

“THE GIFT OF THE MAGI”
BY O. HENRY
Interactive Reading Guide

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- O. Henry published a few stories in local magazines and the editors at the *New York World* newspaper sent a reporter to track him down. He agreed to write one story a week and he established his reputation as a gifted storyteller and master of surprise endings.
- His pen name was William Sydney Porter.
- He married, and then he became a reporter and columnist for the *Houston Post*.
- His wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis; he was accused of embezzling from the bank that he worked at to pay medical bills. He fled to Central America, but when he came back to check on his wife, he turned himself into the police. His wife dies and he spent 3 years in prison.
- It was in prison that he began writing the stories that made him famous. W.S. PORTER emerged as O. Henry.
- He moved back to New York, published 100 stories and gained worldwide acclaim.

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Symbol/Symbolism: (when) any person, place, animal, object or event that exists on a literal level within a work but also represents something on a figurative level.

After reading a story, you can identify symbols by determining which objects or elements play an important role in the story. For example, a dove is often considered to be a symbol of peace. If a dove lands on the windowsill of a family in conflict, it might symbolize an end to the conflict and a fresh start for the family.

Draw some symbols that you recognize in your daily life.

Draw a/the symbol(s) that you would want to represent you.

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Allusion: a reference to a person, place, or event from literature, history, religion, or culture.

For example, to communicate the idea of *self-sacrifice* one may refer to Jesus, as part of Jesus' story portrays him dying on the cross in order to save mankind. In addition, to express righteousness, one might allude to Noah who "had no faults and was the only good man of his time." Thus, allusions serve an important function in writing in that they allow the reader to understand a difficult concept by relating to an already familiar story.

Plot: the sequence of events in a short story, novel, or drama

Plot twist: surprise ending

- Authors create plot twists by leading the reader to believe that something will happen and then having something unexpected instead.

Ironic situation: occurs when there is a contrast between what would seem appropriate and what really happens or when there is a contradiction between what we expect to happen and what really does take place.

Symbol/Symbolism: (when) any person, place, animal, object or event that exists on a literal level within a work but also represents something on a figurative level.

After reading a story, you can identify symbols by determining which objects or elements play an important role in the story. For example, a dove is often considered to be a symbol of peace. If a dove lands on the windowsill of a family in conflict, it might symbolize an end to the conflict and a fresh start for the family.

READING STRATEGIES

Problem: is often the reason for the conflict in the story

Solution: will propel the action of the story; a character's response or answer to a problem

*When there is a problem in a story there is usually more than one solution that a character can choose. The chosen solution reveals something about the character.

*Identifying the main problem and solution will help you to reveal story structure.

Making inferences: making a conclusion drawn from evidence or reasoning

Making predictions: guessing at what might happen

CRITICAL THINKING

Expressing an opinion: expressing a view somebody takes about an issue

Interpreting: ascribing a particular meaning or significance to something

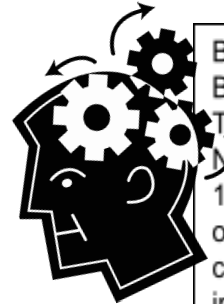
Speculating: to think over possibilities

**“THE GIFT OF THE MAGI”
BY O. HENRY
Interactive Reading Guide**

ANTICIPATION GUIDE

DIRECTIONS: Put an “X” in the space to indicate whether or not you agree or disagree with the corresponding statement.

Agree	Disagree	Statement
_____	_____	1) It is better to give than to receive.
_____	_____	2) A penny saved is a penny earned.
_____	_____	3) Deceiving people is OK sometimes.
_____	_____	4) Crying makes everything better.
_____	_____	5) Pleasing others is not always easy.
_____	_____	6) There are rewards to sacrificing.
_____	_____	7) Women are more verbal than men.
_____	_____	8) Beauty as well as ugliness is only skin deep.
_____	_____	9) A practical gift is always more appreciated than a frivolous one.
_____	_____	10) The wise man is always right.



BUILDING BACKGROUND
This story takes place in New York City around 1900. Most of the action occurs in the main characters' dingy, inexpensive flat, or apartment. The story begins on the afternoon of Christmas Eve and ends shortly after 7pm the same day.

According to the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament, the Magi were the three wise men who came from the East to visit the baby Jesus. The Magi brought precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the child. Over time, the Magi have come to be associated with the practice of giving gifts.

