

Instant Short Story Pack



The Gift of the Magi

BY O. HENRY

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, 2, 3, 4, 5

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1, 2, 4, 5



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Objectives:

After completing the activities in this packet, the student will be able to:

- cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1),
- 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 (RL.9-10.2; 11-12.2),
- analyze how a complex character develops over the course of a text, interacts with other characters, and develops the theme (RL.9-10.3),
- determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings (RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4),
- analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1), and
- analyze how an author's choices concerning how to order events within a text create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise (RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5).

Time:

1-2 class periods

Materials:

✓ 1 copy of each handout per student:

- **Handout #1** (3 pages) – Purpose-setting and Motivational Activities
- **Handout #2** (6 pages) – Text of Story
- **Handout #3** (1 page) – Student Questions
- **Handout #4** (11 pages) – Activities and Graphic Organizers

✓ Teacher Answer Guide

Procedure:

1. Reproduce all handouts.
2. Distribute **Handouts #1** and **#2**.
 - Allow students to read the short biography of O. Henry (approximately 10 minutes).
 - Read and discuss the information about O. Henry's work and ideas (approximately 20 minutes).
 - Assign the story to be read for homework OR
 - Allow students to read the story in class and perform the two **As you read...** activities.
3. Distribute **Handout #3**.
4. Give students time to read the questions (approximately 5 minutes).
5. Review with students what each question is asking for and what type of information is required for a thorough answer (e.g., references to prior knowledge, quotations from the story, additional reading or research, etc.).
6. Distribute **Handout #4**.

O. Henry

The Gift of the Magi

Like Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" has become a steadfast and beloved feature of United States popular culture. First published on December 10, 1905, in *The New York Sunday World Magazine*, this parable about a young couple's selfless love has been adapted into more than a dozen television specials and full-length feature films. Countless television series have used the plot for their holiday episodes (including "Christmas Eve on Sesame Street," in which Bert sells his paper clip collection in order to buy Ernie a soap dish for his Rubber Duckie, while Ernie trades his Rubber Duckie for a cigar box to hold Bert's paper clips).

It is most certainly O. Henry's most well-known short story. So universal are the story and its themes that columnist and blogger Drew Johnson has dubbed it "the American answer to [Charles Dickens's] *A Christmas Carol*."

Before you read:

Know something about the life of the author:

William Sydney Porter was born on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. When he was three, his mother died of tuberculosis, and he and his father moved to the elder Porter's mother's home. He attended an elementary school run by his aunt, Evelina Maria Porter. Even after he began high school, she continued to tutor him. In 1879, he went to work in his uncle's pharmacy in Greensboro, and when he was nineteen, he received his pharmacist's license.

In 1882, Porter moved to Texas hoping to rid himself of a persistent cough. He lived on a sheep ranch where he worked as a shepherd, a ranch hand, a cook, and a babysitter. The ranch hands were a diverse mix of people, and Porter learned bits of German and Spanish from them. In 1884, he moved to Austin. Over the next several years, he worked as a pharmacist, a draftsman, a bank teller, and a journalist. It was during this period that he also began writing short fiction.

Porter was very socially active in Austin. He performed in community theater and sang with a men's quartet that went around the city serenading women. He met and dated seventeen-year-old Athol Estes. Her parents objected to the relationship because of their

O. Henry

The Gift of the Magi

Lexile Measure: 880L

ONE DOLLAR AND eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.

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. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

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.

O. Henry

The Gift of the Magi

STUDENT QUESTIONS:

1. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1) Even though the story begins with action and no exposition, what can you infer about Della and her situation from the opening two paragraphs? Cite the specific words and phrases that lead you to these inferences.
2. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3) As the story progresses, the reader learns a good deal more about Della Young. Briefly describe her character and cite the portions of the story that support your interpretation.
3. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3) Is Della a static or dynamic character? Be certain to explain and support your answer.
4. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5) Up to the ninth paragraph, O. Henry has paced his exposition so that information comes as the reader needs it. Only when Della gets the idea to sell her hair, and O. Henry is about to portray that event does he mention the value of the hair. What, then, are the most likely reasons for O. Henry to provide the exposition about Jim's watch in this same paragraph (paragraph 9) instead of saving the information until the watch actually becomes important?
5. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5) Why does O. Henry wait until after Della has unwrapped the gift from Jim to tell the reader about the combs?
6. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4) What effect do O. Henry's frequent side comments and direct address to the reader have on the tone of the story? How are these techniques probably intended to affect the reader?
7. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2; 11-12.2) What does the narrator mean when he says of Della and Jim, "Of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi"? What elements of the story prepare the reader for this conclusion?

ACTIVITIES AND GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS:

O. Henry, *The Gift of the Magi*

Question 1: Even though the story begins with action and no exposition, what can you infer about Della and her situation from the opening two paragraphs? Cite the specific words and phrases that lead you to these inferences.

STEP 1: Use the chart that follows to help you identify specific details in the first two paragraphs that provide insight into Della’s character and motivation. Because O. Henry wrote in an elaborate, ornamental style, it might be helpful for you to consider what his words, phrases, and sentences mean on a literal level before rushing to an inference.

Specific Detail from Text	Details from the Two Opening Paragraphs	Connotative or Figurative Meaning
“Pennies saved one and two at a time.”	Della saves only a tiny amount of money at a time.	She is a penny-pincher.
“...bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher...”	She is forceful about the discounts.	

Question 7 continued:

What is the literal, denotative meaning of "wise"? • having or showing experience, knowledge, and good judgment
What are some connotative meanings of "wise"?



Examples of Wisdom in the Story			
Experience:	Knowledge:	Good Judgment:	Other/Connotative:
Specific example(s) from text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Della knows that hair can be sold, and she apparently knows where she can sell hers. • Jim apparently knows where he can sell his watch. • • • • • 	Specific example(s) from text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jim knows that Della longs for the combs. • • • • • • 	Specific example(s) from text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • • • • 	Specific example(s) from text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • • • •