists come to the street to practice their creative faculty as well as live a humble life. Here they find room in affordable rent, with good light, and at a low cost. The very setting of the story resembles the life of the artists. The wild, strayed street reflects the condition of the artists and this becomes a suitable place for the artists. "An artist once discovered a valuable possibility in this street" (178). So, through this Henry focuses on the grim reality that in order to practice one's creative faculty one must have to compromise with his/her luxurious life. Here O Henry as a writer also paints the grim realities of life by using the symbol of the 'wild' street. Like the street, life cannot run smoothly rather it takes a different direction or sometimes goes across itself one or two times. So short story as a form of art represents the dynamic experiences and complexities of life,

As art, literature does not exist just for art's sake. Art is also a mirror of life. While art for art's sake is a symbolic representation of life, art as a mirror becomes the means for a larger understanding of human life and a bridge between symbol and practice. (King and Mitchell 47)

Painting as a form of art captivates the mind and heart of the three artists – Sue, Johnsy, and Barhmin. This art sticks to their life as it is their profession and passion. Because of their liking for the same kind of art, the same kind of food and the same kind of clothes they feel some kind of proximity with each other, makes friendship and starts to live together. This sense of reciprocity caters a zeal to their profession and passion for painting as well as give them a scope to care for each other. Sue as an artist paints for life's sake because by selling paintings she wants to build her career and elevate her status as an artist: "Young artists must have their way to Art by drawing pictures for magazine stories that young authors write to pave their way to Literature" (180). Art provides her the scope to forget the complexity, created by Johnsy's illness. When she hears Johnsy has little chance to live, she cries "a Japanese napkin to a pulp" (179). But in the next moment "she swaggered into Johnsy's room with her drawing-board, whistling ragtime" (179). So art is the only tool of their physical and mental sustainability. Henry describes Sue's profession as well as the true kind of friendship and humanity. Sue feeds

Johnsy and arranges for her treatment. When Johnsy muses over the impending death finding affinity with the loss of leaves of the tree, Sue encourages her and says, “the doctor told me this morning that your chances for getting well” (180). Her care for Johnsy reflects that she is not a friend in need but a friend indeed. So in order to lead a good and smooth life, one must need “true friends: without which the world is but a wilderness” (Bacon 118).

Art also determines the subjectivity of Johnsy as she is obsessed with the aim to paint a picture of the Bay of Naples. She is overwhelmed by the scenic beauty of the Bay of Naples and wants to give vent to her artistic self by painting it. Wofflin writes: “Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times” (11). Thus the aesthetic beauty of the Bay of Naples takes a part in herself and always reminds her that life can get permanency through art. In her illness, it is her aim which keeps her zeal alive. So in the case of Johnsy also art and life get correlated with each other.

Through Johnsy’s illness Henry shows how disease creates a sense of despair and death in the human psyche. Pneumonia makes her weak both mentally and physically demolishing her will to live: “Your little lady has made up her mind that she's not going to get well” (179). Interestingly Henry endows human quality to pneumonia and figures him as Mr. Pneumonia: “Mr. Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman” (179). This is very suggestive of the women condition in the hand of male dominated androcentric patriarchal society. In the story, Johnsy’s deteriorated artistic self always gets compared with the old tree which grew against the wall outside the window: “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” (181). She observes how the tree is constantly losing its leaves one by one and counts the leaves. She says, “Leaves. On the ivy vine. When the last one falls I must go too. I’ve known that for three days” (180). She portrays the core issue of how the thought of death engulfs one’s self. But she starts to gather confidence about the possibility of her life when she finds that the last leaf does not fall from the tree. The leaf has survived the stormy weather and rain. The existence of the leaf rejuvenates her artistic zeal, hope and will to live: “It is a sin to want to die...someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples” (183).

Another connoisseur of art is Berhman, an old artist who bears the brunt of his failure as he “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” (181). He is still striving to paint a great picture, a masterpiece. But most of the times he is haunted by the memories of his failures and turns into a drunkard. He is the representative of how failures make one self-destructive: “what makes an old age hard to bear is not the falling of one’s faculties, mental and physical, but the burden of one’s memories” (Maughm). His artistic self is still very powerful because he tries to find out the way to save Johnsy. When he comes to know that Johnsy’s self is stuck to the existence of the last leaf, he tries his best to save Johnsy by imposing permanency on the leaf. As an artist, he finds nothing but art as the only medium of permanence. In the stormy night, he painted a leaf on the wall so that Johnsy can find the last leaf on the wall and rejuvenate herself. Ultimately Johnsy shakes off her sense of

despair regarding death and starts life with new zeal. Berhman with his ‘green painting’ makes Johnsy lively and with his ‘yellow’ painting colours the friendship of Sue and Johnsy. Ultimately he paints his ‘masterpiece’ because he uses his artistic quality for the sake of Johnsy’s life and restores hope and joy in their life. But he cannot survive the stormy weather and dies after two days.

For the sake of humanity to restore the artistic self and aim of another artist Berhman sacrifices his life. He has the true sense of humanity and true artistic self. As an “artist he produces for the liberation of his soul” (Maugham 78). That’s why after the producing of his masterpiece he leaves the mundane world. When he comes to know the worsen condition of Johnsy he tries his best to help Johnsy and Sue. His feeling for Johnsy leads her to paint his master piece. He performs the task secretly the same night so that his pneumonia-affected neighbor will retrieve her will to live. So throughout the story, it is found that all the three artists are totally devoted to their work and passion. They have the realization that art has its permanent value. Only work can make one’s life meaningful. Here the artists want to get completeness in life through their work. They know the very principle of life that it is the work which remains in this mundane world. Henry shows the permanence of art and transience of life. This is very indicative of Tagore’s poem “The Golden Boat”:

No room, no room, the boat is too small.
Loaded with my gold paddy, the boat is full.
Across the rain-sky clouds heave to and fro,
On the bare river-bank, I remain alone -
What I had has gone; the golden boat took all.

In the golden time period of life, only our work make our life meaningful and memorable. This is reflective in Berhman’s sacrifice of his life for Johnsy.

Conclusion

As a short story writer O Henry portrays the core principles of life like friendship, humanity, love, hope and will to live. The most interesting fact is that in order to show the relation between life and art Henry show two aspects – firstly, how painting as a form of art influences the artists’ life and secondly, how a short story as a form of art revolves around the principles of life. Art is used as a re-humanizing factor that

refers to the process of reengaging with the human through the creation of, exposure to, or appreciation of art; the act of affirming a unique, subjective experience of art that promotes individual humanity; the desire to make life meaningful and livable through the sublimation of the external world into the artistic mind or the aesthetic personality” (Komfort 4).

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