

# The Gift of the Magi Study Guide

## The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Gift of the Magi Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Introduction.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Author Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Detailed Summary &amp; Analysis.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Historical Context.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Critical Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Criticism.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #1.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #2.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #3.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Compare and Contrast.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">What Do I Read Next?.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>

## Introduction

"The Gift of the Magi" is one of O. Henry's most famous stories. Included in *The Four Million*, his first collection of short stories, in 1906, it has been anthologized many times since then. The story contains many of the elements for which O. Henry is widely known, including poor, working-class characters, a humorous tone, realistic detail, and a surprise ending. A major reason given for its enduring appeal is its affirmation of unselfish love. Such love, the story and its title suggest, is like the gifts given by the wise men, called magi, who brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the newborn Jesus.



## Author Biography

O. Henry was born William Sydney Porter on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. Though his father, Algernon Porter, was a doctor, the young boy did not receive much formal education. As a teenager, he worked as a pharmacist's assistant in his uncle's drugstore to help support his family. At 19, worried that he might be susceptible to the pneumonia that had killed his mother at a young age, he moved to Texas to take advantage of its warm, dry climate. There he worked on a cattle ranch owned by friends of his family. These early jobs—pharmacist, ranch hand, and bank teller—gave him plenty of material for his stories about poor, working-class people.

When he was twenty-two, Porter moved to Austin, where he landed a job as a bank teller. He also met Athol Estes, who soon became his wife; together they had a daughter, Margaret. For about a year, he owned and wrote a weekly humor paper; when this folded, he continued to submit articles and humorous stories to other newspapers under the pseudonym O. Henry.

In 1894 he was dismissed from the bank because of shortages in his accounts. When the case was reinvestigated in 1895, and it became apparent that he would be charged with embezzlement, O. Henry fled Austin and sailed for Honduras. He gathered material and wrote stories set in Central America while he was there. These stories were collected under the title *Cabbages and Kings* in 1904. In 1897, however, he learned that his wife was seriously ill, so he returned to the United States and turned himself in.

Athol died in July of that year, and O. Henry was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to five years in the Federal Penitentiary in Ohio, where he worked in the prison pharmacy. He had sold his first professional story to a magazine just before he was convicted, and he continued to write and sell stories during his time in prison. He used his in-laws' address in Pittsburgh to hide his actual circumstances.

After his release, O. Henry moved to New York City, at the encouragement of the editors of *Ainslee's Magazine*, who had been printing his stories and believed he could make a living writing for the many New York-based magazines that existed in the early 1900s. He soon signed a contract with the New York *Sunday World* to provide weekly short stories, and he continued to sell stories to other magazines as well. For once, O. Henry seemed headed for financial security. As it turned out, he proved rather reckless and irresponsible with his income—he could perhaps be called generous to a fault. He left big tips in bars and restaurants and gave large handouts to the panhandlers and prostitutes who, he said, inspired many of his stories.

In 1906 O. Henry's second collection, *The Four Million*, was published, which included "The Gift of the Magi." An anthology of his work came out every year after that, continuing for several years after his death.

O. Henry suffered from a variety of health problems, including diabetes and cirrhosis of the liver, which were made worse by his alcoholism. In 1910 he died at the age of 47,

widowing his second wife, Sarah Lindsay Coleman, whom he had married three years earlier. During the last ten years of his short life, and for the next decade, O. Henry was considered by many to be the country's best-known, most widely read short story writer.



## Plot Summary

Della and Jim Young, the main characters in "The Gift of the Magi," are a young married couple with very little money. Jim has suffered a thirty-percent pay cut, and the two must scrimp for everything. On the day before Christmas, Della counts the money she has painstakingly saved for months. She is dismayed to find she has less than two dollars, hardly enough to buy anything at all. After a good long cry, Della determines to find a way to buy Jim the present he deserves. As she looks into a mirror, an idea comes to her.

Jim and Della have two possessions of which they are both proud. One is Jim's gold watch, which has been handed down from his grandfather. The other is Della's hair, lustrous, shining, and falling past her knees. Before she can lose her nerve, Della races out of the apartment to a wigmaker, Mme. Sofronie, to whom she sells her hair for twenty dollars. With the money in her hand, Della goes to the stores, trying to find something worthy of Jim. At last she finds it: a platinum watch chain.

Once home, Della attempts to fix her shorn hair. She heats a frying pan for dinner and waits nervously by the front door for Jim. When he comes in and sees Della's hair, he says nothing. His face shows no anger, surprise, disapproval, or horror—none of the sentiments Della was expecting. Instead, he only stares.

Della goes to him, explaining that she sold her hair to buy his gift. Jim has a difficult time understanding, but suddenly he snaps out of his daze. He draws from his pocket Della's Christmas present. She opens it and finds a set of combs for her hair, which she had been admiring in a store window for a long time. She now understands why Jim was so stunned. Della gives Jim his present, but he does not pull out his watch to fit to the chain, for he has sold his watch to buy Della's combs.

The narrator explains that the wise men, or magi, brought gifts to the baby Jesus and so invented the giving of Christmas gifts. Because these men were wise, they no doubt gave wise gifts. Della and Jim, the narrator asserts, have unwisely sacrificed their most precious possessions. Yet, because they gave from the heart, they are wise: "They are the magi."



# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

The day before Christmas, Della counts all the money she has saved over the past year. By haggling mercilessly with the grocer, the butcher, and the vegetable man, swallowing her pride and thinking only of the penny or two that she had saved each time, she has been able to save exactly one dollar and eighty-seven cents. She counts it again, and even one more time, noting that sixty cents of meager sum is in pennies. After counting three times, her situation is the same. She has one dollar and eighty-seven cents, and one day, to buy her beloved husband Jim a Christmas present.

There is nothing to do but cry over the hopelessness of the situation. The couch that Della lies and howls her frustrations out on is threadbare, in keeping with the shabby interior of the furnished flat that surrounds her, not even worth the \$8 a week they pay for it. The one good thing about the small flat is that each night Della's husband, Mr. James Dillingham Young, comes home to the very same flat in which Della sits, making her the happiest of women.

When Della's sobs have turned to sniffles, she rids her cheeks of its tears with her powder rag, and looks out the window at the gray backyard of the flat. She realizes that her expenses had been more than she had calculated, although with a total income of \$20 a week, there was not much to calculate.

Suddenly, as she stares dully at herself in the pier-glass, Della has an idea. Her eyes light up and scarcely allowing herself to believe the daring of her own thoughts, she unfastens her hair and lets it fall down her back. It reaches below her knees, almost a garment in and of itself. She does it back up quickly and decisively, only faltering for a second. She puts on her jacket and hat, and rushes out the door, her eyes alternately sparkling excitedly and shining with sad tears.

It is important to note there are two possessions of Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young in which they take inordinate pride including Jim's fine gold watch, an item that had been passed down to him through two generations, and Della's hair. "Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts."

