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Reforming Beliefs

**PSYCHIC FEMINISM AND REALISM IN O' HENRY'S *THE LAST LEAF*****G. Sivasamy****ABSTRACT**

The aspect of dream in life was handled as a key factor by some writers. The social and gender factors also influence the dreamers to a greater level thereby affecting or effecting their life and health. It doesn't mean that all the people who underwent a particular incident will definitely get a similar dream. Fear of anything was purely subjective since it affects some and it has no value on some. I like to present '*The last leaf*' by O' Henry with the theories that were stated by some of the renowned psychologists from Freud to Adler and others along with the different kinds of dreams. The character Johnsy was the one to get disturbed a lot by her dream thereby getting her life and health affected and later recovering her health because of her psychic feminism.

**Keywords:** Kinds of dreams, Suppressed wishes, Feministic thought, Instincts, Self.

The view that people may be dissatisfied with any emotional and physical activities or the experiences that they get by dream in their life was handled as a key factor by some writers. Dream may lead a person to get the feelings of happiness and at the same time without any doubt even the sadness. Even though the contents of some dreams were the same for all classes of people either male or female it seems that it was not affecting all kinds of people at similar level. It was most common to see the females more fragile than male in their experiences that they get. It may be of real life or it may be of a dream. The parameters of the female's development are not the same as the male's and that the same terms do not apply (Gilligan 1982:48). The degree varies with an individual to individual. Some are deeply affected by the dream and the others seem to be less or not at all affected by the dream that they get. The social and gender factors also influence the dreamers to a greater level thereby affecting or effecting their life and health.

From centuries past and until this we have people giving much importance to their dream and at the same time we too have people who care little for the dream that they get. We just can't say that this will happen to everyone because s/he had this kind of dream as a scientific measure as we do in some scientific experiments but we can assure that "this had happened because of this" stating a particular incident that happened in one's life that might have led to a particular dream as a tentative solution. It doesn't mean that all the people who underwent a particular incident will definitely get a similar dream. While a behaviorist can recognize mental states- which he identifies with behavioral dispositions- he has literally no use for cognitive process such as causal trains of thought (Foder 1987:147). We too know that there were people who remain unaffected even though they experienced the worst kind of dream saying that its all just a "dream" and on the other hand we can see some who bothers everyone just because that they have dreamt something. Fear of anything was purely subjective since it affects some and it has no value on some. I like to present '*The Last Leaf*' with the theories that were stated by some of the renowned psychologists and the character Johnsy. More women today work outside the home, achieve advanced levels of educational and professional attainment (Wolbrecht 2000:226) Johnsy settles down for her profession as a painter with Sue. To be sure, many women supported themselves and their families through their own entrepreneurial abilities: numbers of female printers, milliners, graphic artists, dress makers, and cosmetologists acquired credit and good reputations (Kessler 2001:24). She dreams of losing her life along with the last ivy leaf that falls off from its branch.

The word dream stems from the Middle English word, "dreme" means "joy" and "music". '*The Last Leaf*' tells us a lot of the dream of Johnsy and its effects that it had on the life of her. It was common to hear that people usually dream of their wishes and about their wishes during the time while they sleep or at the time while they stay awake. In '*The Last Leaf*' Johnsy was constantly dreaming of the falling Ivy Leaf and it was positive towards her death and totally against the wishes of her life since she was sick with pneumonia. Dreams are sometimes downright silly. Don't tell Daddy about it. It's too silly (Munro 1998:75).

Dreams were the suppressed wishes of an individual this was what Sigmund Freud says about the dream. In our dreams as in our illness our unconscious and repressed thoughts and

emotions find expression (Ruitenbeak 1973:38). For many of us it was really true that the dreams are really the wish fulfilling agents but it was not so in the case of Johnsy in O'Henry's, *'The Last Leaf'*. The author had interwoven the story of Johnsy with the nature and her dream since the Ivy leaf that was handled by the writer becomes the one to be the fortune teller of Johnsy. We can see the human to dream of and to bring many of her/his dreams in reality for the comfortable life but in this story we can see the other end of dream that was not for the improved or sophisticated life of Johnsy but for a life that will be without the disturbance of worldly comforts. Freud makes it a rule to encourage the patient to make his own interpretations, to work out his own difficulties, wherever possible, especially after the patient has made some progress (Ruitenbeak 1973:57). On the aspect of dream Sigmund Freud compared the brain of the humans into three different stages that make them act in a particular situation, the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious.

