



'THE GIFT OF THE MAGI BY O. HENRY

: UNIT STRUCTURE :

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3.3.1 About O. Henry's writing style

3.3.2 About the present Story – '*The Gift of the Magi*'

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall

- Know about Short story as a literary form
- Get introduced to the Short story and its writer
- Discuss his writing style and various features of his writing
- Know about the present story and its different literary aspects

On completing the unit, you should be able to

- Know the short story and its writer
- Analyze the short story, plot and characterization

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define literature. It is even more difficult to say what *Good Literature* is. To answer these moot questions may take unpredictable time. Therefore, it will be easier to understand that literature is something, which mirrors life. True literature is a product prepared by a raw material of experiences of life. Literature plays an inevitable role and it touches humans' heart by a powerful communication; and this communication becomes possible in different forms of literature. Literature is mainly divided into two parts: i) Literature of Knowledge / Information and ii) Literature of knowledge. Both are different in many ways. Literature of Knowledge / Information is that which gives us knowledge or information in form of book, newspaper, magazine etc and literature of power is that which moves us, amuses us, entertains us and teaches us. Drama, short story, poem, novel etc are the literary forms.

3.2 WHAT IS SHORT STORY?

Defining short story is not as easy as telling it! As a teacher, one ought to know the difference between the ‘story’ / ‘short story’ and ‘storytelling’. Moreover, short story as a form can be better taught only if one knows what short story is *not* rather than what it is. Short story has some similarities like other genres and therefore it is necessary to know how short story is different from other forms. A teacher without knowing this difference won’t be able to deal with short story with full justice. Short story is an independent form last to have evolved and thus called ‘the youngest form’.

M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines short story as: ‘A short story is a brief work of prose fiction, and most of the terms for analyzing the component elements, the types, and the various narrative techniques of the novel are applicable to the short story as well...’. (286)

Alison Davies in the first chapter “Once Upon a Time” in *Storytelling in the Classroom* introduces short story as: Once upon a time, there was storytelling. It’s hard to pin-point exactly when it started, although I would guess that when first began to communicate he used stories. (3) Again Maline states that there is a vast difference between ‘story’, ‘short story’ and ‘storytelling’ while storytelling is as old as man himself, the short story, as an art form, is of relatively recent vintage. Dr. R B Zala in his Ph.D Thesis *Pre Independence Gujarati and Indian English Short Story: A Comparative Study*, speaks of the present scene as: The short story is the latest literary form to evolve and yet it is the most impenetrable for the critics and the practitioners with regard to its precise elements, development, structure, techniques, regionalism, abundance influence, and relation with the age old traditions. Today it is the most practiced and published form with the largest readership yet it remains the least discussed and a highly neglected to be taken seriously as a major literary genre.

Though the short story has come of age in this century, its origins lie in fables, in anecdotes, in fairy stories, in short in folklore. In this case the emphasis, naturally, is on “telling” rather than “writing”. Here is an interesting fact – when the first settlers landed on what today is the USA, they kept moving west in search of new or unknown lands. They had lots of tales to tell about their experience, and a good story teller was called a “liar”! Mind you, there were no negative connotations attached to the word in those days.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 1

FILL IN THE BLANKS BY READING THE PASSAGE ABOVE. CHECK YOUR ANSWERS WITH THOSE GIVEN AT THE END OF THE UNIT.

1. M.H. Abrams in _____ defines short story.
2. _____ in the first chapter “Once Upon a Time” in *Storytelling in the Classroom* introduces short story.
3. _____ states that there is a vast difference between ‘story’, ‘short story’ and ‘storytelling’
4. Short story is an independent form last to have evolved and thus called _____

5. Today Short story is _____ form with the largest readership.
6. A good story teller was called _____

‘THE GIFT OF THE
MAGI BY O. HENRY

3.3 ABOUT O. HENRY

Universally known with a pseudonym O. Henry, William Sydney Porter (B. 1862-D. 1910) was an American short story writer who popularized the stories with unexpected and surprising end. As Literature mirrors life, the hardships, troubles and unexpected tests which Henry himself witnessed in his own life could never flee from his stories which influenced the rest of the world so far. Born in USA, he spent a troublesome life fighting with poverty, a sick wife and he saw the death of his first child. While working at a bank, discrepancies were discovered in the financial accounts maintained by him and for that he was arrested and imprisoned for three years. After he got released from jail, he rediscovered himself as a somber short story writer and this is when recommenced writing under a self adopted pen name Orrin Henry (one of the prison staff). By the time of his death, he had completed writing more than two hundred and fifty short stories.

