

UNIT III

SHORT STORIES: WARMING UP

Even the most serious and grave among us would not think of saying no to stories. All of us have listened to and told stories. Why are we drawn to these constructs called stories? We can say humour, magic, adventure, supernatural elements etc. Right we are in saying so for, without them we will not bother to listen to or read them. But looking at stories carefully or to be precise the people, the characters in them, we become interested in what happens to them or how they change as the stories progress in narration. Even in a story full of magic we cannot enjoy it unless it shows what happens to a character when confronted thus. So, we value a story first for its event value and then its character (behaviour) value.

Now, this has parallels to the way we process events and people in real lives. At home, among relatives and why even in organisations and offices people talk invariably gathers around events and people's behaviour. Next time in a conversation, look at what you talk about and you will understand why we become so interested in these verbal constructs called stories. The techniques of narration in the stories have correspondences to the way we perceive, understand and interpret ourselves, other people and the world we live in. If success or failure in life depends on how intelligent we are in processing and structuring our experiences, the stories then are simulated exercises to enhance our understanding. Do not treat stories as mere pieces of amusement and enjoyment. Never allow them to fill you in, making you a passive receiver. Interact with them; carry on a critical dialogue. They are like a mirror. Like a mirror that shows a curious little odd shape in one of your ears hitherto unnoticed, you will be able to recognize certain peculiarities, oddities and sometimes strength in yourself by actively participating in the process of the story. In the stories, we have the format all of us use to make, store, possess and remake our identities, selves – working notions about others, the world and us.

THE AVENGER

ANTON CHEKHOV

LINK

Indecisiveness is something all of us have experienced sometime or the other – at a crossroads not knowing which one to take. Though the story by Chekhov is apparently about marital infidelity, the tone indicates otherwise. All you have to do is to look at the opening sentence and its matter-of-fact reporting style. Marital infidelity is a theme associated with violent, vengeful feelings and even a kind of primitive justice. But Chekhov deliberately trivializes such a situation, concentrating on Sigaev's lack of comprehension of the situation and indecisiveness. The latter is indicated by the numerous options he toys with. This is an instance of defensive thinking where we think, find logic to feel comfortable with our weaknesses and incapacities. Whatever the situation, Chekhov's intention is to bring out this general human weakness. And this weakness is something most of us practise in abundance. Now read the story to understand this weakness not to adopt but to devise strategies to overcome.

THE AVENGER

ANTON CHEKHOV

TEXT

As soon as Fedor Sigaev found out that his wife was unfaithful to him, he decided to avenge himself, and for that purpose he paid a visit to the shop of Schmucks & Co., dealers in all kinds of firearms, and asked the man to show him a good revolver. His face expressed anger, sorrow and irrevocable decision.

'I know what I am about to do,' he thought. 'My honour has been trodden in the mud, the sanctity of the family outraged, and wickedness is triumphant; therefore I, as a good citizen and an honest man, must appear as the avenger. First I shall slay my wife and her lover, then myself.'

He had not, as yet, bought a revolver, nor had he shot anyone, but his imagination already pictured to him the ghastly wounds he would inflict, the crowds of people and the scenes at the inquest. With the **malignity** of a deeply offended man he imagined the horror of his relatives and the public in general, the mortal agony of his faithless wife, and even saw in his mind's eye the large headings in the papers and the long editorials treating the breaking up of family life.

The shopman, an active little man with a paunch and white vest, displayed before him on the counter several revolvers, and with a deferential smile upon his lips, continually scraping with his feet, said:

I would advise *you*, sir, to take this splendid revolver. The newest make of Smith-Wesson. It is the latest thing in firearms; it has six chambers with an extractor, just look at its beautiful workmanship. The very latest, sir. We sell dozens every day for defence against marauders, wolves, and the wreckers of family happiness. The bullet strikes surely and powerfully, can hit at a considerable distance, and kills outright the faithless wife and her lover. As to suicides, I can assure *you*, sir, that I know of no better make ...'

The man lowered and lifted it in the air, pulled the trigger, took aim, and handled the weapon lovingly as if he could not contain his enthusiasm. Looking at his **rapturous face** one could think that he would gladly have sent a bullet through his head if he only possessed a revolver of such beautiful workmanship as Smith-Wesson's. 'What is the price of one?' asked Sigaev.

'Forty-five roubles.'

'Mm! It is too expensive!'

