

# On the Emotional Resonance in Gifts: A Discussion on the Materiality Writing in *The Gift of the Magi*

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**Abstract:** O. Henry's renowned short story *The Gift of the Magi* centers on "gifts" and tells the story of Della and Jim, a devoted couple who selflessly relinquish their most prized possessions to purchase Christmas presents for each other. When examined through the analytical lens of the "thing turn", the inanimate objects in the narrative transform into "animate entities" that bear profound symbolic meanings, exhibit a form of subjectivity, and engage in complex interactions with human characters. Analyzing *The Gift of the Magi*'s materiality-centered narrative through these three lenses does more than illustrate the dynamic, multifaceted bonds between objects and humans; it deconstructs the traditional anthropocentric worldview that centers humans, prompting a re-evaluation of the intricate ties between the material and human realms.

**Keywords:** *The Gift of the Magi*; Object; Materiality-Centered Narrative; Subjectivity.

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## 1. Enchantment: The Symbolism of Objects

As a symbol, objects are active participants in the narrative world, and the symbol itself serves as a medium for conveying meaning. Through symbolic activities, creators transform inner perceptions into external symbolic forms, thereby constructing a system of meaning accessible for interpretation by others. Objects possess a dual functionality, acting as both symbolic and material carriers. They participate in constructing the narrative world through the transformation mechanism from "objects to symbols". Zhao Yiheng's assertion that "in human society, any kind of use, or behaviour with a practical purpose, has a symbolic meaning" [1] is reflected in *The Gift of the Magi*. In the story, Della and Jim's "hair-platinum watch chain-combs" form a chain of substitution in terms of semiotics. Hair, as a symbolic object of femininity, is transformed into a symbol of marital fidelity through exchange behavior. As metaphors for middle-class identity, the watch chain and combs reflect an individual's symbolic imagination of a decent life facing material deprivation. As Tang Weisheng notes, "objects, including clothing, food, and shelter, play a crucial role in generating meaning for the narrative world." [2] These objects transcend their practical functions to become "object-symbol" entities in a specific social context. In addition, the metaphorical function of spatial symbols deserves equal attention. Objects such as the "shabby little couch" [3], "a furnished flat at \$8 per week," [3] "worn red carpet," [3] "a letter-box into which no letter would go," [3] and "an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring" [3] form a striking symbolic contrast. The former directly indicates the extreme material scarcity faced by the subjects, while the latter, through "functional failure", implies the survival difficulties of marginalized groups. The unused mailbox and telephones constitute a symbolic reservation of social expectations. This paradoxical state characterized by "anticipating presence" parallels "absurd consciousness". "It is precisely in this sense that it truly becomes a starting point-a journey from recognizing absurdity to breaking through it, not veering toward nihilism or despotism, but moving toward the

sincerity and happiness of life." [4] Such absurd consciousness finds a more concrete expression in *The Gift of the Magi*: the sacrificial acts of Della and her husband amid chaotic existence are, in essence, a symbolic rebellion against absurd reality. Through exchanging material objects, they elevate individual emotions into a cultural ritual, accomplishing a symbolic fusion of "consciousness and practice" amid the dual predicaments of material and spiritual hardship.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as American society transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy, the surge in consumer culture and capitalist market expansion led to significant social structural changes. This transformation not only reshaped the economic structure but also redefined women's social roles and identity mechanisms via symbolic objects. Zhao Yiheng has noted that social material symbols "signifying function is gradually strengthening, to the point where their practical utility is becoming less important." [5] This observation reveals the growing symbolic value within consumer culture. In the novel, the consumption behavior of Della vividly reflects the multifunctional role of objects as "a crucial criterion for social stratification and a fundamental mechanism generating social identities." [6] Della using "only \$1.87" [3] to purchase a platinum watch chain reflects microcosmically the consumption psychology during social transition. Her descriptions of her "mendicancy squad" [3]-like living environment and the detail that "expenses had been greater than she had calculated" [3] directly reveal her lower-class economic status. However, in stark contrast, she insists that gifts must be "fine and rare and sterling" [3] and is also good at "pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned." [3] This contrast essentially represents an individual's symbolic resistance against the social stratification system: The gold watch chain, as a middle-class identity symbol, serves as both Jim's compensatory affirmation for his social status and Della's symbolic practice in transcending economic constraints to construct her ideal identity. "Luxury goods have long been regarded as pivotal symbols through which consumers signal their

socioeconomic status.” [7] Confined to a life of financial straits, Della’s impulsive consumption thus serves not only as compensation for material deprivation but also as passive acquiescence to the societal notion that “success and identity must be displayed through consumption”. Della’s act of sacrificing her hair to exchange for a gift may seem like an emotional expression on the surface. However, in reality, it is essentially a way of confirming her self-worth through the symbolic value of objects. Image-sign perfectly achieves a closed-loop integration from consciousness to practice amidst material scarcity and the spiritual beliefs of the subject. Within the discourse system of consumer culture, women, through the selection and presentation of goods, are placed in a hierarchical social stratum and attempt to break through identity constraints via symbolic operations. The tension between women’s consumption desires, which often transcend their economic circumstances, and the stark reality forms a complex landscape in constructing female subjectivity, indicating that when goods’ general use gives way to connotative significance, consumption becomes a realm of meaningful activity for societal members. Della’s story is a typical example of this interplay.

