

Research Article

## Symbolism in “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received Nov 25, 2022 Revised Dec 28, 2022 Accepted Dec 31, 2022	The present paper is an attempt to discuss the use of symbolism by one of the most famous American short story writers, O. Henry, in his <i>The Gift of the Magi</i> . Before we can interpret the symbols, however, we look into the age in which the short story was written, the Modern Age, and O. Henry’s life. The story speaks of a young married couple living a moderate life in a moderate house. They only have a gold watch and the wife’s long and beautiful hair that they consider valuable. They sell both of them so they can buy each other gifts for Christmas. In this paper, the researchers try to break down those symbols and their relations to one another so that they may have a better understanding of the author’s intended messages.
<b>Keywords</b> O. Henry Modern Age Magi Symbolism Sacrifice	



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### 1. Introduction

The short story, *The Gift of the Magi*, written by O. Henry, contains numerous literary devices, among their symbols. In this paper, the researchers try to break down those symbols and their relations to one another so that they may have a better understanding of the author’s intended messages.

When it comes to deciphering symbols, one has to analyze a few things that might have contributed to their meanings, one of which is the day and age in which the literary work has been written, and in the case of this short story, it was written in the modern age. Another one is the author him/herself, what they have been through, their writing style, and how they might have viewed the world.

Modernism was an age full of dramatic changes all around the world, literature and art were no exceptions. It was a consequence of the rapid pace of change due to advances in science and technology mostly. Human civilization was exposed to unfamiliar territory too much too fast. Modernism was a reflection of those writers and artists. They were now more focused on aesthetics and subjectivity, rather than

morality as in the Victorian era. Some of the most influential theorists of this age include Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud.

O. Henry is one of the prominent writers of the modernist age, a short story writer to be particular. We can understand what exactly a short story is and how it should be through his works since he was most closely identified by the short story. Moreover, with his mastery of irony, local color, and the surprise ending, he wrote dozens of masterpieces worth admiring and studying, such as the one we are focusing on here, *The Gift of the Magi*.

To interpret the symbols, the researchers took into consideration the age in which the author wrote the short story, his personal life and experience, and the conventional meanings given to certain symbols. This is how they present unique interpretations of the symbols, shed light on the connection between them and explain why exactly O. Henry used the words he used, like 'the magi', for instance. This paper intends to answer the following research questions; What were the characteristics of the modern age? Who was O. Henry? What are the symbols in *The Gift of the Magi*, and what do they mean? The study aims to identify the symbols in *The Gift of the Magi*, and then interpret and uncover their hidden meanings. Going through existing literature concerning this particular topic, the researchers realized that there was not much written about it, especially not that they could get their hands on. This makes the input to the broad literature more valuable and necessary.

## 2. Modernism

The word 'modernism' is derived from the root 'modern', meaning 'to be current' from the Latin origin 'modo'. While relating to the concepts of modernity and modernization, modernism should not be set side by side with them. Rather, it was a complete break in European and worldwide cultures towards, what Harold Rosenberg, as an art critic, referred to as "the tradition of the new" (Walz, 2013). It was a celebration of the numerous historical advancements in different aspects of life and a denunciation of them at the same time; excitement for the end of the previous age and deep despair concerning the new one. Thus, modernism in most countries was a remarkable mixture of movements and ideologies mostly contradictory to each other, like classicism and romanticism, nihilism and futurism, naturalism and symbolism... etc. (Bradbury, 1991). It was about aesthetics, the criteria on which works of art were judged as beautiful

or not. Sure enough, modernist aesthetic values were different from the traditional ones, in fact, not only different, but even rejecting those of their forebears, twentieth-century modernist avant-gardes aimed to put civilization on a new path (Walz, 2013).

