

Summary "The Gift of the Magi"

Magi = the wise men, generally assumed to be three in number, who paid homage to the infant Jesus.

The *Gift of the Magi* begins at the small and meager flat of James (Jim) and Della Dillingham Young on the day before Christmas. Della has just finished paying the bills and finds that all she has left to spend on a present for Jim is \$1.87. At first she bemoans her situation as the narrator takes note on the broken mail chute and doorbell, the small pier glass mirror, and the "grey cat walking across the grey fence in the grey backyard".

Della struggles to find a solution to her predicament: she wants to get Jim a present that he will treasure and rightly deserves for all of his hard work, but she only has \$1.87 to spend. Then she gets an idea. The most valuable thing she has is her hair. Her hair is long and beautiful and she compares it to the beauty of the Queen of Sheba. She quickly puts on her "old brown coat and her old brown hat" and hurries off to a hairdresser named Madame Sofronie. Sofronie cuts off Della's hair and gives her \$20 for it.

Della then begins to search for the perfect present for Jim. After being disappointed by the gifts she sees because they just aren't good enough, she remembers Jim's most treasured possession: his grandfather's gold watch. She also remembers that Jim had to tie a leather strap to the watch after the original chain broke, and that was precisely the type of gift she wanted to buy for him. She goes from shop to shop looking for just the right watch chain until she at last finds a handsome, platinum chain that is perfect. It costs \$21. Della buys it, returning home with \$0.87 left over.

Upon reaching their flat, Della begins to worry that Jim might not find her attractive without her hair, so she spends the rest of the evening trying to make it as presentable as possible. She then begins preparing dinner. Jim comes home right on schedule and, as soon as sees Della without her long, beautiful hair, he stops in shock. Della doesn't know what to make of his reaction; he isn't angry, or

sad, or disgusted – just sort of surprised and confused. When she questions him, he hands her a gift and tells her that it is his Christmas present to her and that she will understand his reaction once she sees it. She opens it and sees that it contains a set of combs that she had been yearning for ever since she had seen them in a Broadway window. He had bought her a gift to go with her beautiful hair, and now she had no hair to put them in.

Then Della remembers her gift for Jim and gives it to him to cheer him up. But it doesn't. Jim tells her that in order to get enough money to buy the combs, he had to sell his watch. Then Jim smiles and says that they should keep the gifts to remind themselves just how much they love one another.

The story ends with the storyteller comparing Jim and Della's gifts to the gifts of the Magi: the three wise men who are said to have brought the first Christmas gifts to the baby Jesus. We are told that, even though the main characters would seem to be very foolish, as they gave up their most valuable possessions and were left with completely useless items, because Jim and Della had to sacrifice their most precious belongings in order to obtain these gifts they showed that their love was far more valuable to them than any possession could ever possibly be.

The story of the *Gift of the Magi* deftly displays powerful themes of love, sacrifice, and the concept of true value and worth. This has helped make it the timeless classic it has come to be.