

MASTERPIECE
A great work of literature

"O. Henry" is a pen name. The author of this story was really named William Sydney Porter (1862-1910).

The Gift of the Magi

O. HENRY'S CLASSIC HOLIDAY TALE

ADAPTED FOR SCOPE BY MACK LEWIS • ART BY LINDA WINGERTER



CHECK IT OUT
AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR:

Situational Irony

Situational irony is a contradiction between what is expected and what actually occurs. *Can you identify the situational irony in this play?*

CHARACTERS

- * **NARRATORS 1, 2, 3 (N1, N2, N3)**
- * **DELLA:** a young woman
- * **JIM:** Della's husband
- SYDNEY:** the janitor in Jim and Della's apartment building
- MRS. PORTER:** a neighbor
- MADAME SOPHIE:** a wig maker
- SHOPKEEPER**
- *indicates large speaking role*

PROLOGUE

N1: The holidays are near, a time of love and celebration—and gifts too.

N2: Many people associate the tradition of giving gifts at Christmastime with the Magi.

N3: According to the Bible, the Magi were three men who traveled a great distance to give gifts to the baby Jesus.

N1: They are often called the "Wise Men."



N2: But today, let us tell you a tale about some other gift-givers.

SCENE 1

NEW YORK CITY, TWO DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, 1900

N3: Della and Jim are a young married couple living in New York City.

DELLA: What a splendid walk that was!

JIM: Indeed it was, Della.

Central Park at Christmastime is always so delightful.

DELLA: What shall we do now?

JIM: Let's walk down Broadway and window-shop.

DELLA: But we haven't any money.

JIM: It costs nothing to look.

Besides, we can dream, can't we? Why, look here. Look at these scarves.

DELLA: Oh, wouldn't I be lovely wearing one of those?

JIM: Don't be silly. You're lovely just as you are.

DELLA: And look at those combs! I've admired them forever. Pure tortoiseshell. Imagine how they'd look in my hair.

JIM: Della, your hair is already so long and beautiful. Look, it's almost to your knees.

DELLA: Do you think so, Jim?

Do you really think it's beautiful?

JIM: I may be poor, Della, but I'm the luckiest man in all New York!

SCENE 2

THE NEXT MORNING, JIM AND DELLA'S APARTMENT

N1: Jim and Della live in a shabby little one-room apartment.



N2: But Jim does have one possession he is proud of: his pocket watch.

JIM (*checking his watch*): I must be off to work.

DELLA: Don't be home late, Jim.

JIM: I'll put in my time and nothing more.

DELLA: You look so sophisticated when you glance at your watch.

JIM: Do I? Even with this old leather strap I use in place of a chain?

DELLA (*hugging him*): Who's to notice the strap when such a handsome man is holding such a glorious watch?

N3: Jim leaves for his office. On the way out, he waves to the janitor, Sydney.

SYDNEY: Good morning, Mr. Young. Off to work already, are you?

JIM (*checking his watch*): I mustn't be late for work, Sydney.

SYDNEY: No, sir. That's quite a watch.

JIM: It was my grandfather's. Keeps perfect time.

SYDNEY: It's quite remarkable.

JIM: Sydney, about my mailbox.

SYDNEY: It says on it, "Mr. James Dillingham Young," just like you asked.

JIM: That's just it. Perhaps it would

be best if it just said, "Mr. James D. Young."

SYDNEY: Oh, no, sir. Dillingham sounds so distinguished.

JIM: Distinguished for a man who makes \$30 a week—not for a man who makes a mere \$20.

SYDNEY (*shaking his head, frowning*): Another pay cut? Times are hard.

JIM (*checking his watch again*): Yes they are, Sydney. But whether \$20 or \$30 a week, I must be on time.

SCENE 3

JIM AND DELLA'S APARTMENT

N1: Like Jim, Della has only one treasure—her long, beautiful hair.

N2: Della and her neighbor sit together at the kitchen table.

DELLA (*counting coins*): . . . 85, 86 . . . one dollar and 87 cents. No matter how often I count it, Mrs. Porter, the amount never changes.

MRS. PORTER: Of course not, dear, but a penny saved is a penny earned.

DELLA: And how I've earned these pennies, Mrs. Porter. I've learned to drive a hard bargain. The grocer, the butcher, the milkman—I think they cringe when they see me coming. I'll take the worst cuts of meat to save a penny, the bruised fruit to save two.

MRS. PORTER: Don't you worry now, dear. Things will turn around for you two. I just know it.