Modernism can be either viewed as a time-bound art form or genre-bound. Time-bound, roughly speaking, the historical period when modernist writing can be observed most is between the years 1890-1940. Genre-bound, it was about novelty and innovation (Childs, 2002). While there were not many unified schools and styles of writing at the time to be marked as a genre, there were some common distinctive features in most of the writings of the period, which include: a rhythmic form of narration rather than chronological, contradiction and ambiguity, the abundance of paradoxes, aesthetic self-consciousness and reflectiveness, and overall skepticism towards reality and human subjectivity (Whitworth, 2007).

Class discrimination is another feature of modernism that can be summed up through the writings of modern writers such as *Pygmalion* by G.B. Shaw (Ghafor & Ahmad, 2019).

### 3. Factors that Shaped Modernism

The diverse, experimental, and radical styles of art and writing during the modernist era can be taken as a response to several things, among them are industrialization and the rise of factory-line mass production, unprecedented technological advancements, rapid urbanization of society, the peak and fall of the British Empire, the discovery of the unconscious mind, and the horrors of war in Europe, Africa and elsewhere. As a consequence, modernism is universally referred to as literature of crisis, not only change (Childs, 2002). In times like this, the advent of all kinds of new and revolutionary philosophical ideas is almost certain, which then further contributed to the diversity and appearance of new artistic styles. Three of the most notable ones of the time are the emergence of the New Woman, the Labour party, and the death of God (Whitworth, 2007). Thereby, people, especially in the Western world, experienced a major disillusionment with the established models of society, the individual, nature, and so on. Meanwhile, certain writers, particularly Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, changed the world, in the sense that they altered the most fundamental interpretations of reality in different fields and reinterpreted them (Childs, 2002).

Sigmund Freud wrote about three sensitive topics: psychoanalysis (1895), human sexuality (1898), and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). All combined, they left a huge impact on other writers making

them doubt the unity of a normative self, which each one of them could conform to. In addition, the advances in psychology, to which Freud contributed a great deal, greatly influenced modernist writers and artists, especially in their way of representing human characters (Childs, 2002).

#### 4. Literature in the Modern Age

As Victorian writing was about morality, modernist literature was about aesthetics. modernists did not consider ethics superior to art, rather the other way around, viewing art as the highest form of human production (Ghafor & Ahmad, 2019). They also suggested that objects exist about their functions, which makes a house a machine for living in, and a poem a machine for words. This way emphasizes the fact that the machine age has changed the culture. There is also a feeling of the apocalypse, despair, and a spiritual, personal, or social collapse notable in the writings, as a consequence of decades of Victorian creeping doubt. Alienation is another feature of modernism that came up because of loss of identity. Many novelists illustrated this in their works. Mustafa in his paper clearly shows this element of modernism and illustrates how all the main characters in Khalid Husseini's novel *And the Mountain Echoed* experience the feeling of alienation and estrangement (Mustafa, 2020).

Art and writing were rather complex and difficult in this age, subsuming history in symbolism and mythology, plunging the reader into a state of confusing mental landscape that cannot be resolved immediately, instead the reader ought to move it through the mind and map it out for a clear picture of the meaning and messages to understand it. Norman Cantor proposed a model for modernism, stating its characteristics as follows: modernism favored anti-historicism, for the reason that truth requires analysis, not evolution or progress. it emphasized on microcosm, not macro-, hence individual over society. it was self-referent, self-contained, and not representational. Contradictory to Victorian harmony, it swayed toward disintegration, disjointedness, and discordant (Childs, 2002).

In poetry, modernism moved toward a break from the iambic pentameter and introduced free verse (*vers libre*), symbolism and new ways of writing. in prose, it was about rendering human subjectivity. Through monologue, tunneling, irresolution, rhythm, stream of consciousness and other techniques it represented consciousness, emotions, perception, meaning and the relation of the individual to society. The language used in prose was extremely compressed, forcing the reader to pay attention normally reserved to

philosophy and poetry; short lines and expressions present complex ideas and philosophical theories. there is, however, also refer to anything they think represents ‘normality’ in order to relate the extreme mental condition and situation in the story to the reader’s reality (Childs, 2002).