O'Henry portrayed the character Johnsy and the Ivy leaf with equal importance and he represented the ecological things have a lot of value in affecting and in effecting the lives of individuals. How women describe themselves becomes a crucial marker for predicting their ability and desire to bond together as a group, and to take their rightful place in society (Henry 1994:41). Johnsy was presented as the one who was rather worried of her day dreams than to get her suppressed wishes fulfilled of it since she feared a lot to live her life like the others and worried a lot by seeing and counting the fallen Ivy leaf. "Crisis reveals character," says one of the women as she searches for the problem within herself. That crisis also creates character is the essence of developmental approach (Gilligan 1982:126). It had been portrayed in the majority of the story that she was very conscious of her death rather her life. Individual existence is deprived of meaning and submitted to the destructive power of time, which carries it towards nothingness. The consciousness of the individual is unable to transcend this state of things (Fadiman 1990:99).

Freud categorized mind into three parts: Id centered on primal impulses, pleasures, desires, unchecked urges and wish fulfillment. Ego concerned with the conscious, the rational, the moral and the self-aware aspect of the mind and Superego the censor for the id, which is also responsible for enforcing the moral codes of the ego.

Throughout the story Johnsy was portrayed as the character that the Ego of her was more dominating herself than the Id and the Superego since Sue was telling her think of me, if you won't think of yourself. Even then Johnsy was not ready to leave her thoughts of that falling Ivy leaf. Her fancy was to lose her life along with the last leaf than to live with her dearest friend. It's easy to see how one's beliefs could arise from a desire to be good or happy, but if one knows that this is the source of one's beliefs, how can one continue to believe? I suspect that belief is not the simple matter discussed by epistemologists, but a complicated emotion like love, and that many find it satisfactory to believe and not believe the same thing at the same time (Fadiman 1990:267). When people are awake, the impulses and desires of the id were suppressed by the superego. But in the case of Johnsy it was not so since she cares little for the others or even her dearest friend who stayed with her. She was portrayed as a character who was always ruled by the impulses of her ego since she wished not to live but to die along with the last Ivy leaf and that was the dream of her in her room. Beliefs are the kinds of things that are true or false; desires are the kinds of things that get frustrated or fulfilled; hunches are the kinds of things that turn out to be right or wrong; so it goes (Foder 1987:11). In her case the superego had not acted as the censor of her ego since she had not convinced with her thoughts until her ego (self) saw the last Ivy leaf. Symbols and mental states both have representational content. And nothing else does that belongs to the casual order: not rocks, or worms or trees or spiral nebulae. It would, therefore, be no great surprise if the theory of mind and the theory of symbols were some day to converge (Foder 1987: xi). The last leaf had not fallen off from its branch. Like his mentor Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung also believed in the existence of the unconscious. However, he does not see the unconscious as animalistic, instinctual, or sexual.

According to Jung, dreams are a way of communicating and acquainting yourself with the unconscious. Dreams are not attempts to conceal your true feelings from the waking mind, but rather they were a window to your unconscious. They serve to guide the waking self to achieve wholeness and offer a solution to a problem you are facing in your waking life. The author O'Henry presented the character Johnsy as the one to have the feeling of death and she was also sure of reaching it whenever she sees the old Ivy leaf fall off from its branch. Since the autumn had affected the Ivy branch and pneumonia had affected Johnsy. Feminine qualities are often at

the mercy of various physical conditions that women can't always control (Henry 1994:44). We see that physically by the Ivy branch losing its leaves and Johnsy losing her health. Women and children are among the most vulnerable populations in these societies. (Inglehart., Norris 2003:15).