3.3.1 About O. Henry’s Writing Style

Stories of Henry are featured with the touch of human nature. His stories are special in more than one manner. Henry is, of course, one of the few writers who very well knew the unique art of fusing comedy and pathos. The blend of smiles and tears, in his stories, is something, which draws him apart. Moreover, he pioneered the trend of stories with surprising and unexpected end, which was capable to arrest readers’ attention, and keeps them unmoved until they finish reach the last period. In fact, this quality of his style has earned him a universal fame indisputably.

3.3.2 About the present Story – ‘*The Gift of the Magi*’

The present story, ‘*The Gift of the Magi*’ perfectly fits in for all these features mentioned above. This story, about a poor couple Jim and Della who take great pride in two separate possessions, was first published in 1905. As the title of the story hold the word ‘Magi’ (plural form of the word ‘magus’) which means The ‘wise men’ from the East who brought gifts to the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:1), said in later tradition to be kings named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The story picturizes the irony so powerfully that the reader is stunned with wide eyes; but in fact that is the irony which draws the colorful bonding of their love on the canvas of feelings. And that is: both Jim and Della lose their special possessions in order to please each other by giving a precious gift. Those lines, so beautifully written by Henry, show their heartfelt love for each other.

3.4 SHORT STORY: ‘*THE GIFT OF THE MAGI*’

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, the vegetable man, and the butcher until one’s cheeks 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.

STUDY OF SHORT
STORY

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 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 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 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. 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 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 of saying a 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.

STUDY OF SHORT
STORY

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 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, 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.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 2

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN ONE OR TWO SENTENCES.

1. What is the real name of O. Henry?
2. In which year was O. Henry born and when did he die?
3. What type of short stories did O. Henry popularize?
4. How many total short stories have O. Henry completed writing by the time of his death?
5. Henry possessed an art of fusing two elements in his shot stories. Which are those two elements?
6. Give name of couple that the present story is about.
7. When was Henry’s present story ‘*The Gift of the Magi*’ first published?
8. What does the word ‘*Magi*’ mean?
9. Why did both Jim and Della lose their special possessions?

3.5 BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE STORY

Unlike all other short stories, Henry’s story catches us with its different style and plot. Plot, as Oxford Dictionary defines, is *The main events of a play, novel, film, or similar work, devised and presented by the writer as an interrelated sequence.*

STUDY OF SHORT STORY

In the words of Jonathan Beutlich , a certified educator, “A plot diagram is a common teaching tool that illustrates the main chunks of a piece of literature. There are typically 5 main chunks.

- I. The exposition/introduction,
- II. Rising action,
- III. Climax,
- IV. Falling action, and
- V. Resolution/conclusion.

“*One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all*” This is how the story opens. Technically, Henry arrests his readers’ attention right from the opening sentence. Like a film, the story in the opening scene shows Della (a married girl) who wants to purchase a Christmas gift for her husband but lack the sufficient money on the Christmas eve itself. Thus with the opening scene itself, a question springs in the readers’ mind about how Dell would manage money to purchase the gift for her husband. Moving down to the end of the story, the situation becomes more and more surprising and unpredictable (especially for the readers who get to read the story for the first time). When, in the end of the story, Della sells her hair to get \$20 in order to buy gift for Jim, Henry shows Della worried about Jim’s reaction about her cut hair.

As Henry is famous for his stories with surprising and unexpected end, present one is also not an exceptional. There are many surprising in the story right from the opening scene. Further, when Della sells her hair to buy a Christmas gift for Jim, she is thinking about Jim’s reaction. Della does not know what Jim has bought for her. O. Henry has actually very cleverly taken his readers into surprise.

3.5.1 Philosophical and Symbolical Aspects in the Story

Besides the element of surprise and unexpected end, Henry’s stories are fully dipped in sheer philosophy and symbolism. In the present story too, a careful reader will find some philosophical aspects which are conveyed either in the words of O. Henry or through his characters’ dialogues. In the opening paragraph of the story, Della is shown as a woman who struggles hard to save money and finds that the amount is still not sufficient to buy her husband’s gift on the Christmas occasion. This situation is philosophically commented on in the following paragraph, in which Henry writes,

“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.”