## 5. Short Story in the Modern Age

A short story is referred to as the purest artistic form, where meaninglessness is presented as itself and eternal. It is closer to the epic than the novel, in that the chronological time is not completely rendered and it is fully a product of the disenchanted age of modernism (March-Russell, 2009). A great deal of critics has argued that the short story blooms best in fragmented societies, which was certainly the case in the modern age. With societal fragmentation, the angle of vision and perspective becomes the most crucial point in the short story; unlike the novel, rather than presenting a world to enter, presents a picture to contemplate. Most of the short stories of this era isolate individuals, on account of class, nationality, gender, and other individual differences. Therefore, the short story is known as the natural vehicle used to present outsiders and intense moments that seem like they are outside the ordinary stream of time due to their intensity (Gillies, 2007). The theory of impressionism was also one of the many factors contributing to the emergence of the short story in this age, as it suggested a link between visual art and written literature by introducing visual metaphors and symbolism into the language of the short story, which was similar to poetic moments of illumination (March-Russell, 2009).

## 6. Biography of O. Henry

William Sydney Porter, who was born 11th of September 1862 in Greensboro, North Carolina, was Dr. Algernon Sidney and Mary Jane Porter’s second son. His mother died when he was three, so they moved in with his mother’s mother and her daughter, Lina, whom Porter credited for his development of interest in art and literature. When he was 17, he worked as a pharmacist apprentice in his uncle Clark’s pharmacy for three years, after which, he moved to Southwest Texas and began drawing comic strips and writing humorous letters (Bloom, 1999).

In 1884, Porter moved to Austin, Texas. There, he met Athol Estes and married her after three years. Mrs. Porter was musical and witty. She was very cooperative and helped porter in his journalistic journey. For instance, she helped him establish a connection with the Houston Daily Post (Smith, 1916). Athol gave

birth to their first child in 1888, who shortly after birth passed away. Later that year, a second child was born, Margaret. However, her mother got extremely ill after she was born (Bloom, 1999).

Porter became a cashier in the First National Bank of Austin in the year 1891. He started *The Rolling Stone* publication, which was weekly humor while working at the bank. Unfortunately for Porter, a year later, the magazine went out of print, he lost his job at the bank, and was convicted of money embezzlement too. In February 1896, he was arrested, but on the way to Austin for his trial, he fled to Honduras. However, in January 1897, he returned to Texas to be with the dying Athol, his wife. After her death, he and his daughter moved into Margaret's maternal grandmother's house, and he awaited his trial there. He was found guilty and started serving a five-year sentence in April 1898 at the federal prison of Ohio (Bloom, 1999).

While serving his sentence, he started a professional writing career under his pen name, O. Henry, to earn money and support Margaret with it. His first work published while in prison was *Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking*, which appeared in McClure's Magazine (Themes, Styles and Techniques of O. Henry, 2017). After three years and more than a dozen short stories published, he was released on good conduct. Afterwards, he spent a year living in Pittsburgh with his daughter, writing stories for the Pittsburgh Dispatch, and a few New York magazines. In 1902, he moved to New York to take his career to the next level and signed a contract with the New York Sunday World to write one feature short story per week, which summed up to more than 100 short stories in a span of two years. In April 1906, he published a collection of the most famous of his New York stories, *The Four Million*, making him nationally recognized (Bloom, 1999).

In the year 1907, Porter got remarried Lindsey Coleman, though the marriage was not a happy one, and they ended up separated a year later. On June 5, 1910, O. Henry died from liver cirrhosis in New York (Themes, Styles and Techniques of O. Henry, 2017). His doctor, Dr. Hancock, said he was perfectly conscious till his last moments, he knew his end was near. His last words were "Turn up the light, I don't want to go home in the dark.", and he did not, the sunlight was upon him, illumining his face when he passed away. He died as he lived, his words touching with new beauty and hope (Smith, 1916).

## 7. O. Henry's Works

Prof. William Lyon Phelps states in *The Advance of The English Novel* that no writer has ever been as closely identified with the English short story as O. Henry. What gave his art immediate recognition was

the essential truthfulness in his stories. Regarding Porter's works and his distinctive contribution to the short story, most critics single out his technique, particularly his unexpected endings. They say he surpassed everyone in his mastery of narration and direct denouement (Smith, 1916).

