

Before You Read

This selection also
appears in *Elements
of Literature*.

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry

The Magi referred to in the title of this story are the three wise men, who, according to the Bible (Matthew 2:1–13), brought gifts to the infant Jesus. In O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi," see if you can predict what Della and Jim, a young couple very much in love, will give each other for Christmas.

LITERARY FOCUS: SITUATIONAL IRONY

A story with a surprise ending has an outcome, or conclusion, that most readers would not have predicted. A writer may create a surprise ending by withholding, or not giving, important information to readers. In a well-written story, the conclusion may surprise us, but once we think about it, we realize that it "fits" all the details in the plot.

Surprise endings often create **irony**—the difference between what we expected would happen and what really happens. Sometimes the ending is not just *different* from what we had expected but *contrary* to it. Outcomes that are contrary to our expectations are examples of **situational irony**.

- As you read "The Gift of the Magi," think about what Della and Jim *were expecting* to happen—and what *really* happens. In what way is the ending an example of **situational irony**?
- Like many of O. Henry's stories, "The Gift of the Magi" has a **surprise ending**. What ending does O. Henry seem to be leading you to? What important information does he withhold from you?

READING SKILLS: MAKING PREDICTIONS

Successful readers **make predictions** as they read. This means that they make a series of guesses about what will happen next. Become involved in the lives of Jim and Della by making predictions as you read "The Gift of the Magi." Keep asking: What is going to happen next?

To make a prediction:

- Look for clues in the story that suggest what might happen next.
- Make a prediction about future events based on clues in the story and on what you know from your own experiences.
- Read on to confirm your prediction—to see if it is correct. If necessary, revise your prediction.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand situational irony and the surprise ending.

Reading Skills

Make predictions.

Vocabulary Skills

Demonstrate word knowledge. Understand diction.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

Get to know these words before you read “The Gift of the Magi.”

instigates (in'stə-gāts') v.: gives rise to; causes.

*When Jim and Della fight, it is usually money that **instigates** the argument.*

agile (aj'əl) adj.: moving with ease.

*Della's movements were graceful and **agile**, like a cat's.*

depreciate (dē-prē'shē-āt') v.: make something seem less important; lower the value of.

*Will the value of the jewels **depreciate**, or will their worth increase?*

cascade (kas-kād') n.: waterfall.

*Like a **cascade**, tears ran down Della's cheeks.*

ransacking (ran'sak'ɪŋ) v.: searching thoroughly.

*Della was **ransacking** her purse, looking in every pocket for a coin.*

discreet (di-skrēt') adj.: showing good judgment in what one says or does; being especially silent or careful.

*To Jim, the **discreet** thing to do was not to mention the gift.*

scrutiny (skrōōt'n-ē) n.: close inspection.

*Careful **scrutiny** of the jacket showed many worn spots.*

nimble (nim'bəl) adj.: quickly moving.

*With **nimble** hands she untied the carefully wrapped package.*

coveted (kuv'it-id) v. used as adj.: longed-for.

*Della's wishes were granted when she received the **coveted** treasure.*

singed (sinjd) v. used as adj.: slightly burned.

*Della looked at her **singed** hair, which she had burned while using the curling iron.*

DICTION: PLAIN OR FANCY?

Diction means “word choice.” Diction is an important aspect of a writer's style. For instance, look at this sentence from “The Gift of the Magi”:

“For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction.”

This fancy, or *ornate*, language may sound old-fashioned to you. Here is the same sentence rewritten in a simple style that sounds very modern.

“Okay, let's pretend we don't see them.”

The two sentences have pretty much the same meaning, but their diction—their choice of words—differs. As you read “The Gift of the Magi,” be aware of O. Henry's special style. You'll have a chance to practice rewriting his sentences in simpler language.



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The Gift of the Magi

O. Henry

CLARIFY

Pause at line 11. Why does Della flop down on the couch and howl?

VOCABULARY

instigates (in'stə-gāts') *v.*: gives rise to; causes.

WORD STUDY

Beggar, in line 14, is a verb meaning "make useless." The passage suggests that the unattractive apartment wasn't worth describing.

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 parsimony¹ that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing 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.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat² at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.³

1. **imputation** (im'pyōō-tā'shən) **of parsimony** (pär'sə-mō'nē): suggestion of stinginess.
2. **flat** *n.*: apartment.
3. **mendicancy** (men'di-kən-sē) **squad**: police who arrested beggars and homeless people.