CONNECT TO THE STORY



- What kinds of sacrifices have you made in order to solve a problem?
- What personal items would you have a hard time giving up and why?

VOCABULARY WORDS

VOCABULARY WORD	+	?	-	Used in context	Definition
Imputation				He hadn't done anything wrong, so he didn't like the imputation.	
Parsimony				Despite his wealth, the man was known for his parsimony.	
Instigate				My brother always instigates fights with me.	
Depreciate				The abandoned house on the corner of our street depreciates our home's worth.	
Prudence				It was a dangerous place, and therefore, her prudence was wise.	
Scrutiny				The investigator searched the scene with scrutiny.	
Coveted				Our team finally earned the coveted championship trophy.	

READING GUIDE

Identifying Problem and Solution: What problem does O. Henry present in the opening paragraph?

Expressing an Opinion: Do you agree with the “moral reflection” in the second paragraph?

Making Inferences: What do the details in paragraphs 3-5 tell you about the couple and the setting of the story?

Symbolism: What do the things Della sees out the window symbolize?

Symbolism: What do the watch and hair represent?

Making Inferences: What is the narrator saying in the third paragraph?

Identifying Problem and Solution: When the narrator says “Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet,” what do you think Della is going to do?

Making Predictions: Where do you think Della is going when she leaves her house?

Rewards and Sacrifices: How do you think Della feels about her sacrifice when she “knew it must be Jim’s”?

Rewards and Sacrifices: Do you agree with the narrator that generosity combined with love can cause damage that is difficult to repair?

Point of View: What point of view is the story told in?

Identifying Problem and Solution: Della cut her hair to buy a gift for Jim. What new problem is caused by this solution?

Making Predictions: What do you think will happen when Jim sees Della?

Making Inferences: Why might Jim be acting so strangely?

Ironic Situation: How do the combs create an ironic situation?

Ironic Situation: How does this “snapper” or surprise twist, make the situation in the story even more ironic?

Rewards and Sacrifices: O. Henry is comparing the gifts that Jim and Della exchanged with the Magi’s gifts. What does this comparison suggest about Jim’s and Della’s gifts?

Allusions in the story:

The person, place, or event from literature, history, religion, or culture.	Significance of Reference
The Magi	
King Solomon	
Queen of Sheba	

Allusions to these figures underscore the story’s **theme**, which is:

Exploring and Explaining Symbolic Significance in the Story:

	Significance to Jim	Significance to Della
Della's Hair		
Jim's Watch		
	Literal Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
Magi		
Symbol	Meaning	
Jim's middle name, Dillingham, on the mailbox		
A gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard.		
Della selling her hair		
The watch chain that Della buys Jim		

ANALYZE AND EVALUATE

- Della compares the watch chain to Jim: Quietness and value- the description applied to both. Does this description apply to Jim when he enters the flat? Explain.
- Describe the situational irony in this story. What lesson about life and love do you think it teaches Della and Jim?
- What is the real “gift” referred to in the title? (Notice that O. Henry says “gift,” not “gifts.”)
- **A paradox is an apparent contradiction that is actually true. It may be a statement or situation.** Explain why the following statement is a paradox: Jim and Della were one of the richest couples on earth.
- According to the narrator, who were the Magi? Why do you think the narrator refers to Della and Jim as the Magi?
- During O. Henry’s time, his stories were praised for their surprise endings and plot twists, but later generations of readers criticized these same techniques. What is your opinion of the surprise ending in the story?

CONNECT

- Even though neither Jim nor Della can use their gifts, how are they rewarded for their sacrifices?
- What do you think this story, written almost a century ago, has to say about our consumer society today? Do you think that we often equate love with money? Consider advertising, the amount of money we spend on gifts, the value placed on having many possessions.
- Under what circumstances would you give up a cherished possession, as Jim and Della did?