O. Henry is known for his usual ending. The story starts in one direction and leads readers into thinking they have it all figured out, but then surprises them at the end when the story takes a totally different and unexpected direction. However, he always keeps the ending reasonable and believable. Although the stories' endings can sometimes be tragic, or in some stories the entire plot, there is always some warmth and hope present. This is another technique William uses, which is called "the tearful smile"; a mixture of tragedy and comedy (Tong, 2016). O. Henry's artistry with words can be observed in his allusions too, one more literary device that he has the ability to use very effectively, especially in reference to ancient classics and Shakespearean plays (Themes, Styles and Techniques of O. Henry, 2017).

Porter had good taste of humor, and it shows clearly in his stories. Some of his stories are funny throughout. While some other stories deal with serious issues, they still have a humorous touch. This typical humorous writing of O. Henry takes many forms, a huge portion of which is irony. Another it takes is exaggeration. He has his characters and events exaggerated to make them interesting and funny. In *The Ransom of Red Chief*, for example, a little boy that gets kidnapped enjoys the experience rather than being traumatized by it (Themes, Styles and Techniques of O. Henry, 2017). In addition to exaggeration and irony, he uses a wide variety of other devices to make his writing colorful and rich, such as metaphors, paronomasia, metonymy and many more, making his stories amusing (Tong, 2016).

Some of William's favorite themes to write about are: the effects of coincidence, deception, the inevitability of fate, seemingly unsolvable issues separating lovers, mistaken identity, and common people trying to mix with and impress wealthy folks; the desire to appear as one, in reality, is not. Setting-wise, his stories are divided into five sets; The West, The South, prison, Central America, and New York, which are all places he has been to and has first-hand experience with. Hence the local color, another typical style of his writings. Throughout his life, he observed people from different classes and backgrounds around him, took their speech patterns and rhythm and put out realistic dialogues in his stories using those common folks' words. His writing in vernacular, using slang words and phrases made his stories easy to understand and much more favorable to the general public (Themes, Styles and Techniques of O. Henry, 2017).

## 8. Summary of *The Gift of the Magi*:

The story is about a young married couple, James Dillingham, known as Jim, and Della Dillingham. The couple lives a very modest life with very little money in a modest apartment. They only have two possessions that they consider of value and view as their treasures: Jim's gold pocket watch that was passed down to him from his grandfather, and Della's beautiful long hair, long enough to almost reach her knees.

It's Christmas Eve, and Della is out looking for a Christmas present to buy for Jim. However, after paying the bills, all she is left with is \$1.87. She wants to buy him a chain for his pocket watch, but there wasn't any she could afford. She rushes home and pulls down her beautiful hair in front of the mirror, admiring it for one last time, before she goes out again to have it cut and sold for \$20.00. Combined with the \$1.87, it was just enough to buy a platinum chain for \$21.00.

When Jim comes back from work, he stares at Della for a moment, trying to figure out what's changed about her. She tells him that she sold her hair to buy him a present. Then Jim pulls a package out of his coat pocket casually and hands it to Della. Inside, she finds the costly elegant hair combs that she had long admired, however now completely useless since she has cut her hair off. Hiding her tears, she jumps up and gives Jim her gift. He shrugs, sits down on the old sofa, and tells Della that he sold his pocket watch to buy her combs.

The story ends with a comparison of Jim and Della to the magi, three wise men who gave Baby Jesus certain gifts in the biblical story of Christmas. The narrator concludes that Jim and Della are far wiser than the magi because their gifts are gifts of love, and those who give out of love and self-sacrifice are truly wise because they know the value of selfless love (Marinero, 2021).

