



Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

University of Diyala

College of Education for Humanities

Department of English



THE MUNIFICENCE IN "THE GIFT OF THE MAGI"

A Research

**SUBMITTED TO THE COMMITTEE OF DISCUSSION AT
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH - COLLEGE OF EDUCATION FOR
HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITY OF DIYALA - A PARTIAL
REQUIREMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES FOR THE
DEGREE OF B.A. IN ENGLISH**

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2021A.D

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

(قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُوا الْأَلْبَابِ)

صدق الله العظيم

(القرآن الكريم، الزمر: ٩)

In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful

Say: " Are they equal, those who know and those who do not know? Only those with minds remember"

(The Holey Qur'an, Az-zumar: 9)

Dedication

TO...

All our family members who have supported us

TO...

All our friends at the Department of English.

TO...

Who teach us what's the meaning of love, bravery and freedom
my beloved Iraq.

Acknowledgement

we would like to thank the teaching staff at the Department of English we would like also to thank our Supervisor (Inst. Wallada A.Razzaq) for her encouragement, support and patience.

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Part one

Introduction

William Sydney Porter (September 11, 1862 – June 5, 1910), better known by his pen name O. Henry, was an American short story writer .He was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. He changed the spelling of his middle name to Sydney in 1898. His parents were Algernon Sidney Porter (1825–88), a physician, and Mary Jane Virginia Swaim Porter (1833–65). William's parents had married on April 20, 1858. When William was three, his mother died after giving birth to her third child, and he and his father moved into the home of his paternal grandmother. As a child, Porter was always reading, everything from classics to dime novels; his favorite works were Lane's translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

(Hugh 1922: 30)

Porter graduated from his aunt Evelina Maria Porter's elementary school in 1876. He then enrolled at the Lindsey Street High School. His aunt continued to tutor him until he was 15. In 1879, he started working in his uncle's drugstore in Greensboro, and on August 30, 1881, at the age of 19, Porter was licensed as a pharmacist. At the drugstore, he also showed his natural artistic talents by sketching the townsfolk. (Ibid:30)

Porter married again in 1907 to childhood sweetheart Sarah (Sallie) Lindsey Coleman, whom he met again after revisiting his native state of North Carolina. Sarah Lindsey Coleman was herself a writer and wrote a romanticized and fictionalized version of their correspondence and courtship in her novella *Wind of Destiny*. Porter was a heavy drinker, and by 1908, his markedly deteriorating health affected his writing. In 1909, Sarah left him ,he died on June 5, 1910, of cirrhosis of the liver, complications of diabetes, and an enlarged heart .(Eugene 1993: 123)

O. Henry Short Stories and Books

Indicted in 1896 for embezzling bank funds (actually a result of technical mismanagement), Porter fled to a reporting job in New Orleans, then to Honduras. When news of his wife's serious illness reached him, he returned to Texas. After her death, Porter was imprisoned in Columbus, Ohio. During his three-year incarceration, he wrote adventure stories set in Texas and Central America that quickly became popular and were collected in *Cabbages and Kings* (1904).

<https://www.biography.com/writer/william-sydney-porter>.

Released from prison in 1902, Porter went to New York City, his home and the setting of most of his fiction for the remainder of his life. Writing prodigiously under the pen name O. Henry, he completed one story a week for a newspaper, in addition to other stories for magazines. Popular collections of his stories included *The Four Million* (1906); *Heart of the West* and *The Trimmed Lamp* (both 1907); *The Gentle Grafter* and *The Voice of the City* (both 1908); *Options* (1909); and *Whirligigs and Strictly Business* (both 1910). (Ibid)

O. Henry's most representative collection was probably *The Four Million*. The title and the stories answered the snobbish claim of socialite Ward McAllister that only 400 people in New York "were really worth noticing" by detailing events in the lives of everyday Manhattanites. In his most famous story, "The Gift of the Magi," a poverty-stricken New York couple secretly sell valued possessions to buy one another Christmas gifts. Ironically, the wife sells her hair so that she can buy her husband a watch chain, while he sells his watch so that he can buy her a pair of combs. (Ibid)

Incapable of integrating a book-length narrative, O. Henry was skilled in plotting short ones. He wrote in a dry, humorous style and, as in "The Gift of the Magi," frequently used coincidences and surprise endings to underline ironies. Even after O. Henry's death on June 5, 1910, stories continued to be collected:

- Sixes and Sevens (1911).
- Rolling Stones (1912)
- Waifs and Strays (1917)
- O. Henryana (1920)
- Letters to Lithopolis (1922)
- Postscripts (1923)
- O. Henry Encore (1939).

<https://www.biography.com/writer/william-sydney-porter>.

