

The Politics of Class in “The Gift of the Magi”

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Abstract

This paper examines O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” to analyze this narrative story as a politics of class. It intertwines love with poverty, sacrifice, and class struggle. The narrative begins with Della’s financial hardship, as she saves only one dollar and eighty-seven cents to buy a gift for her husband, Jim. In an act of devotion, she sells her long hair to purchase a chain for Jim’s watch. Simultaneously, Jim sells his watch to buy combs for Della’s hair. These sacrifices portray not only emotional commitment but also the couple’s entrapment within material deprivation and class identity. These exchanged gifts render useless, and only gain symbolic meaning that exceeds their material worth. Drawing on Karl Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, these gifts reflect objects whose symbolic value obscures the couple’s economic vulnerability. Gift-exchange theory further situates these acts as inalienable gestures that tie love to larger social and cultural frameworks. O. Henry’s use of narrative strategies like irony, coincidence, and sentimental resolution tempers the harshness of poverty while exposing the quiet dignity of resilience. This study employs a qualitative approach, with an interpretive research design to demonstrate the tale’s sentimental appeal and subtle social critique. It expresses broader intersection of class, culture, and human survival.

Keywords: Class struggle, commodity fetishism, poverty, sacrifice, symbolism

Introduction

This research explores O. Henry’s short story “The Gift of the Magi” (TGM) through the lens of class politics, to explore a love within structures of economic inequality. By analyzing the intersection of poverty, gift exchange, and sentimental narrative, this paper examines how the story reveals the hidden cost of love in a capitalist society. The story idealizes sacrifice, yet it simultaneously exposes the precariousness of working-class existence. O. Henry’s tale of 1905, while outwardly celebrating devotion, implicitly critiques the economic conditions that render such sacrifices necessary. Traditionally, critics portray the irony of the ending and the moral lesson of selfless devotion (Sanderson, 1992, p.94). However, beyond its surface sentimentality, this story analyzes the politics of class, and explores how poverty structures not only Jim and Della’s material conditions but also their emotional expressions of love. The story demonstrates a sentimental portrayal of love and sacrifice, to emphasize the couple’s

willingness to give up their most prized possessions for each other. This story emerges from an early twentieth-century American context where urban working-class's struggles shaped the lives of millions.

In *TGM*, Della's one dollar and eighty-seven cents saved for a Christmas gift underscores the scarcity and economic vulnerability experienced by working families (Henry, 1953, p.1). Similarly, Jim's prized watch, a family heirloom, demonstrates not merely a sentimental object but also a marker of class aspiration — a possession that signifies a tenuous dignity in a society stratified by wealth. Poverty demonstrates not an incidental backdrop; it governs the characters' choices, compressing their love into the currency of sacrifice. Bloom (2000) adduces, O. Henry often "disguises economic despair beneath the fabric of irony and coincidence" (p.114). Thus, this story's narrative introduces a subtle critique of the romanticization of poverty in a capitalist society.

The early 1900s in the United States mark a rapid industrialization, uneven wealth distribution, and expansion of urban poverty. Nasaw (1985) postulates, "working-class families endured constant economic instability, where wages rarely covered the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter" (p.48). In *TGM*, The one dollar and eighty-seven cents that Della saves over months illustrates the severity of financial constraint. Jim's reliance on his watch as a symbol of dignity underscores the fragile markers of working-class respectability. The scarcity that defines Jim and Della's lives does not represent an incidental backdrop but a structural condition of their existence. O. Henry, who himself lives a life of financial insecurity, sets many of his short stories in such urban settings, to capture both the struggles and resilience of ordinary people.

Numerous scholars explore O. Henry's skill in constructing twist endings and ironic reversals. However, a fewer examine the economic dimensions of his fiction. Nagel (1985) finds, "O. Henry's sentimental tales often obscure the harshness of working-class life by focusing on personal sacrifice rather than systemic inequality" (p.213). In *TGM*, however, poverty operates as both a constraint and a narrative engine. The financial scarcity necessitates Jim and Della to make sacrifices. Their love becomes legible against economic deprivation. In this sense, the readers find this story as an ambivalent text—one that idealizes sacrifice while simultaneously exposing the inequities of class.