SYMBOLISM and IRONY

Symbol/Symbolism: **Symbol is anything that stands for or represents something else. It can highlight certain elements the author wishes to emphasize and adds levels of meaning.**

Ironic situation: **a contradiction between appearance or expectation and reality**

Dramatic Irony The reader or audience knows something that a character doesn't know	(1)
	(2)
	(3)
Situational Irony What actually happens is the opposite of what is expected to happen	(1)
	(2)
	(3)
Verbal Irony A writer or speaker says one thing but really means something completely different (it sounds sarcastic)	(1)
	(2)
	(3)

“THE GIFT OF THE MAGI”
BY O. HENRY
Interactive Reading Guide

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- O. Henry published a few stories in local magazines and the editors at the *New York World* newspaper sent a reporter to track him down. He agreed to write one story a week and he established his reputation as a gifted storyteller and master of surprise endings.
- His pen name was William Sydney Porter.
- He married, and then he became a reporter and columnist for the *Houston Post*.
- His wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis; he was accused of embezzling from the bank that he worked at to pay medical bills. He fled to Central America, but when he came back to check on his wife, he turned himself into the police. His wife dies and he spent 3 years in prison.
- It was in prison that he began writing the stories that made him famous. W.S. PORTER emerged as O. Henry.
- He moved back to New York, published 100 stories and gained worldwide acclaim.

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Symbol/Symbolism: (when) any person, place, animal, object or event that exists on a literal level within a work but also represents something on a figurative level.

After reading a story, you can identify symbols by determining which objects or elements play an important role in the story. For example, a dove is often considered to be a symbol of peace. If a dove lands on the windowsill of a family in conflict, it might symbolize an end to the conflict and a fresh start for the family.

Draw some symbols that you recognize in your daily life.

Draw a/the symbol(s) that you would want to represent you.

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Allusion: a reference to a person, place, or event from literature, history, religion, or culture.

For example, to communicate the idea of *self-sacrifice* one may refer to Jesus, as part of Jesus' story portrays him dying on the cross in order to save mankind. In addition, to express righteousness, one might allude to Noah who "had no faults and was the only good man of his time." Thus, allusions serve an important function in writing in that they allow the reader to understand a difficult concept by relating to an already familiar story.

Plot: the sequence of events in a short story, novel, or drama

Plot twist: surprise ending

- Authors create plot twists by leading the reader to believe that something will happen and then having something unexpected instead.

Ironic situation: occurs when there is a contrast between what would seem appropriate and what really happens or when there is a contradiction between what we expect to happen and what really does take place.

Symbol/Symbolism: (when) any person, place, animal, object or event that exists on a literal level within a work but also represents something on a figurative level.

After reading a story, you can identify symbols by determining which objects or elements play an important role in the story. For example, a dove is often considered to be a symbol of peace. If a dove lands on the windowsill of a family in conflict, it might symbolize an end to the conflict and a fresh start for the family.

READING STRATEGIES

Problem: is often the reason for the conflict in the story

Solution: will propel the action of the story; a character's response or answer to a problem

*When there is a problem in a story there is usually more than one solution that a character can choose. The chosen solution reveals something about the character.

*Identifying the main problem and solution will help you to reveal story structure.

Making inferences: making a conclusion drawn from evidence or reasoning

Making predictions: guessing at what might happen

CRITICAL THINKING

Expressing an opinion: expressing a view somebody takes about an issue

Interpreting: ascribing a particular meaning or significance to something

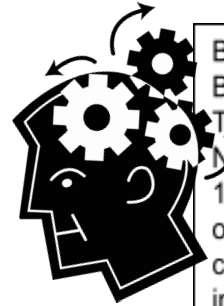
Speculating: to think over possibilities

“THE GIFT OF THE MAGI”
BY O. HENRY
Interactive Reading Guide

ANTICIPATION GUIDE

DIRECTIONS: Put an “X” in the space to indicate whether or not you agree or disagree with the corresponding statement.

Agree	Disagree	Statement
_____	_____	1) It is better to give than to receive.
_____	_____	2) A penny saved is a penny earned.
_____	_____	3) Deceiving people is OK sometimes.
_____	_____	4) Crying makes everything better.
_____	_____	5) Pleasing others is not always easy.
_____	_____	6) There are rewards to sacrificing.
_____	_____	7) Women are more verbal than men.
_____	_____	8) Beauty as well as ugliness is only skin deep.
_____	_____	9) A practical gift is always more appreciated than a frivolous one.
_____	_____	10) The wise man is always right.



BUILDING BACKGROUND

This story takes place in New York City around 1900. Most of the action occurs in the main characters' dingy, inexpensive flat, or apartment. The story begins on the afternoon of Christmas Eve and ends shortly after 7pm the same day.

According to the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament, the Magi were the three wise men who came from the East to visit the baby Jesus. The Magi brought precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the child. Over time, the Magi have come to be associated with the practice of giving gifts.

