

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

O. Henry

OLIVER HENRY (1862-1910) is the pen name of William Sydney Porter. He was a prolific writer. He wrote three hundred short stories which are collected in volumes such as Cabbages and Kings, The Four Million, Roads of Destiny, Waifs and Strays and The Voice of the City.

O. Henry's short stories are best known for wit, word play, warm characterisation and clever twist endings. He was called the American answer to the famous French short story writer Guy De Maupassant. Both authors were famous for surprise endings, but O. Henry's stories are much more playful and optimistic than Maupassant's.

The present story, 'The Gift of the Magi', depicts the profound love of Jim and Della for each other and shows that physical possessions, however valuable they may be, are of little value before true and unselfish love.



A. Form small groups and discuss the following:

1. The importance of gifts on great occasions.
2. Importance of Christmas, Eid, Diwali and New Year presents.

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

- 1 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 cheek burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.
- 2 There was clearly nothing left to do but flop down on the shabby, little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

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

4 In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an
electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto
was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young".

5 The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity
when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk
to \$20, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously
of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham
Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged
by Mrs. James Dillingham Young already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very
good.

6 Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rug. She stood
by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey
backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to
buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this
result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had
calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim: Her Jim. 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.

7 There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen
a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his
reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception
of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

8 Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were
shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she
pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

9 Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Young in which they
both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his
grandfather's. The other was 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. Had King Solomon been the janitor,
with all his treasures pile 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.

- 10 So now 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. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.
- 11 On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out of the door and down the stairs to the street.
- 12 Where she stopped the sign read, "Mme Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie".
- 13 "Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.
- 14 "I buy hair," said Madame, "Take your hat off and let's have sight at the looks of it."
- 15 Down rippled the brown cascade.
- 16 "Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.
- 17 "Give it to me quick," said Della.
- 18 Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.
- 19 She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim, and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation – as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quaintness and value – the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

B.1.1 Complete the following sentences on the basis of the unit you have studied:

1. Della counted her money times.
2. Expenses had been greater than Della had
3. The two precious possessions that Jim and Della had were
4. The Queen of Sheba might have been envious of Della's
5. "Will you buy my hair?" said
6. Della bought for her husband.

B.1.2 Answer the following questions very briefly:

1. Who are Jim and Della?
2. Who is the mistress of the home?
3. What was the possession of Della in which she took pride?
4. What was the precious possession of Jim?
5. Why did Della sell her hair?
6. What was worthy of the watch?
7. Why did Della buy a platinum fob chain?

- 20 Tradition of giving presents or gifts is very common on some occasions in every religion. For the Christians it is Christmas, for the Hindus it is Diwali, for the Muslims it is Eid etc.
- 21 When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends – a mammoth task.
- 22 Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant school boy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.
- 23 “If Jim doesn’t kill me,” she said to herself, “before he takes a second look at me, he’ll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do – oh! What could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?”
- 24 At seven o’clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove, hot and ready to cook the chops.
- 25 Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stairway down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: “Please God, make him think I am still pretty.”
- 26 The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.
- 27 Jim stepped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.
- 28 Della wriggled and went for him.

- 29 "Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again – you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice – what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."
- 30 "You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labour.
- 31 "Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, any how? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"
- 32 Jim looked about the room curiously.
- 33 "You say your hair is gone?" he said with an air almost of idiocy.
- 34 "You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you – sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. May be the hairs of my head were numbered". She went with a sudden serious sweetness. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"
- 35 Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. 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.
- 36 Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.
- 37 "Don't make any mistake, Dell" he said, "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. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going awhile at first."
- 38 White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.
- 39 For there lay The Combs – the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise-shell, with jewelled rims – just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.
- 40 But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"
- 41 And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

42 Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

43 "Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch I want to see how it looks on it."

44 Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

45 "Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em awhile. 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."

46 The Magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gift to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest. Everywhere they are the wisest. They are the Magi.

B.2.1 Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

1. Jim will say that Della looks like a Coney Island chorus girl.
2. Della had a habit of saying noisy prayers.
3. Jim scolded Della for selling her hair.
4. Jim bought a set of combs for Della.
5. The Magi presented a gift to infant Christ.