'In that case, I will offer *you* one of another make, a cheaper one. We have a large assortment at different prices. For instance, this revolver is of a French make. The price is only eighteen roubles, but -- (the man's face expressed contempt) -- this make is an old-fashioned one, it is bought now only by intelligent proletarians and by women **cranks**. To commit suicide or to shoot one's wife with such a revolver is considered now a sign of vulgarity. Polite society recognises only Smith-Wesson.'

'I am not going to kill anyone or to commit suicide. I simply need a revolver to frighten away thieves from my summer cottage,' Sigaev gloomily lied.

'It is none of our business what *you* are buying a revolver for,' said the man, modestly lowering his eyes. 'If we should try to find out the reasons in every case we should be compelled, sir, to close our shop. For frightening away thieves this revolver is no good, sir, because it produces a dull, weak sound. I would suggest that you buy one which is generally used, the **Mortimer pistol** or, as it is commonly known, the **duelling pistol**.'

'Would it not be a good idea to call him out?' ran through Sigaev's head like lightning. 'But no, that would be too much honour -- such a beast ought to be killed outright like a rabid dog!'

The man, gracefully turning and scraping his feet put before him a whole heap of revolvers without ceasing to smile and to chat. But somehow a Smith-Wesson seemed to Sigaev more desirable and **imposing** than the rest. He took one of them in his hands and sank into thought. His imagination pictured to him how he would fire through her head and the blood would pour in torrents from the wound, over the carpets and parquet-floor, and how the dying traitress would writhe in mortal agony.

'That would not do,' he thought. 'I should do much better to kill him and myself -- her I

will spare. Let her live and suffer all the harrowing pangs of remorse, and suffer the contempt of all who come in contact with her. That would be much worse for a nervous, over-sensitive nature like hers than death.'

And he pictured to himself his funeral: he, the offended one, was lying in his coffin with a gentle smile on his lips, and she, pale and worn-out with remorse, walked in his funeral cortege like a **veritable** Niobe, and did not know where to hide from the contemptuous glances the highly indignant people threw at her.

'I see, sir, that you like Smith-Wesson best,' the clerk suddenly disturbed him in his dreams. 'If the price seems too high to you, I am willing to let you have it five roubles cheaper. Besides, we have still other makes, slightly cheaper.'

The little man turned gracefully to the shelves and took down another dozen revolvers.

'Here is one for thirty roubles. That is not dear, if you consider that our currency has fallen terribly and the import duty on foreign makes is becoming higher with every day. 'Pon my honour, sir, I am a conservative by nature and even I begin to grumble. Judge for yourself, sir, things have come to such a pass that only the rich can allow themselves the luxury of a good revolver! The poor must satisfy themselves with revolvers of cheap Russian make, namely, those which are made in Tula, and the Tula make is a misfortune! You fire at your wife with such a revolver and hit your own shoulder.'

Sigaev suddenly felt very sorry that he would not live to see the sufferings of the traitress. Revenge is only sweet when one can see and gloat at one's enemy's sufferings. What good would his revenge do him when he would lie in his grave and not see the havoc it had wrought?

'Would it not be better,' he thought, 'to kill *him* first, be present at *his* funeral and only kill myself afterwards? But I should be arrested long before that and my revolver would be taken away from me. And so: I will kill him, her I will spare, and I -- I will not commit suicide at first, but will let myself be arrested instead. There is always time enough to kill oneself. An arrest would give me an opportunity to show the jury and society in general the whole baseness of her conduct. If I should be fool enough to kill myself, she would probably succeed, with her characteristic boldness and natural aptitude for lying and prevaricating, to clear herself of all guilt and put all blame on me, and society would perhaps justify her action, and who knows, probably laugh at me; if, on the contrary, I should remain alive, then ...'

A moment later he thought:

'Yes, and besides, if I should kill myself I should probably be accused and suspected of being prompted by a petty impulse. And, in truth, why should I kill myself? Besides, to shoot oneself would be to confess cowardice. And so I will kill him, and will leave her alive. As to myself, I shall be arrested. On the trial she would have to figure as a witness. I can easily imagine her confusion when questioned by my lawyer! The sympathy of the

press and the public would in such a case undoubtedly be on my side.'

He considered and the salesman continued to display before him his goods and dutifully to entertain his customer.

