

The Gift of the Magi



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF O. HENRY

William Sydney Porter spent his childhood in North Carolina, where he read voraciously and attended his aunt's elementary school. His uncle trained him to become a pharmacist at nineteen. At twenty, he moved to Texas to work on a sheep ranch. Soon afterwards, he worked a number of jobs as a bank teller, draftsman, and journalist, all while writing on the side. Sometime after his first marriage to Athol Estes, he began writing for the *Houston Post*, but he was arrested soon afterwards for embezzling funds at his previous bank position. He escaped to Honduras, but returned to the United States when he learned that Estes died from tuberculosis. Porter spent the next three years in prison, where he wrote and published under various pseudonyms, the most popular one being "O. Henry." After his release from prison, Porter moved to New York City where he wrote most of his short stories. He died in 1910, at age forty-seven, from complications that likely arose from his drinking.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The setting of "Gift of the Magi" likely reflects O. Henry's location at the time in New York City. In 1906, New York was still a shipping city, bustling and packed. There were no skyscrapers yet, and South Street was still an important commercial district rather than the tourist attraction it would become by the end of the century. The Williamsburg Bridge had been built just three years earlier, and the Manhattan Bridge wouldn't be built for another three years. O. Henry occupied the city at this point during its transition, and he was fascinated by all the people who inhabited New York, leading him to title his second collection of stories *The Four Million*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O. Henry was a prolific short story writer who specialized in twist endings—much like the popular 19th century French writer, Guy de Maupassant. The two writers have been compared because of their use of situational irony, but O. Henry's work tends to be more playful, often making use of a witty narrator. This humorous tone shows the influence of fellow American writer Mark Twain, whose writing was also considered realistic, witty, and often irreverent.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Gift of the Magi
- **When Written:** 1905

- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1905
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short story/Parable
- **Setting:** A city, probably around the beginning of the 20th century
- **Climax:** Della opens her present and finds the combs
- **Antagonist:** Poverty
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient, with a focus on Della's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

"Grift of the Magi." "Gift of the Magi" has inspired numerous pop culture references, including a *Sesame Street* holiday special and a *Simpsons* episode called "Grift of the Magi."

Banana Republic. O. Henry coined the term "banana republic" to describe a small tropical nation with a narrowly agrarian economy when he fled to Honduras to escape trial in 1886.



PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Della despairing over the meager amount of money she's managed to save over the past few months by pinching pennies. She had been hoping to save enough to buy her husband Jim a worthy Christmas present. Della suddenly goes to gaze at her reflection in a window, letting her **hair** fall to its full length below her knee. Della's brown hair and Jim's gold **watch** that had been passed down from his grandfather are the couple's most prized possessions.

Della runs to a hair shop and sells her hair for twenty dollars. Then she uses the money to buy Jim a simple platinum watch chain. The chain is described as possessing "quietness and value," like Jim.

Della returns home to fix her hair into curls and make dinner. When Jim walks into the door, he freezes, staring at Della's hair. Della tells him that she did it in order to buy a proper Christmas present for him. Jim snaps out of his shock, hugs Della, and throws a package on the table. He explains that no haircut could make him love her any less, but that he was surprised because of the present that he bought for her. Della opens the package to find expensive tortoiseshell combs for her long hair. She's ecstatic for a moment before she begins crying, and Jim has to comfort her.

Suddenly, Della remembers her present to Jim, and asks to see Jim's watch so that she could put the new chain on it. Jim sits

back on the couch and smiles, then admits that he sold his watch in order to buy the combs.

The narrator wraps up the story by describing the magi who invented the art of giving Christmas presents. He compares Della and Jim to these wise men, and concludes that of all those who give gifts, these two are the wisest.



CHARACTERS

Della – The narrator, although omniscient, tells most of the story from Della’s perspective. She’s described as young, affectionate, selfless, and somewhat hysterical, requiring Jim to comfort her when she’s upset. She cares deeply for Jim, and the story revolves around her predicament of procuring a worthy Christmas present for him when she’s only saved \$1.87 throughout the year. Her most prized possession at the beginning of the story is her **hair**, which falls below her knee, but in her selflessness, she sells this in order to buy a proper **watch** chain for Jim.