Jung views the ego as your sense of self and how you portray yourself to the world. Part of Jung's theory was that all things can be viewed as paired opposites: good/evil, male/female, or love/hate. So working in opposition to the ego, was the counter ego or what he refers to as the shadow. The shadow represents the rejected aspects of yourself that you do not wish to acknowledge. The shadow was more primitive, somewhat uncultured, and a little awkward. This influenced Johnsy in deciding the life of her even before the doctor decide the condition of her. The first mode of knowing described in women's ways of knowing is simply called silence, which applies to women who think of themselves as "deaf and dumb". They can neither learn by listening to words nor use language to accomplish their goals. The second mode, called received knowledge, grows out of women's passivity. (Patai and Koertge 2003:162). The doctor says it so firm to her companion that he will do all that science can so far as it may filter through his efforts can accomplish. The doctor was very clear that if the patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession he subtract 50 percent from the curative power of medicines clearly indicating that the life forces lead a person to live in this world better and if they lose their chance of livelihood even the medicines will not be effective. The lack of living her life was due to the falling of the ivy leaves from its branch. Mind vs. nature and the body, reason vs. emotion and social commitment, subject vs. object and objectivity vs. subjectivity, the abstract and general vs the concrete and particular – in each case we are told that the former must dominate the latter lest human life be overwhelmed by irrational alien forces, forces symbolized in science as the feminine (Harding 1986:125).

The doctor was also sure that he can be so confident of promising that if the interest of the patient turns towards the winter styles she will get one-in-five chance for her to live. Power comes from within. If one believes she or he has power from outsiders, eventually that power will be stripped away from her/ him (Darlington., Mulvaney 2003:39).

It has been expressed by C.J. Jung in his theory that there are two main forces that govern the life and death of an individual. That was what he called it as the eros – life instincts and thanatos – death instincts. We can see Johnsy as the one who had spent her life towards thanatos and at the end the life of her was turned towards the eros. She was portrayed and presented in the way and in the manner that she had a strong likelihood to embrace her death along with the Ivy leaf thinking that she too will die when the last Ivy leaf fall from its decayed branch. She was very conscious that her body is very much affected by the disease Pneumonia and she strongly believed that she would die at any moment without being aware of her death. We are not surprised how our focus groups responded to “caring” and “self-sacrificing” – these descriptions are automatically labeled “female” (Henry 1994:63).

Jung termed quite appropriately the 'principle of knowledge' and described it as a principle traditionally identified with men and masculinity. Logos seeks out knowledge, analysis, clear-sightedness, light, hard edges, and well-defined spaces. As true to these words Old Behrman cried on hearing the words of Johnsy that it is her foolishness to die with the ivy leaf and he also expressed that he had not heard of such a thing. The difference between the sexes has often been constructed so as to associate masculinity with reason, and femininity, with which is marginalized and repressed, with unreason (Green1995: 20).

This line clearly shows that there was no connection between the life of the useless Ivy leaf that was going to fall from its branch, the dream of Johnsy and to the life of her who was seriously affected by pneumonia. Behrman was presented as the character who was always thinking so positive of his upcoming master piece. Even though Old Behrman was portrayed as the character of drinking gin in excess he was still confident of his coming masterpiece. He had a wish to create that masterpiece for forty years. He was driven by the life force eros since he had a strong desire to live and within his lifetime he wanted to paint his masterpiece. To his wish he had made that painting possible before his death by painting the last leaf.

Adler believed that there was a correlation between dreams and the problems in our daily life. The more dreams you have, the more problems you are likely to have. Conversely, the lesser dreams you have, the lesser problems you have and the more psychologically healthy you are. He believes that it was control, power and motivation that drive your behavior. Furthermore, he

does not think that an individual's actions and behavior were ruled by the unconscious. He believed that strive for perfection and need for control were what causes you to do the things you do. In fact, he does not believe that the conscious and unconscious function against each other. Instead, they act the same way whether you are awake or not. His views on dreams are that they are an open pathway toward your true thoughts, emotions and actions. In your dreams, you clearly see your aggressive impulses and desires. Dreams are also a way of overcompensating for the shortcomings in your waking life.

Daydreaming was often a disregarded and neglected aspect of dream study. There was a lack of emphasis on the content of your daydreams. They are often overlooked as fleeting and wandering thoughts. However, the meanings to your nightly dream symbols were also applicable to your daydreams. The content in your daydreams were helpful in the understanding of your true feelings and in fulfilling your goals.

Daydreaming occurs when you were semi-awake. When you daydream, you were accessing your right brain, which was the creative and feminine side of your personality. Even worrying over things can be classified as a form of daydreaming. When you worry, you are visualizing an unwanted or negative outcome to a situation. By repeating these negative images in your mind, you were more likely to make them happen. Similarly Johnsy had always dreaming of losing her life along with the last Ivy leaf and she was rather happy to receive her end. She was saying that she wants to see the last one fall and she was tired of waiting. Some feminist theorists have argued that physiological differences between females and males ground gender differences. Females should have closer relations to others and to nature than do males, and thus culture simply elaborates biological difference (Harding 1986:179). We know that Johnsy was already affected by pneumonia and she was in a semi awakened condition since the disease had completely made her weak and weary.