CONNECT TO THE STORY



- What kinds of sacrifices have you made in order to solve a problem?

- What personal items would you have a hard time giving up and why?

VOCABULARY WORDS

VOCABULARY WORD	+	?	-	Used in context	Definition
Imputation (p. 123)				He hadn't done anything wrong, so he didn't like the imputation.	an accusation
Parsimony (p. 123)				Despite his wealth, the man was known for his parsimony.	stinginess
Instigate (p. 123)				My brother always instigates fights with me.	give rise to; provoke or urge on to some action
Depreciate (p.125)				The abandoned house on the corner of our street depreciates our home's worth.	to lessen the price or value of
Prudence (p. 126)				It was a dangerous place, and therefore, her prudence was wise.	caution; good judgment
Scrutiny (p.127)				The investigator searched the scene with scrutiny.	close inspection
Coveted (p.128)				Our team finally earned the coveted championship trophy.	wanted

READING GUIDE

Identifying Problem and Solution: What problem does O. Henry present in the opening paragraph?

He established that Della is poor and she does not have enough money to buy a Christmas present.

Expressing an Opinion: Do you agree with the “moral reflection” in the second paragraph?

Yes, for most people, life is full of hardship, suffering, and sorrow. OR No, it's too pessimistic- life is what you make of it.

Making Inferences: What do the details in paragraphs 3-5 tell you about the couple and the setting of the story?

The couple is poor, since they have a shabby apartment, their income has shrunk, and they cannot afford to fix things.

The story takes place in the past, since both the rent and the husband's income are far less than they would be today.

Symbolism: What do the things Della sees out the window symbolize?

They symbolize Della's sadness and the gloomy mood.

Symbolism: What do the watch and hair represent?

The watch is a symbol of continuity in Jim's family. Della's hair is a symbol of beauty. Both are a source of pride.

Making Inferences: What is the narrator saying in the third paragraph?

He is saying Jim and Della value their prized possessions more than riches.

Identifying Problem and Solution: When the narrator says “Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet,” what do you think Della is going to do?

Della is going to do something with her hair, such as cut it off, and sell it.

Making Predictions: Where do you think Della is going when she leaves her house?

Possible answers: To sell her hair OR to take a walk OR to find something for Jim that costs no more than \$ 1.87

Rewards and Sacrifices: How do you think Della feels about her sacrifice when she “knew it must be Jim's”?

Della has possibly put aside her feelings of loss regarding her hair when she sees the perfect fob chain for Jim's watch.

Rewards and Sacrifices: Do you agree with the narrator that generosity combined with love can cause damage that is difficult to repair?

Answers will vary

Point of View: What point of view is the story told in?

The story is told in the third person omniscient point of view.

Identifying Problem and Solution: Della cut her hair to buy a gift for Jim. What new problem is caused by this solution?

Della is worried that Jim will not find her pretty without her long hair

Making Predictions: What do you think will happen when Jim sees Della?

Possible responses: he won't care about her hair; he will be angry that she sold her most prized possession just to buy him a present

Making Inferences: Why might Jim be acting so strangely?

Possible responses: He cannot believe her hair is gone OR he is confused about what she did

Ironic Situation: How do the combs create an ironic situation?

With her hair so short, Della has no use for the combs; it's ironic because Della sold her hair to buy a gift.

Ironic Situation: How does this "snapper" or surprise twist, make the situation in the story even more ironic?

Both Della and Jim sacrificed their most cherished possession to buy something of use with the other's most cherished possession.

Rewards and Sacrifices: O. Henry compares the gifts that Jim and Della exchanged with the Magi's gifts. What does this comparison suggest about Jim's and Della's gifts?

It suggests that Jim and Della's gifts to each other were motivated by love. Jim and Della were poor, yet they found a way to give each other profound gifts. In the end, it was not the watch chain or the combs that mattered, but their willingness to make sacrifices for each other.

Allusions in the story:

The person, place, or event from literature, history, religion, or culture.	Significance of Reference
The Magi	The story of the Magi and Della and Jim are both set at Christmas. Della and Jim, though poor, feel as generous and determined to give gifts as the magi had. The lesson the two characters learn makes them wiser, like the magi.
King Solomon	King Solomon was a very rich king who was also wise. The idea that Solomon would crave Jim's watch reveals its value.
Queen of Sheba	Like the Queen of Sheba, Della is very beautiful and wealthy in her own way. Her hair is the source of both her beauty and her wealth.