Jim – Jim, Della’s husband, and “the lord of the flat,” is only twenty-two and heavily burdened by the need to support the household on a low salary. Despite this burden, however, he’s described as content, quiet, and good-natured. He loves Della and sells his prized watch, passed down from his grandfather, in order to buy fancy combs for Della’s beautiful hair.

Madame Sofronie – Madame Sofronie owns the hair shop to which Della sells her **hair**. She’s described as “large, too white, chilly,” and her manner with Della is brusque and to the point. She wastes no time evaluating Della’s hair and setting a price—twenty dollars. Her manner directly contrasts that of Della and Jim, who value their love and sentiment over material value. For Della, her hair is something special and prized. For Madame Sofronie, her hair is worth the dollar value she can get out of it.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



VALUE

“Gift of the Magi” revolves around a young couple, Della and Jim, who lack a lot in the way of material possessions and external amusements. The beginning of the story focuses on their poverty—the shabby couch, the lack of mirror, the eight-dollar flat, the broken doorbell. Despite this, the narrator adds that Jim always arrives

home to be “greatly hugged. Which is all very good.” Their poverty doesn’t seem to affect their cozy home life on a daily basis, and the emotional value of having each other outweighs their lack of material wealth.

The question of material vs. inner value comes up again when Della finds the chain for Jim’s **watch**, which is “simple and chaste in design” but has value in its substance alone—Della likens this to Jim, who possesses inner value despite having a slight income. In the description of Jim’s watch and Della’s **hair**, the narrator compares them to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—an allusion that describes how much the watch and hair mean to Jim and Della, even if they aren’t truly comparable to an abundance of treasures and jewels, showing that value is subjective. The chatty narrator makes this clear when he says, “Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer.”



LOVE

Della’s main concern is that the money she’s saved by pinching pennies isn’t enough to buy Jim a worthy Christmas present. For her, the main obstacle that poverty poses to her happiness is its limitation of her expression of love.

After the twist ending, Jim sits back on the couch and smiles, even after it’s revealed that both their gifts are now useless. Because while the gift themselves have no purpose, the giving of the gifts means everything: they now know that each one of them would sacrifice their most prized possessions for the other. Their love triumphs over material wealth and possessions. They gave to each other not objects, but love.



SACRIFICE

At the beginning of the story, Della and Jim have only two prized possessions—Della’s **hair** and Jim’s **watch**. In order to overcome their poverty and to give a good Christmas present to the other, each sacrifices the item that they value the most. The sacrifices turn out to have been made rather uselessly, since the gifts they buy can’t be used. One could argue that they ended the story in the same place they started out—minus Della’s hair and Jim’s gold watch—but the narrator suggests that they’ve added value to their relationship through generosity and sacrifice.

The significance of the magi is summed up in the last paragraph, as the narrator compares Della and Jim to the magi who invented the art of gift giving, suggesting that the value of a gift lies in the intent, the level of generosity, and the sacrifice behind it, rather than its material value.

**BEAUTY**

"Gift of the Magi" constantly contrasts the idea of inner beauty and value with outside appearances.

The story begins, for example, with a description of bleak surroundings ("a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray background," "shabby couch") while hinting at a warm home life that brightens the exterior (Jim arrives home "to be greatly hugged"). When Della examines the **watch** chain, she also compares its exterior appearance and actual value to Jim's own appearance and value. Both lack ornamentation, but are remarkable and beautiful for their inner substance.

Della also worries that Jim will no longer find her pretty once she sells her **hair**—but when he sees her and recovers from the shock of her haircut, he tells her that there's nothing in the way of "a haircut or shave or shampoo that could make me like my girl any less." If anything, Jim appreciates the generosity of Della's sacrifice, and the story ends on a satisfied note, with Jim sitting back on the couch and smiling.