The exchanges of objects in *TGM* like Jim's watch and Della's hair symbolize the entanglement of material culture and class politics. Della's hair demonstrates a source of beauty and feminine identity, while Jim's watch demonstrates masculine pride and continuity across generations. At the selling of these objects, the couple forfeits not only material possessions but they stand also as symbols of their social worth. Bloom (2000) adduces, "O. Henry disguises economic despair beneath the fabric of irony and coincidence" (p.114). Yet the act of sacrifice also underscores the painful reality that material conditions mediate love in a capitalist economy. Their devotion may be timeless, but the limits of class dictate its expression.

TGM challenges the tendency to romanticize poverty in literature. Sentimental narratives often portray financial hardship as ennobling, presenting sacrifice as proof of virtue rather than as evidence of systemic inequality. At this, Sanderson (1992) asserts, “The Gift of the Magi” functions as a parable of love, transcending material concerns (p.94). However, by foregrounding the economic constraints faced by Jim and Della, the story reveals the ways in which capitalist structures infiltrate even the most intimate relationships. O. Henry romanticizes not only its poverty but also critiques it, as the couple’s joy tinges with the recognition of what has been lost. Thus, this study attempts to analyze *TGM* as not merely a sentimental tale of devotion but a class-conscious narrative in which love, sacrifice, and poverty converge to expose the precariousness of working-class existence within a capitalist society.

Statement of the Problem

TGM introduces a sentimental tale of sacrificial love. Numerous interpretations of this story overlook the role of poverty and class struggle. It portrays the couple’s financial struggles but it overlooks their choices and experiences. The problem, therefore, lies in the critical neglect of class politics within the narrative. The story romanticizes economic hardship as merely a backdrop to devotion. This critique of inequality and survival under capitalism becomes obscure. It reduces the narrative to a timeless fable while ignoring its grounding in the precarious conditions of early twentieth-century working-class life. This study attempts to explore the tale through the lens of class politics. It explores how love and sacrifice become inseparable from the economic realities that define the couple’s existence.

Research Questions:

- a. How does O. Henry’s *TGM* represent class politics through the material conditions and sacrifices of Jim and Della?
- b. In what ways does the story both romanticize and critique poverty within a capitalist context?

Objectives:

- a. To analyze how the couple’s financial struggles, symbolic possessions, and sacrifices reflect the precariousness of working-class life in early twentieth-century America.
- b. To examine how the narrative idealizes sacrifice as an act of love while simultaneously exposing the structural inequalities that make such sacrifices necessary, thereby revealing the ambivalent role of class in the story.

Review of Literature

Numerous scholars make a study of *TGM* within the critical frameworks of sentimentality, irony, and love. They explore its moral lesson, and interpret it as a parable of selfless devotion and sacrifice. For instance, Sanderson (1992) views the narrative as a universal tale that “transcends material deprivation and becomes an affirmation of true love” (p.94). Such interpretations frame the couple’s poverty as

incidental, focusing instead on the timeless value of generosity. Bloom (2000) finds the author's appeal in "masking despair with coincidence, layering sentiment with irony, and providing readers with an unexpected twist" (p.112). The author's use of irony and his trademark portrays surprise endings. Critics often point to the symmetrical exchange of Jim's watch and Della's hair as the quintessential example of author's ironic craftsmanship. Nagel (1985) examines this stylistic tendency, and postulates, "O. Henry's fiction turns on narrative devices that displace material hardship in favour of sentimental resolution" (p.213). The author deliberately shifts the reader's focus away from the harsh realities of poverty and instead emphasizes emotional or sentimental outcomes. This stylistic choice softens the story's critique of economic hardship, making the struggles of working-class characters appear less systemic and more personal.

TGM draws additional layers of interpretation. Abdulwahid, Mohammed, and Tofiq (2022) foregrounds symbolism, and examine Della's hair and Jim's watch that encode deeper emotional and cultural resonances within a modernist context (pp.40–42). Though this work doesn't parse class directly, it opens avenues for reading these possessions as markers of identity shaped by economic surroundings. Pedagogical scholarship reframes the story's relevance. Templer (2010), in a piece on social justice approaches to literature, and analyzes *TGM*, "it can be taught with attention to inequality and class-based struggle—not just as a sentimental narrative" (p.47). This orientation positions the story within a broader discourse of equity and systemic awareness.

The above critical perspectives enrich understandings of Henry's style and narrative techniques. However, they tend to underplay the role of class and economic struggle in the text. The author introduces Della's "one dollar and eighty-seven cents" (Henry, 1953, p.1) as a quaint detail rather than a "stark marker of financial insecurity" (Templer, 2010, p.47). Similarly, Jim's reliance on his heirloom watch appears as a romantic gesture instead of as an emblem of "working-class aspiration and masculine dignity" (Nagel, 1985, p.213). By overlooking these elements, much scholarship risks romanticizing poverty rather than interrogating its systemic implications.