Allusions to these figures underscore the story's **theme**, which is:

People should always give gifts that they can afford, not ones that are too expensive

If two people love each other, money doesn't matter

Love conquers all.

Exploring and Explaining Symbolic Significance in the Story:

	Significance to Jim	Significance to Della
Della's Hair		Represents her beauty
Jim's Watch	Represents his family and tradition	
	Literal Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
Magi	Three wise men in Biblical stories	Della and Jim are the true magi because of their self-sacrificing gifts
Symbol	Meaning	
Jim's middle name, Dillingham, on the mailbox	As Jim's income shrinks, his name on the mailbox seems to reflect that. It gets smaller and less important sounding.	
A gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard.	Everything seems colorless and unhappy for Della. It reflects her sadness and gloominess.	
Della selling her hair	She sacrificing the one valuable thing she has for Jim, which shows that he's more valuable to her than anything else	
The watch chain that Della buys Jim	The chain represents her love for Jim. It connects him to the treasured watch, which means that he is treasured, too.	

ANALYZE AND EVALUATE

- Della compares the watch chain to Jim: Quietness and value- the description applied to both. Does this description apply to Jim when he enters the flat? Explain.
- When Jim sees Della, he quietly tries to comprehend the changes he sees in Della. When he does respond, he is calm and comforting. He states that the changes would never diminish his feelings for her.
- Describe the situational irony in this story. What lesson about life and love do you think it teaches Della and Jim?
- The situational irony occurs because both Della and Jim expect to delight the other with a gift. Instead, their sacrifices render both gifts useless. Della and Jim may learn that their love does not need material gifts to survive or that love can lead to unexpected results.
- What is the real "gift" referred to in the title? (Notice that O. Henry says "gift," not "gifts.")
- The real gift is the gift of love.

- **A paradox is an apparent contradiction that is actually true. It may be a statement or situation.** Explain why the following statement is a paradox: Jim and Della were one of the richest couples on earth.
- Jim and Della are materially poor, but they are rich in love.

- According to the narrator, who were the Magi? Why do you think the narrator refers to Della and Jim as the Magi?

According to the narrator, Jim and Della are the Magi. Their selfless gifts were the wisest of all

- During O. Henry's time, his stories were praised for their surprise endings and plot twists, but later generations of readers criticized these same techniques. What is your opinion of the surprise ending in the story?

Answers will vary.

CONNECT

- Even though neither Jim nor Della can use their gifts, how are they rewarded for their sacrifices?
- They each learn how much the other sacrificed and how much they love each other.
- What do you think this story, written almost a century ago, has to say about our consumer society today? Do you think that we often equate love with money? Consider advertising, the amount of money we spend on gifts, the value placed on having many possessions.

Answers will vary.

- Under what circumstances would you give up a cherished possession, as Jim and Della did?
- Answers will vary.

SYMBOLISM and IRONY

Symbol/Symbolism: **Symbol is anything that stands for or represents something else. It can highlight certain elements the author wishes to emphasize and adds levels of meaning.**

Ironic situation: **a contradiction between appearance or expectation and reality**

<p>Dramatic Irony</p> <p>The reader or audience knows something that a character doesn't know</p> <p>Examples will vary</p>	(1) When watching a horror movie, you know that the killer is upstairs, but the girl doesn't know, and she runs up the stairs and ends up getting killed.
	(2) Little Red Riding Hood knocks on grandma's door, and the reader knows it's really the wolf dressed as grandma, but the little girl doesn't know this.
	(3) In <i>How the Grinch Stole Christmas</i> , viewers know that the Grinch wants to ruin Christmas for Whoville, but the residents of Whoville don't know this.
<p>Situational Irony</p> <p>What actually happens is the opposite of what is expected to happen</p> <p>Examples will vary</p>	(1) A police chief's son turns out to be a criminal
	(2) The mighty, terrible Wizard of Oz turns out to be a con man
	(3) A fire station catches on fire and burns to the ground

Verbal Irony A writer or speaker says one thing but really means something completely different (it sounds sarcastic) Examples will vary	(1) As you stand next to a polluted river, you say, "Nice clean water you've got there."
	(2) Your boyfriend shows up for your date in ripped jeans and a stained t-shirt. You reply, "I see you've dressed up for our date."
	(3) Someone who has just been seriously hurt in an accident is asked how he feels, and he responds, "I've been better."