The shop Della enters has a sign that reads "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." She walks up one flight of stairs, and encounters Madame Sofronie, who is large and white, like a beluga whale. Hardly looks like a "Sofronie," Della thinks fleetingly, before blurting out to the large lady before her, "Will you buy my hair?" Madame responds curtly that she is in the business of purchasing hair, and requests that Della take her hat off so she can see the merchandise. She glances at the brown ripples with a practiced eye, and flatly offers twenty dollars. "Give it to me quick," says Della.



Two hours later, Della has been relieved of her heavy crown, and has found the perfect present for her Jim. It is a platinum watch chain, simple yet substantial. The item is unique, she has not seen its equal in any of the dozens of shops she has visited and she feels that this chain is truly worthy of The Watch, and of being worn by Jim. For both Jim and the watch chain, Della feels, share the two important characteristics of quietness and value. The chain costs twenty-one dollars, and Della leaves with 87 cents in her pocket.

Despite Jim's unquestionable pride in his watch, he is in certain company forced to look at it on the sly, due to the old leather strap he uses instead of a proper chain. Della thinks delightedly to herself as she goes home that with his new chain, "Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company."

When Della gets home, she realizes that she should take certain prudent measures, to avoid giving her beloved husband a heart attack before he can even be presented with his gift. She spends the next forty minutes covering her cropped head with small curls, and her efforts are rewarded by giving her the look of a truant schoolboy.

At 7 o'clock, everything is ready for Jim's arrival. The coffee is made and the frying pan is ready to cook the chops. Jim is never late, and as the clock strikes seven Della perches herself on the table by the door, the watch chain in her hand. As she hears his footsteps, she whispers a little prayer to herself, "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

As Jim enters and sees Della, he has an expression that Della cannot read. It is not anger, surprise, disapproval nor horror, and Della is terrified. She runs to him, pleading with him not to look at her in that way. She tells him that she had to sell her hair to buy him a present, her voice taking on a pleading note as she adds that her hair grows very fast.

"You've cut off your hair?" Jim says stupidly. "Cut it off and sold it," Della says promptly. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?" He asks the whereabouts of her hair one more time, as if he has not yet grasped the fact that it is gone for good, thinking that perhaps she has hidden it somewhere.

Suddenly, Jim seems to wake from his trance. He takes Della in his arms and holds her there for a full ten seconds. He then lets her go, and withdraws a small package from his overcoat, throwing it on the table. "Don't make any mistake, Dell," he says, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less." He then requests that she open the package, so that she may see the source of his evident despair.

Della hastily unwraps the package, and with a scream of joy beholds the contents. Her joy suddenly dissolves in hysterical tears, for there lay The Combs. Della had been worshipping these combs for as long as she can remember, from their inaccessible perch in a Broadway window. The combs are pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims, combs worthy indeed of Della's beautiful but vanished head of hair.





At length, she is master enough of herself to offer up a weak smile to Jim, comforting herself and him with the thought of how fast her hair grows. Suddenly, Della bolts upright. In the excitement, she had forgotten to give Jim his present. She extends her hand out to him, the precious chain looking finer than ever in her small palm. She prods him to take out his watch so that they can see how it looks.

Instead of obeying, Jim collapses onto the shabby couch. "Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

## Analysis

"The Gift of the Magi" is a story that deals with the pettiness and unimportance of material possessions when compared with the value of true love. Main themes of the story include generosity in the face of poverty, and the various definitions of poverty in comparison to wealth, both physical and spiritual.

The story begins with Della's despair. She is crying because she does not have enough money to buy her husband a Christmas gift. Her tears, O. Henry suggests, "instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating." If it is not true of life, it is certainly true of this story. In the course of the short story, the entirety of which takes place in less than a day, both Della and Jim each go through their respective sobs and smiles. At the end of the day, they realize, through their metaphorical sniffles, that despite the fact that they have each sold their most prized possessions, and despite the fact that their reasons for selling them have been completely invalidated, they still have each other. They also have the love and true Christmas spirit that is more important than the foolishness of their actions.

When the idea to sell her hair comes to Della, in that moment in front of the pier-glass, she does not hesitate. She does not wonder what the loss of her hair will mean to her personally, only what it could bring to Jim. Although we are not with Jim when he has the idea to sell his grandfather's watch, we can assume that he has a similar thought process. All thoughts of self are quelled by the urge to make the other happy, and O. Henry means to highlight this, rather than the unusable gifts, as the true Christmas gifts Della and Jim have given each other.

As Jim wakes from the trance he is gripped by as he stares at Della's cropped curls, O. Henry ponders the thought, "Eight dollars a week or a million a year--what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on." Although the reader is perhaps beginning to guess the outcome of the story at this point, this quote points to the ironic twist that will come at the very end of the story. We realize that not only does Della not have hair to wear the combs in, which will at least grow back, but also Jim has sold his watch to buy them. This is the difference between eight dollars a week and a million a year, that there is simply not



enough money left over from Jim's meager \$20 a week salary for Jim and Della to buy each other presents that truly express their love for one another. Had there been more money, their predicament would never have occurred. However, the true realization is that although Della's money and Jim's watch are their most prized physical possession, the loss of these material items can never replace or be valued as worth more than the sentiment behind the gifts, love and true generosity.

The magi were the wise men who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger, thus inventing the concept of exchanging Christmas gifts. The moral of O. Henry's short but emotional tale is that the spirit of giving and generosity always outweighs in importance the gift itself and that gifts should be given and received with this in mind. This simple story is read and enjoyed by young and old alike, and can be appreciated during the Christmas season and at any other time of the year.



# Characters

## Dell

See Della Young

## Jim

See James Dillingham Young

## Madame

See Mme Sofronie

## Mme Sofronie

Madame Sofronie, the only character in the story other than the Youngs, owns the local hair-goods shop; in the early 1900s, when this story was written, wigs were made of real human hair. She has a small role in the story, but O. Henry provides a rich characterization with only one sentence: "Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the 'Sofronie.'" She is blunt: when Della asks whether she would buy her hair, she says, "I buy hair" and brusquely tells Della to take her hat off so she can see it. She offers Della twenty dollars for her hair.

## Della Young

Della is the wife of Jim Young. As the story opens, she is counting the money that she has saved to buy her husband his Christmas present, and she is reduced to tears when she realizes how little she has. Della and Jim are poor; she has only managed to scrape together \$1.87, despite saving carefully for months. But O. Henry makes Della's happiness in her love for Jim quite clear: "Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim."

She is a pretty, slender young woman. Her long brown hair, when she lets it down, cascades past her knees. In one of several biblical allusions, O. Henry notes that Della's beautiful hair would be envied by the Queen of Sheba herself. In a moment of resourcefulness and courage, Della decides to sell her hair so that she can buy a present for her beloved Jim. With the money from her hair, she buys Jim a beautiful watch chain elegant enough to complement his gold heirloom watch—their only other material possession of any worth.