Thus, in the above lines, Henry talks not only about Della but he talks about life per se. The *moral reflection* which Henry talks about is present in everyone’s life. This is how Henry makes his stories universally appealing.

Along with philosophy, a lot of symbolism appears in Henry’s present story. Henry very smartly talks about time gone through various symbols and objectification. One such example can be seen in the following words, when Henry writes,

“In the vestibule below was a letter box into which no letter would go, and an

electrical button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining was a card bearing the name ‘Mr. James Dillingham Young.’”

‘a letter box into which not letter would go....’ and *‘and an electrical button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring....’* are two metaphors which signify the time Della and Jim had in their past life.

Both Jim and Della have lost a lot in their lives. As Henry rightly mentions during the story that both of them have only two possessions of their own.

“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 has been his father’s and his grandfather’s. The other was Della’s hair.”

This is very symbolic in itself; as by the end of the story, both Della and Jim willingly lose these two last remaining possessions of their own for which they had pride. The writer Henry intensely mystifies whether the *love* both Della and Jim had for each other was the reason for all they lost.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN ONE OR TWO SENTENCES. CHECK YOUR ANSWERS WITH THOSE GIVEN AT THE END OF THE UNIT.

1. How does Oxford Dictionary define Plot?
2. In word of Jonathan Beutlich, what is a Plot diagram?
3. What are the five main chunks of Plot?
4. How does Henry, in the present story, provoke surprise in readers?
5. Besides surprise, what are the two other elements shown in the present story?

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt

- About Short story as a literary form
- About the present Short story and its writer
- His writing style and various features of his writing

3.7 KEY WORDS

Magy: *The ‘wise men’ from the East who brought gifts to the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:1), said in later tradition to be kings named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.* The story picturizes the irony so powerfully that the reader is stunned with wide eyes; but in fact that is the irony which draws the colorful bonding of their love on the canvas of feelings. And that is: both Jim and Della lose their special possessions in order to please each other by giving a precious gift. Those lines, so beautifully written by Henry, show their heartfelt love for each other.

Bulldozing: bullying

Parsimony: miserliness, being very stingy

Pier glass: tall mirror

Queen of Sheba: a famous queen in the bible who visited Solomon and gave him expensive gifts.

3.8 BOOKS/ LINKS SUGGESTED

- 1) Glimpses of Life, An Anthology of Short stories
- 2) Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary
- 3) <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/magi>
- 4) <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/plot>
- 5) <https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-plot-diagram-gift-magi-127797>
- 6) <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/magi>

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*
- 2) Alison Davies
- 3) Maline
- 4) 'the youngest form'.
- 5) the most practiced and published.
- 6) a "liar"!

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Universally known with a pseudonym O. Henry's real name is William Sydney Porter.
- 2) O. Henry was born in Porter 1862 and died in 1910.
- 3) O. Henry popularized the stories with unexpected and surprising end.
- 4) By the time of his death, he had completed writing more than two hundred and fifty short stories.
- 5) Henry very well knew the unique art of fusing comedy and pathos.
- 6) This story, about a poor couple Jim and Della.
- 7) The story got first published in 1905.
- 8) 'Magi' (plural form of the word 'magus') which means *The 'wise men' from the East who brought gifts to the infant Jesus.*
- 9) Both Jim and Della lose their special possessions in order to please each other by giving a precious gift on Christmas eve.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Oxford Dictionary defines, *The main events of a play, novel, film, or similar work, devised and presented by the writer as an interrelated sequence.*
- 2) In the words of Jonathan Beutlich, a certified educator, "A plot diagram is a common teaching tool that illustrates the main chunks of a piece of literature.

- 3) There are typically 5 main chunks.
 - i) The exposition/introduction,
 - ii) Rising action,
 - iii) Climax,
 - iv) Falling action, and
 - v) Resolution/conclusion.
- 4) As Henry is famous for his stories with surprising and unexpected end, present one is also not an exceptional. There are many surprising in the story right from the opening scene. Further, when Della sells her hair to buy a Christmas gift for Jim, she is thinking about Jim’s reaction. Della doesn’t know what Jim has bought for her. O. Henry has actually very cleverly taken his readers into surprise.
- 5) Besides the element of surprise and unexpected end, Henry’s stories are fully dipped in sheer philosophy and symbolism.