'Here are some revolvers of English make which we received but a short time ago, but I assure you that they pale to nothing before the Smith-Wesson. The other day -- you, of course, have seen it in the papers -- an army officer bought from us a revolver of the Smith-Wesson make. He fired at his wife's seducer and -- what do you suppose? -- the bullet went right through his chest, then it went through a bronze lamp, then the piano, from the piano it rebounded, killing a spaniel and wounding the wife. A splendid feat, and one which does honour to our firm. The officer is now under arrest. Of course, he will be found guilty and sentenced to a number of years of penal servitude in Siberia. That is, first, because our laws are too antiquated, and, secondly, because the jury is almost in every instance over-partial to the seducer. Why? Because the judges, jury and public prosecutor all have a weakness for breaking the tenth commandment, and they do not care in the least if there be one husband less in Russia. As to society I really believe it would enjoy nothing better than the deportation of all husbands to Saghalin. Oh, sir, you cannot imagine what a feeling of indignation fills my heart when I think of the deplorable state of our contemporary morals. Why, to love the wife of another is just as much **in vogue** as to smoke someone else's cigars or to read someone else's books. Our trade is falling off every year more and more. That does not mean that family life has become purer and the breaking of the tenth commandment rarer but simply that the husbands are reconciled to their fate and are afraid of the courts and of penal servitude.'

The clerk looked about cautiously and whispered:

'And whose fault is it, sir? Why, only the Government's.'

'...Where is the wisdom of going to Saghalin on account of such a hog?' thought Sigaev. 'If I should be sent to Siberia, my wife would be free to marry again, and to betray her second husband and she would be triumphant. And so, her I shall not kill, myself, also not; *him* I shall also not kill. I must find another way to revenge myself -- one more sensible and more painful. I will pay them with contempt and will institute against her divorce proceedings in which her scandalous conduct will be shown before all the world and she be forever disgraced.'

'Here, sir, is still another make,' said the man, taking down a new dozen revolvers. 'I ask you to turn your attention to the peculiar mechanism of the lock.'

Sigaev, after his decision, no longer needed a revolver, and wished nothing better than to get out of the shop. The salesman in the meanwhile waxed more and more enthusiastic, and did not tire of displaying his goods.

The offended husband felt conscience-stricken at the sight of the salesman, who was giving himself so much trouble displaying his wares, smiling, turning, scraping, and

trying with all his might to please him, the *customer*. ‘Very well, in that case,’ he muttered, ‘I will call later on, or – or will send someone.’

He endeavoured not to see the expression on the shopman’s face, but, to smooth out at least a little the awkward position to which he had brought himself, he felt it necessary to buy something. But what? He looked around the walls of the shop, wishing for something cheap, and his eyes rested upon a net which hung near the door.

‘This – what is this?’ he asked.

‘That is a net for catching quail.’

‘What is the price of it?’

‘Eight roubles, sir.’

‘I will take one.’ The offended husband paid the eight roubles, took the net, and left the shop.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860 – 1904) gave the short story form respectability and intellectual status. The simple plots in his stories dwell on the lives of ordinary people. ‘The Duel’ and ‘Gooseberries’ are some of his well-known short stories.

GLOSSARY

avenge	- to punish somebody for a wrong done to you
irrevocable	- that cannot be changed
trodden	- walked upon
sanctity	- the state of being very important
outraged	- shocked and angry
triumphant	- very successful in a way that causes great satisfaction
ghastly	- very frightening and unpleasant
inflict	- to make someone suffer something unpleasant
inquest	- an official investigation

malignity	- a strong desire to harm someone
deferential	- behaviour showing that you respect
splendid	- excellent
marauder	- one who goes around a place in search of things to steal or people to attack
rapturous	- expressing extreme pleasure
rouble	- the unit of money in Russia
contempt	- the feeling that someone/something is without value and deserves no respect
proletarian	- ordinary people who make money by working
crank	- a person with ideas that other people consider strange
imposing	- impressive to look at; making a strong impression
parquet	- a floor covering made of flat pieces of wood fixed together in a pattern
traitress	- feminine for traitor; a person who betrays friends, country
harrowing	- very shocking or frightening and making you feel upset
remorse	- the feeling of being extremely sorry for a wrong done
indignant	- showing anger and surprise because you think you have been treated unfairly
prevaricate	- to avoid giving a direct answer to a question in order to hide the truth
aptitude	- natural ability or skill at doing something
impulse	- a sudden strong wish
servitude	- the condition of being a slave
deportation	- forcing somebody to leave the country, usually because they have broken the law
vogue	- a fashion for something

hog - a pig

quail - a small brown bird whose meat and egg are used for food

FIND OUT

Why did Sigaev want to kill his wife?

