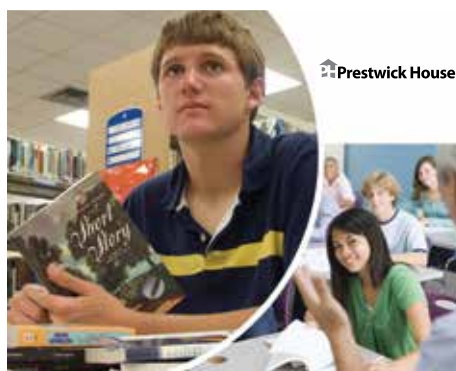




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# The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry

written by Elizabeth Keenan

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# The Gift of the Magi

## Biography of William Sydney Porter (O. Henry)

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

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

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

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

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

# The Gift of the Magi

## Objectives

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

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

# The Gift of the Magi

## Study Guide

### Vocabulary

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

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

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

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

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### Activities

1. Rewrite the story from Jim's perspective, specifically focusing on how he went about getting the money for Della's gift.
2. Imagine that you are Della, and write a letter home to your mother telling her all about your Christmas holiday.
3. Conduct a poll of your classmates to see who thinks Della and Jim were wise and who thought they were foolish.
4. Write the Last Will and Testament of James Dillingham Young.
5. Make a detailed timeline of the events of the story with pictorial representations at each major event.
6. Working in a small group, write a script for and perform a commercial for Jim's watch chain.
7. Write an acrostic poem for one of the following phrases: "Della's Hair" or "Jim's Watch." An acrostic poem is a poem that takes a word or phrase and makes each letter of that word or phrase the first letter of each line of the poem. For example, an acrostic poem for the word *cat* would be:

Cares little when you want to pet her  
Always chasing little mice, tries to lure  
The birds to play.