In his short story *The Gift of the Magi*, O. Henry employs omniscient and external focalization, constructing a narrative paradigm where objects serve as a medium for gender equality. This narrative strategy echoes Gérard Genette’s classic narrative perspective classification and reflects the literary technique of “revealing profound meanings through simplicity.” [8] Genette notes that the omniscient perspective carries a “the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the characters knows.” [9] However, O. Henry’s “omniscient perspective is still merely a ‘single viewpoint’ narrative.” [10] Instead, it selectively reveals the novel’s plot progression, which guides readers to focus on the emotional reciprocity behind objects. Through this narrative pattern, O. Henry fully explores the novel’s plot progression in the story: Della’s internal conflict over sacrificing her hair to buy a platinum watch chain and Jim’s concealed motive for selling his ancestral watch to purchase combs are both presented within the omniscient narrative framework. Such a narrative choice is not an accident but a deliberate strategy to construct profound gender-equal relationships. Indeed, O. Henry’s narrative intervention in gender equality in *The Gift of the Magi* is revolutionary. Unlike traditional patriarchy, which places women in subordinate positions through the “subject-object” dualistic structure, O. Henry, through his narrative approach, constructs a model of equal dialogue based on the “subject-subject” framework. Della’s intense mental activities are vividly depicted by the omniscient perspective, such as when she sold her hair, as if “made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy.” [3] Meanwhile, the external perspective euphemistically describes Jim’s behavior: “Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake,” [3] implying his sacrifice. This narrative shift creates a sense of symmetry. The omniscient perspective ensures readers fully understand the sacrifices made by both parties. Moreover, the external perspective maintains necessary narrative suspense through its dialectical nature. Thus, gender equality is not confined to theoretical statements but is concretized into perceptible emotional practices.

Ultimately, through the dual operation of perspective shifts and object symbols, O. Henry accomplishes the gender-equal narrative reconstruction in *The Gift of the Magi*. This

perspectival strategy dissolves a monolithic subject’s narrative hegemony, allowing gendered images to achieve value equality within the ritual of object exchange, the platinum fob chain and hair combs, as symbols signifying middle-class identity, no longer adhere to a single gender but jointly form mutual affirmation of marital fidelity. As Zhang Hong argues, “Literature suggests rich content through concise techniques” [8]; the object exchange process precisely acts as a metaphorical vehicle subverting traditional gender roles. Such a metaphorical function realizes itself precisely through the mediating role of objects in this process. When objects are media linking gendered emotions, their material value gains symbolic significance, transcending economic attributes. Objects’ symbolic value surpasses their utility, becoming a gauge for emotional worth: the fob chain Della acquires by sacrificing her hair symbolizes her upholding her husband’s social status, while the combs Jim obtains by selling his gold watch metaphorize his cherishing his wife’s beauty. Thus, objects elevate from consumption objects to witnesses of equal relations. Della believes “something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim,” [3] and Jim insists “there’s anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less.” [3] This emotional equivalence, achieved through objects, shatters the traditional narrative stereotype where men act as gift-givers and women as recipients. When objects become a medium for gendered dialogue, and when sacrificial acts break the pattern of one-way giving, the novel transcends conventional love story boundaries, offering concrete enlightenment into real-world gender equality: true equality rests on mutual understanding and respect, while objects, as emotional carriers, stand as materialized witnesses to such equal relations.

## 2. Re-embrace: The Subjectivity of Objects

In literary narratives, while “objects” function as symbolic constructs reflecting writers’ consciousness, they possess an intrinsic ontology independent of human rationality; their inherent “objecthood” endures despite serving narrative purposes. This relation between noumenality and phenomena can be understood by examining the connection between the thing-in-itself and phenomena. “The thing-in-itself manifests its own phenomenon through human sensation; here, it functions solely as a stimulus—stirring the senses, endowing them with objects and materials, and in doing so, bringing forth the phenomenon of the thing.” [11] The object’s ontology precedes its phenomena, and what humans comprehend are merely phenomena, which are outcomes of our subjective initiative, thereby reflecting human agency rather than the object’s intrinsic nature. Tang Weisheng similarly posited that “The absolute existence that lies outside any thinker is beyond the realm of human cognition. It exists independently, regardless of whether it is thought about or not.” [12] It exists independently, regardless of our contemplation, in a realm entirely separate from human consciousness and unrelated to our daily experiences, emotions, desires, and intentions. Historically, humans have tended to position themselves at the universe’s core. Such anthropocentrism has fostered a lopsided and peripheral grasp of “objectivity”, focusing solely on objects’ functionality while disregarding their autonomy. This utilitarian perspective is exemplified in *The Gift of the Magi*. The hair

