

EXTENDED READING COMPREHENSION:

“The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry

“The Gift of the Magi” is a classic short story by O. Henry that was first published in 1905.

Read this adapted version of the story. Then, answer the questions that follow.

I One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. 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.

2 While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from sobs to sniffles, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. In the entryway below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. And next to the button was a card bearing the name “Mr. James Dillingham Young.”

3 Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. 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.

4 Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the mirror. 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.

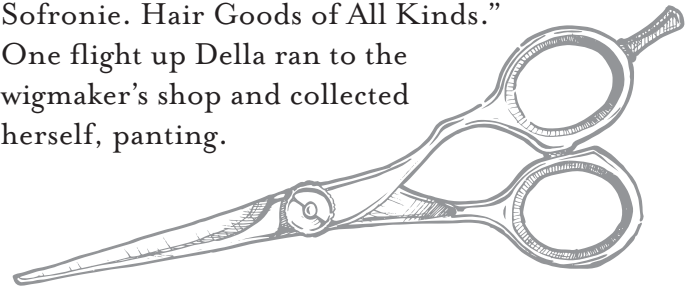
5 Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a

mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair.

6 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.

7 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.

8 Where she stopped the sign read: “Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds.” One flight up Della ran to the wigmaker's shop and collected herself, panting.



9 “Will you buy my hair?” asked Della. She took off her hat, and down rippled the brown cascade.

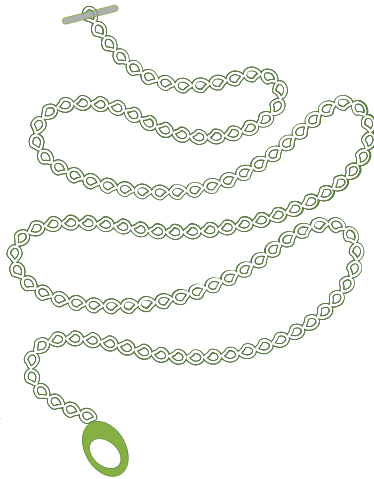
IO “Let me see,” said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand. “I'll give you twenty dollars.”

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

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Continue reading.

12 She found it at last. It was a platinum fob chain, simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by gaudy 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.

13 When Della reached home her elation gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and went to work repairing the damages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

14 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.

15 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.

16 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.

17 Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a dog at the scent of a 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.

18 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.”

19 “You’ve cut off your hair?” asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that obvious fact yet, even after the hardest mental labor.

20 “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?”

21 Jim looked about the room curiously. “You say your hair is gone?” he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

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Continue reading. Then answer the questions on the following pages.

- 22 “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.”
- 23 Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet attention some unimportant 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.
- 24 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.”
- 25 Nimble fingers tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick change to hysterical tears and wails, requiring the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the man of the flat.
- 26 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 long-desired combs were gone.
- 27 But she hugged them to her chest, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: “My hair grows so fast, Jim!”
- 28 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.
- 29 “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.”
- 30 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.”
- 31 The magi, as you may know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who are said to have brought gifts to the baby Jesus. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. And here I have related to you the uneventful tale 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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Answer the questions about “The Gift of the Magi.”

1. Which of the following quotes from the text best conveys the central theme of the story?
- a. “She got out her curling irons and went to work repairing the damages made by generosity added to love.”
 - b. “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.”
 - c. “Dell,” said he, “let’s put our Christmas presents away and keep ’em a while. They’re too nice to use just at present.”
 - d. “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.”**

2. The narrator states that the characters live on twenty dollars a week. What other clues does the author give to describe the economic status of the characters?

The author says that they have a “shabby couch” and that Della wears an “old brown jacket” and an “old brown hat.” They only have two possessions of value—Jim’s watch and Della’s hair.

3. To which of the following objects does the narrator compare Della’s hair?
- a. a carpet
 - b. a waterfall**
 - c. a mirror
 - d. a necklace
4. Choose two adjectives that best describe Della and two adjectives that best describe Jim. Support your answer with details from the story.

	Adjective	Text Details
Della	resourceful	Della needs to get more money to buy Jim a present, so she sells her hair to the wig maker.
	generous	She desperately wants to get Jim a gift that is “fine and rare.”
Jim	loving	Jim comforts Della and assures her that there’s nothing that “could make me like my girl any less.”
	admirable	Della likens Jim to the “quietness and value” of the watch chain.

- 5a. Why does Jim smile in paragraph 30?
- a. He likes his present and can’t wait to use it.
 - b. He realizes the irony of their situation.**
 - c. He is relaxed and ready to enjoy Christmas.
 - d. He loves Della’s new haircut.

- 5b. What does this tell you about Jim’s personality?
- The fact that Jim smiles at the irony of their situation instead of getting upset shows that Jim is easygoing and not easily flustered.**

6. The title of this story is an allusion. What is the source of this allusion?
- a. British literature
 - b. Greek mythology
 - c. The Bible**
 - d. American history

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- 7a. Go back to the text and underline examples where the narrator “breaks the fourth wall,” or speaks directly to the reader. Record one example on the lines below.

Answers will vary. See answer key version of the text for specific sections.

- 7b. What effect does this literary device have on the tone of the story?

Breaking the fourth wall adds humor and personality to the story. It takes readers out of the action of the story to allow them to think more about the deeper meaning of the text.

8. Read the following examples of figurative language from the story. Write whether each quote is an example of simile, alliteration, hyperbole, or personification.

alliteration

“While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from sobs to sniffles...”

simile

“... hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters.”

personification /
alliteration

“...properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by gaudy ornamentation.”

simile

“Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a dog at the scent of a quail.”

alliteration

“...she went on with sudden serious sweetness...”

hyperbole

“... I couldn’t have lived through Christmas without giving you a present.”

9. Compare Della’s sacrifice to Jim’s. In your opinion, are their sacrifices equal? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

10. The narrator calls Della and Jim “two foolish children...who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.” But then he goes on to call them “wisest.” Why?

Della and Jim are foolish because getting rid of the only two things of value that they have is not typically a wise thing to do. However, they are wise because they understand that real love, caring, and selflessness are worth more than anything else.

11. “The Gift of the Magi” is a classic example of dramatic irony. Explain why the end of the story is ironic.

The end of this story is ironic because when Della is given the combs, the reader knows that she can’t use them because she cut and sold her hair to buy the watch chain. And when Jim is given the watch chain, he can’t use it because he sold the watch to get the combs.