Where did he go for the purpose?

How did Sigaev respond to the price of a Smith-Wesson?

The shopkeeper does not talk much. _____(True or False)

There are different revolvers for different purposes. _____ (True or False)

Who talks more, the shopkeeper or Sigaev?

What does Sigaev end up buying instead of the revolver?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Sigaev keeps changing his decisions throughout the story?
2. Do you think the opening sentence strikes the keynote for a revenge story?
3. How serious, do you think, Sigaev is in carrying out his intended revenge?
4. What kind of assessment would you make of Sigaev's character based on the contrast of the revolver he wanted to buy and the net he ended up buying?
5. What is the cultural background suggested by the situation in the story?
6. What argument would you prefer contrasting Sigaev's intention to murder and his buying the net to avoid embarrassment?

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

- i. In the two one-act plays you read dialogues in which the listener responded to what the speaker said. In the short story 'The Avenger' there is supposedly a conversation.
- ii. Who does the most talking in the story and how much of it is really listened to?

- iii. In other words, does one listen to the other or are they lost in their respective thought domains?

Is the communication in the conversation a failure or a success?

CHECK WHETHER YOU READ IT RIGHT

SAY TRUE OR FALSE:

- i. Sigaev wanted to buy a revolver in order to protect himself. _____
- ii. Sigaev trusted his wife. _____
- iii. The shopkeeper lists out the constructive uses revolvers can be put to.

- iv. Smith-Wesson is the name of a handsome young man. _____
- v. Sigaev does not mind the cost of the revolvers. _____
- vi. Sigaev buys the net with the sole intention of catching quails and eating them. _____

GIVE THE SYNONYMS OF THE FOLLOWING

gentle	gracefully
several	honour
wicked	terribly
outraged	outright
enthusiasm	triumphant

REWRITE AS DIRECTED

CHANGE INTO INDIRECT SPEECH

‘Here, Sir, is still another make,’ said the man.

‘It is none of our business what you are buying a revolver for?’ said the man.

ACTIVITIES

- i. Make a table to recognize and list the verbs, nouns and adjectives and adverbs.
- ii. Study the use of Tense in this story.

Past Tense in narration

Dominance of Present Tense in the shopkeeper's conversation.

Future Tense (Prospective) in Sigaev's monologues.

MODEL QUESTIONS

- i. Describe the behaviour of the shopkeeper. (100 words)
- ii. Explain how Sigaev convinces himself into deciding not to carry out revenge. (250 words)

The Gift of the Magi

O. Henry

Link

Gifts are an essential aspect of human living. All of us have given and received gifts. Though some value the cost of the gift, we know a gift is meant as a token of affection, a way of saying, 'I care for you.' It may seem a very ordinary thing since giving gifts has become a convention but when you look at the spirit behind the act you realize what a piece of social engineering it is. What a way to express love and affection, nurture and sustain relationships! The short story here demonstrates how the practice of giving gifts leads to expression of wonderful love the couple have for each other and a sense of sacrifice.

Talking of 'Sacrifice' does it not strike us as a word almost half-forgotten? We do not seem to be using that word often now a day. Can it be that we have stopped believing in it? May be. The idea is abstract and could be another invention of the human mind that has lost its relevance. But, look at the following piece of information and go back to thinking on sacrifice.

Two rhesus monkeys were used in an experiment to find out whether altruistic behaviour is possible in them. They were put in separate cages. The first cage had a lever which when pulled brought in food for the monkey in that cage. The lever was electrically connected to the other cage and the pull for food gave the monkey there an electric shock. Observing the agony of his companion, the monkey in the first cage stopped pulling the lever and preferred to starve even for days rather than cause suffering.

Discuss

Remember from your life an experience of giving or receiving a gift. Describe the experience in a paragraph or two and share it with the class.

Debate

Selfless Love, 'Sacrifice' – reality or myth? Debate.

TEXT

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

O. HENRY

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.

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 squad.

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."

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.

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 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 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.

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: "Mrs. 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 practised 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.

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.

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 prayer 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?”

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.

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.”

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 of 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.

“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.”

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.