B.2.2 Answer the following questions briefly:

1. Why does Della say, "Please God, make him think I am still pretty"?
2. "He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face"
Why did Jim stare at her fixedly?
3. "May be the hairs of my head were numbered but nobody could ever count my love for you." Why did Della say so?
4. Why did Jim say about their gifts that "they're too nice to use at present"?
5. Who is a Magi? Why are Jim and Della called the Magi?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

magi (n): (singular form : Magus) : The three wise men of the East who offered a gift to infant Christ. This marked the custom of giving Christmas presents.

cent (n): the hundredth part of a dollar

- imputation** (n): accusation
parsimony (n): miserliness; niggardiness
implied (v): meant
flop (v): fall and fail
shabby (adj): soiled; worn and torn
couch (n): bed
howl (n): long, loud cry
sobs (n): acts of sobbing
sniffles (n): sniffing sounds
predominating (adj): having control (over)
It did not exactly beggar description: it was not so bad that words could not describe it.
mendicancy squad (n): troops of beggars
vestibule (n): lobby or entrance hall to a building
appertaining (adj): belonging to
sterling (adj): of standard value and purity
pier-glass (n): large but narrow mirror
agile (adj): quick-moving, active
longitudinal (adj): perpendicular
Queen of Sheba, King Solomon (n): Queen of Sheba, the Biblical queen, went with countless gifts to King Solomon, famous for his wisdom
janitor (n): doorkeeper
piled up (adj): accumulated
basement (n): underground room
rippling (adj): waving
cascade (n): a small waterfall
brown waters (adj+n): suggests Della's golden hair
hashed (adj): worn out
metaphor (n): the use of words to indicate something different from the literal meaning
ransacking (v): searching thoroughly
meretricious (adj): attractive on the surface but of little value
sly (adj): deceitful; keeping or doing things secretly
on account of (idiom): because of
prudence (n): carefulness; careful forethought
truant (n): a child who stays away from school without good reason
Coney Island (n): pleasure resort of New York
setter (n): a hunting dog
quail (n): a little bird of prey
terrified (v): scared, horrified
wriggled (v): moved with quick, short twisting
awfully (adv): terribly, dreadfully
curiously (adv): eagerly
Idiocy (n): stupidity, foolishness
trance (n): state of insensibility
enfolded (v): embraced; took in his arms

discreet (adj): careful, tactful

scrutiny (n): examination

assertion (n): statement

illuminated (v): explained

ecstatic (adj): joyous

scream (n): loud, sharp cry

why you had me going awhile :why I was stunned for the moment

nimble (adj): quick

Broadway (n): a fashionable shopping centre in New York

vanished (adj): disappeared

coveted (adj): desired

hugged (v): embraced tightly

dandy (n): (slang) anything excellent of its kind

Babe in the manger (n): Christ, when Christ was born, his parents were unable to find any room in the inn in which they were staying and so they put him in the manger.

lamely (adv): unconvincingly; unsatisfactorily

C.1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the title "The Gift of the Magi"?
2. How can you say that Jim and Della loved each other very much?
3. Describe the family status as well as family life of Jim and Della.
4. Who invented the art of giving Christmas gifts and why are Jim and Della called the Magi?
5. The essence of love is sacrifice. Justify this statement with reference to 'The Gift of the Magi'. Jim and Della were right in their decision.
6. Do you think that to sell their possessions for Christmas gifts was wise? Give your own opinion.

C.2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in groups or pairs:

1. Christmas and its importance
2. Love overrides helplessness.

D. WORD STUDY

D. 1. Dictionary Use:

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words

reflecsion
laboreously
worshiped

prosperiti
inconsegnial
yarned

nervusly
asertion
prevelige

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words - the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common.

instigate

unassuming

intoxication

slender

splashed

hysterical

necessitating

craved

adornments

D.2. Word Formation

On the basis of the text complete the following blanks to form words:

predomi apper..... disappr

generos mathemati privil

D.3. Word Meaning

Match the words given in **Column A** with their meanings in **Column B**.

