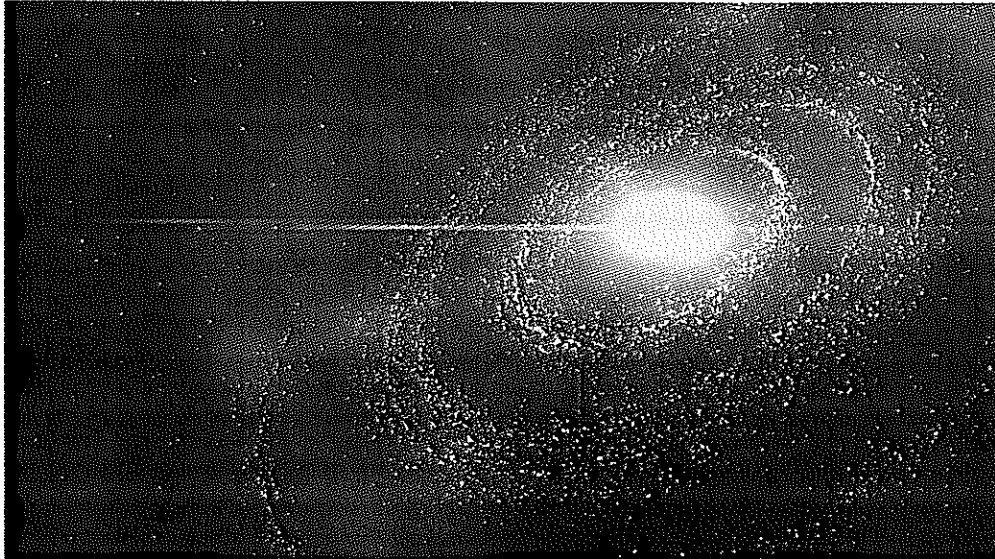


## 4 The Short Story: Plot, Point of View, and Tone



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### Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Explain the basics of plot structure and analyze the plot of a short story.
- Identify point of view and analyze its use in a short story.
- Identify tone and analyze the use of irony in a short story.
- Analyze the themes and concepts of "The Gift of the Magi."

*"The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms."*

—Muriel Rukeyser, American writer, from *The Speed of Darkness*, 1958

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## 4.1 Plot

**Plot** is a connecting element in fiction, a sequence of interrelated, conflicting actions and events that typically build to a climax and bring about a resolution. In short stories, plot captures your attention from the moment circumstances set conflict in motion. As you follow each new twist in the action, your emotions intensify and your interest in the outcome increases. In this way, plot makes the story cohesive; it holds it together. Through the plot, you learn what happens. Even when you encounter an unexpected ending, you will find by carefully rereading the story—if it's a good one—that the final event is not tacked on but can be accounted for by various details in the action and characterization leading up to that point.

Put another way, plot gives a story structure. It creates order: a beginning, middle, and end in a story's organization. And in doing so, plot often reflects unpredictable patterns that are common in our lives. As Chaim Potok explained, a plot cannot be entirely anticipated, even by its author. "If I had a plot that was all set in advance," he said, "why would I want to go through the agony of writing the novel? A novel is a kind of exploration and discovery, for me at any rate" (Potok, 1999). The classic plot structure consists of the following components, which are also diagrammed in Figure 4.1:

**Exposition:** Describes the setting; provides background details and introduces the characters

**Rising action:** Conflicts and circumstances that build to a high point of tension in a story

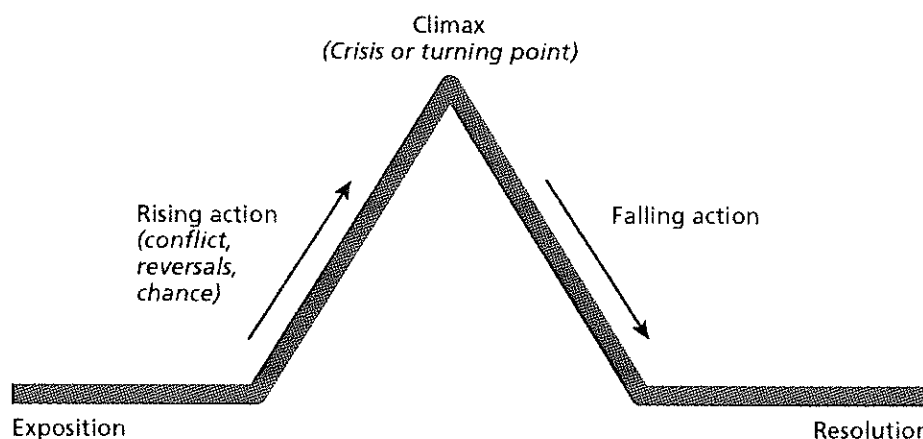
**Climax:** The high point of tension that becomes the story's turning point—the point at which the outcome of the conflict is determined

**Falling action:** Reduces intensity following the climax in a story, allowing the various complications to be worked out

**Resolution:** The outcome of the action in a story

**Figure 4.1** Classic plot structure

The classic plot structure includes exposition, rising action, a climax, falling action, and a resolution.



The length and importance of each component in Figure 4.1 may vary. In some stories, the exposition is

accomplished in a single, descriptive paragraph. In other stories, where a lot of information is required in order to understand the opening action, exposition is more extensive. Normally, the climax occurs near the end of the story, making the falling action relatively short. In some stories, the climax is also the resolution, with no action after the climax is reached.

**Conflict** is the struggle that shapes the plot in a story. It may be primarily external (person against person) or it may be internal (struggles within the characters). Sometimes the conflict consists of a character's battle, against a force of nature, tradition, destiny, or even **fate**.

When fate intervenes, the action in the plot is controlled by an outside source. A classic example occurs in the play *Oedipus Rex*, in which the forces of fate determine that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. When Oedipus learns of this prophecy, he deliberately sets out to avoid circumstances that would lead to such horrifying outcomes, but he finds he cannot escape the hand of fate. Using fate or coincidence can make the plot unrealistic and improbable, however, so such techniques have to be used carefully in order to be effective.

Particularly when there is protracted conflict between characters and uncertainty about how it will be resolved, a writer may offer hints about the final outcome. This technique is known as **foreshadowing**. Conversely, by using **flashbacks**, descriptions of circumstances that occurred prior to the action in the story, a writer can give the reader background information relevant to the particular conflict the character is now facing. This technique can intensify the dramatic tension in the story.

Not all plots contain conflicts with dramatic action. Instead of following *what's happening* blow by blow in the plot, the reader has to give attention to *what's being revealed*. For example, Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (discussed in Chapter 2) does not have a high-action plot, but that does not mean conflict is absent. After the announcement of the death of the protagonist's husband at the beginning, there is little evident action, only a description of the woman's behavior, culminating in a detailed explanation of her "bright moment of enlightenment." Internal conflict holds the story together and prepares the reader for the **epiphany**—a character's sudden, profound personal discovery that helps to convey the meaning of the story.

So, as you read short stories, look for both kinds of plots: the plot that grabs attention through *what's happening* and builds to an action-driven climax and resolution, and the more subtle plot that requires watching for *what's being revealed* through explorations of social, psychological, and spiritual aspects of human dilemmas.

## 4.2 Point of View

**Point of view** refers to who tells the story—the perspective of the narrator who will present the action to the reader. When you read a story, you are sensing everything in it through the narrator. It's important to remember that, whether the narrator is inside the story or looking on from outside the action, the author creates the narrator's voice to suit the purposes of the particular story. The narrator's view of the action is not necessarily the view of the author.

The use of **first-person point of view** occurs in a story when the narrator is a character in the story and tells the story from his or her perspective.

The main character is most often the narrator, although minor characters can be effective narrators who serve to describe and interpret the actions of the central character. Even though first-person point of view is limited in that it presents only what the narrator knows and experiences, this approach can be both intimate and powerful. In Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby Dick*, the main character, Ishmael, narrates his own obsessive hunt for the great white whale. In John Updike's "A & P," (discussed in Chapter 1), everything we learn about the action in the story is told to us by Sammy, the teenage checkout clerk: a first-person point of view.

