

# **William Sydney Porter and summary of his “Gift of the Maggi”**

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# William Sydney Porter



William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) was born in 1862 in Greensboro, North Carolina. His father, Algernon Sidney Porter, was a physician. When William was three, his mother died, and he was raised by his paternal grandmother and aunt.

William was an avid reader, but at the age of fifteen he left school, and then worked in a drug store and on a Texas ranch. He moved to Houston, where he had a number of jobs, including that of bank clerk. After moving to Austin, Texas, in 1882, he married.

**O'Henry and his Family.**  
**Wife -Athol Estes Porter**  
**Daughter-Margaret Sydney Porter**



In 1884 he started a humorous weekly *The Rolling Stone*. When the weekly failed, he joined the *Houston Post* as a reporter and columnist. In 1897 he was convicted of embezzling money, although there has been much debate over his actual guilt. In 1898 he entered a penitentiary at Columbus, Ohio.

While in prison O. Henry started to write short stories to earn money to support his daughter Margaret.

His first work, "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" (1899), appeared in McClure's Magazine. After doing three years of the five years sentence, Porter emerged from the prison in 1901 and changed his name to O. Henry.



O. Henry moved to New York City in 1902 and from December 1903 to January 1906 he wrote a story a week for the New York World, also publishing in other magazines. Henry's first collection, *Cabbages And Kings* appeared in 1904. The second, *The Four Million*, was published two years later and included his well-known stories "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Furnished Room". *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907) included "The Last Leaf". Henry's best known work is perhaps the much anthologized "The Ransom of Red Chief", included in the collection *Whirligigs* (1910).

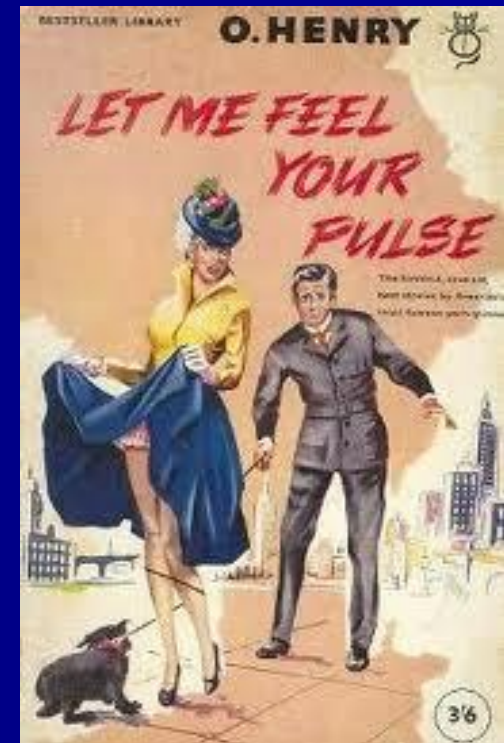
## The Heart Of The West

(1907) presented tales of the Texas range. O. Henry published 10 collections and over 600 short stories during his lifetime. O. Henry's last years were shadowed by alcoholism, ill health, and financial problems. He married Sara Lindsay Coleman in 1907, but the marriage was not happy, and they separated a year later. O. Henry died of cirrhosis of the liver on June 5, 1910, in New York. Three more collections, Sixes And Sevens (1911), Rolling Stones (1912) and Waifs And Strays (1917), appeared posthumously.



# Some works by O'Henry

- Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking 1899
- Cabbages And Kings 1904
- The Four Million 1906
- The Gift of the Magi
- The Furnished Room
- The Last Leaf
- Whirligigs 1910
- The Heart Of The West 1907
- Sixes And Sevens 1911



## Introduction

“The Gift of the Magi” (1906) remains one of the most recognizable and frequently anthologized stories in American literature. In its time the tale was extremely popular, both commercially and critically, and O. Henry was called the “Yankee Maupassant.” Today the story is considered juvenilia and has not garnered much serious critical attention. “The Gift of the Magi” initially appeared in one of O. Henry's best-known collections of stories, *The Four Million*, which was published in 1906.

## Plot and Major Characters

On Christmas Eve, a young married woman named Della has cut and sold her long, beautiful hair to earn the rest of the money she needs for her husband's Christmas present: a platinum chain for his treasured watch. When her husband, Jim, returns to their apartment, he is shocked to see her hair gone; he has sold his watch to buy her a pair of tortoise-shell combs for her long hair.

Touched by his thoughtfulness, Della assures him that her hair will grow back and she gives him the watch chain. When he sees the gift, he lovingly tells her that he has sold his cherished watch to buy her the combs for her hair. The story concludes with an omniscient narrator praising the sacrifice and love of the young couple.

# Major Themes

In my opinion it is the irony of the young couple sacrificing their most treasured possessions—Della's hair and Jim's watch—in order to buy each other gifts related to those same possessions. Poverty is also a prominent theme, as Della saved her money for months to buy the platinum watch chain, but she still had to cut and sell her beautiful hair. The descriptions of the environs and the couple's clothing also underscore the indigence of the characters in the story.

As O. Henry was categorized as a realist, "The Gift of the Magi" has been perceived as an authentic, anecdotal look at lower-class American life near the turn of the century. The story is also thought to exemplify the author's interest in the elements of surprise and trick endings, as the impact of the mutual sacrifice is not revealed until the conclusion of the tale.



# Critical Reception

Upon its publication in *The Four Million*, "The Gift of the Magi" caught the attention of the American public as well as reviewers. It was frequently mentioned as a prime example of O. Henry's work and has appeared in several anthologies of American short stories. Yet the story has mostly failed to attract serious critical analysis. Because some people especially wanted to know where Author got this theme for writing . Many commentators consider the story more of an anecdote, devoid of complex characters and themes. Recently "The Gift of the Magi" has been classified and republished as a story for children. Despite the lack of considerable critical attention, most literary scholars still consider it one of the best Christmas stories ever written.