## 9. Symbolism

By 'symbolism' we can refer to two things: symbolism as a movement, or symbolism as a literary device. The symbolist movement was first initiated in the nineteenth century by some rebellious French poets like Paul Verlaine, Stephan Mallarme, and Jules Laforgue. Not long after, the movement extended to Belgium, Russia, and inevitably to other countries too (Karakacı, 2014). This movement came to be as an opposition to the new materialist and industrialized society. There is dissatisfaction with society at the root of symbolism. They rejected society, revolted against life, were intolerant of humanity in general, and had



a complex relationship with nature; when it suggested an alternative to the modern industrial world, it was attractive, however, when it symbolized the phenomena of life, it was unattractive to symbolists and they would reject it (Neginsky, 2010). Symbols can be embodied or imaginative such as Red Center and Night in *The Hand Maid's Tale* (Atwood & Ahmad, 2019).

Symbolism portrays reality differently from realism and naturalism. While naturalism presents reality in detail, symbolism aspired dreams, imagination, and truths conveyed inexplicitly. They believed in art for the sake of art itself; focusing on the art and its beauty, and avoiding external determination (Karakacı, 2014).

In literature, symbolism will stay as facts analysis because of the paramount nature of life (Mustafa, 2019) as a literary device, on the other hand, is a form of expression, arbitrary until it obtains the force of convention, for a hidden reality perceived by the consciousness (Neginsky, 2010). It is the use of words that normally refer to people, locations, abstract ideas, marks and so on, to represent something beyond their literal meanings. In Ancient Greek theater, for instance, they used props to symbolize their gods. Symbolism was widely used in the Middle Ages too, mostly religious symbolism that, then after the Renaissance, it returned to represent humanistic desires like ambition, lust and heartbreak (Dang, 2022).

Metaphor is a literary device quite similar to Symbolism. The difference is metaphor is an explicit comparison between two subjects, while symbolism is a hidden meaning that requires the reader to search for it (Dang, 2022). Another akin device to symbolism is an allegory. Allegory presents an image and a concept as a pair, it transforms a phenomenon into a concept, then the concept into an image, in such a way that the concept is entirely bound to the image and is always expressed by it. On the flip side, Symbolism transforms the phenomena into an idea, then the idea into an image, but the idea remains infinitely active and distant from the image, even expressed in all other languages it remains inexpressible (M. H, 1998).

Symbols can be conventional or not (Atwood & Ahmad, 2019). The cross, for example, is a conventional symbol resembling Christianity. Writers and artists exploit universally shared associations of an object with a concept to enrich their art with symbolism. On the contrary, some writers use unconventional symbols whose significance is largely generated by themselves (M. H, 1998). To decipher the meaning of those symbols you need to think about the object's characteristics and their significance in the context. There can be many varying interpretations of a symbol, and there does not have to be 'the right one' always

(Atwood & Ahmad, 2019). This implicitness of symbolism obliges the reader to get engaged with the text by making them think about it outside the box, which is an effective way for the writer to hammer their message into the reader's head. This is what makes symbols such a powerful literary device and why they are so widely used (Dang, 2022).

### 10. Symbols in *The Gift of the Magi*

Della's hair: hair can be symbolic of many things, one of which is energy. Hair color can also be symbolic; brown and black further reinforce the general symbolic meanings of hair (Cirlot, 1993). "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" The author's imagery here is a reference to Eve, which is a religious symbol for maternity and fertility. Some other meanings of hair can be feminine beauty, youth, and sexuality. Therefore, Della sacrificing her hair for Jim means she devotes her beauty, sensuality and the best years of her life to him. Della, by giving up her hair, also breaks the ideals of femininity and takes a more masculine role. The Author describes short-haired Della as a "truant schoolboy".

Chain: Generally, chains are symbolic of connections and attachments, a powerful and lasting unity between individuals. Similarly, this story, is a reference to the couple's marriage, love, and shared destiny. Thus, we can say Della sacrificed her hair and everything it resembles for the sake of their love and marriage. However, Della's reasoning as to why she chose the chain as a present for Jim shows us a glimpse of her value system too. "It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation," she then goes on to compare it to Jim himself "It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both." Which means she values inner attributes more than appearance and ornamentations.

