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Writing for the Common Folk

Wise Men from the East famously bestow valuable gifts upon a child in a humble manger: gold, frankincense, myrrh¹. Theirs is a gentle story to which the common reader can connect. Two millennia² later gifts bestowed between young lovers Jim and Della, in O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi," evoke a similar commonality but with this difference. The worth of the magi's gifts is reckoned by an economic measure. Jim and Della's gifts, on the other hand, are reckoned by the high standard of the marriage bond. It is a standard within common grasp of O. Henry's readership. This essay will argue that the O. Henry short story "The Gift of the Magi" tells a tale that ordinary Americans can identify with.

One common American concern experienced by O. Henry's characters, Jim and Della, is that of slim finances. Rena Korb notes that O. Henry has a "talent at presenting situations to which people could, and wanted to, respond" (24). Certainly the problem of scanty finances qualifies as a common situation to O. Henry's readership. This situation only magnifies itself in one's consciousness at gift-giving time. Jim and Della's scanty income is shown by the "one dollar and eighty-seven cents" that Della

scrimps together "for months" (Henry 525). Having to pinch pennies to make a purchase is a common household theme.

The span needed to save such a small amount hints at hard financial times for all. To add to their hard times, the young couple's income "[has recently] shrunk [one third] to \$20 per week" (525). This sudden substantial decrease in finances underscores Jim and Della's household pressures. Hard times gain added empathy³ from the reader by coming at Christmas. That holiday's significance added to the couple's love for one another (added to their financial woes) equal anxiety. All is not lost, though, due to the couple's resourcefulness under pressure.

The trial confronting Jim and Della brings out scrappy good-hearted American resourcefulness. The couple is not totally without resources, after all. They possess two valuable assets: Della's "beautiful hair" and "Jim's gold watch" (526). These are the sorts of treasures from which quick Christmas cash may flow. The common appeal to O. Henry's readership here is the couple's sense of cheerful sacrifice. Korb notes that the sacrifice is given joyfully when the spouses neither "bemoan their fates [nor] even deem their sacrifices unworthy" (25). In short, in accordance to the season's good spirits, Della considers Jim worthy of her lost beautiful hair, and Jim considers

Della worthy of his lost heirloom watch. O. Henry ends his short tale accordingly on an upbeat note by saying "of all who give gifts [Jim and Della are] the wisest" (530). O. Henry's elevation of Jim and Della's gifts give their gift-giving motive (genuine affection) a status beyond that of the Magi's. In effect, O. Henry is making their gifts a new standard for common folk. Relating Jim and Della's watch and hair to the Magi's gold, frankincense and myrrh ties, as it were, a Christmas ribbon round the whole episode.

Thus, Wise Men from the East (Middle East, that is) are supplanted by a Wise Couple from America's East (its East Coast). Being of common stock, Jim and Della reckon their most prized possessions as each other. After all, their most prized monetary possessions are gladly relinquished in exchange for the Christmas joy of the other. This is the high standard of matrimonial love, a standard quite identifiable to O. Henry's common-folk reader.

Notes

¹The three gifts were given to the Christ Child, Jesus, shortly after his birth in Bethlehem.

²Millennia is plural for millennium, that is, one thousand years.

³Empathy equals identification or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.

Appendix



The original magi brought gifts to the child in a manger,
Jesus.

Works Cited

Henry, O. "The Gift of the Magi." *Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002. 524-530.

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Thesaurus Words

01. Give - bestow
02. Low class - humble
03. Average - common
04. Contract - bond
05. Grows - magnifies
06. Mind - consciousness
07. Buy - purchase
08. Valuables - treasures
09. Precious - heirloom
10. Positive - upbeat