

LITERARY ANALYSES ON THE SHORT STORE «GIFT OF THE MAGI»

Literary analyses are given to the short story “Gift of the Magi” by well-known American writer O. Henry in this article.

Keywords: main hero, genre, form of the story, summary.

ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ ДАЕТСЯ НА КОРОТКИЙ РАССКАЗ "ДАРЫ ВОЛХВОВ" О. ГЕНРИ

Литературные анализы приведены в новелле «Дары волхвов» хорошо известного американского писателя О. Генри в этой статье.

Ключевые слова: главный герой, жанр, форма рассказа, резюме.

William Sydney porter was an American short story writer. He acquired the pseudonym from a warder called Orrin Henry. Henry published ten collections and over 600 short stories during his life time. He worked as a reporter and a columnist in a local news paper agency.

‘*The gift of the Magi*’ is a short story of Della and James; husband and wife. They were living in a rental flat. They were so much sincere, faithful and loyal to each other, they sold their possessions to celebrate their Christmas. They are included in the list of the Magi. Magi were the wisest people who presented gifts to the Christ.

The form of the story

The Gift of the Magi Narrator

O’ Henry often uses third person to evaluate or narrate this story. Omniscient means a storyteller with total, God like knowledge of the characters and their actions.

“She was ransacking the stores for Jim’s present.”

“He looked thin and very serious.”

Technically, the story seems to be third person limited omniscient. It's told in the third-person, and only follows Della. We don't see what Jim is doing during the story, and once he does show up, he remains closed to us: we don't know what his

The genre of the story

The Gift of the Magi Genre

Parable

The key feature of a parable is that it uses a situation, which feels very simple to make a more complex or general point, often a moral one. (Also, unlike a fable, a parable does this with people, not animals.)

This classification defines "The Gift of the Magi," which is a remarkably simple story. It boils down to a few bare essentials: Della and Jim are poor, but love each other very much; they each want to buy the perfect Christmas gift for each other; they each have one prized possession which they give up to buy the other a present, and the presents they buy are meant for the prized possessions they've sacrificed. You don't need to know almost anything else about the story to "get it," and there's very little in the story itself that doesn't serve to develop one of those elements.

The set of the story

The Gift of the Magi Setting

The story is set in drab flat in a gray city on Christmas Eve in America.

There is no mention of any particular name. But we can assume that the setting is America because of the use of the words 'color' and 'labor'. The reference to dollars and cents also suggests American currency.

The narrator calls our attention almost immediately to the two most important details of the story's setting: it takes place on a Christmas Eve, and its two main characters live in a very unassuming flat. The action of the story depends on the fact that Christmas is sufficiently close that Della needs to buy a present now, even with her small amount of money. The couple's very humble abode brings out their poverty vividly. It's their poverty which both forces them to make the sacrifices they do, and which makes those sacrifices meaningful. O. Henry sketches the flat with just enough detail to convey an image of its squalor: it's cheap, sparsely furnished, and has a broken mailbox and a broken doorbell.

Tone of the story

The Gift of the Magi Tone

Take a story's temperature by studying its tone. Is it hopeful? Cynical? Snarky? Playful?

Wise, A Bit Preachy, Grandfatherly

The narrator of "Gift of the Magi" is not a character, but he's certainly not a neutral observer either. Rather, he comes across distinctively as a person, and one who's telling you a story, maybe even at your bedside. He's willing to take breaks from the "action" of the story to paint a vivid scene. The narrator seems to speak directly to his "audience":

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. (3)

The plot of the story (summary):

Initial Situation:

“One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all.”

The story's opening confront us right away with the problem: Della only has \$ 1.87 to buy a Christmas present, and it's Christmas Eve. After the first paragraph, the narrator gives us a bit more fleshing out of the situation. Della's in a meager flat, she and her husband Jim are poor, she loves her husband more than anything else in the whole world. Plus, positively needs to buy him the perfect Christmas present. With \$ 1.87. When Della lets down her hair, we also learn the other most important fact for the story: her hair and Jim's gold watch are the only prized possessions the couple has. Everything is now set up for the rest of the story to unfold.

