

# The Gift of the Magi -O' Henry

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DR. BARNALI CHETIA



# Author

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- **O. Henry**, original name **William Sidney Porter**, (born September 11, 1862, Greensboro, North Carolina, U.S.—died June 5, 1910, New York, New York).
- American short-story writer whose tales romanticized the commonplace—in particular the life of ordinary people in New York City.
- His stories expressed the effect of coincidence on character through humour, grim or ironic, and often had surprise endings, a device that became identified with his name and cost him critical favour when its vogue had passed.
- Porter attended a school taught by his aunt, then clerked in his uncle's drugstore.

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- In 1882 he went to Texas, where he worked on a ranch, in a general land office, and later as teller in the First National Bank in Austin.
  - He began writing sketches at about the time of his marriage to Athol Estes in 1887, and in 1894 he started a humorous weekly, *The Rolling Stone*.
  - When that venture failed, Porter joined the *Houston Post* as reporter, columnist, and occasional cartoonist.
  - In February 1896 he was indicted for embezzlement of bank funds. Friends aided his flight to Honduras.

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- News of his wife's fatal illness, however, took him back to Austin, and lenient authorities did not press his case until after her death.
  - When convicted, Porter received the lightest sentence possible, and in 1898 he entered the penitentiary at Columbus, Ohio; his sentence of five years was shortened to three years and three months for good behaviour.
  - As night druggist in the prison hospital, he could write to earn money for support of his daughter Margaret.
  - His stories of adventure in the southwest U.S. and Central America were immediately popular with magazine readers, and when he emerged from prison W.S. Porter had become O. Henry.

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- In 1902 O. Henry arrived in New York—his “Bagdad on the Subway.”
  - From December 1903 to January 1906 he produced a story a week for the *New York Sunday World* magazine and also wrote for other magazines.
  - His first book, *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), depicted fantastic characters against exotic Honduran backgrounds.
  - Both *The Four Million* (1906) and *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907) explored the lives of the multitude of New York in their daily routines and searchings for romance and adventure, and the former contained the widely popular story “The Gift of the Magi.”
  - *Heart of the West* (1907) presented accurate and fascinating tales of the Texas range.

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- Then in rapid succession came *The Voice of the City* (1908), *The Gentle Grafters* (1908), *Roads of Destiny* (1909), *Options* (1909), *Strictly Business* (1910), and *Whirligigs* (1910).
  - *Whirligigs* contains perhaps Porter's funniest story, "The Ransom of Red Chief."
  - Despite his popularity, O. Henry's final years were marred by ill health, a desperate financial struggle, and alcoholism.
  - A second marriage in 1907 was unhappy.

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- After his death three more collected volumes appeared: *Sixes and Sevens* (1911), *Rolling Stones* (1912), and *Waifs and Strays* (1917).
  - Later seven fugitive stories and poems, *O. Henryana* (1920), *Letters to Lithopolis* (1922), and two collections of his early work on the *Houston Post*, *Postscripts* (1923) and *O. Henry Encore* (1939), were published.
  - Foreign translations and adaptations for other art forms, including films and television, attest his universal application and appeal.
  - The O. Henry Prize, given annually to outstanding short stories, was established in his honour in 1919.

# Summary

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- 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.



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- **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.

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- 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.

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

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- **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**.

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- 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.
  - 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.

# Questions

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1. How essential is the setting of the story? Could the story have taken place at another time?
2. How do the sacrifices of Jim and Della compare to each other?
3. Do you think that Jim and Della appreciated their gifts?
4. Would the personalities of Jim and Della change if they were better off financially?
5. Why do you think the story compares Jim and Della to the Magi?
6. How important do you think appearances are?
7. What is your most prized possession?
8. How would you react to losing your prized possession?
9. If you were Jim or Della, how would you feel about the gift you received?
10. Would you prefer to be financially secure, or emotionally content?