Jim's gold watch: Watches conventionally are symbolic of time, and gold to prosperity and money. Consequently, Jim's sacrifice of his watch is symbolic of his commitment to Della with his time and money. For Jim, the watch being passed down from his grandfather to his father and then to him resembled something greater as well. Which were his ties to his ancestors and the family he grew up in. However, in the story, Jim does not seem very proud of that, perhaps even ashamed. "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". The watch was

passed down to him, but the leather strap was not, which means what he is ashamed of is his lack of worldly possession, rather than his family. On that account, Della buying a chain for his watch is symbolic of her expressing how proud she is of him, which would also help Jim be proud of himself “With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company.”

Combs: The combs symbolize Jim’s love and attraction to Della, since arranging hair and grooming are such intimate acts. Moreover, the combs were one of Della’s dreams, as the author explains “For their lay The Combs—the set of combs, side, and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window.” They were a dream far from achievable to Della “They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession.” Jim gives up his Gold watch and the things it resembles so that he can provide for his beloved Della and to see her happy. Furthermore, the combs being “beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims,” in contrast to Della’s present to Jim “simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation,” implies the importance of beauty and appearance in a woman, and inner properties in a man.

Letter-box and doorbell: The letter-box and doorbell of the couple’s apartment symbolize their connection to other people. They are described as “a letter–box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring.” The couple not bothering to fix the doorbell and the letter box with no letters going in resemble their lack of other people in their lives and the fact that all they have is each other.

Gray cat, fence, and backyard: the color gray seems to mean sadness, hopelessness, and/or indifference. “She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard” this could either mean the outside world, unlike inside their house is a cold and uncaring world, or that Della is feeling hopeless and sad as the day after is Christmas and she is unable to buy Jim a worthy present.

The worn red carpet: many objects throughout the story symbolize the young couple’s reduced financial status, objects like the shabby little couch, the old brown jacket and hat, the watch’s old leather strap, the narrow pier–glass and the worn red carpet. However, the worn carpet, being red, can be symbolic to the couple still having their honor, passion and inner warmth despite their economical shortcomings.

The magi: The magi were three wise men according to the Bible, who visited baby Jesus and offered him the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. As the author explains "Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones." Their gifts had symbolic values; the gold was a symbol of royalty and leadership, the frankincense of his divinity, and the myrrh of his mortality and early death. "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" here O. Henry directly addresses his comparison of the couple with the magi and claims it is a lame comparison, but then he concludes "that in the last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi." He says the couple is even wiser than Magi because they willingly sacrificed their most valuable worldly possession for each other, they know that they are the real gifts to each other with all their love and compassion for each other. That is what he considers true wisdom.

## 11. Conclusion

To conclude, the modern era was one full of novel and revolutionary forms and styles of art and writing. As a result of the rapid changes in human civilization, societal fragmentation, and feelings of isolation in the individuals in this age, the short story blossomed and was used like no time prior. O. Henry was one of the writers that contributed to the short story the most. He was an American writer solely known for his short stories, and his sense of humor. He lived an interesting life, in a variety of places, with various kinds of people from different classes and backgrounds, which influenced his writing career hugely. His short stories are best known for their ironic plots and surprise endings. Symbols are one of the many literary devices O. Henry used in his short stories, and by symbols, we mean anything that represents something else beyond its literal meaning. In *The Gift of the Magi*, which is our focus of study here, Della sacrifices her hair to buy Jim a chain for his golden watch, while Jim sacrifices his golden watch to buy Della combs for her hair. These objects are all used as symbols. Della's hair, for instance, symbolizes her youthful beauty and fertility. The main symbol of the story, however, is none other than the word 'magi' itself. The author used this word to compare the young couple to the three wise men, the magi. He believes Jim and Della are

even wiser than them, because, unlike the magi, their gift were ones given out of love, selflessness, and pure compassion, as they even sacrificed their most prized possession for the cause.

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