The Gift of the Magi

**Literary Focus: Situational Irony**

What would you think of a movie that was completely predictable? You’d probably think it was pretty boring. Stories by good writers are often very *un*predictable. When something happens that is the opposite of what you expected, it is called *situational irony.* Situational irony remind us that many things in life turn out differently from what we expect.

**Reading Skill: Making Predictions**

You may have heard someone describe an exciting book as “a real page turner.” When you keep wondering what will happen next, you’ve got a page turner in your hands. Try to predict what will happen as you read “The Gift of the Magi,” and see how often the writer surprises you. You may want to keep track of your *predictions* in a chart like this one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>My Prediction</th>
<th>What Really Happens</th>
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**Into the Story**

O. Henry’s real name was William Sydney Porter. He worked as a bank teller in Austin, Texas, until he was accused of stealing $1,000 from the bank. Porter was arrested, tried, and sentenced to five years in prison. No one knows whether he really stole the money. Porter served three years of his sentence, and he wrote more than a dozen stories while in prison. He left prison in 1901 and moved to New York. He wrote about New York City and the people who lived there until his death in 1910.
Based on the story by

O. Henry

The Gift of the Magi
Della had saved one dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. She had saved the pennies one and two at a time by bargaining with the grocer, the vegetable seller, and the butcher to lower their prices. At times, her cheeks had burned with shame, for she was certain these sellers thought she was stingy. She counted her money three times. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day was Christmas.

Della decided there was nothing she could do except flop down on the shabby little couch and cry. So she did.

Della and her husband lived in a furnished apartment costing $8 per week. It didn’t exactly look like the home of a beggar, but it had no extras, either.

In the entrance hall below, there was a letterbox that a letter couldn’t fit in and a doorbell that didn’t ring. There was also a card with the name “Mr. James Dillingham Young” on it.

For a short time, Mr. James Dillingham Young had done well for himself, making $30 per week. Now, his pay had shrunk to $20. With his pay cut, he’d lost his sense of place in the outside world. But whenever he came home, he was joyously greeted and hugged by his wife, Della. Which was all very good.

Della finished her crying and dried her cheeks. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and after all her saving, she had only $1.87 to buy Jim a present. There were always more expenses than she thought. She had spent many happy hours planning a gift for him, something fine and rare and perfect, something worthy of her special Jim.

Suddenly Della turned from the window and looked at herself in the tall, old mirror. Her eyes were shining brightly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Quickly she pulled down her hair and let it fall loosely around her.

Jim and Della were proud of two things, Jim’s gold watch, which had been his father’s and his grandfather’s, and Della’s hair. Della’s beautiful, shiny hair now fell below her knees. A few of her tears splashed on the worn carpet.

1. $30 per week: equal to about $600 today.
But she put on her coat and hat and, with a brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, hurried out. She stopped at a shop with a sign that read “Madame Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds.” Della ran up the flight of stairs. Panting, she collected herself and said to Madame Sofronie, “Will you buy my hair?”

“Let’s have a look at it,” said Madame. Della let down her beautiful hair. Madame lifted the mass of hair. “Twenty dollars,” she said. “Give it to me quickly,” said Della.

For two hours, Della searched for Jim’s present. At last she found a platinum fob chain, worthy of The Watch. It was like Jim—quiet and valuable.

She paid twenty-one dollars. With that chain, instead of the old leather strap he used now, Jim could proudly check the time in public.

At home, Della worked with her curling iron. After forty minutes, her head was covered with tiny curls. She studied herself in the mirror. “If Jim doesn’t kill me right away,” she said to herself, “he’ll say I look like a chorus girl. But what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents!”

When she heard him on the stairs, her face turned white for a minute. She whispered, “Please, God, make him think I am still pretty.”

The door opened and Jim entered. His eyes fixed on Della. He did not show anger, surprise, disapproval, or horror. He had an expression she could not read.

Della went to hug him. “Jim, darling,” she cried, “don’t look at me that way. I sold my hair because I couldn’t have lived without giving you a Christmas present. It’ll grow. You won’t mind, will you?”

“You’ve cut your hair?” asked Jim. “Cut it off and sold it. Don’t you like me just as well, anyhow? I’m me without my hair.”

“You say your hair is gone?” he said. He seemed stunned.

“It’s sold. It’s Christmas Eve. Be good to me, because I sold it for you. I love you dearly.”

2. *fob chain:* short chain meant to be attached to a pocket watch.
Jim came out of his trance and hugged Della.

“Don’t mind me, Dell,” he said. “You could cut or shave your hair any way you like and I wouldn’t love you less. But if you unwrap that package, you may see why I was so surprised.”

Della tore at the paper and string. She screamed for joy and then began crying. Jim rose to comfort her.

He had given her The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had wanted for a long, long time. They would have been perfect in her long hair. She had longed for them without ever believing she’d own them. And now they were hers, but the beautiful hair to wear them in was gone.

She smiled at Jim. “My hair grows fast!”

And then Della cried, “Oh, oh!”

Jim hadn’t seen his beautiful present yet. She held it out to him eagerly.

“Isn’t it a dandy, Jim? You’ll have to look at the time one hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how the fob looks on it.”

Jim didn’t hand over the watch. “Dell,” he said, “let’s put away our Christmas presents. They’re too nice to use right now. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs.”

The Magi, as you know, were wise men. They brought gifts to the baby Jesus. They were the first people to give Christmas presents. They were wise, and probably so were their gifts. Here you have read the story of two foolish children in an apartment. They unwisely gave up the greatest treasures of their house for each other. But of all who give and receive gifts, those like these two are wisest. Everywhere they are the wisest. They are the Magi.
In **situational irony**, events turn out to be the opposite of what you expected. Authors use irony in fiction to surprise the reader. Also, in real life it is impossible to predict the future exactly. Things often turn out differently from what you had hoped or expected.

Explore O. Henry’s use of situational irony in “The Gift of the Magi” by filling in the following chart. The first item has been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Della has saved her money expecting to buy Jim a wonderful Christmas present.</td>
<td>She has saved only a fraction of what she needs, so she sells her hair on Christmas Eve to get the money.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Della thinks the watch chain will be the perfect gift for Jim.</td>
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<td>3. Jim thinks Della will be happy with the combs she has admired for so long.</td>
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