We are clear that Johnsy had not just dreamt of the bad outcomes of her illness but she was also been aware of what will happen to her in the mere future. Daydreams of Johnsy had come true via repetition in her mind; she used it as a tool not to get her health improved but to get her health even worsened. It was said that many athletes, musicians and business leaders utilized daydreams to envision success. On contrary to those people Johnsy got her health



worsened because of her daydreams.

Johnsy was also portrayed as the character of having Positive daydreaming and it had been considered so healthy. It relieves stress, improves attitude, fosters creativity and refresh the mind, body, and spirit and so Johnsy saw the last leaf that stayed in its place bearing the wind and the thought of her that she would die along with the fallen leaf had completely left the mind of Johnsy. Johnsy began to think of her improvement and she was getting her thoughts improved towards her life than her death since she was under the impression that the ivy leaf survived the powerful wind and she can survive pneumonia. The key to the nature of cognition is that mental processes preserve semantic properties of mental states; trains of thought, for example, are generally truth preserving, so if you start your thinking with true assumptions you will generally arrive at conclusions that are also true (Foder 1987:154).

Recurring dreams repeat themselves with little variation in story or theme. These dreams may be positive, but most often they are nightmarish in content. Once you find a resolution to the problem, your recurring dreams will cease. We see Johnsy as the character who always dreamt of falling Ivy leaf and losing her life and when she saw the last Ivy leaf clinging on its branch she got hope in her life and that had improved and saved her life.

Many dream experts believe that dreams can help in avoiding potential health problems and healing when you were ill or when you were grieving. Johnsy was in no doubt worried of her death since she was constantly thinking of the falling Ivy leaves but the painting that was made by old Behrman on the wall saved her life. It was his attempt to get Johnsy leave out her worries of her dreams. Once women experienced what it was like to win, they pressed to keep winning (Wolf 1993:49). This made the doctor say that there are chances to get the health of Johnsy improved to a better condition. The next day the doctor informed Sue that she was out of danger. These changes had really occurred in the life of Johnsy on seeing the last Ivy leaf that had not fell off from its branch.

Falling dreams was another theme that was quite common in the world of dreams. Falling was an indication of insecurities, instabilities, and anxieties. This may reflect the way you feel in your relationship or in your work environment. Falling dreams also often reflect a sense of failure or inferiority in some circumstance or situation. It may be the fear of failing in your

job/school, loss of status, or failure in love.

In *'The Last Leaf'* Johnsy had not experienced a falling of herself in her sleep or while she was awake but she was always thinking of the falling leaves that was given much importance in this story making anyone feel that the Ivy leaf was also a character which was going to lose its life hour by hour and the autumn had made the ivy branch so bare and she thought that it will be the indication to her that make her aware that she was nearing her death. She was losing her attachment to her life. Women underestimate their own power while men do not underestimate women's power; women have trouble seeing themselves as powerful aggressors, even when they are (Wolf 1993:11).

When each of the Ivy leaves fell off from its decayed branch and later she gets a hold of survival on seeing the same Ivy leaf. It is possible that we believe so strongly that we initiate our behavior and one therefore responsible for it because we are aware of what we are doing but forget, if we ever know, the history of variation and selection responsible for doing it (Fadiman 1990:196). We also know that the wish of Johnsy was to paint the "Bay of Naples" one day on getting her life saved.

From the beginning of the story Johnsy was totally disturbed to lead a normal life like her friend. Her attraction towards death rather her fear of death was consuming her health day by day. But in real the effort of old Behrman saved her life. Her thought was too feministic but the realism was that she can withstand even the powerful pneumonia that had killed many people by her strong will.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



During his ten years of career in education department, **G. Sivasamy** worked as a Block Resource Teacher Educator for 4 years covering various aspects on teaching and learning methodology. His work mainly focused on adopting innovative methods in teaching and also in giving training to the teachers who are working in government and in aided schools up to elementary level. This has in turn helped him greatly and brought a wide exposure to improve his knowledge by undergoing in-service trainings at RIE Bangalore, at Rishi Valley and many other places. Now, Sivasamy is working as a Post Graduate English Teacher in a Government School at the Higher Secondary Level and teaches for the higher secondary students.