Later that day, while waiting for Jim to return home from work, Della experiences a moment of insecurity. Though she has curled what is left of her hair as attractively as she can, she worries that Jim might no longer find her beautiful. When he arrives and appears stunned by her appearance, Della again shows unselfishness, courage, and resilience, reminding him that her hair grows quickly and that she loves him. She entreats him to be happy, for it is Christmas eve, and she has sold her hair because she could not face Christmas without a gift for him.

## James Dillingham Young

Della's husband, Jim, is a thin, serious young man, twenty-two years old. O. Henry tells the reader what Jim is like, and also indicates Della's feelings for him, when he compares Jim to the platinum watch chain: "[the watch fob] was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both." He works hard, not returning home until seven o'clock, and is reliable: "Jim was never late."

Jim's most prized possession is the gold watch that has been handed down to him from his grandfather and his father. Continuing the biblical allusion begun with the Queen of Sheba, O. Henry claims that King Solomon himself would have envied Jim's watch. But Jim clearly values his young wife more than his gold watch, because he sells it in order to buy her a set of beautiful, jewel-edged tortoiseshell combs for her long hair.

When the couple discover that both have sold their treasures to buy a wonderful present—and in the process, made those presents useless—Jim reacts with gentle humor and the same kind of resilience Della has shown. First he affirms his love, telling her, "I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less." In the end, rather than bemoaning their situation, he smiles and suggests, "Let's put our presents away and keep 'em awhile. They're too nice to use just at present."



# Themes

## Love

Love, generosity, and the various definitions of wealth and poverty are central themes in "The Gift of the Magi," in which a poor, loving young husband and wife sell the only valuable things they own to give each other special Christmas gifts. Della Young sells her beautiful hair to buy Jim a platinum watch chain, and Jim sells his heirloom watch to buy Della some tortoiseshell hair combs. These gifts are useless, in one sense; Della cannot wear her combs without her hair, and Jim, without his watch, cannot use his watch chain.

But the narrator of the story points out that the Youngs possess a gift greater than any object: the gift of love. He compares them to the magi (the wise men who brought gifts to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem), saying: "let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest\_\_\_They are the magi."

## Generosity

Growing out of the Youngs' love is their deep generosity. Della and Jim are very poor, and yet Della decides to sell her only treasure: her hair. O. Henry shows that this is not an easy sacrifice for Della to make. He contrasts Della's gorgeous hair with the Youngs' impoverished apartment. The Queen of Sheba herself would have been jealous of this treasure, he asserts, and he gives his readers a vivid image of it: "Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her." The color drains from Della's face when she makes her decision, and she urges Mme. Sofronie to hurry□perhaps so she will not change her mind.

O. Henry does not show the decision-making process when Jim sells his watch, but he does describe how important the watch is to him. Handed down from his grandfather to his father to Jim, the watch is lauded as a treasure that even wealthy King Solomon would covet. Jim, too, sells his only valuable possession, so that he may buy his wife a special Christmas gift. Della has never asked for the combs that Jim buys her, but clearly he has seen her face when she has passed the combs in the shop window and has decided that his wife, and his love for her, are more important than his precious keepsake.

## Wealth and Poverty

The themes of love and generosity work hand in hand with the story's examination of what it means to be rich or poor. O. Henry provides many details to illustrate Jim and Della's poverty. The furniture in their apartment is shabby; the apartment's doorbell does not work, and it is not possible even to put a letter in their mail slot. They do not own a



proper mirror. When Della goes out, she puts on "her old brown jacket" and "her old brown hat," and Jim needs gloves and a new overcoat. Their rent is \$8 per week, and Jim makes only \$20 per week.

In contrast, the narrator of the story makes biblical allusions concerning the great value of Della's hair and Jim's watch; even King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba would be jealous of such fine things. And yet Jim and Della each sacrifice their only good material possessions out of love for the other.

O. Henry makes the point that while Jim and Della are terribly poor by material standards, they are wealthy beyond compare in their love for each other. "The Gift of the Magi" is often held up as a story about true love and about the true spirit of Christmas and of giving.



# Style

## Point of View

In "The Gift of the Magi," O. Henry uses a folksy narrator to tell the story of Jim and Della Young, a poor young couple who buy each other special Christmas gifts, which ironically cancel each other out because Della sells her hair to buy Jim a chain for his watch, which he in turn has sold to buy her a fine set of combs for her hair. Despite the fact that these gifts are now useless, Jim and Della have given each other the greatest gift of all, which the narrator compares to the gifts given to the Christ child by the wise men, or magi: selfless love.

O. Henry employs several techniques, or literary devices, in "The Gift of the Magi" that are typical of most of his short stories. The first of these is a narrator with personality and presence. Although the story focuses on Della's point of view, the reader sees primarily what Della sees, the story is told in another narrative voice that directly addresses the reader as "you." It is almost as if the narrator is an additional character that is heard, but never seen, engaging the reader as a friend and sharing his insights into the Youngs' situation. The narrator tells the story in a joking, neighborly way, with several funny asides directed at the reader. He uses casual expressions such as "took a mighty pride" and interrupts his tale with humorous phrases like "forget the hashed metaphor." Another writer who often uses this technique, sometimes called authorial intrusion, is Charles Dickens.

## Setting

Although "The Gift of the Magi" is a famous story, O. Henry is mainly known for the *type* of story he wrote, rather than for individual pieces. All of the stories follow certain patterns of character, plot, structure, and setting. The settings of O. Henry's stories are often grouped into five categories: the American South, the West, Central America, prison, and New York.

"The Gift of the Magi" is a New York story. Although almost half of his stories are set in New York, O. Henry establishes the particular settings of each story with great attention to detail. In "The Gift of the Magi," the writer uses details of the setting to show that Jim and Della are poor. As soon as the story opens, he describes "the shabby little couch," the dismal view ("she... looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard"), "the letter box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal linger could coax a ring." The writer's careful rendering of setting, and mood, help the reader understand just how big are the sacrifices Della and Jim are making when they sell their most prized possessions. The details of place also help make the story seem realistic on one level, although on another level it becomes an allegory.



## Structure

"The Gift of the Magi" is also a good example of the kind of story structure, or organization, for which O. Henry became famous. One of the most widely recognized elements of his fiction is the surprise ending; in fact, many critics refer to the sudden, unexpected turn of events at the very end of a story as "the O. Henry twist."

O. Henry was an economical writer. As in this story, he often began by introducing a character and giving telling details about setting that hint at plot. The first paragraph, primarily made up of short phrases and sentence fragments, introduces Della and her money problem. Using very little space, O. Henry gives readers an accurate sense of her character, her predicament, and her surroundings. He outlines her decision and its aftermath in a tightly constructed plot, moving quickly from introduction to action and on to the surprise ending.

## Allusion

Another element of "The Gift of the Magi" is allusion, or references to well-known people, places, events, or artistic works. When the narrator in this story describes Della's hair and Jim's watch, he alludes to the Bible: "Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out of the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy."