Column A

agile

cascade

janitor

appertaining

predominating

shabby

terrified

assertion

enfolded

discreet

Column B

embraced

active

soiled

waterfall

scared

belonging to

controlling

doorkeeper

careful

statement

D.4. Phrases

Write the meaning of each of the following phrases and make at least one sentence by using each of them.

on account of

pull out

wiggle off

cut off

hold out

all over

E. GRAMMAR**E.1. Active and Passive Voice**

Read the following sentences taken from the lesson carefully:

1. She **saw** it. (Active)
2. He **looked at** it. (Active)
3. He **was called** Jim. (Passive)

In the first two sentences you will notice that the verbs **saw** and **looked** are in the Active Voice whereas in the third sentence the Verb **was called** is in the Passive Voice. In the first sentence **She** and in the second sentence **He** are doers, but in the third sentence **He** is not a doer but something is done to him. You will also notice that in the first sentence the Past form of the Verb **see** and in the second sentence the Past form of the Verb **look** have been used but in the third sentence the Past Participle form of the Verb **call** has been used with the Past and Singular form of the Verb **be**. If we change the Voice of the above sentences we find the following new sentences:

4. It **was seen** by her. (Passive)
5. It **was looked at** by him. (Passive)
6. People **called** him Jim. (Active)

Notice that the Verb **saw** in example 1 has been changed as **was seen** in example 4, **looked** in example 2 as **was looked** in example 5, and **was called** in example 3 as **called** in example 6. Mark that the Preposition **at** in the Active Voice of example 2 has been retained in the Passive Voice of example 5.

For changing the sentences of the Active Voice into those of the Passive Voice and vice-versa we observe certain rules. Study them carefully and follow them whenever you do exercises.

Some Important Facts:

1. Active Voice: The Subject does something.
2. Passive Voice: Something is done to the Subject.
3. Only Transitive Verbs have Passive forms. Intransitive Verbs have no passive forms.
4. In the Passive voice the form of the verb is always **V³**.

Rules for changing Active into Passive:

1. The Object of the Active is made the Subject of the Passive.
2. The Subject of the Active is made the Agent of the Passive.



3. An appropriate form of 'Be' is used with the subject in the Passive if the Active is in the Simple Present or in the simple Past. But in other conditions an appropriate form of 'Be' is used with the Auxiliary Verb in the sentence.
4. The Past Participle Form (i.e. V³) is used after 'Be'.
5. Normally Preposition 'by' is used before the Agent of the Passive.

Note - 1. Indefinite subjects in the Active Voice (like everybody, somebody, everyone, someone, one, People etc.) are deleted in the Passive Voice.

Note - 2. The Tense of the Active is not changed in the Passive.

Note - 3. By reversing the above rules we change the Passive into the Active.

1. Ram **made** this mistake (Active)
= This mistake **was made** by Ram. (Passive)
2. No one can **solve** this problem. (Active)
= This problem cannot **be solved**. (Passive) ('by no one' is not required)

E.2. Change into the Passive Voice:

1. She had spent many a happy hour.
2. Take your hat off.
4. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand.
5. He needed a new overcoat.
6. You needn't look for it.
7. She held it out to him.
8. I sold the watch to get the money.
9. The Magi invented the art of giving Christmas presents.
10. They sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.

F. ACTIVITIES

1. Do a project work on the well - known lovers in the history of human civilization such as Laila - Majnu, Shirih - Ferhad, Romeo - Juliet, Heer - Ranjha. You can take help of your teacher or reference materials in your school library.
2. Make some gift item for your best friend.

G. TRANSLATION

Translate the following sentences into Hindi / your mother tongue.

1. Some children were playing football in the field.
2. All the chairs were broken by Mohan.
3. Can this work be done by tomorrow?
4. Why have the thieves not been sent to jail?
5. The two cars were badly damaged in the accident.
6. Five persons will be sent to help the injured persons.
7. Jim and Della loved each other very much.
8. The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it.
9. She had a habit of saying little silent prayers.
10. A new overcoat was needed by Jim.

