

The Gift of the Magi by O Henry Part 1

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Level: Advanced

Age: Young adults / Adults

Aims: In this lesson the students will:

1. discuss the topic of gift-giving;
2. listen to the introduction and familiarize themselves with the narrator's voice and pace;
3. listen to the first half of the story, focusing on the main events and information;
4. listen carefully to a short extract and raise their awareness of pace and pausing;
5. predict the events in the second half of the story and act out a scene between the two main characters.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (introduction), Track 2 (full audio for Part 1) and Track 3 (short extract) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of full transcript per student

Summary: The story is set in New York at Christmas in the early 1900s. A young married couple are poor but very much in love. They both want to buy each other the best Christmas present possible.

Activity 1

Aim: to engage students in the topic of gift-giving

1. Write the title on the board. Ask the students what they know about the original story. You will probably need to explain that the Magi are better known as the Three Wise Men or the Three Kings. Explain that you are going to listen to a story about Christmas and the importance of gift-giving. Brainstorm typical Christmas gifts with the whole class. Either ask the students to call out their suggestions so that you can write them on the board, or ask them to come up to the board and write their suggestions.

2. Ask the students to work in small groups. Ask them to discuss the questions in Activity 1 on the worksheet. Appoint a spokesperson in each group to report back to the class.

3. Ask each spokesperson to report back on their discussion to the whole class.

Activity 2

Aims: to familiarize the students with the narrator's voice and speed of delivery; to introduce the main character and the setting for the story

Note on style: The prose is often quite dense and the students may need some initial guidance and support in identifying the main

information and separating the descriptions and the asides from the key events.

1. Tell the students that the story they are going to listen to is about a newly married couple, living in New York at the beginning of the 20th century. Write these questions on the board:

- Which character is introduced first, the wife or the husband?
- What is he or she doing at the beginning? Why?
- What is he or she doing at the end? Why?

Ask the students to listen to the introduction, a very short track, and answer these questions. Play Track 1 (introduction). The students may find it difficult to start with, as it will take them time to tune in to the narrator's voice and style. The next activity will help them with the main information.

Key: *The wife is introduced first. She is counting money at the beginning because it is Christmas and she wants to buy a present. At the end she is crying because she has very little money.*

2. Ask the students to look at the simplified version on the worksheet. Tell them that it is a shortened version of the introduction. Ask them to listen again and underline the words or phrases that are NOT the same in the recording.

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Key a:

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies that she'd saved one and two at a time. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas. Della fell down on the sofa and cried.

3. Ask the students to compare their answers in pairs and discuss any extra information they understood.

4. Give the students a copy of the full transcript and ask them to compare the simplified version with the first two paragraphs in the script. You may want to ask them to fold their paper after the first two paragraphs so that they are not tempted to read further before they listen to the rest of the instalment. Then ask them to match the explanations and definitions on the worksheet with the words in the box.

Key b: 1. *imputation*; 2. *howl*; 3. *bulldozing*; 4. *parsimony*; 5. *shabby*; 6. *couch*; 7. *sobs*; 8. *sniffles*; 9. *close dealing*; 10. *instigate*

5. Check the answers with the class and ask them if they think any of the words from the activity are essential in order to understand the story and what extra information they give about Della and her situation.

Key: *They tell us that she's poor and that she's upset about not having enough money to buy Christmas presents.*

Activity 3

Aims: to practise extensive listening; to summarize the key information from Part 1

1. Explain that you are now going to listen to the whole instalment and that you are going to concentrate on the main events and information. Ask the students to put the transcript to one side and look at the questions on the worksheet. Play Track 2 (full audio for Part 1). Remind them that the style is quite dense and descriptive and not to worry if they don't understand all

of it. They will get a chance to look at the transcript again later.

Key: 1. *Jim*; 2. *his watch*; 3. *her hair*; 4. *She sells her hair.*; 5. *a watch chain*; 6. *21 dollars*

2. Ask the students to compare their answers in pairs and to share any other information they understood. Prompt their discussion by writing these questions on the board as they are speaking and referring to them as and when the students need prompting:

- What is their flat like?
- What does Della's hair look like?
- What do you imagine the woman in the wig shop looks like?
- What does the watch look like?