O. Henry's use of allusion here accomplishes three things. First, it is funny. The thought of the Queen of Sheba living in the apartment across the airshaft from Della and Jim Young, and the thought of King Solomon as a janitor—these are silly images, designed not just to make readers laugh but also, perhaps, to remind them that Della and Jim do not take their circumstances too seriously. Second, by comparing Della's hair and Jim's watch to royal treasures, O. Henry lets his readers know how special these items are. Finally, this lighthearted allusion to the Bible prepares the way for the more serious allusion which appears at the end of the story, when Della and Jim are compared to the Magi.





## Historical Context

O. Henry does not specify where or when "The Gift of the Magi" takes place. The reader may assume that "the city" he refers to is New York City and that the story occurs around the time he wrote it—in the early 1900s. Details from the story, such as the clothes the characters wear, the physical descriptions of the apartment and of the city, and the language in the story (both the slang used by the characters and the vocabulary of the narrator) help support this assumption. For instance, the Youngs' flat has an electric buzzer (even though it is broken), but Delia must use the gas to heat her curling irons, showing that the story takes place before electricity was as widely used as it is today. Wigs are made with real human hair, and watches are commonly carried in a pocket rather than worn on the wrist.

When this story was first published, in 1906, the roles of American men and women were fairly clearly defined. Jim and Delia show several signs of meeting conventional expectations: he works outside the home, while she shops and cooks and takes care of the household; he is emotionally secure, comforting her during her crying spells. Women did not yet have the right to vote, although the suffrage movement had begun.

In the United States, an economic crisis was building, made worse by the tremendous amount of federal aid needed to help the people of San Francisco, California, after the infamous 1906 earthquake, the worst ever to hit an American city. The quake was calculated to register 8.3 on the Richter scale, cracking water and gas mains and igniting a 3-day-long fire that burned two thirds of the city. Twenty-five hundred people died, 250,000 were left homeless, and over \$400 million in property was destroyed.

## Critical Overview

When O. Henry published "The Gift of the Magi," his stories were popular with the reading public and critics alike. For the last ten years of his life, and for ten years or so after that, he was hailed as a master of the short story. Critics ranked him with Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Bret Harte, and his techniques were taught in creative writing courses.

Although O. Henry's characters are often regarded more as types than as unique individuals—vagabonds, shop girls, criminals, cowboys—critics find them likeable, and the writer's use of detail creates a sense that they are "real people." Della and Jim fit this pattern in that the reader knows little about the details of their personalities or backgrounds—just enough to sympathize with their circumstances. Reviewers also find the story typical of O. Henry in its tight structure, humorous tone, and signature surprise ending. These qualities have kept his stories popular with the reading public, even during times when his work has been out of favor with critics.

Ironically, just when his popularity was at its height, and C. Alphonso Smith published *O. Henry Biography* in 1916, critics began to question the value of his work. Some—in particular, Fred Lewis Pattee—dismissed his stories as superficial, false and predictable. The craftsmanship that made tales such as "The Gift of the Magi" compact and pointed fables began to seem mere trickery. His reputation continued to fall throughout the 1920s and 1930s, when Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and other Modernists began to experiment with literary form.

O. Henry's work remained popular among readers, however, and in the 1960s, literary critics began to reassess his work. Today, most critics agree that his short, funny, inventive stories have earned him a permanent place in American literature. "The Gift of the Magi" has earned a niche as one of his masterpieces.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the varying critical opinions expressed about O. Henry's work, maintaining that stories such as "The Gift of the Magi" are carefully crafted, achieve the author's intentions, and successfully speak to the audience for which they were written.

It would be difficult to find a reader of short American fiction who does not have at least an acquaintance with O. Henry's story "The Gift of the Magi." This story, penned for the Christmas edition of a weekly magazine, is essential O. Henry. It is as synonymous with his name as its technique of the surprise ending.

O. Henry, pseudonym for William Sydney Porter, reached great fame in the first decade of the twentieth century as a writer of some 300 short stories. They are known for their pervasive sense of humor, their quick, chatty beginnings, their confidential narrator, and, of course, their inclusion of one of several types of surprise endings. O. Henry's fame traveled beyond the borders of the United States; his short story collections have been translated into many foreign languages and can be found throughout the world. Some stories have also been adapted for television, screen, and stage. Such exposure has led O. Henry biographer Eugene Current-Garcia to maintain that "the pseudonym O. Henry has become a symbol representing, especially to foreigners, a particular kind of 'All-American' short story, as well as a touchstone for evaluating the art of short fiction writing in general." An annual award for a volume of the best short stories was named for him in 1919, and The O. Henry Awards is still published each year.

Though the decade following his death in 1910 saw critics comparing his short stories to those of such greats as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry's star began to decline in the 1930s, particularly as new, "experimental" writers, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, rose to prominence. The majority of critics then dubbed O. Henry's stories facile, anecdotal, superficial, and flippant. His work was discredited for its convenient endings, its sentimentality, and what Katherine Fullerton Gerould in a 1916 assessment called its "pernicious influence" on the genre of the short story because his stories lacked intellectual content. Over the years, some critics have continued to fight against the mainstream, and with the help of a loyal reading public they have reinstated O. Henry among important American writers. Though his work is constantly being reassessed, it is now generally agreed that O. Henry's stories are the work of a skilled and inventive writer; it is recognized that part of his gift is the ability to write of people and situations with which the American public could identify. His place as a major player in the development of a truly American literature is perhaps finally assured. But the question remains, however, of why readers throughout the twentieth century, in comparison to critics, have little quarrel with the stories of O. Henry.

There are many possibilities. One might suggest that readers are not averse to the surprise ending, even when it is so much a part of a writer's repertoire that it is no longer a surprise. Guy de Maupassant, one of the masters of the short story, uses a surprise



ending tragically in "The Necklace"; this ending assuredly does not detract from the skill of the writing and tale telling. The zany plots of Saki (H. H. Munro) give the surprise ending a lighthearted twist, such as in his brief but bewitching tale "The Open Window." Each of these three writers takes a plot contrivance but uses it originally, thus making it an integral part of the story. H. E. Bates maintains in *The Modern Short Story* that "by the telling of scores of stories solely for the point, the shock, or the witty surprise of the last line, O. Henry made himself famous and secured for himself a large body of readers."

There are, of course, a variety of other reasons that readers like O. Henry. Perhaps one of the most important is that not all art is meant to appeal primarily to the intellect or the intellectuals. O. Henry's readers wanted to read about regular people. As William Saroyan wrote in the 1960s, "The people of America loved O. Henry... He was a nobody, but he was a nobody who also was a somebody, everybody's somebody." O. Henry's work is popular art, which is specifically created to appeal to the masses, but it is not necessarily a lower form of art.