In the vestibule⁴ 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 appertaining⁵ thereunto was a card
 20 bearing the name “Mr. James Dillingham Young.”

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.

30 Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray back yard. 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
 40 near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier glass⁶ 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.

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

4. **vestibule** (ves'tə-byōōl') *n.*: small entrance hall.

5. **appertaining** (ap'ər-tān'in) *v.* used as *adj.*: belonging.

6. **pier glass** *n.*: tall mirror hung between two windows.

Notes

INFER

Pause at line 29. How would you describe Jim and Della's relationship?

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 40. Why does Della want more money?

VOCABULARY

agile (aj'əl) *adj.*: moving with ease.

IDENTIFY

Lines 51–53 name the two possessions that make Jim and Della proudest. Circle the word that names Jim's possession. Underline the word that names Della's. Why are the two items so important to the couple?

VOCABULARY

depreciate (dē·prē'shē-āt') v.: make something seem less important; lower the value of.

cascade (kas·kād') n.: waterfall.

ransacking (ran'sak'in) v.: searching thoroughly.

PREDICT

Pause at line 79. What do you predict Della will do with the money?

50 Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs 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 air shaft,⁷ 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 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.

60 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.

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 the door and down the stairs to the street.

70 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."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

80 Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was **ransacking** the stores for Jim's present.

7. **air shaft** n.: narrow gap between two buildings.

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,⁸ simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious⁹ 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.

90 Quietness 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.

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 ravages¹⁰ made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task,

100 dear friends—a mammoth task.

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.

“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?”

At 7 o’clock the coffee was made and the frying pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

110

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 stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 83–89. Locate and circle the item that Della buys for Jim.

INTERPRET

The sentence in lines 93–95 is an example of O. Henry’s ornate (fancy) **diction**, or word choice. What does the sentence mean, in simpler language?

CLARIFY

Pause at line 108. What reaction does Della think Jim will have to her short hair?

8. **fob chain**: short chain meant to be attached to a pocket watch.

9. **meretricious** (mer’ə-trish’əs) *adj.*: attractive in a cheap, flashy way.

10. **ravages** (rav’ij-iz) *n.*: terrible damage.

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 122–127. To create a **surprise ending**, a writer may withhold important information. What information does O. Henry *not* give us here?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 136–143. How would you describe Jim's reaction to Della's haircut?

habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

120 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.

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.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

130 "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."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent¹¹ fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

140 "Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"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. Maybe the hairs on my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

11. **patent** (pāt'nt) *adj.*: obvious.



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Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded
 150 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 mathe-
 matician 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.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it
 upon the table.

“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
 160 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.”

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.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back,
 that Della had worshiped for long in a Broadway window.

VOCABULARY

discreet (di-skrēt') *adj.*: showing good judgment in what one says and does; being especially silent or careful.

scrutiny (skrōt' n-ē) *n.*: close inspection.

nimble (nim'bəl) *adj.*: quickly moving.

PREDICT

Pause at line 157. What do you predict the package contains?

IDENTIFY

What has Jim bought for Della (lines 167–168)? Circle the text that tells you so.

IRONY

Pause at line 174. **Situational irony** occurs when an event is the *opposite* of what you expected or of what would be appropriate. How does Jim's gift to Della create situational irony?

VOCABULARY

coveted (kuv'it-id) *v.* used as *adj.*: longed-for.

singed (sinjd) *v.* used as *adj.*: slightly burned.

IRONY

Re-read lines 188–191. Describe the **situational irony** you find there.

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud two times. Focus on conveying the narrator's message and expressing his tone simply and clearly.

170 Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled 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.

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!"

And then Della leaped up like a little **singed** cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

180 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.

"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."

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

190 "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."

The Magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts 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 wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi.