combs and platinum watch chains, which are consumer goods with clear utilities as decorations for Della's long hair and accessories for Jim's gold watch, undergo a disruption in their original substantiality when Della sells her hair and Jim parts with his watch. Thus shifting their value from functionality to ontology. As Brown states, "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us." [13] When objects lose their practical value to humans, we begin to contemplate their ontology beyond mere functionality. Jim's words, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while," [3] illustrate that even though the combs and chains have not fulfilled their decorative functions, they transcend their commodity status. Instead of being mere market exchangeables, they evolve into depersonalized carriers of emotion and memory, and through this process, the protagonists forge a deeper emotional bond.

Humanism has long led Western societies to see humans as the primary agents who understand and shape the world, with objects viewed as passive tools serving human will and objectives. However, recent years have seen a significant "object-oriented turn" in academia, which challenges anthropocentric views and advocates treating objects as equal entities to humans. "Things become vital entities, and beings in constant interaction, always becoming." [14] Thus, objects are not passive but subjects with agency. They are active elements that drive narratives. Latour's actor-network theory strengthens this idea. "The actions of objects must be embedded in the framework of social interpretation." [15] Society is a network of diverse actors. These networks connect humans and objects, creating complex human-object and object-object interactions. In this network, non-human actors are as important as human ones. Ryan categorizes objects in narratives into two types: those that operate at the plot level and those that operate at the character experience level. In *The Gift of the Magi*, plot-serving objects are vividly portrayed. The tension between an object's practical use and emotional worth destabilizes the narrative. At the start, O. Henry, through an external focalization perspective, shows Della's contradictory relationship with objects. She is so meticulous with money that she will not even buy a full-sized dressing mirror. Instead, she uses the method of "by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks." [3] Given her poverty, buying Jim a practical Christmas coat would make more sense. Yet, she sacrifices her hair to buy an expensive platinum fob chain. "Returning a gift also reflects the inner qualities of the giver and continues to maintain this social relationship." [16] When an individual bestows a gift upon another, they offer not merely a material object, but also impart their intentions, emotions, and even a piece of themselves through presents. Such gifts extend beyond the material realm, delve into the spiritual dimension, and extend the giver's emotions and personality within the narrative. It unveils the profound essence of gift-giving: true gifts are not merely material transfers but serve as a medium for emotional exchange and a connection between hearts. Presenting the watch chain is not a passive gesture awaiting interpretation, but actively and inevitably reveals the absence of the accompanying gold watch. These micro-objects emerge as pivotal nodes that drive the narrative forward, participating in plot construction as fragmented scenes. In the narrative world of *The Gift of the Magi*, the platinum chain and hair combs, as non-human actors, surpass their roles as mere background or props and become active elements within the story. They

connect with human will and form a diversified narrative network, driving the story forward. In this network, humans and objects have a redefined relationship, and the subjectivity of objects is recognized and respected.

In consumer societies, material comforts strongly exert a pull on social members. In social structures dominated by commodities and consumption, goods hold social value beyond basic needs. This materialism causes serious social problems. Since workers cannot understand or own commodities, alienation is widespread among members of capitalist societies. Objects manipulate human emotions, and people increasingly self-enslave through material possessions. Emotional fluctuations are often closely tied to acquiring or losing items, with individuals feeling temporary happiness on getting desired objects and sadness when they cannot possess or lose them. In *The Gift of the Magi*, non-human entities manipulate Della's emotions: she blushes over "pennies" [3]; she agonizes over not having a proper Christmas gift for Jim; she leaps for joy when buying one, with time seeming to have "rosy wings," [3] and ecstasy on receiving Jim's gift. These emotional shifts stem from material influences. Initially, Della, having sacrificed her proud, long hair for Jim, feels momentary self-pity. When reason returns, she fears Jim will find her less hair. Essentially, these material-induced emotional changes represent "fetish". "Within the consumptive illusions fostered by consumerism, the subject's excessive consumption and possession of commodities amounts to an obsession with their inherent sensible yet supersensible sublime status. It is a misrecognition of the true social relationships of human beings, and an illusory longing for the sublime position that is 'without goods'." [17] In modern societies, people commonly depend on material things, which profoundly impact their emotional experiences and self-perception. Interactions are often based on material exchange. This material dependence and self-worth uncertainty reveal the complexity of emotional life in consumer societies. Non-human entities can drive societal progress or become developmental barriers in human life. Thus, humans must clearly understand material forces, recognizing objects as world-shaping subjects. Only by finding a balance between material enjoyment and spiritual pursuits can we ensure the healthy development of individuals and society.