The engaging nature of "The Gift of the Magi" has no doubt helped O. Henry's reputation throughout the century. This story of a poor married couple who give up their most prized possessions—his watch and her hair—to buy each other Christmas gifts—a watch fob for him and decorative combs for her—has been widely anthologized. It is often taught in high-school English classes because of its accessibility and its usefulness as a tool for discussing the elements of a short story.

"The Gift of the Magi" also is a prime example of O. Henry's talent at presenting situations to which people could, and wanted to, respond. One critic, N. Bryllion Fagin, who finds O. Henry to be at best "a master trickster" in an essay published in Current-Garcia's *O. Henry: A Study of the Short Fiction*, sarcastically details why "The Gift of the Magi" is so popular: "Why is it a masterpiece? Not because it tries to take us into the home of a married couple attempting to exist in our largest city on the husband's income of \$20 per week. No, that wouldn't make it famous. Much better stories of poverty have been written, much more faithful and poignant, and the great appreciative public does not even remember them. It is the wizard's mechanics, his stunning invention—that's the thing!" Ironically, Fagin arrives at something utterly crucial to the success of "The Gift of the Magi": that it has every thing—an absorbing (if short) narrative drive and a twist ending that makes it wholly original.

The story opens with another of O. Henry's trademarks: a quick, compelling beginning that immediately involves the reader while providing a sense of the background of the narrative drive: "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." So, even before having knowledge of the impoverished circumstances of the protagonists Della and Jim Dillingham Young, the reader has learned that the main conflict of the story concerns their lack of money. Also foreshadowed in this opening are the sacrifices Della and Jim will make for each other. Della shows herself already acquainted with saving and scrimping, elements of



sacrifice; her ability to withstand the reproach of the vendors highlights her ultimate willingness to give up something she values highly—her hair—for that which she values more—her love for her husband.

It is important that readers become involved with the story in the first few lines, for the success of the story, through the surprise ending, truly hinges on its brevity. If readers spend too much time with a story, they may feel they deserve a more complex and "bigger" ending; the story's brevity allows the reader not to feel cheated but, instead, satisfied. The surprise ending really is ideal, for "The Gift of the Magi" never attempts to make a grand statement. In the words of Current-Garcia, it "encapsulates what the world in all its stored-up wisdom knows to be indispensable in ordinary family life": unselfish love, the only thing that has the power to transform. The message itself is so strong that to focus intently on the messengers—the Youngs—would only serve as a deflection.

The message thus can only be effectively delivered in an understated fashion. O. Henry understands this and downplays the theme in his treatment of the Youngs. Despite the rather dour circumstances of their poverty and despite their having fallen from better times, they maintain an air of joy. Della, though having just cut off the hair which could rival the jewels belonging to a queen, still experiences "intoxication" at finding the perfect present for Jim. Jim willingly gives up the watch that would have made King Solomon "pluck at his beard with envy." After they realize that the gifts bought through their mutual sacrifices have no use at the present time, they do not bemoan their fates or even deem their sacrifices unworthy. Della, smiling, asserts, "My hair grows so fast, Jim!" Jim, sitting on the couch with his hands behind his head—the posture of a relaxed man—declares, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em awhile. They're too nice to use just at present." This acceptance also points to his affirming belief that life will improve, that he and Della will not always be poor, and that their lives will be enriched for this sacrifice: instead of having only two possessions "in which they both took a mighty pride," they will have four, after Della's hair grows back and Jim buys another watch.

O. Henry's descriptions of the Youngs and their situation support this viewpoint. Though they wear old clothes, have a "letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring," and live in an apartment surrounded by "a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard," they are not shabby, in either sense of the word. Della is akin to a saintlike figure in her capacity for acceptance. She does not regret her lifestyle. "She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things," but she does not ask for help for the big ones, such as changing hers and Jim's circumstances. When presented with the combs she reflects how "her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession." O. Henry clearly approves of her in everything she does. With her short hair, the strong authorial voice notes that she look[s] wonderfully like a truant schoolboy," while she quite calmly accepts that she now resembles a "Coney Island chorus girl." Yet, she has not lost the respectability necessary to a married woman, for in closing, the authorial voice compares Della and Jim to those holy men who initiated gift giving on Christmas, the three magi.



Certainly elements of the sentimental, the facile, the coincidental—those elements that critics have railed against—can be found in "The Gift of the Magi." To focus on them as faults, however, is to overlook the subtlety through which O. Henry expresses his approval of his characters as well as their growth throughout the few short hours in which the story plays itself out. Such a narrow reading also ignores the overarching message O. Henry wishes to convey: that it is the unselfish sacrifices we make for those we love that are most crucial to the emotional health of the family. This message itself is not sentimental but rather a universal truth, and as such, almost a moral. In presenting this message in the chosen manner, O. Henry avoids preaching, however—certainly one of the most effective ways to distance an audience. In "The Gift of the Magi" O. Henry gives to readers a heroine and hero they can understand and thus learn from. At the same time that the reader is learning about the power of selflessness, so too are Jim and Della learning: that their most precious possessions are not something they will ever own, but each other.

**Source:** Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following excerpt, Blansfield explores O. Henry's role as a popular artist; she employs the auteur theory of criticism, which Blansfield describes as an approach that emphasizes an artist's "entire body of material to discover and analyze structural characteristics and stylistic motifs."*

As a popular artist, [William Sydney] Porter shares company with a host of literary luminaries: Homer, [William] Shakespeare, [Mark] Twain, [Victor] Hugo, [Charles] Dickens, [Herman] Melville, and innumerable others. Like them, he stirred the mass imagination, drawing for material from the world about him, probing the foibles, dilemmas, comedies, and tragedies of human existence, speaking in a voice that could be understood by the multitudes.

This communal kinship lies at the heart of Porter's popularity, as it does for any popular artist. The public could identify with and respond to the people, places, and situations Porter wrote about. His stories offered the escape from daily drudgery so desperately needed by "the four million" and fulfilled the fantasies—if only vicariously—they so often longed for. [In his essay "Oh What A Man Was O. Henry," published in the *Kenyan Review* (November 1967), William Saroyan stated:] "The people of America loved O. Henry.... He was a nobody, but he was a nobody who was also a somebody, everybody's somebody."

Porter, of course, calculated this success to some degree; he knew his audience and gave them what they wanted. "We have got to respect the conventions and delusions of the public to a certain extent," he wrote to his prison comrade Al Jennings. "In order to please John Wanamaker, we will have to assume a virtue that we do not possess." Nevertheless, he perceived his subjects with a compassion and understanding that is unquestionably sincere—He specialized in humanity but did not exploit it. He accepted,

Besides, Porter spins a good yarn, and he can turn a phrase as few authors ever have, rambling on in an easy, neighborly manner that slaps the reader on the shoulder, bandying an insouciant humor, and displaying a verbal range and precision that is astounding. He is a born raconteur; to listen to him is irresistible.

Above all, he is a master of technique. Even his severest critics acknowledge that as a designer of stories Porter "ranked supreme." His manipulation of elements into a tight literary structure ... is effective, if mechanical, and were one aspect of Porter's art to be held up as the most important or memorable, it would surely be this one....