The Gift of the Magi

Irony Map “The Gift of the Magi” is famous for its **situational irony**. Fill in the Irony Map below to understand how the story’s events create situational irony. Then, explain what the irony shows us about the characters.

| Della | Jim |
|---|---|
| <p>What Della Sells:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>What Jim Sells:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |
| <p>What Della Buys:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>What Jim Buys:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |
| <p>Why Della Buys It:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>Why Jim Buys Them:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |
| <p>What Della Receives:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>What Jim Receives:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |
| <p>Situational Irony/Why the Gift Is Useless:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>Situational Irony/Why the Gift Is Useless:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |
| <p>What We Learn About Della:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>What We Learn About Jim:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |

Test Practice

The Gift of the Magi

Complete the sample test item below. Then, check your answer, and read the explanation at right.

| Sample Test Item | Explanation of the Correct Answer |
|--|---|
| <p>To create a surprise ending in “The Gift of the Magi,” O. Henry —</p> <p>A keeps one character hidden</p> <p>B withholds important information</p> <p>C does not let the characters meet</p> <p>D explains right away what the characters know</p> | <p>The correct answer is <i>B</i>.</p> <p><i>A</i> and <i>C</i> are incorrect because Jim and Della are not hidden and they do meet. <i>D</i> is not correct because O. Henry does not tell us right away what Jim is thinking when he sees Della’s hair.</p> |

DIRECTIONS: Circle the letter of each correct response.

- Della buys a watch fob for Jim because —
 - he lost his watch
 - he treasures his watch
 - he doesn’t know how to tell time
 - his watch has a new strap
- When Jim sees Della’s short hair, he realizes —
 - she has been to a beauty parlor
 - he likes the new look
 - she couldn’t always have long hair
 - his gift to her will be useless
- O. Henry suggests that Della and Jim’s “greatest treasure” is —
 - a watch fob and a comb
 - their foolishness
 - their sacrifices
 - their love for each other
- Which statement best describes the **situational irony** in the story?
 - The watch fob is as useless to Jim as the combs are to Della.
 - Jim and Della bought each other expensive gifts.
 - Della’s combs were bought with the money she received for her hair.
 - Jim and Della are as wise as the Magi.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Analyze situational irony and the surprise ending.

Test Practice

The Gift of the Magi

Diction

DIRECTIONS: Write the letter of the type of **diction** from the right-hand column next to its example in the left-hand column.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>___ 1. Jed knew that an enormous task had befallen him; nevertheless he forged ahead and proceeded to locate the volumes of learning that would help him.</p> | <p>a. fancy diction</p> <p>b. simpler diction</p> <p>c. simplest diction</p> |
| <p>___ 2. "What a chore, but someone has to get this work done," mumbled Jed. He grabbed his bookbag.</p> | |
| <p>___ 3. For Jed it was a huge task, but he knew he would have to finish the project. He picked up his school-books with a sense of purpose.</p> | |

SKILLS FOCUS

Vocabulary Skills
Analyze diction.
Use words in context.

Vocabulary in Context

DIRECTIONS: Complete the passage with words from the box. Not all words from the box will be used.

Word Box

instigates
agile
depreciate
cascade
ransacking
discreet
scrutiny
nimble
coveted
singed

We were trying to avoid (1) _____, to keep our work a secret. (2) We were _____ the enemy's files, checking everywhere, to find what we really wanted, the (3) _____ Monster File. We were (4) _____ enough not to tell anyone about our project, but we were constantly on the lookout for Agent X, a spy whose (5) _____ body and (6) _____ fingers could cause us real trouble.

The Magi referred to in the title of this story are the three wise men, who, according to the Bible (Matthew 2:1-13), brought gifts to the infant Jesus. In O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi," see if you can predict what Della and Jim, a young couple very much in love, will give each other for Christmas.

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Surprise endings often create **irony**—the difference between what we expected would happen and what really happens. Sometimes the ending is not just *different* from what we had expected but *contrary* to it. Outcomes that are contrary to our expectations are examples of **situational irony**.

- As you read “The Gift of the Magi,” think about what Della and Jim were **expecting** to happen—and what **really** happens. In what way is the ending an example of **situational irony**?
- Like many of O. Henry’s stories, “The Gift of the Magi” has a **surprise ending**. What ending does O. Henry seem to be leading you to? What important information does he withhold from you?

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- Look for clues in the story that suggest what might happen next.
- Make a prediction about future events based on clues in the story and on what you know from your own experiences.

- Read on to confirm your prediction—to see if it is correct. If necessary, revise your prediction.

revise your prediction.

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Will the value of the jewels **depreciate**, or will their worth increase?

cascade (kas·kād') *n.*: waterfall.

Like a cascade, tears ran down Della's cheeks.

ransacking (ran'sak'in) v.: searching thoroughly.

Della was ransacking his every pocket for a coin.

singed (sɪnd) *v.* used as *adj.*: slightly burned.
*Della looked at her **singed** hair, which she had burned while using the curling iron.*

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"Okay. let's pretend we don't see them."

