

The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry

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The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry

Known by his pen name “O. Henry,” William Sydney Porter wrote hundreds of short stories that were published in magazines and newspapers of his day and printed in collections of his work. “The Gift of the Magi” is undoubtedly Porter’s most famous story. First published as “Gifts of the Magi” in the *New York Sunday World* two weeks before Christmas in 1905, the story re-appeared in 1906 as “The Gift of the Magi,” collected in *The Four Million*, a volume of O. Henry’s short stories set in New York City.

The plot of the story is well-known, especially its ironic conclusion. Jim and Della, a young married couple who love each other very much, live in poverty in New York City. As Christmas nears, Della secretly sells her most valued possession—her long beautiful hair—to buy Jim a fine chain for the pocket watch he treasures. When Della gives her present to Jim, she finds out that he has secretly sold his watch to buy her the expensive combs she has often admired. Their costly Christmas gifts are useless, for the time being at least, but in their sacrifices, Jim and Della give each other the greatest of gifts: unselfish love. Like that of the Magi, the three

wise men who brought gifts to the Christ child, Jim and Della’s devotion expresses the true meaning of Christmas.

Since its initial publication, “The Gift of the Magi” has seldom waned in popularity. It is included in many anthologies of American literature and has been adapted for the stage and screen, in the United States and abroad. The story also has made its way into American popular culture, with versions of the tale appearing in episodes of television programs and in musical productions. Although numerous literary critics have dismissed the artistic value of O. Henry’s stories, many place “The Gift of the Magi” among the best Christmas stories ever written.

Theme Developed through Symbolism and Irony

This lesson focuses on symbolism and situational irony in “The Gift of the Magi,” particularly in regard to the plot and the characterizations of Jim and Della Young. Students will identify examples of the two literary elements in the text and interpret the ideas they communicate. By analyzing symbolism and situational irony in the narrative, students will be better able to describe the story’s major theme.

Lesson Plan Overview / Theme Developed through Symbolism and Irony

Estimated Time

60 min.**Skills**

Close reading / Analyzing passages in a text for implied meaning / Supporting literary analysis with textual evidence / Drawing themes from a text

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- define and explain symbolism and situational irony as literary devices
- identify symbols in the story and describe the ideas they communicate
- explain why the conclusion of the story is an example of situational irony
- determine the main theme in the story and describe how it is developed through symbolism and situational irony

Assumed Knowledge

- Students can use a computer to access information and navigate a web site.
- Students have experience with taking notes and annotating texts.
- Students know the register and genre of the lecture style and have participated in cooperative learning activities.
- Students are familiar with conflict, symbolism, situational irony, and theme as literary elements.
- Students have read “The Gift of the Magi” and know the author and the characteristics of his short stories.
 - For suggestions in identifying William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) as an American short story writer and placing “The Gift of the Magi” in the context of his work, please refer to the Previous Lesson that follows.

Resources & Materials

- www.owleyes.org
- Owl Eyes Classroom
- “The Gift of the Magi” from the Owl Eyes Library
- Handouts and Keys:
 - *Characteristics of an O. Henry Short Story*
 - *Analyzing Symbolism and Situational Irony in “The Gift of the Magi” (Activity and Key)*
- Computers or tablets; paper and pencil

Class Profile

This lesson is appropriate for high school students of different racial/ethnic heritages, cultural experiences, and reading skills who are studying English literature in grades 9 and 10. Some elements in the lesson are consistent with the content found in Advanced Placement Literature classes and dual credit courses in literature.

Common Core Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1**
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2**
Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5**
Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1**
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Main Lesson / Theme Developed through Symbolism and Irony

Time /
Interaction

Stage

Aims

5 min.

T-CL

Introduction

Have students log on to Owl Eyes at www.owleyes.org and navigate the site to open “The Gift of the Magi” and locate the annotations they completed for homework in the Previous Lesson.