DELLA (*crying*): But it's Christmas Eve. One dollar and 87 cents! What can I buy my wonderful Jim with one dollar and 87 cents?

MRS. PORTER: Now don't cry, Della.

N3: Just then, Della happens to glance in the mirror.

N1: She catches sight of her long, beautiful hair, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown water.

N2: She stands for a moment. A final tear splashes on the worn carpet.

DELLA: I have it, Mrs. Porter.

N3: Della's face grows pale as she quickly arranges her hair into a bun.

MRS. PORTER (*concerned*): Oh, Della, you mustn't.

DELLA: I must. For Jim. For Christmas.

N1: On goes Della's old brown coat and old brown hat.

N2: And with a whirl of skirts and a brilliant sparkle still in her eye . . .

N3: . . . she flutters out the door and down the stairs into the street.

SCENE 4

ON BROADWAY

N1: Moments later, Della arrives at Madame Sophie's Hair Goods of All Kinds.

DELLA: Will you buy my hair?

MADAME SOPHIE: I do buy hair. Take off your hat and let's have a look at it.

N2: Down ripples the brown cascade.

MADAME SOPHIE: What could be so important that you'd sacrifice such lovely hair?

DELLA: I'd sacrifice anything for my Jim. How much is it worth?

MADAME SOPHIE: Your hair? Twenty dollars.

DELLA: I'll take it.

N3: Her hair gone and 20 dollars crumpled in her fist, Della rushes out onto the street.

DELLA (*to herself*): Now for Jim's present.

N1: For two hours, Della ransacks the stores searching for that special something.

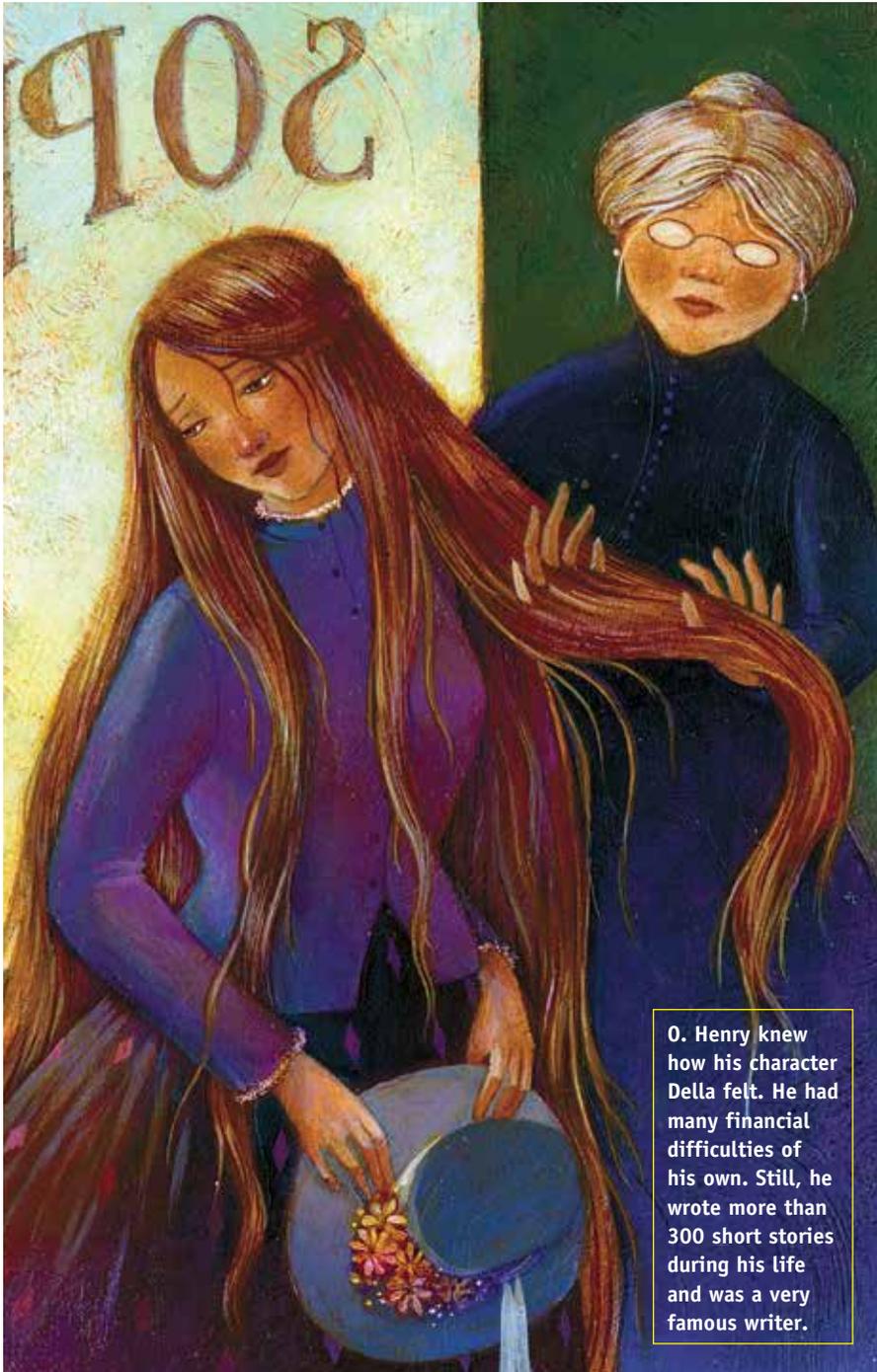
DELLA: He needs a new overcoat, and every day he goes off to work without gloves to warm his hands. But his gift must be something precious, something worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