### 3. Disenchantment: Human-Object Interactivity

Humans exercise agency over objects: they actively and purposefully influence and transform objects or environments to satisfy their needs and desires. Material production activities in human society are not isolated processes but closely intertwined with social structures, cultural traditions, and political institutions. "Even individuals who have attained independence remain embedded in social connections broader than ever before and retain their social character." [18] In this context, human functions and activities as creators of material wealth and commodities are shaped by a broad range of social conditions and relationships, including non-human entities. Concretely, in *The Gift of the Magi*, Della's long hair embodies beauty and confidence; for Jim, his gold watch symbolizes heritage and remembrance. Through their owners' sale, these cherished items gain new meaning-love and yield tangible objects: a hairpin and a platinum fob chain. The couple's mutual gifting transforms

the intrinsic value of the hairpin and watch chain from mere commodities to socially connected gifts, demonstrating that human productive practices not only create society's material world but also can "modify the sociocultural meanings of objects." [19] This phenomenon is also evident in the environmental descriptions of *The Gift of the Magi*. When Della is despondent, "She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard." [3] She projects her emotions onto external things, reflecting the notion that "when one observes things through oneself, all things take on one's own hue" and is a result of human subjective experience acting upon objects.

In interactions within human society, human subjects continuously influence the surrounding material world, actively exercising their agency to create, transform, and use materials to satisfy their needs and desires. Meanwhile, material entities possess their own distinct agency: rather than passively accepting human manipulation, they can to some extent influence, guide, and even shape human behaviors and thoughts. Latour argues that "an actor is nothing but a network, except that a network is nothing but actors." [20] Humans and non-human objects can exert influence on social relations and practices. In this sense, objects cease to function merely as media for human activities; they can operate within their social networks, thereby steering the course of human social practices. Material entities serve as the binding agent for Della and Jim's love. The platinum fob chain and hairpin are not just symbols of affection but active factors driving the development of their relationship. Through the acts of selling and mutual gifting, these objects actually construct and maintain their romantic bond, embodying the agency of objects over humans. This intervention of objects in social relations resonates with Nan Fang's proposition that "material entities endowed with dynamism continuously generate experiences and construct meanings through interactions with human societies or other uncharted systems." [21] The "movement" of material entities is not merely physical displacement but also a flow of sociocultural meanings. They circulate through human society, connecting diverse individuals and social groups, and shaping human behaviors and thoughts. The role of material entities in human society should not be underestimated: they are not just products of human activity but participants in social relations and culture. The existence and "actions" of material entities are crucial to understanding how human society operates. By focusing on material entities, society members can more fully recognize interactions between human and non-human actors and how these interactions collectively shape the world.

Social interaction constitutes an indispensable dimension of human survival and development, while human ethics form the fundamental basis of such interaction. Gifts interact with social exchange and human ethics, with the three elements forming a cyclical closed loop. Social interaction prompts people to abide by human ethics, expressing and consolidating relationships through gift exchange. In turn, gift-giving guided by human ethics strengthens social interaction, fostering closer bonds between individuals. The outcomes of gift exchange further validate and reinforce the significance of human ethics, expanding their endorsement and practice in social engagement. Shao Fajun argues that "the true essence conveyed by Marx's concept of 'the sum total of social relations' does not denote a mere summation in the sense of quantitative aggregation of things. Rather, it seeks to uncover how the totality of social relations exerts a

formative influence on practical activities and their essence—specifically, to what extent this formative influence renders all interpersonal social relations a reflection of human essence and a force humans can master." [22] The social interaction practices constituted by human-relation ethics and gift exchange, in turn, embody precisely the concrete manifestation of this total of social relations. Humans are inherently social; individuals' social relations define their essence. An individual's social interactions, adherence to human ethics, and acts of gift exchange are all integral to shaping the totality of their social relations. Typically, social members establish ties for economic interests and social connections. Material exchange is the most direct manifestation in building such ties, functioning as a conventional "ritual" throughout history. Couples united by shared beliefs in love recognize their moral unity through shared Christmas religious rituals. Clearly, Della and Jim's mutual gifting stems from the need to nurture their intimacy. Even amid financial hardship, they strive to select the finest gifts for each other. This exchange transcends mere material exchange in the traditional sense; it carries spiritual significance. In this process, gifts become a vehicle for intimate bonds, reflecting the co-constitution of emotional capital and relational networks in social interaction. The symbolic expression of social relations and emotional ties is substantively strengthened, and the relationship between objects and humans achieves genuine integration.

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