- **Note:** When you create an Owl Eyes classroom, your students can access “The Gift of the Magi” and other assigned texts through a “classroom context.” The only annotations visible in a classroom context are the ones you and your students create. Students in your Owl Eyes classroom will not see any annotations written by other users.

Primary Aim

To give students access to the specific text used in the lesson

Secondary Aims

- To signal that class has now begun
- To focus students’ attention on the work at hand
- To make sure that everyone has access to Owl Eyes and the Owl Eyes classroom

5 min.

T-CL
S-S

OCFB

Warm Up

Have students share their Previous Lesson homework annotations with a partner and then with the class.

In the class discussion, establish these points:

- Jim and Della are a young married couple, Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young, who live in New York City. Jim is the breadwinner in the family; his salary, once \$30 a week, is now \$20 a week.
- Even though Della has been haggling over prices with the butcher, grocer, and vegetable man for some time, she has managed to save only \$1.87.
- Jim and Della live in a cheaply furnished apartment in a run-down building; their rent is \$8 a week.
- The apartment is not well-furnished; the couple’s sofa, for example, is “a shabby little couch.”
- Their mailbox and electric doorbell don’t work: “In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring.”

(continued on next page)

Primary Aim

To identify the main characters, the specific setting, and Jim and Della’s financial circumstances

Secondary Aims

- To employ a pair/share strategy in initiating class discussion
- To review students’ homework annotations

T-CL / Teacher-Classroom • S-S / Pair Work • S-S-S / Group Work • OCFB / Open Class Feedback

Worksheet / Analyzing Symbolism and Situational Irony in “The Gift of the Magi”

Working as a group, discuss the following questions and record your answers on the handout.

Refer to the text on Owl Eyes as you discuss and answer the questions.

Choose one member of your group to highlight passages in the text that suggest symbolism and situational irony and write an annotation for each passage explaining how your group interprets ideas in the passage.

As each annotation is being written, monitor the content to make sure the annotation accurately and thoroughly expresses the analysis of your group.

1. How does the narrator describe Della’s long hair and Jim’s watch? Include some details from the text in your answer.

2. Why would Jim’s watch have great sentimental value to him? In what ways does Della’s hair have more than monetary value to her? Include details from the text to support your answer.

3. Why does Della sell her long hair to Madame Sofronie? Why does Jim sell his watch? What do Jim and Della buy after selling their possessions? How are their purchases described? Include some details from the text in your answer.

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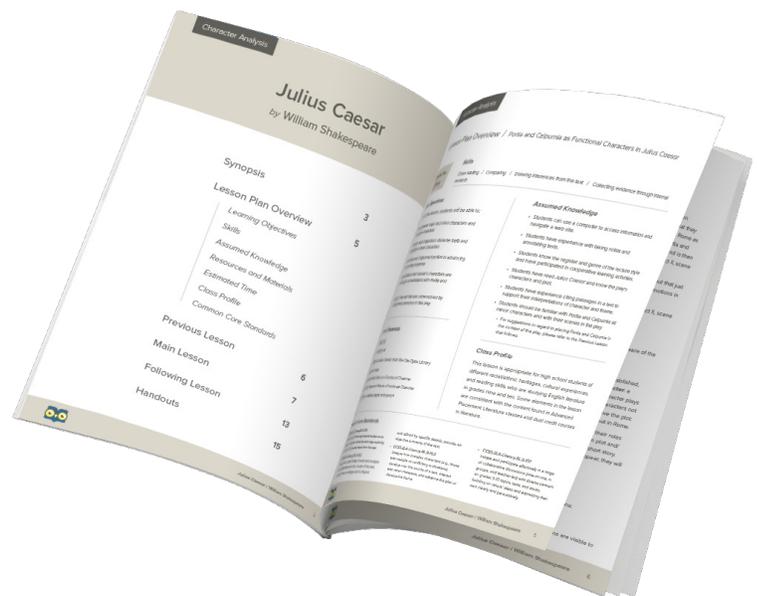
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