

The season has come when the works of O Henry are being appreciated.

The season of falling leaves coincides with the Christmas Holidays. This season reminds me of the works by O Henry: “The last leaf” and “The gift of the Magi”. Among his many creations, these two pieces have been read by many in Japan.

When I encountered these literary works, I was in high school, studying English literature. We read short essays and novels. The contents of these were understandable and instructive, and the English language itself was comparatively easy. I assumed the works were most appropriate materials for youth. I imagine there were those of us who read the translated format, whereas many have appreciated these works in the original English.



**“The last leaf”**

At one square in Washington there was an area where many artists lived. Johnsy shared a small atelier in her apartment with Sue whom she had met across the street. Johnsy meanwhile was suffering from pneumonia.

The doctor told Johnsy, “The one thing that will save your life is your will to live, not these medicines or treatments.” Johnsy, however, could only think about the time when she would die, while looking at a tree outside the window.

“When the last leaf of that tree falls, I shall die.”

Sue was totally at a loss as what may alleviate her friend’s depression.

There lived an eccentric old man in the next apartment. “I will create a masterpiece someday.” This was his usual way of talking. Although he was already old, he still had not achieved his dream. Sue told the old man that Johnsy had lost her will to live and she was dying from pneumonia. The old man said nothing in return.

Winter came. Leaves began to fall one by one from the trees. Then a storm attacked the area. The next morning after the storm, Johnsy opened the window. She saw only one last leaf left on the branch of the tree. Seeing that the leaf had withstood a night in the violent storm, Johnsy restored her will to live again. Soon after, she was able to recover from her pneumonia.

Incidentally, almost at the same time, the old man in the next apartment died through pneumonia. Someone said that during that stormy night, he was seen at the gate of the apartment, drenched to the skin, and became ill.

It appeared the last leaf was like a picture painted against the brick wall. It was the first picture Johnsy saw and, at the same time, the last "masterpiece" the old man painted in his life.

What did the author intend to transmit to the readers through this short story? Someone says, "The old man saved a young life in exchange for his own." Another says, "He staked his life for the sake of authentic art." There could be many kinds of interpretation. Under this situation, I believe the doctor spoke the truth.

The doctor said, "Johnsy, I will do my best, trying as many ways of treatment as I know. I would like to tell you, however, that if you continue to count the number of cars that would line up at your funeral procession, the effectiveness of my medicine will become only 50 percent. But I can promise you that if you can start asking questions about the newest fashions of sleeves for the winter-gowns this year, we can probably increase your chance of recovery by 10%, or even 20%."

Just the other day, as I referred to the life of Anne in the novel "Anne of Green Gables", I believe that an optimism under any circumstances is the key to recovery from illnesses and to pave the path for a grateful life.



### **"The Gift of the Magi"**

There was once a poor young couple. Christmas was arriving but they didn't have any spare money to give presents to each other. They had, however, wonderful treasures each possessed respectively. Dela, the wife, had magnificent, beautiful hair which everyone adored, and Jim, the husband, had a shiny, valuable gold watch that everyone admired.

The two made individual decisions without first consulting with each other. Dela sold her precious hair to buy a suitable chain for her husband's gold watch, and Jim pawned his gold watch to buy a comb so that his wife could comb her beautiful hair.

On Christmas day, the gifts they presented to each other turned out essentially useless. However, Dela and Jim still considered these being the "Best present from each other's heart."

This short story transmitted to us a strong and profound message. Similarly, In the Nichiren Daishonin's 'Gosho', there is a passage which reads as follows. "More valuable than treasures in a store house are the treasures of the body, and the treasure of the heart is the most valuable of all."

In conclusion, what touches the heart of others is one's heart.