

THE MULHERN STORY LIBRARY — SALON READING GUIDE

The Gift of the Magi

O. Henry · American Realism · first published 1905

AUTHOR	O. Henry
PUBLISHED	1905
ERA	American Realism
THEMES	Sacrifice, Love, Poverty
READER PATHWAY	Accessible adult / college entry

INTRODUCTION FOR THOUGHTFUL READERS

A young couple, Della and Jim, each secretly sell their most prized possession to buy a Christmas gift for the other, only to find their gifts rendered useless by their mutual sacrifice. The story closes by calling them the wisest of gift-givers.

HISTORICAL & LITERARY CONTEXT

First published in 1905 and collected in *The Four Million* (1906), the story exemplifies O. Henry's signature twist ending and his affection for ordinary New Yorkers. Its sentimentality and craft make it a useful case study in popular American realism.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Situational irony, the twist ending, selfless love, class constraint, and authorial intrusion. Invites discussion of whether sentiment can coexist with technical elegance.

SALON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why does the ending feel both contrived and emotionally satisfying?
- How does O. Henry transform poverty from social fact into moral theater?

READ & RESEARCH

1. Full text at Wikisource — https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Gift_of_the_Magi
2. *The Four Million* at Project Gutenberg — <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2776>