



The Gift of The Magi

By O. Henry

[Things To Know/Things To Think About](#)

William Sydney Porter, more commonly known by his pen name, O. Henry, was an American short story writer, made famous for his penetrating social observations and twist endings. O. Henry's subject matter—in the same tradition as the British Romantic poet, William Wordsworth—was the everyday and the commonplace. As a writer, O. Henry sought to underscore the lives of average people, and to paint their joys and sorrows in such a way as to make them worthy of fiction. With no shortage of wit, and a graceful economy of language, O. Henry masterfully captures life in New York City during the early 20th century. In fact, O. Henry does more than capture life—he calls our attention to the little things that make life worth living.



Few stories, especially ones barely over 2,000 words, are as poignant as O. Henry's "Gift of The Magi." The story, largely a meditation on the significance of gift giving, chronicles a young couple as they make preparations for Christmas. Although O. Henry begins the story by placing special emphasis on the young couple's finances, and their worldly possessions, don't mistake these points of emphasis as manifestations of his personal values. On the contrary, O. Henry highlights material possessions to make us question our conceptualization of wealth.

Despite barely scraping by, Della Dillingham is determined to buy her husband, Jim, a present worthy of her boundless affection for him. Instead of making due with \$1.87 at her disposal, Della sells her most valued possession, her hair, to buy Jim a watch chain to accompany his cherished pocket-watch. The story reaches its climax when we learn that Jim was equally determined to find a material object that could attempt to approximate the extent of his feelings for Della. Ironically, Jim ends up selling his pocket-watch to buy Della—now hairless—the comb set she has had her eyes on. Although the combs and watch chain are now rendered functionally useless, both Della and Jim are richer for their financial sacrifices. O. Henry makes explicit allusions to the gifts of the Magi, perhaps, to emphasize that money, at least as we know it, was not among their presents. In fact, for Christians, the Magi's gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh are highly symbolic. It comes as no surprise, then, that O. Henry's

gifts are equally symbolic—symbolic of unconditional love. This piece works perfectly as part of a lesson on American short-stories, and the conventions of short-story writing. In addition, because of the holiday themes, this piece also works well as part of a lesson on exploring the tradition of gift-giving.

Standards Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.9

Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

Before Reading

1. In your opinion, what is the purpose of gift-giving? Do you think the increasing emphasis of commercialism during the holidays has undermined the significance of giving and receiving gifts? Why or why not?

During Reading

1. What is the effect of opening up the story with a discussion of money? Do you think O. Henry intended this? Support your answers using the text. (*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4*)
2. At one point in the story, O. Henry cleverly writes, “Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts.” What is the purpose of his analogy? And what does it convey to the reader? (*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4*)

After Reading

1. Several passages in the story give subtle clues about the kind of person Jim is. Identify at least three passages and explain what they tell the reader about him. Use details to support your answer. (*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3*)
2. What is “comically ironic” about the end of the story? And why? Support your answer with a close reading of the text. (*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1*)
3. At the end of the story, O. Henry leaves the reader with a paradox. He refers to Della and Jim as “foolish children” while simultaneously lauding them as “the wisest” of “all those who give gifts.” How do you make sense of this paradox? And what do you think O. Henry means by it? (*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4*)

Connections In Text

1. Compare O. Henry’s attitude towards money in the “The Gift of The Magi” with the author’s attitude towards money in the Books That Grow piece “The Beggar’s Feast.” Are these prevailing attitudes more similar or different? Support your answer using the texts. (*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.9*)

Further Readings

For Teachers:

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/node/22280/edit%3Fdestination%3Dadmin/content/filter>

This resource provides teachers with a number of ideas for activities to pair with holiday-themed texts. In addition, the link also brief summaries of three of the most popular gift-giving holidays: Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa.

For Students:

<http://etceteraflowersandgifts.com/a-history-of-gift-giving/>

This resource provides students with a brief history of gift giving, cross culturally.

Vocabulary

G8 Challenging Vocabulary:

ecstatic (8), parsimonious (8), subside (8), agile (7), vestibule (7), anxious (6), apply (6), bear (6), crave (6), illuminate (6), instigate (6), period (6), platinum (6), substance (6)

G6 Challenging Vocabulary:

apply (6), anxious (6), bear (6), crave (6), defy (6), ecstatic (6), illuminate (6), instigate (6), period (6), platinum (6), substance (6), whirl (6), adorn (5), burden (5), cascade (5), case (5), chronicle (5), fix (5), lack (5), necessitate (5), sequence (5), truant (5), waver (5), wit (5), yearn (5), account (4), attend (4), critic (4), differ (4), master (4), patent (4), practiced (4), proper (4), regard (4), thin (4), wonder (4)

G4 Challenging Vocabulary:

attend (4), differ (4), practiced (4), rather (4), worn (4), decorate (3), grand (3), prize (3), value (3), world (3), attach (2), beauty (2), comfort (2), compare (2), could (2), doubt (2), dull (2), exchange (2), expect (2), express (2), sudden (2), flop (2), fool (2), furniture (2), genius (2), glitter (2), immediate (2), inside (2), kind (2), leap (2), leather (2), possess (2), possible (2), receive (2), recover (2), serious (2), spirit (2), step (2), surprise (2), sweet (2), thin (2), time (2), turn (2), vanish (2), wise (2), worth (2)

G2 Challenging Vocabulary:

beauty (2), comfort (2), confuse (2), dull (2), embarrass (2), expect (2), flop (2), fool (2), furniture (2), kind (2), leap (2), leather (2), matter (2), pure (2), serious (2), step (2), sure (2), surprise (2), switch (2), thin (2), time (2), turn (2), value (2), vanish (2), wise (2), worth (2), awful (1), coffee (1), comb (1), come (1), cost (1), could (1), couch (1), cover (1), cry (1), dear (1), down (1), earn (1), eighty (1), enough (1), explain (1), flash (1), forty (1), gift (1), gold (1), hall (1), hour (1), hundred (1), husband (1), inside (1), instead (1), jewel (1), joy (1), kill (1), knee (1), know (1), large (1), last (1), late (1), letter (1), mind (1), minute (1), mistake (1), moment (1), money (1), most (1), much (1), nice (1), obey (1), often (1), old (1), once (1), open (1), own (1), perfect (1), person (1), pocket (1), pull (1), quick (1), read (1), save (1), scare (1), second (1), secret (1), see (1), shell (1), shop (1), simple (1), stare (1), stay (1), strange (1), think (1), treasure (1), turn (1), use (1), wait (1), after (0), again (0), all (0), almost (0), angry (0), any (0), baby (0), best (0), box (0), boy (0), brown (0), child (0), close (0), cold (0), count (0), cut (0), day (0), dollar (0), door (0), eight (0), fast (0), finger (0), friend (0), give (0), glass (0), go (0), good (0), gray (0), grow (0), happy (0), hand (0), hat (0), head (0), home (0), house (0), little (0), long (0), look (0), love (0), made (0), mirror (0), more (0), need (0), never (0), next (0), off (0), one (0), present (0), pretty (0), put (0), quiet (0), same (0), saw (0), say (0), seven (0), show (0), sign (0), small (0), sound (0), stop (0), store (0), story (0), table (0), tell (0), three (0), tiny (0), two (0), we (0), week (0), when (0), whisper (0), who (0), why (0), woman (0)