



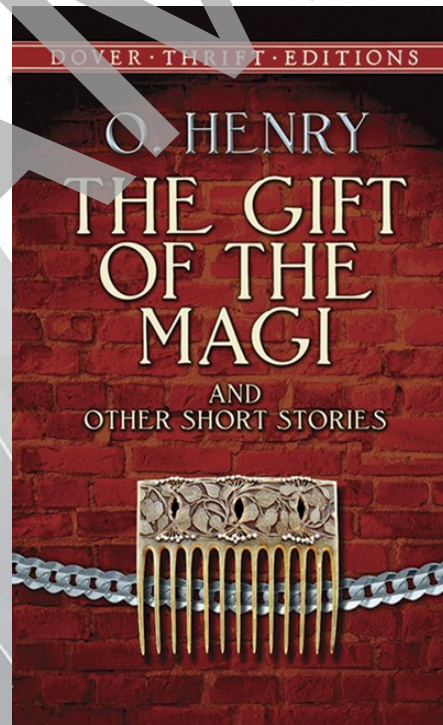
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Gift of the Magi and Other Short Stories

Lisbeth Zwerger



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Gift of the Magi and Other Short Stories

Lisbeth Zwerger

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

ISBN 978-1-50203-817-3

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Analysis, evaluation, prediction, research, cause/effect

Vocabulary

Application, definition, context clues

Comprehension

Literary terms and application

Writing

Description, dialogue, skit, compare/contrast, poetry, diary and journal writing, letter, newspaper article

Listening/Speaking

Drama, personal experience, discussion, court trial

Fine Arts

Skit, art, collage, video program

Genre: short stories

Style: mixture of narrative and dialogue

Subject Matter: the common man's life

Tone: often humorous, sentimental, friendly

Themes: the unpredictability of life; the beauty of life; fate

Summary

This short story collection introduces the reader to some of O. Henry's most popular and beloved short stories. All the stories speak to some area of O. Henry's life experience: his childhood in North Carolina, his time in Texas, his three years in jail, and his final years in New York City.

About the Author

Personal: William Sydney Porter was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, on September 11, 1862. After Porter's mother died when he was three years old, his early years were spent with his alcoholic physician father Algernon Porter, his grandparents, and a paternal aunt, who reared and educated him. His great love during this time was reading, which gave him vast stores of interesting words to use later.

At age 15, Porter quit school and began working in a drugstore. By 1884, he was seized by wanderlust, and he traveled to Texas to work on a sheep ranch. His experiences in the Old West were engraved in his imagination. While in Texas, he married and worked in his father-in-law's bank. Bank practices were not regulated at that time, and after checking bank funds, the federal government accused Porter of embezzling. To his dying day, he vowed he was innocent.

In 1896, 34-year-old Porter left his ailing wife and young daughter behind and fled to Honduras to escape jail. He returned to his dying wife the next year. After a trial, he was sentenced to five years in a federal prison in Columbus, Ohio. After serving only three years, he was released and moved to New York where he worked as a writer under the pen name O. Henry.

From 1902 to 1910, O. Henry's life in New York was one of writing, making and spending money, drinking, and roaming the streets and bars of the city he loved. In 1907, he married a childhood friend, Sarah Coleman, who tried desperately to save him from himself. She later returned to North Carolina, having failed.