### Difference Between the Narrator and the Author of the Story

Adam Deutsch, Instructor of English at Ashford University, explains why every literary work should be seen to have a life and meaning beyond the author bio.

#### Critical Thinking Questions

- Do you agree with Professor Deutsch that a literary work has a life "beyond" the author?
- What does Deutsch mean when he says that different contexts—such as historical or spiritual—should be considered when reading a literary work?

Note that expressions made by a first-person narrator speaking as a "character" in the story may not be totally reliable; they may represent only a limited view of that character. In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout Finch is a first-person narrator, and some of the events in the story happen when she is only six years old. However, she tells the story as an adult, recalling these past events and feelings with a more mature outlook. As a result, the reliability of her perspective is increased. By comparison, Sammy in "A & P" has some perceptions of his boss, the store manager, that sharpen the conflict in the story but are not wholly reliable.

**Third-person point of view** occurs when the narrator tells the story using third-person pronouns (he, she, they) to refer to the characters. Normally, the third-person narrator is external to the story, not a character in it. Third-person has two forms: omniscient point of view and objective point of view.

- **Omniscient point of view**—An all-knowing point of view, evident when an external narrator has access to the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in a story
- **Limited omniscient point of view**—Occurs when a narrator has access to the thoughts and feelings of only one character in a story
- **Objective point of view**—A detached point of view, evident when an external narrator does not enter into the mind of any character in a story but takes an objective stance, often to create a dramatic effect

Alice Walker's "The Welcome Table" (discussed in Chapter 2) is told from a third-person omniscient point of view, as is evident in the opening paragraph:

The old woman stood with eyes uplifted in her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes: high shoes polished about the tops and toes, a long rusty dress adorned with an old corsage, long withered, and the remnants of an elegant silk scarf as head rag stained with grease from the many oily pigtailed underneath. Perhaps she had known suffering. There was a dazed and sleepy look in her aged blue-brown eyes. But for those who searched hastily for "reasons" *in that old tight face*, shut now like an ancient door, *there was nothing to be read*. And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; *a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known*. Some of those who saw her there on the church steps spoke words about her that were hardly fit to be heard, others held their pious peace; and *some felt vague stirrings of pity, small and persistent and hazy*, as if she were an old collie turned out to die.

The details italicized above illustrate the depth of insight that the narrator has about the people in the story who are watching the old woman. It is clear that the narrator is aware of their thoughts. The onlookers cannot understand the old woman's intentions: "in that old tight face . . . there was nothing to be read." The narrator also is aware of their feelings. After indicating that the onlookers have a general feeling of fear, "a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known," the all-knowing narrator reveals other feelings: "some felt vague stirrings of pity, small and persistent and hazy." As the story continues, the narrator also delves into the inner thoughts and feelings of the old woman.

Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is told from a third-person point of view with limited omniscience. The narrator provides insightful glimpses into Mrs. Mallard's thoughts and feelings, but there is no exploration of the inner thoughts of the other characters. With action in the story so limited, the reader is fascinated by what is happening in Mrs. Mallard's mind as she senses freedom from her husband's repression and the exhilaration of an entirely new life. Her anticipation creates interest in how she will put her thoughts into action and deepens the ambiguity associated with her death at the end of the story.

## 4.3 Tone and Irony

Tone is the attitude reflected by the author in a literary work. In developing tone, an author has many choices: At one extreme, tone can be somber or solemn; at the other extreme, tone can be light or playful. Other "tone words" include descriptive words such as jovial, condescending, critical, matter-of-fact, cynical, intimate, and direct (forthright). In determining tone, ask yourself, "What is the author's *attitude* toward the reader or the action in this story?"

Writers use **irony** by creating a contradiction in words or actions. For example, the author may deliberately give the reader reasons to expect a certain outcome, only to surprise the reader with a wholly different ending. This is what happens in O. Henry's story "Gift of the Magi." The author uses **situational irony**, in which a situation ends very differently than expected, and **verbal irony**, in which words are used to convey a meaning that is the opposite of their conventional meaning. Another common type of irony is **dramatic irony**, which occurs when the reader or audience knows more about the action than the character involved.