Note on the Author

Popular and widely read, O. Henry's stories are known for their twisted endings, like the one we have in 'The Gift of the Magi.' Such ending is often referred to as the 'O. Henry Twist.' O. Henry is the pseudonym (pen name) of William Sydney Porter (1862-1910). *Sixes and Sevens*, *The Heart of the West* and *Rolling Stones* are some of his famous short story collections.

Glossary

Magi	: the three kings or wisemen from the east who, following the star came to see baby Jesus with gifts
bulldoze	: force
grocer	: one who sells food and other things used in the home
butcher	: one who sells meat
imputation	: belief
parsimony	: habit of spending very little
implied	: said indirectly
flop down	: to come down with a thud
shabby	: dirty
instigate	: cause something to happen
reflection	: careful thought
sob	: to cry noisily taking sudden, sharp breaths
sniffles	: breathing repeatedly and loudly through the nose while

crying

predominating	: exercising more influence
subside	: become calmer or quieter
beggar description	: an idiom meaning too extreme or shocking to believe or describe
mendicancy squad	: refers here to beggars
vestibule	: a small enclosed area in front of a house
appertaining	: belonging or referring to
pier-glass	: a glass that is vertical and thin
agile	: able to move quickly and easily
whirled	: turned around quickly
depreciate	: to become less valuable over a period of time
janitor	: care taker
cascade	: waterfall
faltered	: lost courage or strength
hashed	: mixed
ransacking	: searching
fob chain	: a chain to fasten the watch to the waist coat
meretricious	: looking attractive but actually false or untrue
on the sly	: doing something secretly
intoxication	: usually means the influence of alcohol; here refers to a state of excitement and pleasure
prudence	: wisdom, intelligence

curling irons	: iron tubes used to curl hair
ravages	: damages
mammoth	: an extinct animal that looked like a large hairy elephant; here it means huge.
truant schoolboy	: a schoolboy who stays away from school
setter	: a long haired dog, trained to help hunters to find birds or animals to shoot.
wriggled	: twisted one`s body with quick movements
yearned	: wanted very much
tresses	: a woman`s long hair
singed	: burnt

Get it Right

(Say true or false)

1. Della had 187 pennies.-----
2. Jim is now paid a salary of 30 dollars.-----
3. The couple did not have to pay rent for their flat.-----
4. Della and Jim wanted to buy gift for each other on the occasion of their wedding day.-----
5. Della was relieved to have sold her hair.-----
6. Jim was happy to see Della with her hair cut.-----
7. Della`s hair fetched 20 dollars-----
8. Jim`s present was a hair pin.-----
9. Della bought Jim a necklace.-----
10. Jim and Della were unwise in their sacrifice.-----

Discussion Questions

1. Focus on the first two sentences. What effect are they intended to create?
2. What kind of tone does the narrator adopt?
 - a. Serious
 - b. Sentimental

- c. Comic
- d. Trivial
- e. Ironic

Discuss and identify the tone.

3. What do you think is the authorial intention?
In other words what does he want to communicate?
4. How were you, as a reader, affected by the final, unexpected twist in the story?

Fill in the blanks and get the tense right. The verbs are given in brackets

The door----- (**open**) and Jim-----(**step**) in and -----(**close**) it. He -
-----(**look**) thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he -----(**is**) twenty-two --
and to be -----(**burden**) with a family. He ----- (**need**) a new overcoat and
he ----- (**is**) without gloves.

Rewrite the following as Directed

Change into indirect speech

1. "You say your hair is gone?" Jim told Della.
2. "Don't make any mistake, Dell," Jim said.
3. Della asked Mrs.Sofronie, ``Will you buy my hair?"

Change into Passive Voice

1. Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket.
2. The magi brought valuable gifts.
3. Della pulled down her hair

Give the synonyms of the following

gradual	hardly
prosperity	wonderful
contract	silent
accurate	unwrap
quickly	expensive

Use the following to make sentences

arrive at	gave way
on the look out	turned white

looked out
fluttered out

have one going a while

Activities

1. Look up the dictionary to find the meaning of the word ‘irony.’

Next, identify the ‘irony’ in ‘ The Gift of the Magi.’

The term ‘irony’ is not a mere literary term. All of us, as communicators, use them in our day to day living. It involves tone, words, situations, etc.

Your understanding of ‘irony’ in place, make a list of occasions you had used irony as a speaker or found yourself in ironic situations.

You may write on select occasions describing them and also how you felt about it.

2. “ Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor.”

These two sentences occur immediately after Della collects the money for her hair.

Now, what is a metaphor?