**SYMBOLS**

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

**DELLA'S HAIR**

Della's hair and Jim's gold **watch** are the young couple's most prized possessions at the start of the story, and their eventual sacrifice of these items represents the couple's love. More specifically, however, Della's hair represents her beauty and youth. Her hair reaches down below her knees, meaning that she must have started growing it very young, and the sentimental value it has for her is directly contrasted with Madame Sofronie's brusque evaluation of the hair's dollar value.

**JIM'S GOLD WATCH**

Jim's watch holds sentimental value for him as well, having been passed down from generation to generation. In this way, the watch represents Jim's ties to the family he grew up in—the family he leaves in order to make a new family with Della. The watch also more conventionally represents time, which Jim gives to Della in the form of the hours he works to support the household and the hours he spends at home afterwards. As the narrator mentions towards the story's end, Jim is never late returning from his job. The gold in the watch can also symbolize several things, including purity, money (which the couple lacks), inner value, and permanence.

**QUOTES**

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday, Page and Company edition of *The Four Million* published in 1906.

The Gift of the Magi Quotes

☞ The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Related Characters: Jim, Della

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

As a young couple struggling to make ends meet, Della and Jim rely on small points of pride—such as Della's hair and Jim's gold watch—to maintain their identity in the face of financial hardships. In this quote, the narrator notes that when Jim's salary was \$30 a week, the couple did not feel the need to use the stately "Dillingham" in their shared married name; however, since his pay was reduced by one-third, they have begun considering how to sneak the extra, more aristocratic-sounding name back in little by little to regain some sense of higher-class identity and pride. But regardless of their names outside the home, or what is on their mailbox, inside the flat they are always "Della" and "Jim," a hallmark of the fact that their love for each other is not dependent on any level of money or worldly status. No matter how much or how little Jim makes, he will always be welcomed home warmly by Della, who unconditionally loves her husband despite their financial struggles.

☞ Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling--something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

Related Characters: Jim

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Despite pinching pennies for months, Della is only able to save \$1.87 with which to purchase a Christmas present for her husband Jim. As the couple lives on a slim salary, Della had been hoping to save enough money to buy Jim a nice present for the holiday. When she realizes that this is all she has to buy a gift, she cries for some time in despair and disappointment. Della unconditionally loves Jim, and wants to express this love in the form of a lavish present, the likes of which they can only afford to spend money on for special occasions.

In this quote, Della hopes to purchase Jim something "fine and rare and sterling," a gift that is "worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim." To Della, her husband Jim himself is "fine and rare and sterling," a man whose worth is singular and enduring, regardless of trends or the times. Throughout the story, Della and Jim equate their love to the ability to buy a present worthy of the other person. Jim eventually buys Della beautiful, expensive combs that he believes are worthy of her love and beauty. However, it is through their willingness to sacrifice the worldly possessions that they personally cherish—Jim's watch, and Della's hair—that they ultimately express their enduring admiration and love.

☞ Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. 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. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

Related Characters: Della, Jim

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Though Jim and Della are poor in terms of their bank accounts, they are rich in three things: Della's hair, Jim's heirloom watch, and their mutual love for each other. The watch and Della's hair are special in that they are singular, unique items, not to be found anywhere else in the world. The items are priceless in their personal worth, meaning that even a richer couple with unlimited wealth would not be able to purchase them, and the poverty in which Della and Jim live does not mean that they lose these items. The fullness and beauty of Della's hair cannot be replicated on the head of a wealthier woman due to special products, and the rarity of Jim's watch only comes with antiquity and age over the years. O. Henry underscores the importance of these items using the hyperbolic, theoretical situations in which the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, two Biblical figures famous for their wealth, are jealous of the watch and the hair. By showing how impressive and priceless the hair and the watch are to the young couple, Henry thus renders the sale of the items in order to please the other person even more sacrificial and tragic. Though the items cannot be retrieved after they have been sold for a sum nowhere near their worth to the owner, the love that their sale proves is immeasurable.

☞ It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation--as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value--the description applied to both.