Some scholars make a study of the social realities embedded in O. Henry's fiction. For instance, Nasaw (1985) examines at the turn of the century, "working-class families endured relentless economic instability, where wages were insufficient to cover basic needs" (p.48). This observation underscores that Jim and Della's sacrifices should be read not merely as evidence of devotion but as responses to structural inequalities that limited working-class families. Despite the relevance of such socio-historical contexts, there remains a lack of sustained literary analysis that situates *TGM* within the framework of class politics.

This research explores the gap where the present study intervenes. By examining the material culture of the story — particularly the hair and watch, alongside the characters'

economic struggles, this research positions *TGM* as a narrative deeply shaped by poverty. Rather than treating financial constraint as a backdrop for love, this approach foregrounds class as a determining force in the characters' lives. In doing so, the paper extends existing scholarship on O. Henry by revealing how the text both idealizes sacrifice and critiques the capitalist system that renders sacrifice inevitable.

Significance of the Study

O. Henry introduces *TGM* as a sentimental and ironic tale of selfless love. However, this research attempts to analyze the story as a politics of class. Here lies the significance of the study. The setting of the story in a precarious urban working-class environment underscores the limitations imposed by poverty and economic inequality. By demonstrating the story's material conditions, this study explores how O. Henry dramatizes the struggles of ordinary people. He makes visible the socio-economic realities that frequently overlook the mainstream interpretations.

Method and Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine *TGM* through the lens of class politics. The methodology roots in close reading, a fundamental practice in literary studies where textual analysis, combines with theoretical frameworks, to uncover the layers of meaning. By focusing on narrative details like diction, imagery, symbolism, and characterization, the analysis interprets how "poverty and sacrifice are represented and how they illuminate broader class struggles" (Tyson, 2006, p.55). They reveal how material deprivation and acts of sacrifice function as reflections of deeper systemic inequalities and class struggles.

This research employs an interdisciplinary critical approach. Insights from Marxist literary criticism provide a basis for analyzing the socio economic structures underlying Jim and Della's struggles. This lens explores the material conditions that shape their identities, decisions, and emotional lives (Eagleton, 2002, p.3). At the same time, perspectives from feminist criticism guide the reading of Della's sacrifice, situating her act within the patriarchal economy that circumscribes women's roles and opportunities (Moi, 2002, p.64). Furthermore, cultural theory, particularly Marcel Mauss's and Annette Weiner's discussions of gift exchange, enriches the analysis by framing the couple's gifts as "symbolic acts that intersect love, identity, and class" (Weiner, 1992, p.10). Jim and Della's exchanges not merely demonstrate personal gestures of affection but also portray culturally loaded actions. Thus, social identity and class conditions entwine and shape their love.

This study relies on secondary sources—critical essays, books, and cultural theory to contextualize the story within broader discourses of class, gender, and cultural exchange. These sources not only provide interpretive support but also help identify the scholarly gap this research seeks to fill: the relative neglect of class politics in critical discussions of O. Henry's story.

Limitation of the Study

This research limits its focus on a single short story, *TGM*. It restricts the generalizability of its findings to O. Henry's larger body of work or early twentieth-century literature, broadly. It relies on qualitative, interpretive methods, and its analysis reflects the subjectivity of critical frameworks rather than empirical evidence. The scarcity of scholarship addresses the class and constrains the study, as most existing criticism emphasizes themes of love and sacrifice. Thus, the prioritization of class inevitably sidelines other interpretive possibilities like religion or narrative style. Despite these limitations, the research contributes a new perspective by foregrounding class politics in a story often read primarily for its sentimentality.