"The Gift of the Magi" is a short story by O. Henry first published in December 10, 1905. It was first published in book form in the O. Henry Anthology *The Four Million* in April 1906. It's the most famous of O. Henry's, standing out among many stories with surprise endings, like "The Last Leaf" and "After Twenty Years".

<https://www.LiteraryTraveler.com>.

O. Henry uses several literary devices to make his short stories distinctive:

- **Structured plot:** His stories are readily identifiable by their tightly structured plots. When crafting his stories, O. Henry decided on the endings first and then wrote the beginnings and middles of the stories to match them. For example, in "The Gift of the Magi," O. Henry chose the ending of a couple who sold their most prized possessions in order to buy Christmas gifts for each other and then discovered their gifts could not be used because of what they had sold. The beginning and middle of the story was written to lead up to that ending.
- **Surprise ending:** "The Gift of the Magi" is often considered one of the best-known examples of situational irony in a short story. Situational irony occurs when something other than the expected happens. For example, in "The Gift of the Magi," the two spouses plan to surprise each other with a special Christmas gift. They each sell their most prized possession, which makes the gift they each receive useless since it was meant to complement the now-lost treasured possession. These surprise endings are known as the "O. Henry twist." In "The Gift of the Magi," there is a double twist at the ending. The first twist is that [Jim Young](#) has purchased combs for [Della Young](#) that she cannot use because she has cut her hair. The second twist, another example of situational irony, is that Della has purchased a chain for Jim's watch, which he cannot use as he has sold his watch. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-gift-of-the-magi-by-o-henry-summary-theme-irony.html>.
- **Particular character types:** The characters are frequently types—such as a young husband or wife as in "The Gift of the Magi," a shop girl, or another working-class person—rather than unique, well-developed individuals. Many are newcomers to New York, who, like O. Henry, became enamored of its charms and sought to fulfill their dreams despite their lackluster personal situations, shabby environs, and financial struggles.(Ibid)

O. Henry, however, typically shows the best side of the characters. Even when the characters do something wrong, he often makes certain that things end well for them.

- **Unique phrases and words:** O. Henry's folksy style is often peppered with unique phrases, idioms, and high-level vocabulary. For example, O. Henry loved multisyllabic words not typically part of everyday conversation. "The Gift of the Magi" features words such as *imputation*, *parsimony*, *mendicancy*, and *meretricious*. A lover of similes, exaggeration, and nonparallel construction, O. Henry often wrote complex sentences when a simpler one would do. For example, in "The Gift of the Magi," the narrator says, "Let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction," when "Let us look away" would have done just as well. (Ibid)
- **Narrative technique:** O. Henry's narrative technique is straightforward and simple. He narrates his stories as if he were talking directly to the reader. The narrator frequently interrupts the story to address the reader in asides or to interject authorial musings about a topic or event as if he were speaking confidentially to a reader he knows well. For example, in "The Gift of the Magi," the narrator tells the reader to "take a look at the home" while Della Young is sobbing and sniffing. O. Henry also uses devices such as capitalizing words to emphasize symbols. For example, Jim Young's watch is "The Watch," and Jim's gift to Della is "The Combs." Similarly, he often uses similes to create comparisons that contrast city living with country living: Jim is so stunned at seeing Della's shorn tresses he appears "as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail." O. Henry also uses contrast to create imagery and tension. For example, he describes the combs as beautiful and "just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair." The story tells of a young married couple, James, known as Jim, and Della Dillingham.

- The couple has very little money and lives in a modest apartment. Between them, they have only two possessions that they consider their treasures: Jim's gold pocket watch that belonged to his father and his grandfather, and Della's lustrous, long hair that falls almost to her knees . It's Christmas Eve, and Della finds herself running out of time to buy Jim a Christmas present. After paying all of the bills, all Della has left is \$1.87 to put toward Jim's Christmas present. Desperate to find him the perfect gift, out she goes into the cold December day, looking in shop windows for something she can afford .

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-gift-of-the-magi-by-o-henry-summary-theme-irony.html>.

