

Essential Short Stories

Teaching Unit

The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry

written by Elizabeth Keenan

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The Gift of the Magi

Biography of William Sydney Porter (O. Henry)

O. Henry is the pen name of writer William Sydney Porter, who was born on September 11, 1862 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Because his mother passed away early in his childhood and his father was often absent, Porter was mainly raised by his strict aunt, Evalina Porter. When Porter was 15, he was apprenticed to his pharmacist uncle, Clark Porter. While working in his uncle's drugstore, Porter got his start writing stories and drawing caricatures, which brought him local fame. After being apprenticed for several years, Porter earned his pharmaceutical license in North Carolina.

Soon after, Porter moved to and settled in Texas at the invitation of his friend, Dr. James K. Hall. While there, Porter worked odd jobs on a ranch but read and wrote avidly to improve his intelligence. Eventually, Porter took a more stable and better paying job as a draftsman with the Texas Land Office. His increased salary allowed him to elope with Athol Estes in 1887, though her family objected to the match.

Due to the gubernatorial politics of Texas, in 1891 Porter had to leave his job and take a job as a bank teller and bookkeeper for the First National Bank of Austin. While working for the bank, Porter also entered into a few ventures with local newspapers. But in 1896, he was indicted for embezzling \$5,000 from the First National Bank, a charge for which there was little evidence but which forced Porter to flee to Honduras. Porter planned on staying out of the country until the statute of limitations was up on his indictment, but he returned to America in 1897 to be with his dying wife. After her death, he was convicted of the charges and sentenced to five years in prison.

Porter entered a penitentiary in 1898 in Columbus, Ohio, where he was allowed to work as the night druggist. He also began writing in all his free time and coined the pen name 'O. Henry' at this time. He was even able to publish some stories and establish a reputation for himself while in prison. He was released after three years of prison for good behavior, and moved to New York, where he was offered a writing job by *Ainslee's*.

During this time, Porter became a very popular and successful writer. In 1907, he married Sara Lindsay Coleman, his childhood sweetheart. But he began drinking heavily and producing less writing, leading his creditors to become more and more fervent. In 1909, his wife left him. After her departure, he died quickly of cirrhosis of the liver in New York City.

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Plot Summary

“The Gift of the Magi” begins with the narrator commenting on Della’s upset at having only \$1.87 the day before Christmas. Della’s distress leads her to cry on the sofa for some time. At this point, the narrator describes the apartment in which Della lives. The apartment costs \$8 per week and is rather shabby. The narrator also comments how the letter box in the vestibule used to boast the name of “Mr. James Dillingham Young” when said man was earning \$30 a week. But now that his income has been reduced to \$20 a week, the “Dillingham” seems inappropriate and as if it should be shortened to just a “D.”

The narrator points out, however, that Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young love each other very much, and Della (Mrs. James Dillingham Young) always affectionately calls her husband Jim.

The narrator resumes the story by telling the audience that Della has finished crying and is very depressed to have only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. She had scrimped and saved, but on only \$20 a week, that was all she could come up with. Upon these thoughts, Della catches a sight of her image in the mirror, lets her hair down and has a brainstorm. The narrator then informs the audience that the Youngs have two prized possessions: Della’s hair, which would make the Queen of Sheba envious, and Jim’s gold pocket watch, passed down to him from his grandfather. Della quickly leaves the apartment and runs to Mme. Sofronie, who trades in hair goods. Della sells her hair to Mme. Sofronie for \$20, which delights and upsets Della at the same time.

Della then spends two hours frantically and happily searching for a present for Jim. Eventually, she decides on a pocket watch chain, which Della believes to be the perfect gift; it is “simple and chaste in design,” which Jim will appreciate more than anything. The narrator notes that Jim currently uses an old leather strap in place of a chain for the watch, which leads him to be somewhat ashamed of it.

Della finally goes home and tries to make her hair as presentable as possible with scissors and a curling iron. She frets that Jim will not think she is pretty anymore. She also prepares their evening supper.

Jim comes home and the narrator comments how worn and shabby he looks for a man of 22. Jim stops and stares at Della when he walks in the door, with an unreadable expression on his face. Della worries and tells him not to be angry because she had to sell the hair to buy him a nice Christmas gift. Jim seems confused at first. He tells her that he would love her no matter what she does with her hair, but was surprised and upset because of the gift he bought her. She opens the gift, and it turns out to be the hair combs Della had desired for a long time but could not afford. Della is delighted, though distressed, by the gift.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define and identify in this story literary devices such as:
 - metaphor
 - simile
 - foreshadowing
 - allusion
2. understand and explain narrative voice and its function in the story.
3. explain the function of the Biblical allusion to the Magi in the Christ story within the context of this short story.
4. differentiate between plot and narrator commentary.
5. explain the importance of both money and gift giving in the story.
6. understand the importance of sacrifice in the story.
7. define and discuss the qualities that constitute wisdom and foolishness as defined by O. Henry in this story.

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Study Guide

Vocabulary

assertion – a statement
flat – a British term for an apartment
fob chain – a watch chain
hashed – old; over-used
idiocy – stupidity
illuminated – clarified; explained
imputation – allegation
inconsequential – unimportant; minor
instigates – starts, begins
longitudinal – vertical lines
mendicancy – the condition of being poor and a beggar
parsimony – frugality, thrift
prudence – caution; carefulness
scrutiny – intense observation
sentiment – feeling; opinion; thought

1. Would you consider the narrator a character in the story? Why or why not?

2. What do you believe to be Della's main characteristic? Explain with examples.

3. How is Jim different from Della? How is he the same?

7. Do you think that Jim and Della were wise or foolish? Explain your opinion, and cite examples from the text and your own knowledge.

8. How do the characters' physical reactions to events let you know what they are thinking or feeling? Explain, citing examples.
