

The Gift of Love

Apart from the Bible story of the gifts given to the Christ child by the three Magi, of Wise Men, there is probably no more famous story about gift-giving than O Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." It's also one of the most famous short stories in the English language. It's been hugely popular since it was first published in 1906. It gets read and performed countless times every holiday season, and has even been used by the Sesame Street Muppets and the Simpsons.

The writer whose pen name was O. Henry was born William Sidney Porter in 1862. Porter was a complicated man and held many jobs during his brief life. He was a bank teller, cowboy, sheep herder, merchant, miner, druggist, and journalist. He even spent time in prison for embezzling, though the verdict of history has been that he got a raw deal there. He certainly knew hardship, struggled financially all his life, and died penniless in 1910. Perhaps this is why his portrayal of the poverty of the couple Della and Jim so poignant and believable. They seem so much like the poor young couple journeying to Bethlehem in the Gospel story.

"The Gift of the Magi" is a story about the power of love and of the relationship between love and sacrifice. In the determination to find the perfect gift for each other, the two main characters make a important sacrifice in the name of love. In the process, they each sell their most precious possessions. The irony of the story is that these sacrifices make the gifts they give each other useless from a practical perspective. Della cannot adorn her hair with the beautiful tortoise-shell combs and Jim has no pocket-watch to hang from the elegant platinum watch chain. The result is the exact opposite of what Jim and Della intended. What makes this ending so bittersweet is that it only comes about *because* they acted on their intentions: their gifts wouldn't have been useless if they hadn't sacrificed their prize possessions.

That, of course, makes their "useless" gifts incredibly valuable after all: the selfless love each feels for the other is embodied in those gifts. As long as they treasure these gifts, they'll remember the essential truth of their love

for each other. That kind of thing can't be bought. And it makes both gifts even more special and precious than what they replaced. The gifts they exchange become poignant symbols of what it means to be truly rich, of what really counts in human life. "The Gift of the Magi" is a tale about the power of love and the gifts it brings even when asking us to sacrifice a great deal in its service.

O Henry's story also embodies the tradition of classic wisdom stories. It's a parable about a kind of foolish wisdom. Most traditions seem to have such stories, stories about innocent, naïve – often young – characters who stumble onto profound truths without meaning to do so. Who learn that there's a kind of mysterious power at work in human life that brings about magical and marvelous outcomes from our stumbling, bumbling humanity.

Wisdom stories and parables often make use of the technique of irony, when things and events mean the opposite of what they seem. We like to think of irony as a modern invention, but O Henry was famous for his use of it. Of course, while modern folk tend to use irony as a way of distancing ourselves from our feelings, O Henry uses it to actually underscore and heighten the emotional power of the story.

This quality of O Henry's tale is powerfully expressed at the end of the story. He says his story has been "an uneventful chronicle of two *foolish children* in a flat who most *unwisely sacrificed* for each other the greatest treasures of their house. "

Of course, the events in this story are hardly uneventful. For the rest of their lives, Jim and Della will undoubtedly feel this story to be among the most eventful and meaningful ones they share. And they while they may be described as "children" on account of their relative youth, their behavior is foolish only in the most practical and materialistic sense. I also suspect that O Henry wants to remind us here of Jesus' teaching that unless we become as little children the doorway to heaven cannot open for us.

As to his final bit of irony, the idea that these two people "most *unwisely sacrificed* for each other the greatest treasures of their house," it's only in

the most “worldly wise” way that Della and Jim’s sacrifices are “unwise.” Indeed, lest we mistake O Henry’s real meaning, he ends the story with an observation containing the profoundest spiritual guidance and wisdom.

“But in a last word to the wise of these days,” he tell us, “let it be said that of all who give gifts *these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.*”

And I would add, so are we when we treasure love above all things. When we choose to give love and not count the cost. May we, too, at this season of the rebirth of the light in a very dark time, take to heart the lesson of O Henry’s seemingly simple tale. May we, too, become like these foolish children, like the magi themselves, and offer our gifts of love to each other, to our community, and to a world badly in need of all the love we have to give.

May it be so. Amen.