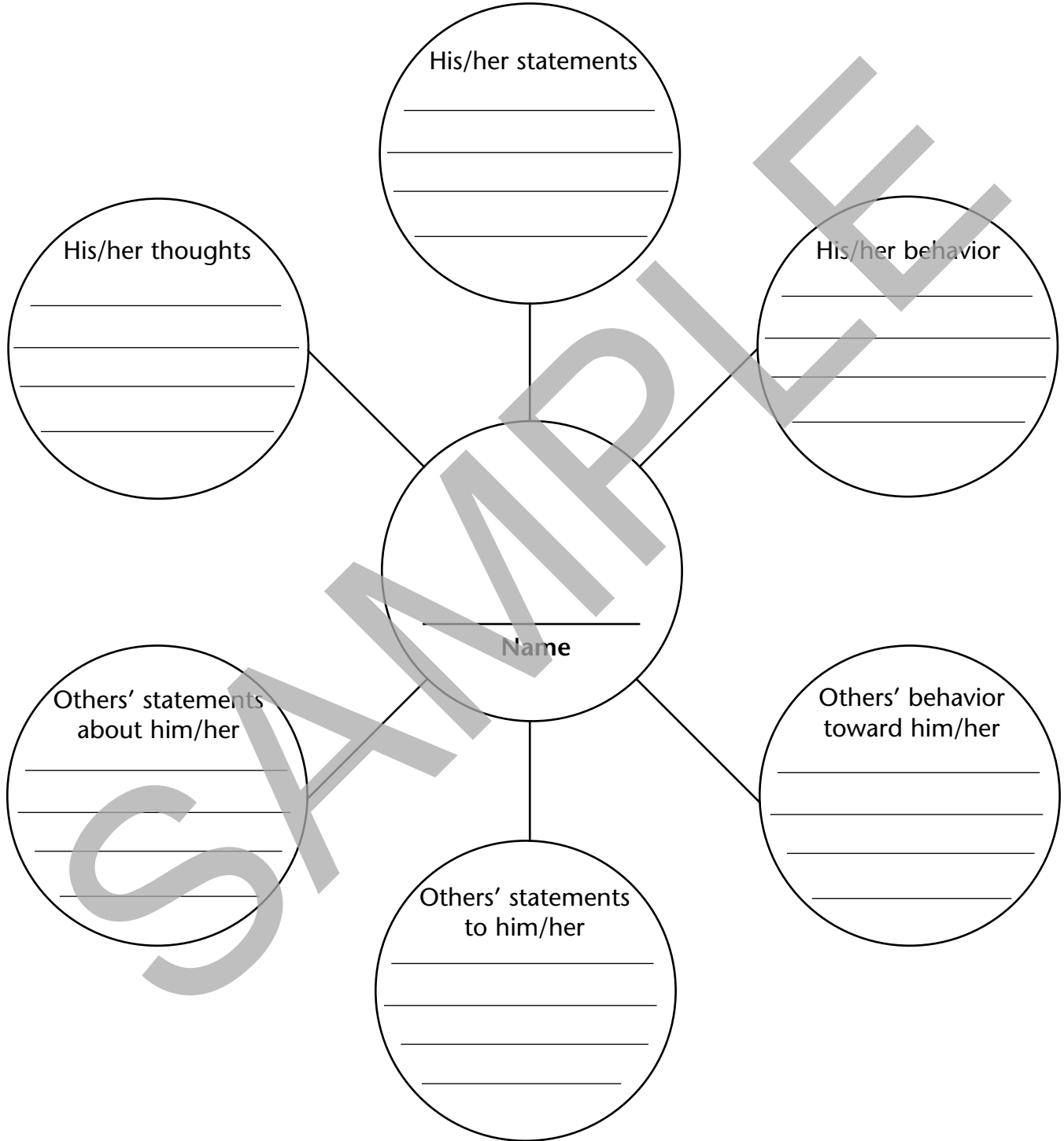
O. Henry died of cirrhosis of the liver and diabetes in a New York hospital at the age of 47 with only 23 cents in his pocket.

Literary Career: O. Henry, often called "The Voice of the City" and frequently compared to Balzac and Maupassant, is the third-most-read short story writer behind Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe. In some ways his rise to fame was slow and tedious; in other ways it was meteoric. The few stories he wrote while living in Texas sold for barely \$10. O. Henry began his serious writing while in prison. After moving to New York, he wrote most of his 300-plus stories, often writing one story a week for *New York World* magazine. He was profusely read and highly acclaimed in his day. The outstanding quality of his work lies in interesting wordplay and vocabulary, entertaining use of irony, allusions, metaphors, and similes, as well as surprise twists and unpredictable endings.

During his lifetime O. Henry published ten collections: *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), *The Four Million* (1906), *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907), *Heart of the West* (1907), *The Voice of the City* (1908),

Character Web

Directions: Complete the attribute web below by filling in information specific to a character in the book.



Springtime à la Carte, pp. 10–15

Setting: Manhattan, New York; hall-roomed apartment near a restaurant

Characters: Sarah; Mr. Schulenberg; Walter Franklin

Point of View: omniscient

Conflict: person vs. person

Climax: Sarah realizes that she has typed “Dearest Walter, with hard-boiled egg.”

Theme: Life is often surprising and ruled by fate.

Sarah lives in a hall-room apartment in New York. Making a living for herself as a stenographer is difficult, but she has successfully landed one job: typing daily menus for Mr. Schulenberg. In the midst of her work, Sarah fondly remembers the previous summer when she met Walter and fell in love. Dandelions with egg is on the menu, which reminds her of the dandelion crown he made her. She weeps bitterly, but goes back to work. Walter has been looking for Sarah, and soon finds her, because she has written “Dearest Walter, with hard-boiled egg” on the menu.