Conflict:

Della sells her hair.

The conflict is supposedly the moment where the "problem" in the story appears, but this story began right from the fist with a problem. In "Gift of the Magi" the point of conflict actually solves the first problem and replaces it with a second. By selling her hair, Della gets the money to buy Jim a great present, eliminating the first problem though decisive action. Shortly thereafter she finds the perfect present, so neither the money nor the presents is the issue any longer. But now there's a new problem: will Jim be pleased by Della's action and appreciate her gift, or will the hair he loved so much?

Complication:

Jim is shocked by Della's short hair.

When Jim arrives, he doesn't seem to react well: he stares at Della and can't seem to process that her hair is gone. But it doesn't look like he's angry, so much as simply shocked. Della can't quite understand what kind of reaction he's having, nor can we. This creates suspense: we want to know he'll react to Della's gift. When Jim snaps out of his shock, he tells Della (and us) that this reaction will make sense when Della opens the present he bought her...

Climax:

Combs!

When Della opens, Jim's present to find the combs; we understand why Jim was so shocked. It also becomes clear now that he's not angry with Della, and he assured her he'll love no matter how she looks.

Although the climax doesn't fully "predict" the ending; it is the first half of the twist. And if we do get to thinking about where Jim got the money to buy those combs, we might be able to guess what happens next.

Suspense:

Della's turn

We're still waiting to know how Jim will react to Della's gift, and we might also be wondering just how he got the money to buy those expensive combs. Della gives Jim the watch chain, and...

Denouement

So...how about those pork chops?

Presented with his gift, Jim calmly reveals (with a smile) that he sold his watch to buy Della her combs. So her present is useless too. Well, that does it for the Christmas presents. Not much left to do but eat those pork chops.

Resolution:

Pretty fly for magi.

In the narrator's final paragraph, which definitely a "zoom out" of epic proportions, the narrator tells us that it doesn't really matter that Jim and Della's presents turned out to be useless. They are the wisest givers of all – in fact, they're the magi. We leave feeling satisfied and happy.

The theme of the story:

Themes in the Gift of the Magi:

The theme for "The Gift of the Magi" is that love is more important than any material item. Della and Jim, the two main characters, demonstrated the theme.

A single work may have several themes.

Love means the attraction between two persons or entities there are two kinds of Love in this universe, mortal and immortal Love or worldly or spiritual Love. Love is an abstract noun but it can be materialized through the presentation of gifts. The presentation of gifts in friendship increases the passion of Love. This is the story of two Lovers, husband & wife. They have to celebrate their Christmas ceremony through giving and receiving the gifts to each other. Della sells her beautiful hair to present a gift to Jim.

As Jim also buy a wondrous gift for Della.

"Maybe the hairs of my head were number of."

"But nobody could ever count My Love for You."

"I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs."

Sacrifice is one of the major themes of "the gift of the Magi"

Both gift and sacrifice are the expression of Love. Gifts are presented in the shape of objects and things as well as the devotion of the physical efforts. However, the devotion of physical efforts through the depth of heart shows the purity of Love. Della and James sacrifice for each other.

Della says, "I had my hair cut off and sold because I could not have lived through Christmas with out giving you a presents."

"I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs."

Poverty is also discussed in this short story. 'The Dillingham' were so poor and leading a miserable life. Della was very contended and faithful wife. She used to save money on daily basis. The writer also tells us their expenses were high than their income.

"Expenses had been greater than she had calculated"

That's why they sold their possessions to presents the gifts to each other.

Women and Femininity

The main character of "Gift of the Magi" is a woman named Della. Loveable as she is, at times, Della is hysterical, often overreacting, a characteristic that the narrator identifies as "feminine." Della's complete and single-minded devotion to her husband could raise the question of whether the love in their relationship is between equals or based on a difference in power between the two.

Character analysis:

The main characters are Della and James

Della: One Devoted Woman

Della is the loving, warm, selfless, and occasionally hysterical heroine of the story. Della's financially poor. She spends all of her days in a cramped flat, as "mistress of the home". In other words she's homemaker. Della basically lives for one thing (or rather, person): Jim, her husband. She's spent a lot of the time leading up to Christmas just thinking of what to get him:

She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him.