# Cartoon to the novel "Gift of the Maggi"



# Plot Summary

On the day before Christmas, Della has only \$1.87 in savings with which to buy a gift for her husband, James Dillingham Young.

.....She had squeezed every spare penny out of household expenses, and still there was not enough for the wonderful present she dreamed of getting for Jim. Times are tough. Jim's salary, formerly \$30 a week, is now only \$20 a week.

.....Suddenly, Della gets an idea. Whirling about the room, she lets down her hair. It is one of two prized possessions between her and Jim, the other being the gold pocket watch handed down to him from his father. A moment later, Della goes down the street to Madame Sofronie's shop, where the sign reads "Hair Goods of All Kinds." There, Della sells her hair for \$20.

.....After shopping for two hours, she finds just the right gift, a platinum fob chain to replace the old leather strap attached to his watch. It is simple and elegant, and it costs \$21, leaving Della 87 cents.

After returning home, she uses curling irons to give herself a new hairdo, puts coffee on, gets pork chops ready for frying, then prays that Jim will like her new look. It is seven o'clock. When he walks in, he stares at her. His gaze is long and unrelenting. Worried that he is displeased with her appearance, Della tells him that she sold her hair "because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present." Jim seems bewildered.

....."You've cut off your hair?"

....."Cut it off and sold it," Della says.

....."You say your hair is gone?"

.....A moment later, he comes out of his "trance" and enfolds Della in his arms. Then he takes a package from his overcoat and tosses it onto a table. He tells his wife nothing she could do would make him love her any less. However, he adds, the package will explain why he reacted strangely upon seeing her. After opening the present, she cries out with joy, then bursts into tears. Her gift is a set of expensive, tortoise-shell combs she had long eyed in a shop window. To comfort him, she says, "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

.....Then Della gives him his present. As the reader by now suspects and as the story confirms, Jim had sold his pocket watch to buy the combs.

.....However, like the three wise men of long ago, Della and Jim had given perfect gifts. After all, the narrator says, they "sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house." What they gave as presents was worth far more than the chain and the combs.

## Setting

.....The action takes place in New York City in a very modest apartment and in a hair shop down the street from the apartment. Although Porter does not mention New York by name, he does refer to Coney Island, the city's most famous amusement park, located in the borough of Brooklyn. Porter lived in New York when he wrote and published the "The Gift of the Magi."

## Characters

**Della Young:** Pretty young woman who cuts off her beautiful long hair and sells it to buy a Christmas gift for her husband.

**James Dillingham Young:** Husband of Della. He sells his gold watch to buy a gift for Della.

**Madame Sofronie:** Shop owner who buys Della's hair. .

## Type of Work and Year of Publication

.....“The Gift of the Magi” is a short story, one of several hundred written by O. Henry between 1903 and 1910. It was published in a New York City newspaper in 1905 and in a collection, *The Four Million*, in 1906.

# The Three Magi

The Magi were the so-called three wise men from the east who traveled to Bethlehem, following a bright star, to present gifts to the infant Jesus. The term magi (singular, magus) comes from the Greek word magoi, a rendering of a Persian word for members of a priestly caste. The Gospel of Matthew (Chapter 2, Verse 11) says: "And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him: and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh." .....

These offerings, though valuable, were not as important as the recognition, respect, and love they gave the Christ child. Frankincense was used as a treatment for illness and as an fragrant additive to incense. Myrrh was also added to incense, as well as perfume, and found additional use as an ointment. The three wise men have been identified in western tradition as Balthasar, king of Arabia; Melchior, king of Persia; and Gaspar, king of India.

# Three: A Magic Number

In "The Gift of the Magi," the number three figures prominently. Consider the following:

The story has three characters: Della, Jim, and Madame Sophronie.

Della counts her money three times (Paragraph 1).

The narrator says that "Life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles (Paragraph 2).

The story refers three times to the Youngs' supper entree: chops.

The story mentions the Queen of Sheba, who gave three types of gifts to King Solomon: spices, gold, and jewels.

A sentence in paragraph 5 says, "She stood by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard."



Jim tells Della, 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.

The narrator alliteratively describes Della as speaking with "sudden serious sweetness."

There were three magi: Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar.

The magi offered three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

According to tradition, the magi were kings of Arabia, Persia, and India.

The story centers on three valuables: Jim's gold watch, Della's hair, and the love Jim and Della share.

# Theme: Love

Della and Jim give each other the best of all possible gifts, love. It does not matter that Jim no longer has the gold watch to display on the elegant chain that Della gave him. Nor does it matter that Della no longer has long, luxurious hair to comb with the gift Jim gave her. What matters is that they have is each other.

# Climax

.The climax occurs when Della and Jim open their gifts.



**The house where lived O'HENRY**

# Conclusion

- William Sydney Porter, or O. Henry, wrote mostly about ordinary people going about the daily adventure of living. Not infrequently, his stories involve coincidences or unexpected twists that result in surprise endings like that in "The Gift of the Magi." Before becoming a full-time writer, he worked in a drugstore, on ranch, in a bank, and on newspaper staff. When he was in his early twenties, he published a weekly humor magazine, *The Rolling Stone*, which failed. He then took a job with the *Houston Post* newspaper. However, a past misdeed, embezzlement of bank funds, caught up with him. To escape punishment, he fled to Honduras. When his wife, Athol Estes Porter, became terminally ill, he returned to the U.S. to be with her. After her death, he spent more than three years in prison in Columbus, Ohio. There, he cultivated his writing skills. After his release from prison, he became a professional writer, settled in New York City, and became famous as under his pseudonym, O. Henry.