Results and Discussion

The following results and discussion help to derive the result of the research:

Poverty and Everyday Survival

TGM explores the narrative in the realities of poverty: "One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all" (Henry, 1953, p.1). This opening line not only announces Della's desperate attempt to save for Jim's gift but also signals the couple's daily struggle to meet basic needs. Even the small, repeated act of counting coins—"Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher" (Henry, 1953, p.1)—evokes a routine of frugality and deprivation rather than festive cheer. Kazin (1942) postulates, "O. Henry's fiction finds its inspiration in the working poor of the city, where survival becomes itself a heroic act" (p.152). The couple's heroic acts also portray the everyday survival of Henry's period. Jim's "gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's" (Henry, 1953, p.2) not simply demonstrates an heirloom but one of the few durable tokens of masculine dignity available to a working man. This mirrors Lukács's (1971) claim about "the typical circumstances of the working class, embedded in the contradictions of capitalist society" (p.39). Jim and Della's situation, therefore, does not represent isolated misfortunes but demonstrates structural conditions tied to their position within capitalist production. Their labor cannot secure them dignity without sacrifice, and so Henry dramatizes a universal class condition through an intimate domestic story.

Sacrifice and the Economics of Love

In *TGM*, Jim sells his watch to buy Della combs, while Della sells her hair to buy Jim a chain. Henry (1953) demonstrates Della's moment of decision with blunt economy: "So Della did it. She cut off her hair and sold it" (p.2). This act, strips of sentiment in its phrasing, reveals how material deprivation shapes their love. Eagleton (2002) postulates, "there is no cultural form independent of material life" (p.3). For Jim and Della, sacrifice becomes the only available language of affection, as consumerist forms of gift-giving remain out of reach. The story explores the fetishized objects themselves. Della's "beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters" (Henry, 1953, p.2), demonstrates a vivid image of feminine identity and potential social capital. "The platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design" (Henry,

1953, p.3) intends for Jim's watch. Jim, meanwhile, sacrifices his "gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's" (Henry, 1953, p.2) to buy "the set of combs...pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims" for Della's hair (Henry, 1953, p.3). Marx's (1990) concept of commodity fetishism clarifies how these objects—combs and chain—embody love and devotion even though the couple's mutual sacrifice negates their practical value (p.165). This irony underscores how the poor cannot escape the commodification of emotion even when their gestures aim to transcend materialism. The combs and chain, shorn of their use-value by the very sacrifices made to acquire them, dramatize how capitalist conditions structure even the most intimate acts of affection.

Gender, Class, and the Burden of Sacrifice

Della's decision to cut and sell her hair reflects the intersection of gender and class oppression. Weiner's (1992) theory of "inalienable possessions" (p.6) analyzes how some possessions—deeply tied to personal identity—resist commodification. However, poverty forces them into the marketplace. In *TGM*, Henry (1953) analyzes the intimacy of this loss: "So Della did it. She cut off her hair and sold it" (p.2). She sacrifices her natural hair. Her hair, "rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters" (Henry, 1953, p.2), a marker of her femininity and beauty, becomes an economic resource in times of need. This act portrays the vulnerability of women in patriarchal and class-bound economies, where even the body subjects to commodification.

From a feminist perspective, Della's sacrifice demonstrates how women often bear disproportionate burdens in negotiating class inequalities. Showalter (1977) asserts, "Women's cultural roles frequently demand personal self-effacement in service of male and familial needs" (p.88). In the story, Jim also sets an example of sacrifice by selling his watch, "the gold-watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's" (Henry, 1953, p.2), a symbol of masculine status. However, Della's bodily sacrifice resonates more profoundly because it involves altering her identity as a woman—literally cutting away part of her. This reflects how class oppression, compounded by gendered expectations, places women in doubly exploitative positions.

Sentimentality as Ideological Mask

TGM closes with a sentimental flourish that elevates Jim and Della to the level of the Magi: "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" (Henry, 1953, p.8). Yet this sentimentality functions ideologically, softening the harsh realities of class oppression. The text repeatedly frames their poverty as quaint rather than crushing: "Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present" (Henry, 1953, p.1). This framing presents deprivation as an occasion for nobility, masking the systemic injustices that force the couple's sacrifices. Williams (1977) analyzes how cultural forms often "naturalize and legitimize class conditions by embedding them in narratives of virtue and morality" (p.64). The story takes a risk by masking the systematic injustices. It presents poverty as a site of nobility that perpetuates economic deprivation.

Similarly, Jameson (1981) makes a study how literature frequently resolves social contradictions through “narrative closure” (p.57), offering symbolic rather than material solutions to inequality. In *TGM*, the sentimental ending provides emotional satisfaction but leaves the structural problems of poverty unchallenged. The couple’s joy functions as a moral lesson rather than a critique of capitalist society, thereby deflecting attention from systemic inequities.