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140 Part 1 Collection 5: Irony and Ambiguity

The Gift of the Magi 141



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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 parsimony¹ that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing 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.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat² at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.³

CLARIFY

Pause at line 11. Why does Della flop down on the couch and howl?

It's Christmas Eve, and she has almost no money.

VOCABULARY

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WORD STUDY

Beggar, in line 14, is a verb meaning "make useless." The passage suggests that the unattractive apartment wasn't worth describing.

1. imputation (im'pyoo-tā'shun) of **parsimony** (pār'sə-mō'nē): suggestion of stinginess.

2. flat n.: apartment.

3. mendicancy (men'di-kən-sē) **squad**: police who arrested beggars and homeless people.

142 Part 1 Collection 5: Irony and Ambiguity

In the vestibule⁴ 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 appertaining⁵ thereto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

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 greently hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

NOTES

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It is warm and loving.

INFER

Pause at line 40. Why does Della want more money?

Della wants more money so she can buy a nice present for Jim.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 40. Why does Della want more money?

Della wants more money so she can buy a nice present for Jim.

VOCABULARY

agile (ə'jəl) adj.: moving with ease.

4. vestibule (ve'stīb-yool) n.: small entrance hall.

5. appertaining (əp'ər-tān'īŋ) v.: used as *adj.*: belonging.

6. pier glass n.: tall mirror hung between two windows.

30

The Gift of the Magi 143

50 Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs 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 air shaft,⁷ Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to **deprecate** 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.

60 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.

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 the door and down the stairs to the street. 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."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was **ransacking** the stores for Jim's present.

7. **air shaft** *n.*: narrow gap between two buildings.

IDENTIFY

Lines 51–53 name the two possessions that make Jim and Della proudest. Circle the word that names Jim's possession. Underline the word that names Della's. Why are the two items so important to the couple?

Of the couple's few possessions, Jim's watch is the most valuable, and Della's hair is the most beautiful.

VOCABULARY

deprecate (de-pré/she-át) *v.*: make something seem less important; lower the value of.

cascade (kas-kád) *n.*: waterfall.

ransacking (ran'sak'in) *v.*: searching thoroughly.

PREDICT

Pause at line 79. What do you predict Della will do with the money?

Della will use the money to buy Jim a present.

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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,**⁸ simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious⁹ 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.

90 Quietness 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.

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 ravages¹⁰ made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

100 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.

"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?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

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 stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 83–89. Locate and circle the item that Della buys for Jim.

INTERPRET

The sentence in lines 93–95 is an example of O. Henry's ornate (fancy) **diction**, or word choice. What does the sentence mean, in simpler language?

The watch was handsome, but Jim was sometimes ashamed of it because it had a worn leather strap instead of a chain.

CLARIFY

Pause at line 108. What reaction does Della think Jim will have to her short hair?

She thinks he'll be upset. He'll think she looks like a chorus girl.

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8. **fob chain**: short chain meant to be attached to a pocket watch.

9. **meretricious** (mer'a-trí-fé-as) *adj.*: attractive in a cheap, flashy way.

10. **ravages** (rav'ij-iz) *n.*: terrible damage.

habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty!"

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.

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.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"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."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent¹¹ fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idioy.

"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. Maybe the hairs on my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

11. **patent** (pə'tɛnt) *adj.*: obvious.

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 122–127. To create a **surprise ending**, a writer may withhold important information. What information does O. Henry not give us here?

He does not reveal what Jim is thinking.

INTERPRET


Re-read lines 136–143. How would you describe Jim's reaction to Della's haircut?

He is dumbfounded; he seems to be in shock.

146 Part 1

Collection 5: Irony and Ambiguity

11. patent (pə'tɛnt) *adj.*: obvious.



Museum of the City of New York/Byron Company/Archive Photos.

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.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"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."

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.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshiped for long in a Broadway window.

VOCABULARY

discreet (di-skreet') *adj.*: showing good judgment in what one says and does; being especially silent or careful.

scrutiny (skroo'tē'nē) *n.*: close inspection.

nimble (nim'bal) *adj.*: quickly moving.

PREDICT

Pause at line 157. What do you predict the package contains?

It might contain something for Della's long hair.

IDENTIFY

What has Jim bought for Della (lines 167–168)? Circle the text that tells you so.

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IRONY

Pause at line 174. **Situational irony** occurs when an event is the *opposite* of what you expected or of what would be appropriate. How does Jim's gift to Della create situational irony?

