

The Gift of the Magi

O. Henry

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And 60 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 of parsimony¹ 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.

10 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.²

ANALYZE VISUALS

From this painting, what can you **infer** about the characters in this story?

instigate (ɪnˈstɪ-gāt)
v. to stir up; provoke

1. **imputation** (ɪmˈpyʊ-tāˈshən) **of parsimony** (pärˈsə-mōˈnē): suggestion of stinginess.
2. **mendicancy** (mənˈdɪ-kən-sē) **squad**: a police unit assigned to arrest beggars.

The Kiss (1891), Édouard Vuillard.
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
The Louis E. Stern Collection, 1963.
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New York/ADAGP, Paris
(1963-181-76).





Woman Combing Her Hair, Edgar Degas. Charcoal and pastel. © The Fine Art Society, London/Bridgeman Art Library.

In the **vestibule** below belonged to this flat a letterbox 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, the letters of “Dillingham” looked blurred, as 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

vestibule (vēs'tə-byōōl')
n. a small entryway within a building

A IRONY
You might expect someone named Mr. James Dillingham Young to be rich. Is he?

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
30 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 glass³ 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
40 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 Sheba⁴ lived in the flat across the air shaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry and mocked at Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon⁵ 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. **B**

50 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 "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran and collected herself, panting, before
60 Madame, large, too white, chilly, and hardly looking 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 practiced 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.

agile (äj'əl) *adj.* able to move quickly and easily

B PREDICT

What events might occur involving these prized possessions?

falter (fôl'tər) *v.* to hesitate from lack of courage or confidence

ransack (răn'săk') *v.* to search or examine vigorously

3. **pier glass**: a large mirror set in a wall section between windows.

4. **Queen of Sheba**: in the Bible, a rich Arabian queen.

5. **King Solomon**: a Biblical king of Israel, known for his wisdom and wealth.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else.

70 There was none other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain⁶ simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation⁷—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.

80 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.

prudence (prōod’ns) *n.*
the use of good judgment
and common sense

ravage (rāv’ij) *n.* serious
damage

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 Island⁸ chorus girl. But what could I do—oh, what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents!”

90 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 little silent prayers 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 100 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 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. **C**

C PREDICT
What will Jim say about
Della’s hair?

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 it because I couldn’t have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It’ll grow again—you won’t mind, will you? I just had to do it. My

6. **fob chain**: a short chain for a pocket watch.

7. **meretricious** (mēr’ī-trīsh’əs) **ornamentation**: cheap, gaudy decoration.

8. **Coney Island**: a resort district of Brooklyn, New York, famous for its amusement park.

110 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.

120 “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.

130 “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 a 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 to quickly wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us 140 regard with discreet scrutiny⁹ 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. **D**

150 “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 awhile at first.”



assertion (ə-sûr'shən)
n. a statement

D PREDICT
What do you predict Jim’s gift will be? Explain.

9. **discreet scrutiny**: cautious observation.

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 worshiped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair.

160 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. **E**

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.

170 “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.” **F**

180 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 gifts. 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 of the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest. Everywhere they are the wisest. They are the magi. 

coveted (kŭv'ĭ-tĭd)
adj. greedily desired
or wished for **covet** *v.*

E GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 160–163.
O. Henry uses the **precise verbs** *craved* and *yearned* to show Della’s great desire for the combs.

F IRONY

Reread lines 175–177.
What is ironic about the resolution of the plot?

chronicle (krŏn'ĭ-kəl)
n. a record of events

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why is Della unhappy when the story begins?
2. **Recall** What two possessions do Della and Jim treasure?
3. **Summarize** What **sacrifices** do the Youngs make to buy each other gifts?

Literary Analysis

4. **Predict** Reexamine the predictions you made as you read the story. Were you able to predict the outcome of the story, or were you surprised? Go back through the story to find passages that hint at the surprise ending.

5. **Analyze Irony** This story contains **situational irony**, in which characters, or the reader, expect one thing to happen but something entirely different occurs. To explore the situational irony in this story, make a chart like the one shown.

<i>What Della Plans:</i>	<i>What Actually Happens:</i>
<i>What Jim Plans:</i>	<i>What Actually Happens:</i>

For each character, identify what is expected to happen and what actually does happen. There is a double irony here. How are the two ironies related?

6. **Draw Conclusions About the Narrator** Reread lines 22–24. In this and many other passages, the narrator speaks directly to the reader. How would you describe the narrator’s personality? Cite evidence.
7. **Make Judgments** Reread lines 178–186. Here the narrator uses an **allusion**, or indirect reference to a person, place, event, or literary work. Why does the narrator compare Della and Jim to the Magi? What does this imply about the characters and the events in this story?
8. **Synthesize** What does this story seem to be saying about material possessions? Cite evidence to support your answer.

Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** For several years in the early 1900s, O. Henry was one of the most widely read short story writers in the United States. Even today, some of his stories are considered classics. What elements in “The Gift of the Magi” might account for his continued popularity?

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Write the letter of the word that is most different in meaning from the others.

1. (a) destruction, (b) ravage, (c) ruin, (d) creation
2. (a) stop, (b) stir, (c) urge, (d) instigate
3. (a) desired, (b) coveted, (c) craved, (d) unwanted
4. (a) cellar, (b) vestibule, (c) foyer, (d) entryway
5. (a) waver, (b) proceed, (c) falter, (d) hesitate
6. (a) assertion, (b) declaration, (c) denial, (d) statement
7. (a) limber, (b) clumsy, (c) flexible, (d) agile
8. (a) loot, (b) plunder, (c) organize, (d) ransack
9. (a) history, (b) record, (c) chronicle, (d) prediction
10. (a) carelessness, (b) caution, (c) prudence, (d) wisdom

WORD LIST

agile
assertion
chronicle
coveted
falter
instigate
prudence
ransack
ravage
vestibule

VOCABULARY IN WRITING

How might Della or Jim describe the events in this story? Assume the role of one of them and briefly retell the story as that character. Use three or more vocabulary words. Here is an example of an opening:

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

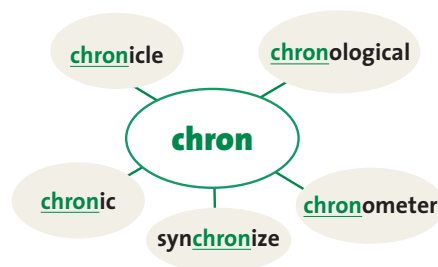
Here is my sad chronicle of the Christmas that almost wasn't.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE GREEK WORD ROOT *chron*

The vocabulary word *chronicle* contains the Greek root *chron*, which means “time.” This root is found in a number of English words. To understand the meaning of words with *chron*, use context clues as well as your knowledge of the root.

PRACTICE Write the word from the word web that best completes each sentence. Use context clues to help you or, if necessary, consult a dictionary.

1. A ____ illness is one that lasts a long time.
2. In a personal narrative, events are usually presented in ____ order.
3. The mayor kept a ____ to record events of his years in office.
4. If we ____ our watches, we'll be sure to meet at exactly noon.
5. A ____ in a ship is an aid in determining longitude.



VOCABULARY PRACTICE

For more practice, go to the **Vocabulary Center** at **ClassZone.com**.