



## A FEMINIST APPROACH TO O'HENRY'S SHORT STORY- "THE GIFT OF THE MAGI"

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**Abstract:** Society has created not only the differences but inequalities between men and women, which were neither natural nor pre-ordained. Family, religious institutions, education, arts and other social and cultural structures are reiterating these inequalities since long. To do away with these deep-rooted injustice and inequalities, there emerged a movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which is known as feminism.

Feminism, simply, is the belief in full social, economic and political equality for women. The key assumption of feminism is that society pre-determines the gender- roles and women are trained to fit into these roles. However, feminist approach means an analytic approach that uses the stance of feminism to read or view any cultural practice or artifact. I like to present O'Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" with the predominance of love and sacrifice which, however, opaquely gives us glimpses of how women are trained to fit into the roles of the so-called "feminine gender".

**Key words:** feminism, feminist approach, equality, gender-roles.

**Introduction:** The creator of any cultural artifact or texts, knowingly or unknowingly, naturalizes the inequality between the sexes through their representation. They try to stereotypically represent the women as weak and vulnerable object or, frankly speaking, a procreating machine. Such representation can also be seen, though in a benign manner, in the aforementioned work of O’Henry.

**Feminist approach to “The Gift of the Magi”:** O’Henry’s beautiful short story “The Gift of the Magi” centres around two main protagonists- Jim and Della. He cleverly shows both the characters as important as far as the plot of the story is concerned. However, when we go through the story, the slightly stereotypical representation of the characters becomes visible.

In the story, Della is shown as a loveable character. At times, she is also shown as hysterical and over-reacting which are traditionally been identified as feminine character:

“White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then; alas! A quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.”

Della is a selfless but loving character. She has spent a lot of time just thinking of what to get her husband on Christmas:

“... She had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. 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....”

As shown in the story, Della lives for one thing only- her husband, Jim. She spends all her day in a congested flat, as “mistress of the home”:

“There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl.”

As we progress through the story, we might clearly gather that Della spent all her energy just to make Jim happy. She has been saving every penny just to gift her husband a lovely present on Christmas. She has even endured the silent imputation of parsimony or stinginess in the stores.

Though Jim could not provide Della with a proper house, he could not even bring much money, Della always treat him as exceptionally excellent person and admired him highly. For Della, he is the epitome of excellence and thus he deserves the finest of gifts :

“Something fine and rare and sterling- something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.”

Della goes to the extent of selling off her most prized possession- her long beautiful hair to buy the best gift for her husband. She doesn't even think of it deeply :

“I had my hair cut-off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It will grow out again- you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it.”

Thus, the characteristics of feminine-gender are clearly visible in the character of Della. Her unwavering intention to make her husband happy, her respect and admiration for her husband, lack of financial independence- all reflect the traditionally acknowledged characters of a women. Della doesn't have any possession to sell apart from her long hair.

At this juncture, we must notice that Della's long beautiful hair is her only prized possession which is something traditionally characterized as feminine. After selling off her hair, she looks like a boy. Even in such a condition, she doesn't care about her looks, she only worries that this change in her looks will be repulsive to Jim :

“Please God, make him think I am still pretty.”

Here, we get a clear indication that a relation, intensely intimate, might depend on the separation of traditional masculine and feminine roles. Della feels worried about how she will look for Jim more than she cares about the loss of her cascade like hair. When she is more concerned about her appearance in front of a man, she becomes a traditionally feminine stereotype.

In conclusion we can say that Dell's whole –hearted devotion to her man, her act of putting every bit of energy to make her husband happy, sacrifice of her only prized possession- her long cascade-like hair- all characteristics of the roles traditionally apprehended as feminine. O'Henry portrays Della as she lives only for her husband. But he also portrays Jim as he might live only for Della too. After all he sacrifices his watch- which

is very precious as it has been passed down through his family and ancestors. In this case, we can say that though Della and Jim play different roles, their relationship is made up of equality and equal devotion. However, the point is that Jim has at least something which comes down to him from his family. But Della has no such things except her long hair. This brings home the issue of identity. Della, being a woman, lives only as a wife and thus she has nothing that hereditarily came down to her.

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