Difficult to answer? Well, most people would be at a loss to explain it, whereas the truth is all of us make metaphors and speak in them.

In the line quoted above the passing of time is compared to a winged bird or insect. This is done to enable us understand how Della felt searching for suitable gift.

The word ‘tripped’ suggests a state of being frantic and anxious and at the same time the words “rosy wings” do indicate a pleasurable experience. Della feels anxiety as well as thrill and pleasure simultaneously. The metaphor used may be mixed, but it successfully communicates the state the character is in.

What we learn from this is that metaphor is not simply a literary ornament but thought-making, language-making, idea-expressing device. We use it in our everyday conversations—metaphors are part of effective communicative behaviour.

The Coimbatore Tamil dialect is rich in metaphors. Try identifying metaphors or expressions with metaphorical quality in your speaking behaviour.

To give a simple example, in the Tamil expression “unmaiai kakkinan” (cz;ikiáf; ff;fpdhd;), you have a metaphor. The context is where investigation and interrogation are involved and the expression means that the suspect unable to withstand the pressure came out with the truth.

Now, when do we vomit? when unable to withstand the pressure from our stomach. Look at the aptness of expression and correspondence between what is conveyed and what it is compared to.

The English equivalent for this Tamil expression is “spilling the beans.”

A metaphor comprises a ‘Source Domain’ and a ‘Target Domain.’

Source Domain	-	Target Domain
Vomit, Physiological feature	-	forced to speak; psychological behaviour

There is a transfer from source domain to target domain

Metaphors help in communicating complex ideas. Hence essential to communication.

Look for metaphors in speech by you and others.

Why, you can even make your own metaphor. Go ahead and enjoy.

3. Take the sentence

‘Down rippled the brown cascade’

and rewrite it as

‘ The brown cascade rippled down.’

Compare the two and find out which is more effective.

The original has the normal word order changed.

The rewritten sentence is in normal order.

What does the author achieve by changing the word order?

4. Is the story 'The Gift of the Magi' dominated by short sentences or long sentences? Or, are they almost equal?

Count them to find out.

5. Read the following sentence from the text.

'Something fine and rare and sterling – something just a bit near to being worthy of the **honor of being owned** by Jim.'

'honor of being owned' – What is the sentiment here? Remember that O. Henry wrote this a century ago.

Do you, especially the women, approve of this sentiment? Go in for a debate.

6. Consult a dictionary or a reference book to know who Sheba and Solomon were.

Model Questions

1. Describe how Della decided to sell her hair and her visit to Mrs. Sofronie. (100 words)
2. Establish that Della and Jim are selfless lovers using events from the story. (250 words)

THE UNICORN IN THE GARDEN

JAMES GROVER THURBER

LINK

Is there any one among you who does not want to enjoy humour? The answer will be in the negative for, all of us love humour. Who could not want their stress lightened, hearts feel at ease and moods or spirits go up. We have shared and enjoyed humour in the company of friends. In lighter moods the digs and fun aimed at us are taken in good spirit.

There are various kinds of humour among which none of us would have missed the one involving mischief, cunning and cleverness. In a comic situation what otherwise could have been perceived as cruelty becomes laughable. Remember your Goundamanis, Senthils, Viveks and Vadivels, what they do to others or what is done to them, you will definitely have instances of cunning and trickery. Here, you have one such tale. Go ahead and enjoy it. You may, of course, later reflect on your enjoyment and try identifying the elements that constitute humour.

DISCUSSION

Discuss husband-wife relationship in groups of six. Each Group leader is to make a presentation.

TEXT

The Unicorn in the Garden

James Thurber

Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a *breakfast nook* looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white *unicorn* with a golden horn quietly *cropping* the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him.

"The unicorn is a *mythical* beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden. The unicorn was still there; now he was *browsing* among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man, and he pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it gravely. With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him coldly. "You are a *booby*," she said, "and I am going to have you put in the *booby-hatch*."

The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat down among the roses and went to sleep.

As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a *gloat* in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned a psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a *strait-jacket*. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest.

"My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning ." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a *solemn* signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time *subduing* her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

"Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." "That's all I wanted to know," said the psychiatrist. "Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is as *crazy as a jaybird*."

So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an *institution*. The husband lived happily ever after.