She doesn't have long hair anymore; she sold it to buy Jim's present.

VOCABULARY

coveted (kuv'it'id) *v.* used as *adj.*: longed-for.

singed (sinjd) *v.* used as *adj.*: slightly burned.

IRONY

Re-read lines 188–191. Describe the **situational irony** you find there.

Jim doesn't have the watch anymore; he sold it to buy Della's present.

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud two times. Focus on conveying the narrator's message and expressing his tone simply and clearly.

Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled 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.

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!"

And then Della leaped up like a little **singed** cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

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.

"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."

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

"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."

The Magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts 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 wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi.

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SKILLS PRACTICE

The Gift of the Magi

Irony Map "The Gift of the Magi" is famous for its **situational irony**. Fill in the Irony Map below to understand how the story's events create situational irony. Then, explain what the irony shows us about the characters.

| Della | Jim |
|---|--|
| What Della Sells: her hair | What Jim Sells: his pocket watch |
| What Della Buys: a watch chain | What Jim Buys: hair combs |
| Why Della Buys It: to go with Jim's watch | Why Jim Buys Them: for Della's beautiful hair |
| What Della Receives: combs for her hair | What Jim Receives: a watch chain |
| Situational Irony/Why the Gift is Useless: Della no longer has long hair. | Situational Irony/Why the Gift is Useless: Jim no longer owns a watch. |
| What We Learn About Della: She loves Jim more than her looks. | What We Learn About Jim: He loves Della more than his most treasured possession. |

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Skills Review

LITERATURE

TestPractice

The Gift of the Magi

Complete the sample test item below. Then, check your answer, and read the explanation at right.

| Sample Test Item | Explanation of the Correct Answer |
|---|---|
| To create a surprise ending in “The Gift of the Magi,” O. Henry — A keeps one character hidden B withholds important information C does not let the characters meet D explains right away what the characters know | The correct answer is B . A and C are incorrect because Jim and Della are not hidden and they do meet. D is not correct because O. Henry does not tell us right away what Jim is thinking when he sees Della's hair. |

DIRECTIONS: Circle the letter of each correct response.

- Della buys a watch fob for Jim because —
A he lost his watch
B he treasures his watch
C he doesn't know how to tell time
D his watch has a new strap
- When Jim sees Della's short hair, he realizes —
F she has been to a beauty parlor
G he likes the new look
H she couldn't always have long hair
I his gift to her will be useless
- O. Henry suggests that Della and Jim's “greatest treasure” is —
A a watch fob and a comb
B their foolishness
C their sacrifices
D their love for each other
- Which statement best describes the **situational irony** in the story?
E The watch fob is as useless to Jim as the combs are to Della.
G Jim and Della bought each other expensive gifts.
H Della's combs were bought with the money she received for her hair.
J Jim and Della are as wise as the Magi.



Literary Skills
Analyze situational irony and the surprise ending.

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Skills Review

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

TestPractice

The Gift of the Magi

Diction

DIRECTIONS: Write the letter of the type of **diction** from the right-hand column next to its example in the left-hand column.

- Jed knew that an enormous task had befallen him; nevertheless he forged ahead and proceeded to locate the volumes of learning that would help him.
a. fancy diction
b. simpler diction
c. simplest diction

- “What a chore, but someone has to get this work done,” mumbled Jed. He grabbed his bookbag.

- For Jed it was a huge task, but he knew he would have to finish the project. He picked up his school-books with a sense of purpose.

Vocabulary in Context

DIRECTIONS: Complete the passage with words from the box. Not all words from the box will be used.

Word Box

instigates
agile
depreciate
cascade
ransacking
discreet
scrutiny
nimble
coveted
singed

We were trying to avoid (1) **scrutiny**, to keep our work a secret. (2) We were **ransacking** the enemy's files, checking everywhere, to find what we really wanted, the (3) **coveted** Monster File. We were (4) **discreet** enough not to tell anyone about our project, but we were constantly on the lookout for Agent X, a spy whose (5) **agile** body and (6) **nimble** fingers could cause us real trouble.



Vocabulary
Analyze diction. Use words in context.

Name _____ Date _____

Selection Title _____

Situational Irony Chart

Situational irony occurs when what happens is opposite from what you expected to happen. Think about the story you just read. Then, write what you expected would happen. Finally, tell what actually happened. (The number of events will vary based on the selection.)

| What You Expected to Happen | What Actually Happened |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |

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