3. When they have finished their discussion, ask the students to look at the transcript and check the answers to the questions on the board, underlining or highlighting the relevant extracts.

Activity 4

Aims: to listen in detail; to raise awareness of pace and pausing

1. Ask the students to look at the short extract on the worksheet. Tell them that all the full stops, except the final one, have been taken out. Ask them to read it and decide where the full stops should go. (There are three full stops missing.)

Key:

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.

2. Ask the students to listen to the extract and check their answers. Play Track 3 (short extract).

3. Check their answers and ask them how the narrator's voice helped them to decide where each sentence ended.

Key: *The narrator pauses between sentences.*

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4. Ask them to listen again and make a note of any other pauses. Then ask them to read the extract out loud to each other in pairs. The student who is listening should check that their partner is pausing in the appropriate places.

Key: (// = pause)

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.

Activity 5

Aims: to predict the events in the second half of the story; to act out a scene between the two main characters

1. Ask the students to imagine how Jim will react when he sees that Della has cut her hair, and how he's going to react to the present.
2. Put the students in pairs and ask them to act out the scene between the couple when Jim comes home from work. Ask some of the students to act the scene out to the whole class. Ask them which version they think is the most likely and why.

Follow-up tasks

1. Ask the students to write a simplified version of the story so far. Use the simplified extract from Activity 2 as a model.
2. Ask the students to write the text for the dialogue between Jim and Della that they acted out in Activity 5.
3. Ask students to write about a special gift they were given or that they gave to somebody else.

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Part 1

Activity 1

Discuss these questions:

1. Do you give gifts to friends and family at Christmas? If not, on what occasions do you give gifts?
2. What kind of gifts do you buy? Do you find it difficult to choose gifts? Why? Why not?
3. Can you remember any gifts that you were particularly happy to receive?
4. Can you think of any gifts that you didn't want? Why didn't you want them?
5. Do you prefer to give gifts or to receive them? Why?

Activity 2

a. Read this simplified version of the introduction:

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies that she'd saved one and two at a time. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas. Della fell down on the sofa and cried.

b. Match the words in the box with the definitions below.

bulldozing	close dealing	couch	howl	imputation
instigate	parsimony	shabby	sniffles	sobs

1. (formal) accusation _____
2. cry loudly; also used to describe the sound a wolf makes _____
3. forcefully persuading someone to do something (in this case to sell something for a cheaper price) _____
4. not wanting to spend your money _____
5. old and worn-out _____
6. sofa _____
7. the sounds a person makes when crying loudly _____
8. the sounds a person (often a child) makes with their nose when they've been crying _____
9. bargaining for a good price or discount _____
10. (formal) to make something start _____

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Activity 3

Listen to the whole instalment and answer these questions:

1. What is Della's husband called?
2. What is his most prized possession?
3. And Della's?
4. How does she get the money to buy a present for her husband?
5. What does she buy?
6. How much does she pay for it?

Activity 4

Add three full stops to the short extract below.

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.

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Part 1

Track 1

Transcript and glossary

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 and 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.

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 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, 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.

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Part 1

Track 3

Transcript and glossary

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. 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.

Glossary

pennies usually refers to currency in the UK but here it refers to American cents

beggar description be impossible or very difficult to describe; *beggar* also means a poor person who asks for money on the street

mendicancy (formal) the act of asking for money on the street – the writer is playing with the double meaning of *beggar*

sterling (formal) good, strong and reliable

Queen of Sheba an extremely rich and powerful queen according to some religions (including Christianity, Islam and Judaism)

King Solomon a figure in the Bible, famous for being a wise and good man as well as a very wealthy and powerful ruler

yer (informal, spoken) your

hashed metaphor badly constructed metaphor

fob chain a short chain used to hold a pocket watch

meretricious (formal) seeming to be good, useful or important but not really having any value at all