N2: She soon spots just the thing.

SHOPKEEPER: May I help you?

DELLA: Might I see that watch chain?

SHOPKEEPER: Why certainly, Miss. It's platinum. A fine



O. Henry knew how his character Della felt. He had many financial difficulties of his own. Still, he wrote more than 300 short stories during his life and was a very famous writer.

chain—but very expensive.

DELLA: It's so perfect for my husband. With a chain like this on his watch, he could check the time in anyone's company. How much is it?

SHOPKEEPER: Twenty-one dollars.

DELLA: I'll take it.

SCENE 5

JIM AND DELLA'S APARTMENT

DELLA: How bad is it, Mrs. Porter?

MRS. PORTER: A pretty thing like you? You're adorable with or without your hair. We'll curl what's left of it. That's what we'll do. We'll curl it.

N3: Within 40 minutes, Della's head is covered with tiny curls.

MRS. PORTER: That's not so bad now, is it?

N1: But when Della looks at her reflection in the mirror, she remains worried.

DELLA: If Jim doesn't faint before he takes a second look, he'll say I look like a truant schoolboy! A boy!

MRS. PORTER: Now, now.

DELLA: But what could I do with a dollar and 87 cents?

MRS. PORTER: I'll go now, before Jim gets home.

DELLA: Yes, you had better. He's never late.

MRS. PORTER (leaving): Don't you worry now. It'll be all right.

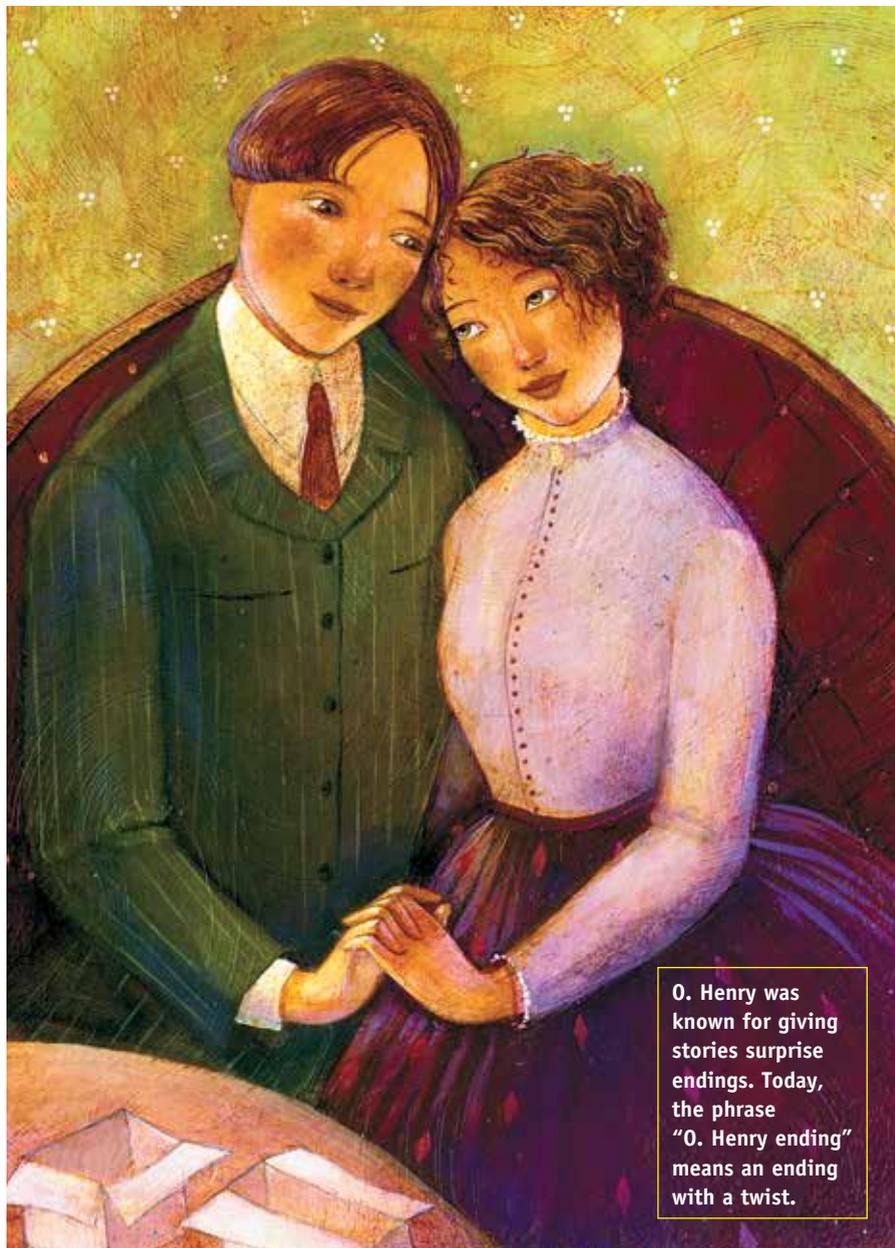
DELLA (aside): Oh, please, let him think I'm still pretty!

