Objectives

1. Engage students in the characters and themes of O. Henry's timeless short story "The Gift of the Magi", preparing them to discuss and write critical responses to the excerpt.
2. Practice and reinforce the following Grade 9-10 ELA Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, and speaking and listening:
   - **READING:** LITERATURE – RL.9-10.1-5, 7, 9-10
   - **WRITING:** W.9-10.1-10
   - **SPEAKING AND LISTENING:** SL.9-10.1-6

Time

130 minutes (with an additional 260 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on O. Henry's “The Gift of the Magi”

Overview

A famous Christmas tale that has been adapted and retold countless times, O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” is the story of a young married couple, Jim and Della, who barely have enough money to survive--let alone buy each other Christmas gifts. When they secretly decide to get a little creative in the spirit of giving, they find themselves the beneficiaries of an ironic but valuable lesson. O. Henry wrote hundreds of short stories like this in his brief but prolific career, many of them well known for their “surprise twists” at the end. With the ubiquity of “The Gift of the Magi” the ending will come as less of a surprise for some, but students will nevertheless appreciate the cosmic irony at the heart of this simple but powerful story. In this StudySync Premium Lesson, students will read and annotate this story, then follow up with in-depth discussion and critical written analysis that are consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for Grades 9-10.
Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview** (*SL.9-10.1-2*). As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. After viewing, use the following questions to spur a discussion:

   a. Why do we give Christmas gifts to friends and family? What are the sentiments of the Christmas season that are expressed in this seasonal tradition? Discuss both the religious and secular significance of this holiday in American culture.

   b. What are some of your most prized material possessions? Share with the class a few of the personal belongings you hold most dear. Would you ever sacrifice any of them for someone you love? Why or why not?

   c. Why is Christmastime an especially challenging time for impoverished or struggling families? What can we do to help these people? Discuss the responsibilities of the more fortunate to help those in need. Why is it important to give to those less fortunate? How do the givers benefit?

Extension (additional 60 minutes)

   d. **Timeline** (*W.9-10.7 and SL.9-10.1-2, 5*). Split the class into small groups and have each group research a different period in author O. Henry’s life. Groups should find at least five notable events or accomplishments from the period they are assigned, and compile these events or accomplishments into timeline form. Finally, once the individual groups are finished, bring the class together to discuss the entirety of O. Henry’s life, including his legacy and most memorable works.

   e. **Research** (*W.9-10.7 and SL.9-10.4-5*). Who were the Magi? As a homework assignment, have students research these mythical figures and bring in different artists’ illustrations to share with the class. What is their relevance to the mythology of Christmas? Why are they integral to our understanding of this holiday? What gifts did they bring and why were they important?

   f. **Define** (*SL.9-10.1-3 and W.9-10.7*). What is irony? Have students define and discuss the concept of literary irony, including examples of dramatic, verbal, and situational irony. Each student should bring in for presentation at least three anecdotal examples of something that is ironic, noting the type of irony that is being employed. For more fun, screen for students the famous Alanis Morissette song “Ironic” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v9yUVgrmPy) along with a parody video, “It’s Finally Ironic” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32LCwZFokio) which attempts to “correct” the original song’s lackluster examples of the concept.

Engaging the Text (120 minutes)

2. **Read the Text** (30 minutes)

   a. **Read and Annotate** (*RL.9-10.1-5, 9*). Have students read and annotate the introduction and excerpt. If students are completing as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

   b. **Discuss** (*SL.9-10.1, 3*). Have students get into small groups or pairs and briefly discuss the questions and inferences they had while reading.
Extension (additional 20 minutes)

c. **Listen and Discuss** *(SL.9-10.1-2)*: As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to share how their understanding of the text changed after listening. What additional images came to mind? What words did the author use to develop the setting?

d. **Comprehend** *(RL.9-10.1-5, 9-10)*: Have students complete the multiple-choice questions. Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.

3. **Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)**

   a. **Watch** Either watch the SyncTV discussion as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

   b. **Focus** *(SL.9-10.1-3 and RL.9-10.4)*: Pay attention to the section between 1:40-2:44, as the SyncTV students begin to tackle the prompt with a dictionary definition of the word ‘wise’. Use this close analysis as a model for how to carefully consider what an essay prompt is asking.

   c. **Focus** *(SL.9-10.1-3 and RL.9-10.1-2)*: Then, watch from 3:06-3:47 as the SyncTV students introduce and discuss three of the primary themes of the story: generosity, sacrifice, and love. Consider how the students come to an understanding of these themes and their significance in the story.

   d. **Focus** *(SL.9-10.1-3 and RL.9-10.1-2)*: Finally, focus on the discussion from 6:57-7:40, as the SyncTV students form conclusions about the symbolic meaning of two important elements in this story: the reference to the “Magi” and the gifts they buy.

   e. **Discuss** *(SL.9-10.1-5 and RL.9-10.1-5, 9-10)*: After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students’ discussion? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:

   i. O. Henry calls Jim and Della “the wisest” of those who give gifts. Would you agree that Jim and Della are “wise”? If not, can you think of a better word to describe the shared quality these two possess?

   ii. What is O. Henry’s tone as narrator in this story? What is his narrative “voice” and how does he interject his views into the narrative and address the reader directly? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story this way, rather than in a different style?

   iii. What is the function of the “Magi” allusion in both the title and the finale of this story? Why do you think the author references this legend, and how does it add meaning to both the story of Jim and Della and the larger meaning of Christmas?

   iv. The surprise ending of “The Gift of the Magi” is a good literary example of irony. What is irony? Why is the ending of this story ironic? What does the story say or achieve by ending with such an ironic twist?

   v. Is the purpose of the Christmas holiday to give or to receive (or both)? Similarly, what conclusions about the “Christmas spirit” are stated or implied in “The Gift of the Magi”? Cite specific examples.
vi. Could “The Gift of the Magi” happen in today’s world? Discuss whether this story has any relevance in the 21st century, noting the themes and lessons in the story that are timeless.

Extension (additional 80 minutes)

f. **Update** *(RL.9-10.1 and W.9-10.4, 9)*. Let’s pretend that “The Gift of the Magi” is instead taking place in the present day: what’s different? Have students go through the story, identifying and changing every element of the story that is anachronistic or obsolete. Some will be obvious (e.g. the $8/week rent) and others will be less so. Encourage students to think carefully about how a hundred years would change this story. The student with the most “complete” list of changes wins!

g. **Debate** *(SL.9-10.1, 3-4, 6 and W.9-10.9)*. