

The Gift of the Magi by O Henry Part 2

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Level: Advanced

Age: Young adults / Adults

Aims: In this lesson the students will:

1. recall the main events from Part 1 of the story and predict the events in Part 2;
2. listen to Part 2 and discuss the moral of the story;
3. listen carefully to a short extract and practise the intonation of lists;
4. discuss their ideas for an ideal gift and plan a modern version of the story.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (full audio for Part 2) and Track 2 (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. In Part 1, Della sold her beautiful, long hair to buy a watch chain for her husband, Jim.

Warmer

Aims: to recall the main events in Part 1 of the story; to predict the main events in Part 2 of the story

1. Ask the students to recall the main events in Part 1 of the story and to pool all the information they can remember about the two main characters. If the students wrote a simplified version of the story as a follow-up task to Part 1, they can compare their simplified versions.
2. Ask the students to work in pairs or small groups and to write three things they think are going to happen in Part 2. Bring all the students' ideas together on the board. Ask the class to arrange the ideas in the order they will happen, if this is appropriate. If they have not already included ideas about Jim's present for Della, then ask them what they think Jim will have bought for her.

Activity 1

Aims: to practise extensive listening; to recount the main events; to discuss the moral of the story

1. Tell the students that they are going to listen to Part 2 of the story. Ask them to look again at the ideas on the board from the Warmer activity and make a note of which

ones actually come up in Part 2, and in what order. Play Track 1 (full audio for Part 2).

2. Ask the students to compare their answers in pairs or small groups. Give them a copy of the worksheet. Tell them that they can use the questions in Activity 1 to help them remember what they heard.

Key: 1. *She styles her hair.;* 2. *seven o'clock;* 3. *silence and then disbelief;* 4. *his present for her – a pair of hair combs;* 5. *At first she's delighted and then she cries because she has cut off her hair and can't use the combs.;* 6. *He suggests they put their presents away for a while (because they cannot use them) and tells Della that he sold his watch.*

3. Ask the students to report back on their discussion, check the answers to the questions and then ask them to write out the moral of the story in a short, simple sentence. Give them the transcript and ask them to compare their moral with the last paragraph. Is it the same?

Activity 2

Aims: to practise listening for detail; to practise the intonation of lists

1. Explain that you are going to listen again to a short extract from the story. Ask the students to listen and identify the point in

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the story the extract comes from. Make sure that they have not read the extract on the worksheet. Play Track 2 (short extract).

Key: just after Jim arrives home and sees that Della has cut her hair

2. Ask them to listen again and list the emotions that are named. Play Track 2 again. Ask them to check their answers on the worksheet.

Key: anger, surprise, disapproval, horror

3. Ask them to listen a third time and notice how the speaker's voice goes up on the stressed words. Play Track 2 a third time. Explain that this intonation pattern is typical when reading or reciting lists. Add that the voice usually goes down at the end of the list if the list is complete, but continues to rise if the list is open-ended.

4. Ask the students to read the short extract out loud, copying the listing intonation. Then ask them to write a shopping list of five or six items that they need to buy. Ask them to practise reading them out in pairs. The student who is listening should check that their partner is using the correct listing intonation.

Activity 3

Aims: to discuss the students' ideas of the ideal gift; to plan a modern version of the story

1. Ask the students to think about what would be the best gift that someone could give them at this moment in time. Give a personal example and encourage the students to be as imaginative as they want. You may want to give an example of something material and also of something more abstract, e.g. *I need a new car because my old one has broken down / I'd love to have three more hours a day so I could get all my work done!* Allow them a few minutes to gather their thoughts and then ask them to share their ideas with the class and explain their choices where necessary.

2. Ask the students to work in groups. Explain that they are going to plan a modern version

of the story for a short film. Show them the questions on the worksheet and ask them to discuss the questions and make notes on their decisions. Circulate, monitoring and prompting where necessary.

3. When they have made their decisions, ask them to prepare to present their decisions in the form of a short story.

4. Each group tells their story. Vote on the best adaptation. The groups should not vote for their own idea.

Follow-up tasks

1. Ask the students to complete the simplified version of the story they started in Part 1.

2. Ask them to write out the modern version of their story that they planned in Activity 3.

3. The story is written from Della's point of view. Ask the students to rewrite it from Jim's point of view, beginning with Jim's decision to sell his watch.

4. Suggest the students do a search online for video versions of the story, choose a favourite and share the link with their classmates. If you have access to the internet in the classroom, you might want to watch one together and notice any differences between the original and the adaptation.

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Activity 1

Use these questions to help you remember what happened in the story.

1. What does Della do when she gets home?
2. What time does Jim come home?
3. What is Jim's reaction to Della's haircut?
4. What does Jim show Della?
5. What is Della's reaction? Why does she react in that way?
6. What does Jim say in reaction to his present?

Activity 2

Listen to the short extract and notice how the speaker's voice goes up on the underlined words.

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.

Activity 3

Plan a modern version of the story with new characters. Look at the questions below and make notes on your answers.

Setting:

Where do they live? What country? What town? What is their home like? What do they do?

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Treasured possessions:

What are their treasured possessions? Are they objects or something else?
Remember they should be able to exchange them for money.

Gifts:

What gifts do they want to buy for each other?

Worksheet

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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.

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 Island** chorus girl. But what could I do – oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?”

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 for 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 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 **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.

Track 2

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.”

“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.

“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.

“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. Shall I put the **chops** on, Jim?”

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. 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.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

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Part 2

“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.”

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 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 coveted adornments were gone.

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.

“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.”

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 presents. 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 the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

Glossary

truant an adjective describing a child who does not go to school

Coney Island a beach resort in New York

chop a small piece of meat with a bone in it, usually pork or lamb

setter a kind of hunting dog

quail a small bird

wit someone who uses words in a clever and funny way

wail to cry with a long high sound to show that you are very sad

tresses (literary) long hair that hangs down a woman’s back

ardent (literary) showing very strong feelings of love

dandy (mainly American, informal, old-fashioned) excellent