## 4.4 Illustrating Elements of Plot, Point of View, Tone, and Irony

### William Sydney Porter (1862–1910)

William Sydney Porter, best known by his pen name O. Henry, is recognized as an outstanding short story writer. After early years and basic schooling in North Carolina, he worked as a rancher and a bank teller. Accused of embezzling bank funds, he was arrested and imprisoned for three years, despite his plea of innocence. While he was in prison, he began writing short stories using the pseudonym O. Henry. *Cabbages and Kings* was his first book of tales, to which he added 12 volumes before his death from alcoholism at the age of 48. His use of surprise endings in his short stories, what he called a "snapper" ending, is a feature that makes them memorable.



© Bettmann/CORBIS

### *The Gift of the Magi*<sup>1</sup> ([http://content.thuzelearning.com/books](http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1)

[/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1](http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1))

O. Henry (1906)

- i One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.
- i There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

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. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy<sup>2</sup> (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1>) squad.

- i In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

<sup>i</sup> The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. 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 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. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

<sup>i</sup> Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the queen of Sheba<sup>3</sup>  
<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1>  
lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon<sup>4</sup>  
<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1>  
been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

i So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mme.<sup>5</sup>

<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/AUENG125.14.1/sections/navpoint-24#ch04fn1>

Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

i She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

i When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered:

"Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed 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.

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as

well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

i Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

i Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

i 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.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

<sup>i</sup> "Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

<sup>i</sup> The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

*This selection is in the public domain.*

<sup>1</sup> In the biblical story of Jesus' birth, the Magi are the three wise men (kings from the East) who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

<sup>2</sup> The practice of begging.

<sup>3</sup> Ruler of an ancient Middle Eastern region referred to in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>4</sup> A biblical king who ruled the Kingdom of Israel 900 years before the beginning of the Christian Era (BCE).

<sup>5</sup> Abbreviation for "Madame" in French (married woman).

## RESPONSE AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The narrator looks at the events of the story from outside; we see the people and events as the narrator sees them. What is the main point that the narrator wants to communicate through the story?
2. Examine the last paragraph in the story. In it, the narrator addresses the reader directly. Do you think this paragraph is necessary? What is gained by the narrator's reference, or **allusion**, to the biblical Christmas story?

### Exploring Plot

3. What event initiates the rising action in this story?
4. Identify the other actions that advance the plot. Are all of them credible—that is, likely to happen in ordinary life?

### Exploring Tone and Irony

5. What is the tone (the attitude of the author toward the reader or subject) in the story? (Recall that

tone words are descriptive words such as somber, playful, foreboding, judgmental, matter-of- fact, or jovial.)

6. Irony is used in this story to identify and emphasize character as well as theme. Which strong character traits of Della and Jim are revealed through irony?

### **Journey into Literature Game: The Land of the Short Story**

Now that you've finished reading "The Gift of the Magi," take a journey to the Land of Short Stories to interact with the characters and delve further into the theme of the story!

## **Examples of Irony**

**Situational Irony:** Irony experienced through a change in circumstances. It is created in a story when the outcome of an episode or circumstance is the opposite of what was expected.

O. Henry appears to be taking a straightforward approach to the subject of gift giving (and how it can express love relationships). When Della sells her hair to buy a gift for Jim, both she and the reader expect that its use will be a continual reminder of her love—but O. Henry's plot prevents this outcome. Similarly, when Jim buys the combs for

Della, he expects that she will wear them as an expression of love—but, ironically, she does not have enough hair left to hold them. This is a classic example of situational irony.

**Verbal Irony:** Irony experienced through verbal exchanges. It is created in a story when a character or narrator intentionally uses words to express the opposite of what they actually mean.

The word *wise* in the last paragraph of "Gift of the Magi" is an example of verbal irony: "But in a last word to the wise of these days." The narrator uses *wise* here to describe people, unlike Della and Jim, whose carefully ordered lives prevent them from giving (and expressing their love) exuberantly. What such culturally driven people lack, the narrator implies, is an understanding of how to be truly wise about selfless giving.