# Biblical Allusions-

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1. Queen of Sheba

2. King Solomon

3. The Magi

- **The Queen of Sheba**-The Queen of Sheba - an exotic and mysterious woman of power - is immortalised in the world's great religious works, among them the Hebrew Bible and the Muslim Koran.
- She also appears in Turkish and Persian painting, in Kabbalistic treatises, and in medieval Christian mystical works, where she is viewed as the embodiment of Divine Wisdom and a foreteller of the cult of the Holy Cross.
- In Africa and Arabia her tale is still told to this day and, indeed, her tale has been told and retold in many lands for nearly 3,000 years.

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- Hollywood, too, has fallen under her spell, releasing its own polished epic version of her story in the glossy *Solomon and Sheba* of 1959.
  - The sources and history of the legend, however, are elusive.
  - No other popular heroine is so celebrated but so puzzling.
  - Trying to ascertain who she may really have been is an arduous task, and a question soon arises.
  - Why, if so little is known about her, has she become such an important figure?
  - The tales of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba have, after all, even provided the founding myths for the modern states of Israel and Ethiopia.



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## ■ **King Solomon**

- King Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived and also one of the most foolish.
- God gifted him with unsurpassed wisdom, which Solomon squandered by disobeying God's commandments.
- Solomon was the second son of King David and Bathsheba.
- His name means "peaceable." His alternative name was Jedidiah, meaning "beloved of the Lord." Even as a baby, Solomon was loved by God.
- A conspiracy by Solomon's half-brother Adonijah tried to rob Solomon of the throne.

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- To take the kingship, Solomon had to kill Adonijah and Joab, David's general.
  - Once Solomon's kingship was firmly established, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and promised him anything he asked.
  - Solomon chose understanding and discernment, asking God to help him govern his people well and wisely.
  - God was so pleased with the request that he granted it, along with great riches, honour, and longevity.
  - Solomon's downfall began when he married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh to seal a political alliance.
  - He could not control his lust.

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- Among Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines many were foreigners, which angered God.
  - The inevitable happened: They lured King Solomon away from Yahweh into worship of false gods and idols.
  - Over his 40-year reign, Solomon did many great things, but he succumbed to the temptations of lesser men.
  - The peace a united Israel enjoyed, the massive building projects he headed, and the successful commerce he developed became meaningless when Solomon stopped pursuing God.

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## The Magi

- The **biblical Magi** (/mædʒaɪ/), also referred to as the **(Three) Wise Men** or **(Three) Kings**, were, in the **Gospel of Matthew** and Christian tradition.
- A group of distinguished foreigners who visited **Jesus** after his birth, bearing gifts of **gold**, **frankincense** and **myrrh** (a fragrant gum resin obtained from certain trees and used, especially in the Near East, in perfumery, medicines, and incense.)
- They are regular figures in traditional accounts of the **nativity** celebrations of **Christmas** and are an important part of Christian tradition.

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- Traditional nativity scenes depict three "Wise Men" visiting the infant Jesus on the night of his birth, in a manger accompanied by the shepherds and angels.
  - But this should be understood as an artistic convention allowing the two separate scenes of the Adoration of the Shepherds on the birth night and the later Adoration of the Magi to be combined for convenience.
  - The single biblical account in Matthew simply presents an event at an unspecified point after Christ's birth in which an unnumbered party of unnamed "wise men" visits him in a house not a stable, with only "his mother" mentioned as present.

# Topics to be discussed

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## **1. Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory**

## **2. Where It All Goes Down-A drab flat in a gray city on Christmas Eve**

## **3. Plot Analysis**

- Initial situation (One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all)
- Conflict (Della sells her hair)
- Complication (Jim is shocked by Della's short hair)

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- Suspense (Della's Turn)

We're still waiting to know how Jim will react to Della's gift, and we might also be wondering just how he got the money to buy those expensive combs. Della gives Jim the watch chain, and...

- Denouement (the final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved.)

Presented with his gift, Jim calmly reveals (with a smile) that he sold his watch to buy Della her combs. So her present is useless too. Well, that does it for the Christmas presents.

- Conclusion

They are the wisest givers of all – in fact, they're the magi. We leave feeling satisfied and happy.