That's devotion.

Jim:

Jim's job is not so great

He's the only breadwinner for the Dillingham Young family (that is, him and Della), and it seems he works long hours, but his salary is low. And it recently went from bad to worse: whereas he used to make \$30 a week he's now down to just \$20. He and Della are struggling just to pay the expenses of their small flat. So if Jim happens to seem a little tired, serious, overworked, and perhaps a tad underweight, there's a good reason for 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. (22)

Minor character: Madame Sofronie

Madame Sofronie is the owner of a hair shop, which, we are told, sells "hair goods of all kinds" (12). She is "large," "white," and "chilly" (12). Her manner is direct and to-the-point: she doesn't give off any signs of being impressed by Della's gorgeous hair, and casually offers to buy it for \$20.

Stylistic devices:

Style used in The Gift of the Magi:

There's not a whole lot of *imagery* or *metaphor* in this story. That makes the few Bible *allusions* stand out all the more. There's the whole "magi" reference. The last paragraph compares Jim and Della to the three wise men who, according to the Christian New Testament, delivered gifts to Jesus on the first Christmas (see "What's Up with The Title?" for more on this comparison).

Irony

Irony is a kind of device which is used in literature to increase the value of the work. Irony consists of saying one thing while you mean another. There are several kinds of Irony in the literature. But this story deals with the situational Irony. When their gifts become useless for themselves, it creates the situational Irony. Because gifts are presented by the wisest these gifts are useful and beneficial for the receivers.

"I could not have lived through Christmas without giving you a present"

"Being wise, their gifts no doubt wise ones... two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other"

Humor

In writing or speaking 'HUMOUR' can mean 'MOOD' or 'CHARACTER' but the word also denotes 'that which causes laughter.' In the very beginning of this story, the way how THE DILLINGHAMS were spending their lives was pathetic and humorous as well.

"There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it..."

Symbolism / Imagery

A symbol is something which represents something else (often an idea or quality) analogy or association. The Dillingham were so poor that they were living in miserable condition. Their misery is symbolized through this sentence.

"... and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard"

Color imagery also exists in this short story.

"She turned white for just a moment."

Comparison

O' Henry uses a colorful comparison in a mastery way to attract his readers. He describes the beauty of his heroine in a splendid comparison. Comparison is a device which shows the value of something than other on the basis of quality.

"Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds"

"Being wise, their gifts no doubt wise ones... two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other"

Simile

A figure of speech usually used in prose and verse. Similes always contain the words 'like' or 'as'. Here the writer uses simile of cascade for the beauty of Della's hair.

"Della's beautiful hair fell like a cascade of brown water."

After cutting her hair off Della was looking like a schoolboy.

"That made her look like a truant schoolboy."

Allusion

Allusion is a historical or Biblical reference. The main motive of the usage of allusion is to relate the present events and characters with the previous incidents and persons and to enhance the attraction knowledge of the readers.

"Had the question of Sheba lived in the flat across the Airshaft?"

"Had King Solomon been the Janitor?"

"The Magi – who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger."

Reiteration

It means the repetition of phrases and clauses again and again. It shows character's physical or psychological condition in the story.

"One dollar and eighty seven cents."

"Like a Cascade of brown waters."

Pathos

It is a quality that arouses emotions especially pity or sorrow. The sad plight of Jim and Della arouses our pity and sorrow. But just for fleeting moments. Our pity and sorrow change to admiration for the deep devotion displayed by the couple. It is a story which shows that any gift of love, however unwisely given or received, is the greatest and the wisest gift. Thus *The Gift of the Magi* is not just one of the most read stories of O' Henry but it is one of the finest narrations on love.

Conclusion

After the whole discussion, we can say that 'The Gift of the Magi' is O' Henry's masterpiece. 'The Gift of the Magi' held so much popularity that many writers wrote operas and many singers sang that operas. These short stories are derived from the life of the ordinary people in New York City.

O' Henry uses twist plot in his stories, which turn on ironic or coincidental circumstance. Although some critics are not so enthusiastic about his work yet the public loves it.

Literatures:

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