All of these characteristics—his empathy for his fellow man, his sharp scrutiny of public demand, and his skill at the narrative craft—contribute to Porter's vast popularity. Furthermore, one other feature essential to popular art—wide-spread distribution—also accelerated Porter's rise to literary fame.... [The] superfluity of magazines and the tremendous need for material were propitious conditions for the fledgling author; joined





with his talents and the public's desire, they propelled Porter into a position as a popular and widely read writer.

In the decades since, his stories have been anthologized, collected, and reprinted; they have been translated into numerous foreign languages; they have been performed as radio, stage, and television drama, with some also made into films \_\_\_\_

Such broad appeal is the domain of the popular artist, be he author, musician, performer, painter, or other creative type. Although he manifests a style distinctly his own and is recognizable by his particular manner, the popular artist conforms to certain expectations, presenting his material in forms familiar to his audiences and mirroring the joys and frustrations, the excitement and ennui of their everyday lives. This direct, personal relationship is one which the popular artist strives for, aiming deliberately to reach and to please his readers or listeners. Unlike "elite" or "high" art, which springs from individual and aesthetic motives, or folk art, which tends to be anonymous and utilitarian, popular art purposely appeals to the masses, while displaying the unmistakable touch of a single creator....

The skills of Porter as popular performer fuse into a style as distinctive and memorable as Charlie Chaplin's or Alfred Hitchcock's, an indelible style which breathes "O. Henryism" into his tales. Two of the most predominant components of this style ... are plot structures and character types. The most famous and easily recognized plot characteristic is, of course, the surprise ending, a trick which results from clever, careful strategy. Although Porter was certainly not the first writer to employ this device— [Guy] de Maupassant being particularly inclined toward it—he popularized it and staked a peculiar claim upon it, so that it has come to be inextricably linked with him and dubbed "the O. Henry twist." In terms of characters, the most well-known is probably the shopgirl, a type which, again, is invariably associated with the writer.

Other idiosyncrasies also contribute to the "O. Henryism" that generated such enthusiastic response: the folksy narrative voice, confidential asides to the reader, intricate and sometimes outrageous language and dialogue, full-blown metaphors, hyperbole, and copious allusions.

Porter embroiders all these elements together to form a personal style that distinguishes his work from that of other popular writers, even though such writers may employ similar or identical devices. Less skillful popular artists may depend so heavily upon story formula or character stereotypes to accomplish their purposes that individual artistry is obliterated, indeed, a whole slew of nineteenth-century fiction manufacturers churned out material in such quantity and such anonymity that their work "was more or less comparable to the product of machines," and authors were easily interchangeable— names like Horatio Alger, Jr., Laura Jean Libbey, Edward Stratemeyer, and Edward Judson pertain. But a popular artist like Porter is an essential creative force behind his products; his shaping hand is always apparent, and his presence within his work helps to establish the rapport so important to the popular artist. As one critic points out, "To read him is at times almost to feel his physical presence."



This unique style, a compilation of several elements, defines Porter's work internally as well as externally. Besides setting him apart from other popular writers, Porter's style constitutes a kind of formula which recurs within and defines his own body of work. This evolution of a personal, recognizable formula is intrinsic to popular art: "the quality of stylization and convention" that is so important "becomes a kind of stereotyping, a processing of experience, a reliance upon formulae." In other words, the artist employs his selected materials—characters, settings, plots, etc.—over and over again, so that they become familiar aspects within his work, yet he also imbues them with a flavor distinctly his own....

In a sense, because of the personal style that emerges through his recurrent use of specific literary elements, Porter can be considered an *auteur*, and the proposal to examine his body of work in terms of these elements is essentially the approach of *auteur* criticism. Originating in the 1950s as a mode of film criticism, the *auteur* theory offers a worthwhile model for analyzing and interpreting popular culture in general, as John Cawelti suggests in his seminal essay on the subject:

The art of the *auteur* is that of turning a conventional and generally known and appreciated artistic formula into a medium of personal expression while at the same time giving us a version of the formula which is satisfying because it fulfills our basic expectations ...

For a popular artist like Porter, the *auteur* approach, with its emphasis on surveying an entire body of material to discover and analyze structural characteristics and stylistic motifs, seems particularly appropriate and useful. What is distinctive about *auteur* criticism is that it stresses "the whole corpus" of material rather than a single work, emphasizing recurring characteristics and themes; it "implies an operation of decipherment" and ultimately defines the *auteur*—the film-maker, the author—in terms of these recurring elements, which come to be recognized as his particular style. "The strong director imposes his own personality on a film," [asserts Andrew Sarris in *his The American Cinema* (1968)], just as a writer can stamp his distinctive seal on his own creations....

[Although not the *entire* body of Porter's work, the] New York stories form a singular portion of his literary output for several reasons: together, they comprise well over a third of his work; they are bound together by their urban characteristics; they were produced during the most significant period of his literary career, and they include most of the stories for which he is so well remembered. Furthermore, the recurring characteristics and themes which are discovered here through "an operation of decipherment" can then serve as models for examining Porter's other stories—of Texas, New Orleans, and South America—which display similar structural and character motifs though in different cultural contexts.

As a popular artist, Porter is similar to the type of filmmaker who emerges in *auteur* criticism, since the latter is essentially a cinematic popular artist. Both the *auteur* and the popular artist utilize formulaic elements of plot and character to create a personal, recognizable style, weaving new variations on old familiar themes. Both, in turn, develop



this individual style into a kind of personal formula running through their work. Both are also confronted by similar restrictions—mainly, conventional limitations on characters, setting, and plots, and commercial demands in their given mediums....

So the identities of these two creative types are similar: like the popular artist, the *auteur* is neither absolutely original nor completely technical; rather, like the popular artist, he is, [as John C. Cawelti claims in *Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness* (1973)],

an individual creator who works within a framework of existing materials, conventional structures created by others, but he is more than a performer because he recreates those conventions to the point that they manifest at least in part the patterns of his own style and vision ...

[The patterns] in the plots and characters of Porter's urban stories draw upon conventional situations, reinforce conventional values and expectations, and embody recognizable cultural types. By occurring repeatedly within the body of Porter's work, these plots and characters define it internally; by emulating more universal, archetypal patterns and characters, they achieve a broader recognition and a similarity to other artistic products, while remaining distinctive to Porter's art.

This continual recurrence of specific motifs, so central to Porter's art, to popular art, and to the theory of *auteur* criticism, constitutes the element of formula. For Porter, as for any popular artist, formula provides the fundamental structure for his art, and not surprisingly, it also contributes to his popular appeal. For as a constant and predictable pattern, formula is inherent to the cycle of human existence, and it also characterizes the earliest forms of literature most people learn—myths, fairy tales, songs, etc. Because it is so elemental, formula is familiar and comforting; it is an artistic expression of the subliminal human need for security and certainty in a life that promises just the opposite, and to some extent at least, the presence of formula in popular literature satisfies that need ...