N2: A moment after Mrs. Porter leaves, Jim steps in.

N3: Seeing Della, he freezes.

N1: He says nothing. He merely stands there with a peculiar expression on his face.

DELLA: Jim, darling, don't stare at



O. Henry was known for giving stories surprise endings. Today, the phrase "O. Henry ending" means an ending with a twist.

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 back.

N2: But Jim continues to stare at Della. He seems to be in a trance.

DELLA (almost crying): You don't mind, do you, Jim? My hair grows awfully fast. Jim, say something. You can't imagine what a wonderful gift I have for you!

JIM (confused): You cut off your hair.

DELLA (crying): And sold it. Don't you like me just as well anyhow? I'm still me without my hair, aren't I?

N3: Jim looks around the room curiously.

JIM (coming out of his trance): You say your hair is gone?

DELLA: Don't look for it. It's gone. I did it for you.

JIM (hugging her): Don't make any

mistake, Della. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut that could make me love you any less. But if you unwrap this present, you'll see why you took me by surprise.

N1: Della unwraps the gift and screams for joy . . .

N2: Then cries aloud.

N3: For there are the combs, the precious tortoiseshell combs she'd so long desired without the hope of ever having.

DELLA (sniffing): My hair does grow fast, Jim.

N1: Jim has not yet seen his present.

N2: Della holds it out to him in her open palm.

DELLA (excited): Isn't it dandy, Jim? Let's put it on your watch. I want to see how it looks!

N3: Jim tumbles onto the sofa and begins to laugh.

JIM: Della, I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs!

N1: Now they laugh together.

JIM: Let's put our presents away and keep them for a while. They're too nice to use just yet. And now,

suppose we have some dinner.

N2: Today we've told you of two people who sacrificed their greatest treasures.

N3: You might think they were foolish.

N1: But in a word to the wise, let us conclude with this:

N2: Of all who give and receive gifts, these two were the wisest.

N3: They are the Magi. ●

SCOPE CLOSE-UP

A REAL-LIFE MAGI

In 2006, Hannah Salwen (right), then 14 years old, was with her dad, driving home from a sleepover. At a traffic light, she looked out the window and saw a Mercedes next to them. On the sidewalk, next to the Mercedes, was a homeless man begging for food.

"Dad," she said, "if that man had a less-nice car, the other man could have a meal."

They drove away. But the idea stuck in Hannah's mind—how the well-off could help the poor by doing with less. She kept bringing it up to her parents until finally her mom asked, "What do you want to do? Sell our house?"

Hannah's answer was YES. And shockingly, Hannah's parents did just that. They sold their fancy home, bought a more modest one, and donated the difference—nearly \$1 million—to the Hunger Project, an organization that fights poverty and hunger in Africa. Later, they wrote about their experience in a book called *The Power of Half*.

The Salwens still live in a house half the size of their old one. And their hearts feel twice as big.



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