Related Characters: Jim, Della

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In order to have more money with which to buy Jim a Christmas present, Della sells her hair to a wig shop for \$20 without a second thought. She roams around shops, searching for the perfect present, and finally happens upon what she believes to be the only chain worthy of accompanying Jim's watch.

Della places extreme importance on the personified qualities and worth of the chain because she purchase it to express the traits she admires most in her husband. She

loves him for his simplicity, and how he appreciates that which has substance, not just "meretricious ornamentation." Ironically, Della is concerned about buying an expensive yet subtle present for someone she admires precisely for his lack of desire for shiny trinkets. However, purchasing the absolutely perfect present is important to her because she sacrifices her most precious possession, her knee-length hair, in order to purchase the chain. She is willing to sell her hair for any amount because she values Jim's happiness far and above any monetary amount her hair might be worth. More than the worth of just the chain, the gift she is giving to Jim is the immeasurable value of the chain, the hair, her sacrifice, and her unconditional love.

☝ Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

Related Characters: Della (speaker), Della, Jim

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

After buying the fob chain for Jim, Della goes home to prepare dinner and curl her newly shortened hair. When it nears the time that Jim returns from work each night, she waits impatiently by the door, eager to give him her present. However, when she begins to hear him ascend the staircase, she is struck with the fear that Jim will dislike the way she looks with the shorter hairstyle.

Though Della's hair is technically her possession, both she and Jim hold pride in its singularity and its beauty. Similarly, Della also takes pride in Jim's watch even though it technically belongs to him, since it was passed down from his grandfather, to his father, and finally to Jim. After selling her hair, Della is suddenly worried that Jim will no longer find her beautiful without her luxurious, knee-length hair. Since it is an important aspect, but not a core part of her identity, Della was able to easily part with her hair in order to buy Jim a Christmas present. However, she is still overcome with the realization that she is not sure how

much of Jim's attraction and love for her is predicated on the beauty and rarity of her locks. After sacrificing her hair, which takes years and years to grow, Della prays that she will not lose Jim's love along with it.

☝ Eight dollars a week or a million a year--what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When Jim comes home, he is shocked by the sight of Della's short hair. She tells him that though she has cut her hair in order to buy him a Christmas present, the number of hairs cut off could not even come close to the amount of love she holds for him. Jim breaks out of his shocked trance and enfolds Della in a hug.

In this quote, the narrator speaks to the fact that some things in life are intangible, and cannot be bought for any amount of money—regardless of whether a person has eight dollars or one million dollars in their pocket. Similarly, these intangible things cannot be logically explained or evaluated. For Della and Jim, their love, goodness, and willingness to sacrifice what they treasure to make the person they love happy, is worth a sum for which there can be no price tag. Their love for each other is something that is unwavering regardless of how much Jim's salary is that week, or how much hair is on Della's head. It is in this moment that the young couple reminds each other of how little importance they place on the watch and hair compared to their mutual respect and admiration.

☝ And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

Related Characters: Della, Jim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

After Della tells him she has cut and sold her hair in order to buy him a Christmas present, Jim admits that he sold his watch in order to buy Della the hair combs she has been admiring for months. Thus, Della sold her hair to buy Jim a chain for a watch he no longer has, and Jim sold his watch to buy Della combs for hair she no longer possesses.

At the end of the story, and in this quote, the narrator

invokes the Biblical story of the Three Wise Men, the "magi" who first gave the baby Jesus gifts in his manger, thus traditionally inventing the ritual of gift giving around Christmas. The narrator notes that though Della and Jim might seem "foolish" for their miscommunication in the gift exchange, they are in fact like magi themselves. The wisdom to be willing to sacrifice their greatest possessions in order to bring happiness to the person they love makes them the "wisest," and therefore just as sacred as the original magi.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

The story begins on Christmas Eve, with Della lamenting the fact that she's only saved \$1.87, despite months of pinching pennies at the grocer, butcher, and vegetable man. She flops down on their shabby couch and cries, while the narrator goes on to introduce the young couple, Della and Jim Dillingham Young. The narrator then describes their apartment, remarking upon its cheapness—8 dollars a week—and lack of a working doorbell.