She wants to buy Jim a chain for his pocket watch, but they're all out of her price range. Rushing home, Della pulls down her beautiful hair and stands in front of the mirror, admiring it and thinking. After a sudden inspiration, she rushes out again and has her hair cut to sell. Della receives \$20.00 for selling her hair, just enough to buy the platinum chain she saw in a shop window for \$21.00 . (Ibid)

When Jim comes home from work, he stares at Della, trying to figure out what's different about her. She admits that she sold her hair to buy his present. Before she can give it to him, however, Jim casually pulls a package out of his overcoat pocket and hands it to her. Inside, Della finds a pair of costly decorative hair combs that she'd long admired, but are now completely useless since she's cut off her hair. Hiding her tears, she jumps up and holds out her gift for Jim: the watch chain. Jim shrugs, flops down onto the old sofa, puts his hands behind his head and tells Della flatly that he sold his watch to buy her combs. (Ibid)

The story ends with a comparison of Jim and Della's gifts to the gifts that the Magi, or three wise men, gave to Baby Jesus in the manger in the biblical story of Christmas. The narrator concludes that Jim and Della are far wiser than the Magi because their gifts are gifts of love, and those who give out of love and self-sacrifice are truly wise because they know the value of self-giving love. (Ibid)

Part two

Self-Sacrifice

Sacrifice means to go beyond imitation of someone. Jim and Della show this sacrifice from their most actions of selling their most valuable things for the sake for love " The Gift of the magi" describes the tale of Jim and Della who sacrifice their most excellent possessions for each other. (Banerjee2015: 515)

Jim and Della's selflessness is a major theme in the story. Both have given up much to live in New York. Jim has taken a job with a low salary. Della is forced to make ends meet by haggling with vendors. Both are wearing old clothes. They live in a barely furnished apartment. As a couple, they are willing to sacrifice a more comfortable life to allow Jim to pursue his ambition of working in New York.(Robert 1950: 220)

They are a poor couple who live in New York. They hardly earned enough so they did not get money to save. It was already the eve of Christmas, and Della did not have money to buy a present for her husband. She just had I dollar and seventy-five cents. This amount could not buy any worthy present. She felt so sad and frustrated and she could not help crying. She eventually decided to sell her hair and use the money to buy the present . Della's character reveals great love and commitment to her husband. Despite the challenges of poverty, she shows determination and strong will. (Ibid:220)

Her hair and Jim's watch were the most valuable things to this couple. Jim had inherited the watch from his father. His grandfather had it too so it was to be passed on to him. Della walked to Madame Sofronie's store and sold her hair at twenty dollars. After receiving the money, she started her search for Jim's present. Finally, she saw a chain for a watch. It perfectly suited Jim's watch. She almost thought it was supposed to belong to Jim. They accepted to sell it to her at twenty-one dollars and she happily

took it with her. Though the watch and hair were important to this couple, they did not surpass the love they had for each other. (Ibid: 220)

The gold pocket watch and Della's hair were the most important things to this couple. It is amazing how both of them decide to give them up the same time for presents. According to the story, Della did not hesitate selling her hair. On the other hand, Jim did not also think twice about selling a souvenir for her wife's happiness. It is quite uncommon to sell hair or any other component of the body. If it would happen, it is expected that the reason is a very critical issue. Regardless to this, Della goes ahead and sells her hair to buy a present. She was also very willing to do anything possible to make her husband happy.(Goffman1990:51)

Della takes up a character of a woman with a positive attitude and never gives up. Even when money is not enough, she figures out what to do. She is submissive, loving and determined. She does everything possible to get a gift for his husband. It is evident she always wanted to make her husband happy. When she cuts her hair, she tries to style it appropriately and made nice food for her husband. She hoped that he would not be upset with her James Young is a committed husband who evidently shows his love for his wife. (Ibid:52)

He sells a valuable gold watch to buy her wife a simple present for Christmas. This is a noble act and it shows how much he could sacrifice for the happiness of his wife. He is good at adjusting to change. When she notices her wife has cut her hair it does not alter his love for her. What only worries him is that she will not use the combs he bought her. (Ibid:52)

The minor character Sofronie is the owner of the shop where Della sold her hair. Though some may view the outcome of the story as tragic, Della and Jim are able to find the humor and joy in the situation. Ultimately, it is not the combs or the platinum watch chain that matter. Rather, Della and Jim's mutual expressions of selfless affection represent the greatest gift of all: unconditional love .(Zwege 2009:132)

“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”. (Henry :6)

we see that Della has already been sacrificing. She's been carefully saving whatever money she can get, and probably depriving herself of various smaller expenditures to do so.

“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”.
(Ibid: 10)

Della's not unaffected by her plan. She's nervous about it, and she sheds a couple of tears. In spite of her love for Jim, losing her hair isn't easy for her, since she's so fond of it. This is really the only indication in the story we get of that. Is she still considering what to do at this point, or has she already made up her mind?

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. (Ibid:11)

Again we get an indication (with her whirling, and sparkling eyes) that Della is more excited at the thought of sacrificing her hair than down in the dumps about it. This is also the point in the text where it's clear that Della's made the decision to go through with the plan.

