**THE GIFT OF THE** [**MAGI**](http://www.answers.com/magus)

**by O. Henry**

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](http://www.answers.com/imputation) of [parsimony](http://www.answers.com/parsimony) 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 flat at $8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the [mendicancy](http://www.answers.com/mendicancy) squad.

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."

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, 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.

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 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 honor of being owned by Jim.

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.

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.

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 airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to [depreciate](http://www.answers.com/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.

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: "Mne. 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 practised 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.

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](http://www.answers.com/fob) chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by [meretricious](http://www.answers.com/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. 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 ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, 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](http://www.answers.com/truant) schoolboy. 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 habit for saying little silent prayer 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 stopped 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 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 patent 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 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 of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

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 a while 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 worshipped 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.

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 them 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. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

**Character**

How many characters are in the story?

Can you name them?

Which character speaks the following lines and what do these lines tell us about their character?

• And now I think we should have our dinner.

• Will you buy my hair?

• I sold the watch to get the money to buy the combs.

• You've cut off your hair?

• Isn't it perfect, Jim?

• What could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?

• Don't you like me now?

• You won't care, will you?

\*Extra Credit: Re-tell the story by putting the lines in order on a separate paper.

**Setting**

What is the setting of the story? Think about time and place.

**Plot**

What is the climax of the story?

What is the resolution of the story?

**Conflict**

What are some of the possible conflicts that could arise in a story like this?

Think back to the anxieties of Jim and Della (the answers to the character exercise could help you here).

Write a short dialog between the main characters based on one of the possible conflicts that could arise.

Anchor Extension Opportunity:

You might like to develop this into a short dramatic performance for the rest of the class

**Theme**

The theme is the point, or reason, for writing a story. Some people think of theme as the message or meaning.

**Major and Minor Themes**

A story usually has one main theme and several minor themes. Below is a list of some common general themes in literature around the world. Think of some stories or movies that you are familiar with and try to identify some of the themes

in them. Eight of these themes can be found in The Gift of the Magi. Highlight 8 themes that O. Henry uses in his story.

Art, Justice, Beauty, Knowledge, Bravery, Law, Death, Loss, Fear, Love, Family, Money, Faith, Nature, Freedom, Peace, The Future, Poverty, Giving, Pride, Greed, Sacrifice, Growing Up, Religion, Heroism, Sacrifice, Honesty, Truth, Hope, War, Identity, Wisdom, Independence

**Ranking: Major and Minor Themes**

Rank the eight themes identified above from 1-8 with 1 being the main theme in the story and 8 the least important minor theme. There are many possibilities, depending on your personal beliefs. Compare and contrast your choice for main theme with other people.



**Exploring specific themes: Sacrifice & Wisdom**

**Sacrifice**

Many teachers in the USA feel that sacrifice, or giving up something for someone else, is the main theme in The Gift of the Magi. Both Della and Jim make sacrifices so they can buy Christmas gifts for each other. Who made the greatest sacrifice, Della, by selling her hair or Jim, by selling his watch? Why? Write a short paragraph of your own thoughts on this matter.

**Wisdom**

At the end of the story, O.Henry seems to be saying two different things. Read below from *The Gift of the Magi*.

“And here I have told you the story of two children who were not wise. Each sold the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me speak a last word to the wise of these days: Of all who give gifts, these two were the most wise.”

• Who are the two children?

• Why does O' Henry refer to them as "children"?

• How were they unwise?

• How were they wise?

**Themes & proverbs**

Usually, an author's theme can be stated in terms that resemble familiar sayings or proverbs. Look at these English sayings. Are there similar sayings in your language. If not, can you translate them easily into your language?

• Love is the greatest gift of all.

• Money can't buy you love.

• A gift must come from the heart.

• Beauty comes from within.

Which of the four sayings best describes the main theme of The Gift of the

Magi?

**\*EXTENSION MENU: Dramatization**

Animators and movie makers use a technique called "story-boarding" to illustrate the scenes as they want them to be represented on screen. A story board is like a sketch of the characters and setting, with the intention of visually interpreting, plot, conflict and theme. Even though it may be difficult to draw illustrations that would interpret events from a story such as The Gift of the Magi, it is possible to provide short written descriptions of each scene as it is intended to be portrayed. This is a common technique in script writing.

• Plot a new ending for the story.

• Imagine that Della tries to buy back Jim's watch.

• How will she raise the money?

• What will Jim's reaction be?

Draw a few sketches that illustrate the scenes from the story or write descriptions of the scenes as you would like them to be portrayed. In groups of three, plan and perform a short skit using the dialog you have created and the scenes you have visualized.

Think carefully of all the elements you have worked with in the five short stories: character, setting, plot, conflict and theme. How does your new ending relate to each of these elements?

**ANSWER KEY**

**3a) Which character speaks the following lines? Answers**

Which character speaks the following lines, Jim or Della?

What does each line tell us about their character?

**And now I think we should have our dinner.**

**Jim:** he doesn't want either of them to worry or think too much about their new

gifts and lost possessions. He just wants them to enjoy Christmas together.

**Will you buy my hair?**

**Della:** she is willing to sacrifice her beautiful hair to be able to buy a nice gift for

her husband.

**I sold the watch to get the money to buy the combs.**

**Jim:** he is willing to sell his most prized possession, his watch, to buy Della a

nice gift.

**You've cut off your hair?**

**Jim:** he realizes that Della will not need the combs he bought her for a while.

**Isn't it perfect, Jim?**

**Della:** she really wants to make Jim happy.

**What could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?**

**Della:** she doesn't have very much money and she is worried that she can't

buy a nice present for Jim.

**Don't you like me now?**

**Della:** she is worried that Jim will not like her with short hair.

**You won't care, will you?**

**Della:** she is worried that Jim will not like her with short hair.

• In what order are the lines spoken in the story? **(2, 6, 8, 7, 4, 5, 3, 1)**

**3c) Major and Minor Themes: one interpretation of the story**

The eight themes that O' Henry uses are:

**Beauty** Della is worried that Jim won't think she is beautiful with

short hair, but Jim loves her for more than just her beautiful

hair and how she looks. If you really love somebody, they

are beautiful no matter how they look.

**Family** Jim and Della are husband and wife and they love each

other. Jim's watch was given to him by his father and has

been in his family for many years. Still, he sacrifices it out of

love for Della.

**Giving** Della and Jim both feel that it is important to give nice gifts

to each other to express their love.

**Identity** Della learns that Jim loves her for just for being herself, not

because of her hair or the Christmas present she buys him.

**Love** Because Jim and Della love each other, there is really no

need to prove their love by buying gifts for each other.

**Love** is the greatest gift. Money Della and Jim sell valuable

things to get money to buy gifts for each other, because they

are poor.

**Sacrifice** Both Della and Jim give up valuable possessions so they

can buy Christmas gifts for each other.

**Wisdom** Della and Jim were wise because they were willing to make

sacrifices to show their love for each other.

**4a) Exploring specific themes: Sacrifice & Wisdom—notes**

**Wisdom**

At the end of the story, O.Henry seems to be saying two different things. Read

below from page 6 in The Gift of the Magi.

“And here I have told you the story of two children who were not wise. Each sold

the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me

speak a last word to the wise of these days: Of all who give gifts, these two were

the most wise.”

**Who are the two children?**

Jim and Della

**Why does O' Henry refer to them as "children"?**

Although they are both young adults, they are simple like children in many

ways.

**How were they unwise?**

They sold valuable things to buy gifts that they didn't really need to buy in the

first place, because they were truly in love.

**How were they wise?**

They thought only of the other person and not of themselves when they gave

their gifts.