Della stops crying but is still at a loss for how she might buy a Christmas present worthy of Jim. She suddenly remembers the pier-glass—a sort of thin mirror between the windows of the apartment—and stands before the glass, releasing her **hair** to fall to its full length. Here, the narrator describes the couple's most prized possessions: Della's long, brown hair that falls below her knees and Jim's gold **watch** that was passed down from his grandfather. He compares these items to King Solomon's treasures and the queen of Sheba's jewels.

Della runs downstairs onto the street, where she finds a **hair** shop run by a Madame Sofronie. After a brief exchange during which Madame Sofronie evaluates Della's hair, Della sells her long locks for twenty dollars.

Della spends the next two hours looking for a perfect present for Jim. She decides finally on a simple platinum chain for Jim's **watch**, comparing the watch's lack of ornamentation and value to Jim's personality, which is equally quiet and valuable.

Della returns home to fix her **hair** into curls and prepare dinner before waiting for Jim at the door. She says a little prayer hoping that Jim will still find her pretty without her long hair.

This first section of the story focuses on how little the Dillingham Youngs have of external or material value. Della has saved only \$1.87 after months of effort, and the apartment they live in is shabby and broken—there is nothing beautiful in their life at first glance.



The narrator shows that value is subjective when he compares Della's hair and Jim's watch to the treasures of King Solomon and the queen of Sheba—these items are clearly not equally valuable, but to Della and Jim, their prized possessions mean just as much as the mythical jewels the narrator alludes to. Della also demonstrates that her main concern with their poverty revolves around how it limits her ability to show her love for Jim. Also note that Della's hair here represents her own external beauty and youth.



Madame Sofronie's cold evaluation of the dollar value of Della's hair directly contrasts with its value to Della and Jim. To Madame Sofronie, it's worth no more than the money she can get for it. To them it is worth so much more than that. Della demonstrates her love for Jim by sacrificing her own most prized possession—and external beauty—without a second thought.



The watch's substance is more important to Della than its lack of ornamentation—just as Jim's inner worth means more than his salary or quiet manner.



Everything Della does is out of love for Jim. Here, she worries for a moment that her sacrifice of external beauty will affect how Jim feels towards her or that Jim won't have wanted her to make the sacrifice.



When Jim enters the door, he freezes, staring at Della's **hair** without expression. Della runs to Jim and tells him that she had her hair cut and sold in order to buy him a Christmas present. Jim continues to stare, and Della repeats that her hair is gone—but that her love for him is immeasurable. Jim finally moves, giving Della a hug and throwing a package on the table. He reassures her that no haircut could make him like her any less, but that he was shocked because of the present he bought for her.

Della opens the package to find the beautiful tortoiseshell combs that she had coveted for her **hair**. She shrieks in joy before crying, and Jim comforts her before she remembers her own present to Jim. She pulls out the **watch** chain and asks to see Jim's watch so that she might try the chain on it.

Jim flops down on the couch and smiles, saying that they should put their presents away for now and that they're too nice to use just yet—before admitting that he sold the **watch** to buy the combs for Della. They decide to have dinner, and the narrator sums up the story with a little paragraph on the magi. He describes them as wise men who invented the art of giving Christmas presents, and he compares Jim and Della to the magi—saying that of all who give gifts, these two are the wisest.

Both Jim and Della express their love for each other—Jim says that Della's external changes wouldn't budge his love for her. Her sacrifice and generosity make him value her more.



The combs are beautiful and expensive on the outside—but with Della's hair gone, their external value is diminished. However, they still have the same sentimental value, coming from Jim.



It's revealed that Jim made his own similar sacrifice in order to buy the combs for Della. The narrator's paragraph on the magi suggests that the true spirit of giving involves sacrifice and generosity and that the intent counts more than the external value of the gift—which is why, he says, Della and Jim are the wisest gift givers. Although their presents are useless, they've demonstrated, through sacrifice, their great love for one another. They have, in effect, given each other the greatest affirmation they could of each other's love.





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