The other major element of formula, repetition, involves, like the term "convention," distinctions of degree. Within the context of one author's work—in this case Porter's urban short stories—repetition involves the frequency with which the author employs specific plot patterns and specific cultural elements. It is through such repetition that the works assume a formulaic nature....

Secondly, repetition involves the frequency with which the plot patterns and cultural elements have been employed outside the context of the author's works. This is the universal aspect of repetition and the means by which plot patterns and specific elements become archetypal and serve as models of comparison for specific works. The existence of a universal story pattern, or of a general element such as a character type defined only by human traits, not bounded by cultural details, provides the standard of comparison for an author's works and the framework on which he can, with specific cultural elements, construct a story which will be relevant and meaningful to a certain group of people in a certain place and time.



Elements of repetition are quite apparent in Porter's urban short stories, for he draws recurrently upon a number of basic plot patterns and character types. Variations occur, of course, and not every single story can be neatly categorized according to plot and character; such extremism threatens to squeeze the life out of the literature. Still, in the nearly one hundred stories that deal with the city, recurrent plot patterns and characters do emerge which can be identified and used as a means of classification.

The plots of these stories can be divided into four basic patterns, overlapping to some extent but nevertheless bearing distinguishing characteristics: they are the cross pattern, the habit pattern, the triangular pattern, and the quest pattern. All develop themes familiar to most readers: the cross pattern, for example, builds on the unexpected reunion; the habit pattern provides excitement by an unexpected change in routine; the triangular pattern inserts a new twist in the familiar love triangle, and the quest pattern is Porter's version of the adventure story.... Porter repeatedly uses these patterns, or some variation of them, in his stories.

The characters, too, can be divided into six basic types, although because they often play more than one role simultaneously, they are more difficult to classify definitively. These six types [are] the shopgirl, the habitual character, the lover, the aristocrat, the plebeian, and the tramp\_\_\_ Each type is a composite of specific characteristics, such as appearance, lifestyle, and attitude—characteristics which identify the entire group, with little if any attention paid to individual tendencies. Furthermore, each character type responds to conventional expectations: the shopgirl is poor but brave; the habitual character sticks to the ordinary routine of domestic life; the lover places love above self-interest; the aristocrat places money below principle; the plebeian bears the standard marks of poverty; and the tramp sleeps on a park bench.

Thus, Porter draws upon a "conventional system " for structuring his stories. His plot patterns are formulaic within the context of his own works, for he uses a number of patterns repeatedly; they are also formulaic in their relationship to more standard universal models. His characters are formulaic because they appear repeatedly, as types, within the stories and also because they represent, underneath their garb of culture, more universal character types. This recurrence of character type and plot pattern, and the interweaving of specific cultural material with more universal standards, together form the basis of the formulaic art of Porter's urban short stories....

**Source:** Karen Charmaine Blansfield, in her *Cheap Rooms and Restless Hearts. A Study of Formula in the Urban Tales of William Sydney Porter*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988,143 p.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Rea traces some of the events and stories that may have led O. Henry to write "The Gift of the Magi," pointing out the differences that make his story superior to its models.*

There are two accounts, differing in significant details, of how O. Henry wrote "The Gift of the Magi," but neither indicates a source for the "gimmick" on which the story rests. Since we intend to suggest such a source, these accounts are worth examining. According to one version, Dan Smith sought out O. Henry, whose Christmas story he was to illustrate for the *World*. O. Henry, who had not yet even an idea for the story, told Smith to proceed with an illustration whose elements he suggested. The author would then fit his story to the picture, a story he later wrote while his friend Lindsey Denison lay on a sofa. In the other version it is William Wash Williams who lay on the couch while O. Henry, who had already given instructions for the illustration, wrote his story to meet a deadline only hours away. The first version surmises that Denison and his wife may have served as models for the couple of the story, although it has also been suggested that the model for the girl may involve memories of O. Henry's first wife Athol.

Both versions cannot be true, since one claims that Denison was present during the writing and the other that Williams was. However, both accounts are rendered suspect by the actual illustration on which they place such emphasis. In Williams' version, O. Henry tells Smith to "draw a picture of a good-looking girl in a flat with a fellow just coming in the door." These scant details are contradicted by the picture itself, which shows the young man, in the middle of the room, leaning on the back of a chair. No door is visible. The other, more detailed account specifies that Smith was to show "a poorly furnished room" with "only a chair or two, a chest of drawers, a bed and a trunk. On the bed a man and a girl are sitting side by side... The man has a watch fob in his hand... The girl's principal feature is the long beautiful hair that is hanging down her back." But the illustration shows no bed, no chest of drawers, no trunk, and no watch fob. The man and the girl are both standing, and the girl, facing us from the page, wears her hair in a Gibson Girl upsweep. There is a round table strewn with enough objects even to belie the caption. "Della wriggled off the table and went for him."

Williams claims that O. Henry, though at a loss for ideas, would have refused any plot suggestion that might have been offered. Others have also insisted that Porter never borrowed plots, but jotted down ideas "on the cuff in the streets and taverns of New York. But Davis and Maurice include in their study of the background of O. Henry's stories a flat denial of the notion that he scrupulously avoided borrowing. They examine in this light "The Song and the Sergeant," and "A Retrieved Reformation," which clearly derive from published stories by other authors, including a certain amount of detail beyond the basic plot idea. They discuss similar possibilities for "The Duplicity of Hargreaves," and point out that the idea for "The Last Leaf" is partly based on an episode from the *French Vie de Boteme* by [nineteenth-century French writer Henri] Murger. They delicately conclude that assertions that O. Henry never borrowed plots are



"hardly to be accepted as complete." Langford, indeed, finds that O. Henry on occasion even paid others for ideas.

In point of fact, O. Henry seems to have taken the essential plot ingredients for "The Gift of the Magi," as well as many of its circumstantial details, from a French story, as he had previously done in "The Last Leaf." More than sixty years before "The Gift of the Magi," Emile Chevalet, a minor

French writer, published a poorly constructed short story named for its heroine, "Dulvina." Chevalet's story opens on its hero, Gilbert, who is "un jeune homme de vingt-deux ans," Jim, in the "The Gift of the Magi," we will recall also "was only twenty-two." Gilbert is alone in a "petite chambre ou se trouvaient quelque vieux meubles indispensables," like the "poorly furnished room" of the Denison version of the writing of "The Gift of the Magi." Gilbert is in the process of, "considerer attentivement une belle montre d'or qu'il tournait en tous sens, l'ouvrant, examinant le mouvement, la refermant," Jim "took a mighty pride" in his gold watch, and even, "Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up on the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy." Physically Gilbert is described as having a face which, although good looking, is rather "maigre" with a line or two on his forehead, "ouvrage de la pensée," Jim too, we recall, "looked thin and very serious."