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 (Ibid:21)

Della's not only lost the single valuable thing she had to sell, and the thing of which she was most proud. She's actually affected her own looks, and potentially made herself unattractive to Jim. Does that make her sacrifice perhaps a greater one than Jim's?

"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?" (Ibid:22)

What seems to be hard for Della about the sacrifice she made is not that she misses her hair, but that she's worried about how she'll appear to Jim. Even in this regard, her thoughts are primarily on him.

"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." (Ibid:44)

Jim reveals here that he's made the same sacrifice as Della. Just like her, he doesn't seem to be terribly troubled by the sacrifice itself, nor even at its unexpected results. He just appears calm and happy.

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. (Ibid:45)

The narrator weighs in here with his final pronouncement on Jim and Della's sacrifice. He first calls it foolish. Why? Perhaps it's "foolish" because we often call things "foolish" which are against our own self-interest, and Jim and Della's actions were certainly that. Perhaps also it was foolish to give up something so *special* and personal – the watch was a family heirloom, the hair was a part of Della herself (they were "the treasures of the house") – to buy something more generic (neither of the things they bought had any intrinsic connection to Jim or Della). <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/gift-of-the-magi/quotes/wealth>.

Part Three

Material versus Spiritual

Della and Jim's spiritual or emotional connection is portrayed as more important to them than any material or physical possession. When they discover their actions have canceled out each other's gifts, they reveal what matters most to them. Rather than regretting what they have lost, they recognize they have something of far greater value—their love and concern for each other. Jim tells Della he will continue to like her no matter what she does to her hair. Della confirms her love for her husband is greater than the length of the hairs on her head. The narrator emphasizes the theme of spiritual over material qualities through a biblical allusion that mentions the magi, wise men from the East who brought gifts to Christ when he was born and who "invented the art of giving Christmas presents." The narrator considers Della's and Jim's gifts to each other equal to or as wise as those given by the magi. This is a reference not to the combs and watch chain they gave each other, but to their giving of themselves.

<https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Gift-of-the-Magi/themes/>.

Hair and the watch are allegory of material values. Della's hair that was "more beautiful than any queen's jewels and gifts" and Jim's "gold watch" matter a lot for their owners. The young pair is proud of their treasures, for there are not many of them in their possession. The moment when Jim and Della decide to give up on them for each other's sake is also a moment of liberation. Material values are being replaced with spiritual ones. Their presents become evidence of their love. O. Henry's purpose in writing 'The Gift of the Magi' was to show that material possessions are not as important as true love. Even though Della and Jim each have just one valuable material possession—her hair and his watch—they both are willing to part with that possession to buy something for the other. <https://askinglot.com/what-does-the-gift-of-the-magi-teach-us-about-true-love>.

‘Had the queen of She believed in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window someday 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’. (Ibid:9)

This use of Biblical allusion really sticks out in a story otherwise sparse in such imagery. It's certainly a fanciful exaggeration. But it helps to emphasize how valuable the two possessions are to Jim and Della. It also couldn't clash more with the image of Jim and Della's humble apartment. This first suggestion that Jim and Della are actually among the richest people of all hints at the later affirmation of the value of their love.

Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take your 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. (Ibid:13-16)

Whereas Della's hair is for her almost a treasure without price, for Madame Sofronie, it's just something else to be bought and sold. For twenty-dollars. She sees stuff like this all the time. The contrast between the value Della gives to it and the value Madame Sofronie gives to it is striking. 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. (Ibid:34)

Here the narrator draws explicit attention for the first time to the two different ways of thinking about value: monetary value or something else. The implication is that money isn't what's really valuable – the difference between a poor man and a rich man is of no great worth. What the real measure of value is the narrator doesn't say, though he promises to tell us more later on. (<https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/gift-of-the-magi/quotes/wealth>)

Conclusion

The present study is an attempt to examine the theme of Self-Sacrifice and Material versus Spiritual in *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry. The story tells of a young husband and wife and how they deal with the challenge of buying secret Christmas gifts for each other with very little money. Self-Sacrifice is a major theme in the story, Jim and Della want to do something special for the other. Unable to squeeze enough money out of Jim's paycheck to buy a gift, they each sell their most prized possession. Their desire to make their partner happy is more important to them than any wish to please themselves. Considering neither of them owns much, this is indeed remarkable. Despite their dreary environment, lack of possessions, and financial straits, both put the interests of the other person above their own. The narrator emphasizes the theme of spiritual over material qualities through a biblical allusion that mentions the magi, wise men from the East who brought gifts to Christ when he was born and who "invented the art of giving Christmas presents". The narrator considers Della's and Jim's gifts to each other equal to or as wise as those given by the magi. This is a reference not to the combs and watch chain they gave each other, but to their giving of themselves.

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