Irony and the Symbolic Economy

The central irony of the story—the materially useless gifts analyzes the futility of individual efforts to transcend systemic poverty. After months of saving “one dollar and eighty-seven cents” (Henry, 1953, p.1), Della sacrifices her “beautiful hair” to buy Jim a chain for his watch, only to discover that Jim has sold his watch to purchase combs for her now-absent hair (Henry, 1953, pp.3–4). This twist reframes futility as wisdom, positioning Jim and Della as “the Magi” (Henry, 1953, p. 4). Bourdieu (1977) examines the paradox of the ‘symbolic economy’, analyzing “when material capital is scarce, cultural or symbolic capital is mobilized to compensate” (p.241). For Jim and Della, love becomes a form of symbolic wealth that substitutes for material lack. Their gifts, stripped of practical value, embody devotion but also underscore deprivation. The fact that their sacrifices culminate in useless objects illustrates how poverty disrupts even the most intimate spheres of life. In this sense, O. Henry critiques the absurdity of poverty while simultaneously idealizing it through symbolic resolution, using the couple’s misaligned gifts as a parable of love constrained by economic hardship.

Cultural Mythologies of Poverty

TGM makes a study of cultural mythologies of poverty. The opening line—“One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all” (Henry, 1953, p.1) frames Jim and Della as figures of deprivation, yet their sacrifices elevate them into symbols of moral authenticity. In the early 20th century, American literature often presents the working poor as repositories of virtue in contrast to the corruption of wealth. This period as Hofstadter (1955) analyzes “a persistent romanticization of poverty as spiritually elevating” (p.214). O. Henry’s tale embodies this cultural narrative: Della cuts her “beautiful hair” to purchase Jim’s chain and Jim sells his heirloom watch for Della’s combs (Henry, 1953, pp.3–4). These narratives transform economic deprivation into a stage for moral heroism.

However, such portrayals risk reinforcing social hierarchies. By depicting poverty as a condition of virtue rather than injustice, literature may normalize inequality. This aligns with Althusser’s (1971) “theory of ideology,” in which cultural forms reproduce the conditions of capitalist society by making them appear natural (p.175). In this sense, *TGM* participates in and critiques ideological reproduction: it romanticizes scarcity while hinting at the systemic forces that shape the couple’s sacrifices.

Politics of Class and Broader Social Implications

The politics of class in *TGM* resides in its contradictions: the story critiques the cruelty of poverty while romanticizing it as a site of love and wisdom. Della's savings, "One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all" (Henry, 1953, p.1) frames the couple's lives within the scarcity of the working poor. Their sacrifices—Della cutting her "beautiful hair" to buy Jim's chain and Jim selling his "gold watch" for Della's combs (Henry, 1953, pp.3–4) reflect both devotion and the exploitation of the working class, transforming economic hardship into a moral lesson that reinforces dominant cultural ideologies. O. Henry's story exemplifies what Jameson (1981) calls the "political unconscious" of literature, where narratives reveal hidden social conflicts through symbolic forms (p.61). In the story, this conflict emerges not in overt critique but in the tension between material deprivation and symbolic redemption; their gifts lose practical value but acquire moral significance. This tension makes the story a rich site for critical inquiry, demonstrating how even the most sentimental tales carry political implications about how capitalist society structures love, sacrifice, and dignity.

Conclusion

This study finds *TGM* a narrative tale, embeds in the politics of class. Jim and Della portray economic struggles. Their poverty shapes the forms of sacrifice available to working-class individuals. Material deprivation mediates their love, turning their personal acts of devotion into reflections of systemic inequalities. The sentimental conclusion which aligns the couple with the wisdom of the Magi, romanticizes their hardship. The couple's sacrifices demonstrate the commodification of love and identity under capitalist constraints. For instance, Della's hair illustrates the gendered dimensions of economic struggle. At the same time, the elevation of their symbolic wealth over material lack suggests how cultural narratives valorize poverty in ways that neutralize its political implications. The significance of these findings recognizes *TGM* not ideologically neutral, but a cultural text that engages with and reproduces class discourses. Future research could extend this study in several directions. For instance, comparative studies could examine how O. Henry's representation of poverty aligns with or diverges from other early twentieth-century American writers like Stephen Crane or Jack London. Additionally, analyzing adaptations of *TGM* in film, theater, and contemporary media might reveal how time and forms reshape or maintain class politics. A more focused feminist-materialist reading of Della's sacrifice could further explore the intersections of gender, class, and sentimentality, especially in relation to contemporary discussions of women's labor and emotional economy.

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