But our young French couple like Jim and Della are having financial difficulties. In a gesture of love, and without telling Dulvina, Gilbert sells his fine gold watch. And then Dulvina, without telling Gilbert, "tout-a-coup" gets the idea of selling her lovely long hair. Going along the streets of Paris she "s'arreta devant une belle enseigne de coiffeur-parfumeur qui habitait le premier," where Della "stopped the sign read: 'Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of all Kinds.' One flight up Della ran." When she returns to the flat, Dulvina shows Gilbert her "tSte de petit garçon" after Della sold her hair her "head was covered with tiny close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy." There is a suspicious homeography to the names: DeLla DuLvinA, Jim Gilbert.

There is no need to press the point of these and other detailed resemblances, which go well beyond the basic plot business of the hair and the watch, and which are clearly more than sufficient to have allowed O. Henry to give Dan Smith plenty of details for the illustration long before he sat down himself with his needle-sharp pencils and yellow copy paper to remake these ingredients in his own way.

It is instructive to examine differences between the two stories, to see what O. Henry did with this material to make it his own. For example, just as Jim and Della of "The Gift of the Magi" are O. Henry's "archetypal husband and wife" (whoever served as immediate model), so Gilbert and Dulvina are the archetypal French young man of good family and his mistress. The change that needs to be made by O. Henry for the Christmas issue of an American Sunday supplement is as clear as the need to replace such "exotic" names as Gilbert and Dulvina by American Jim and Della.





Worse still is the plot structure of "Dulvina," for the selling of the watch and the selling of the hair lack the reciprocal relationship we find in "The Gift of the Magi." In fact, the watch gets sold to pay for Dulvina's cab fare, and the hair is sold to buy food. What O. Henry can do with this is also clear, for the typical O. Henry ending, the ironic twist that the sale of the hair is to buy a chain for the sacrificed watch, and the sale of the watch is to buy combs for the shorn hair, is what makes it possible to say that "in this trite little tale of mutual self-sacrifice, O. Henry crystallized dramatically what the world in all its stored up wisdom knows to be of fundamental value in ordinary family life."

Having missed the motivational possibility offered by sale of the hair and the watch, Chevalet had his heroine sell her hair not to a chilly Mme. Sofronie, but to a fifty-year-old lecher who then attempts to rape her—"Je voulais vendre mes cheveux et non mon corps,"—and who later strangles poor Gilbert with the severed hair while Dulvina watches in horror. Following which, Chevalet cheats his readers, for it turns out that the sale of the hair (but not of the watch) and all that followed was just an "awful dream" of Dulvina's. Gilbert in fact goes on to be one of the most popular authors: which was not, of course, the case with Emile Chevalet, but was indeed with O. Henry, who had the vision to see what could be done with such plot ingredients, and had the skill to bring it all off.

**Source:** John A Rea, "The Idea for O. Henry's 'Gift of the Magi'," in *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. VII, No. 3, Summer, 1973, pp 311-14.

## Adaptations

' "The Gift of the Magi" was adapted for film as a 21-minute segment of *O. Henry's Full House*, produced by Andre Hakim, starring Jeanne Gain and Farley Granger, narrated by John Steinbeck, and with music by Alfred Newman, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1952.

It also appeared in a 15-minute segment of the four-part *Short Story Classics Series*, produced in 1980 and distributed by Britannica Films.

It was also one of several O. Henry stories adapted for the musical *Gifts of the Magi*, produced in New York City at the Lamb's Theater, 1985.

This famous story has also been recorded on audiocassette by Miller-Brody Productions.

"The Gift of the Magi" was adapted as a stage play by Anne Coulter Martens.





## Topics for Further Study

Compare the typical living and working conditions in New York in the early 1900s with today. What does a "normal" working person make per week today in New York City, and what would his or her rent be? How much did food and clothing cost at the time "The Gift of the Magi" takes place?

Where, exactly, in New York did O. Henry live? Research what his life was like when he lived there.

Find the places in the Bible that O. Henry alludes to in "The Gift of the Magi." Also, do some historical research on King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, and the magi. What do these references bring to the story?

# Compare and Contrast

**Early 1900s:** In most married couples, the husband works and the wife stays home. Only one-third of the workforce is women.

**Today:** Women represent 40 percent of the workforce, and two-income families are common.

**Early 1900s:** Fewer than half of the families in America-46 percent-own their own homes.

**Today:** Home ownership extends to 64 percent of all families.

**Early 1900s:** Average annual income is \$700, with an average work week of 53 hours.

**Today:** Average annual income is \$31,000, with an average work week of 40 hours.

O. Henry did not allude to the current events of his day in "The Gift of the Magi " or in many of his other stories. This may have been because his characters were mainly working-class people, too involved with getting along in their day-to-day lives to pay much attention to international or even national events that did not affect them directly and immediately.

## What Do I Read Next?

*Whirligigs*, a collection of O. Henry's short stories published in 1910, features the popular story "The Ransom of Red Chief," about two men who kidnap a boy so impossible that soon they are offering to pay his parents to take him back. This story has been made into films and is often anthologized.

*O. Henry: A Biography of William Sydney Porter*. Written by David Stuart and published by Doubleday in 1987, this biography offers a recent look at O. Henry's life.

"The Open Window," from Saki's collection *Beasts and Super-Beasts* (1914), is a short story that features many of the characteristics common to O. Henry's work, including brevity and a surprise ending.

Ambrose Bierce's story "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," included in his collection *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891), is a suspenseful tale of a man's last moments before his hanging, ending with a dark surprise.

The play *Our Town* (1938), by Thornton Wilder, features a narrator who comments on and draws a moral from the lives of the play's ordinary, small-town characters, who are largely symbolic.

Damon Knight's science fiction story "To Serve Man"—published in *Galaxy* magazine in 1950, adapted as an episode of television's *Twilight Zone*, and anthologized numerous times—makes effective use of the surprise ending.



## Further Study

Bates, H. E. *The Modern Short Story*, Writer, Inc., 1941, 231 p Bates surveys the development of short stories in America, France, Russia, and Great Britain from the writers of Edgar Allan Poe's day through the 1940s and explains why O Henry's short stories are so successful

Current-Garcia, Eugene. *O Henry (William Sydney Porter)*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965.

This thorough biographical and critical study includes an examination of how O. Henry's regional background influenced his work

Current-Garcia, Eugene, editor *O. Henry. A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne, 1993, 256 p.

This volume presents Current-Garcia's analyses of the stories of O Henry and collects articles by various other critics

Ecldey, Wilton "The Gift of the Magi," in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, St James Press, 1994, pp. 716-17. After a very short introduction about the writer, Ecldey provides a brief general overview of plot and technique in "The Gift of the Magi."

"William Sydney Porter," in *Discovering Authors Modules* (CD-ROM publication), Gale Research, 1996.

A detailed overview of the author's life, career, and writings, with a number of excerpts from criticism of his works dating from 1917 through 1996.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

SSfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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