Moral: Don't count your boobies until they are hatched.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

A notable American humorist and cartoonist, **James Grover Thurber** (1894-1961), contributed interesting and popular cartoons and short stories to THE NEW YORKER, a reputed American magazine. Fables for Our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated (1940), Men, Women, and Dogs (1943), The Beast in Me and Other Animals (1948) and Further Fables for Our Time (1956) are some of his well-known works. 'The Unicorn in the Garden' is from the collection first mentioned. Mostly light and humorous, Thurber occasionally brings in serious reflection on life.

GLOSSARY

Unicorn - an animal (exists only in stories and fables) like a white horse

	with a long straight horn in its forehead
breakfast nook	- a little side room for eating breakfast
cropping	- (animals) biting off or eating parts of plants
mythical	- imaginary, not real
browsing	- eating leaves etc.
booby	- an insane person
booby-hatch	- mental asylum
gloat	- a look of happiness
strait-jacket	- a piece of clothing like a jacket used for controlling people mentally ill
solemn	- serious
psychiatrist	- a doctor who studies and treats mental illnesses
subduing	- bringing under control
as crazy as a jaybird	- an expression meaning 'extremely crazy'
institution	- here (a mental asylum)

CHECK WHETHER YOU READ IT RIGHT

1. The man was eating boiled eggs when he saw the unicorn. _____
(True or False)
2. His wife was busy cooking when he went up to meet her. _____
(True or False)
3. What is the meaning of the sentence "She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him?"

PICK OUT THE CORRECT ANSWER

- a) The wife had only one eye.

- b) Her eyes were always unfriendly.
 - c) She opened only one eye at a time.
 - d) The relationship between the husband and the wife was strained.
4. What did the wife say when the husband said he saw a unicorn in the garden?
-

5. The husband offered the unicorn a carrot to eat. (True or False)
6. The unicorn had a _____(golden/iron) horn.
(Choose the correct word)
7. Was the unicorn a male or female? _____
(If you are not sure go back to the story and read it carefully)
8. Whom did the wife phone to?
-

9. Who signalled to the police to capture the woman?
-

10. Identify and write down the sentence spoken by the wife first and repeated later by the husband.
-

What do you infer?

Stories are interesting not because they tell everything. There are things left for the reader to supply in order to make enjoyment and understanding complete. In fact, by our guesses and inferences we participate in a story. In other words, our role as reader is crucial in making up the story. Answer the questions below to understand the way you made sense of the story.

1. What are your impressions of the husband and the wife?
2. What does the 'gloat' in the eye of the wife suggest?
3. Explain the plan and the counter-plan in the story.
4. In what sort of tales do we usually see the ending "They lived happily everafter?" How does this line contrast with "The husband lived happily everafter."

5. The concluding sentence (Moral) “Don’t count your boobies until they are hatched” is a play on a well-known expression. Find out the original expression.

TEXT TO CONTEXT

One-reason stories engage our attention is that they parallel our experience of life. Quite often we have found ourselves arguing about stories, and movies using our own life experiences. It is here that knowledge gained from texts and real-world knowledge intersect enlightening and enhancing each other. This is the site where your thinking abilities have to come to the fore. Keeping this in mind answer the question given below.

1. Do you sympathise with the wife or the husband? Write a justification of your stand.

Fill in the blanks and complete the passage

At a solemn _____ from the _____, the police _____ from their chairs and _____ the wife. They had a _____ time _____ her, for she _____ a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her.

Give the antonyms of the following

sunny -	slowly -	solemn -	coldly -
asleep -	gravely -	terrific -	
unfriendly -	liked -	crazy -	

Make sentences using the following

looked up

to turn one’s back

walked over

put up

as crazy as a jaybird

ACTIVITIES

1. Compare 'The Unicorn in the Garden' to the well-known *Panchathantra* tale involving the monkey and the crocodile, and analyse the trick-counter trick structure found in both. You may also make a list of similar stories known to you and your responses to them.
2. The husband in the story pretend to literally believe in something purely mythical. Ours is a land rich in myths and it is hence inevitable we come across people literally believing myths. Remember and compile such instances. You may, as well, make a list of mythical animals/beasts that capture your imagination.
3. The story can be divided thus:
 - event
 - people (behaviour)
 - structure

Now write down

- How you reacted to the event
- How you responded to the behaviour of the husband and the wife
- How the story is structured

The third exercise would demand that you keep track of your responses from the beginning to the end and identify the story element responsible for a particular response.

Model Questions

1. Give a description of the character of the wife. (100 words).
2. Explain how the husband outsmarts the wife. (250 words).