Vocabulary

per diem (11)
obsequious (11)
vivacity (11)
scrupulously (11)
harbingers (12)
callow (13)
ignominious (14)

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the reasons Sarah breaks down in a torrent of tears. *(Answers will vary; remembrance of sweet moments; loneliness; lost dreams; disappointment; lack of work; sadness because Walter has not gotten in touch with her, pp. 10–15)*
2. O. Henry liked writing about the common labor class. How does Sarah fit the stereotype he creates? *(She has few skills, lives in a hall room in a poor district in town, doesn't seem to have any or very many social contacts, seems swallowed up by the city and her circumstances, and has a feeling of being trapped in her situation. pp. 10–15)*
3. Compare Sarah and Della from “The Gift of the Magi.” *(Sarah and Della are very much the same. Both girls live in the city in poor housing, are young, devoted, sensitive, emotional, have depth of feeling, and value relationships. Both of them cry in the story. Both are very much in love. pp. 1–5, 10–15)*
4. Why do flat characters work better in O. Henry's stories rather than round, dynamic characters? *(First, flat characters are types rather than real persons. They are stereotypes of the working class, rather than people with varied personalities. Second, if O. Henry used round, dynamic characters, his emphasis would be on character rather than on the twist in the plot. Third, for the type of story he writes, flat characters are easier to manipulate within the plot. He doesn't have to develop their character, their emotions, and so forth, but rather he can superficially move them toward the surprise ending.)*
5. Why is the setting for “Springtime à la Carte” appropriate for the story? *(Sarah is alone in the city—the spring makes her loneliness more poignant; spring is a time of love. The city is a large, nearly impossible place for Walter to find her.)*
6. Could the story be just as effective in another time period or setting? *(Answers will vary. Another time period or setting probably would be appropriate because the story deals with the universal theme of love. The setting would still have to be in the springtime, but it could be set in a different historical period.)*

7. O. Henry is often criticized for his contrived stories and endings. Explain how realistic or unrealistic the story and its ending really are. *(Answers will vary. The story is very realistic in setting and in details about the city and its people. Sarah and Walter seem like real people in their emotions. It is a real situation that could have occurred in New York at the turn of the century. It is unrealistic that Walter finds her in a big city, and the way he does find her is totally coincidental. O. Henry superficially juggles people and circumstances to get to the ending that he desires for his stories.)*

Supplementary Activities

1. Find a recipe for dandelion and egg and prepare it as a class. Serve it over hot boiled potatoes.
2. Create an imaginary biography for Sarah: Why is she in New York alone? How old is she? Where did she come from?
3. Write two paragraphs describing Walter’s search for Sarah.

The Green Door, pp. 15–20

Setting: the streets of New York, and particularly one five-story apartment building

Characters: Rudolf Steiner; black man distributing cards; impoverished young woman

Point of View: omniscient

Conflict: person vs. fate

Climax: Rudolf Steiner discovers that all the apartment doors are green.

Theme: Adventures can be found anywhere at the hands of fate.

Rudolf Steiner is an adventurer who goes out every day on the New York streets, looking for excitement. One day he receives a card that says, “The Green Door.” He knocks on the green door of a nearby apartment where he finds a girl, lovely but poor and faint with hunger. Rudolf leaves to buy food for her. Upon his return, he realizes that all the doors are green—fate had led him to this particular door where romance was waiting for him. “The Green Door” is actually a play across the street—the card is merely an advertisement for it.

Vocabulary

consummation (15)
 pallid (16)
 egregious (16)
 ingenious (16)
 mercenary (16)
 specious (16)
 deftly (17)
 suavely (17)
 contemptuous (17)
 disdain (17)
 enigma (17)
 expedient (20)

Discussion Questions

1. What difference exists between people like Rudolf Steiner and other famous people the reader thinks of as adventurers? *(The other adventurers already have an adventure or a quest in mind—a golden fleece, a holy grail, ladyloves, etc. To O. Henry, a true adventurer like Rudolf Steiner just steps outside of his door and waits for adventure to find him. O. Henry says that the true adventurer is not someone who has a goal in mind but someone who lets fate drop the adventure in his lap. p. 15)*
2. Explain the allusion to the Prodigal Son. *(O. Henry alludes to the Prodigal Son’s return home, not to his carousing. Because the Prodigal Son did not know what was going to happen when he returned home, it was, in O. Henry’s mind, an adventure. When the Prodigal Son arrived home, he was shocked. His father greeted him lovingly, killed the fatted calf, had a party, and dressed him in nice clothes. p. 15)*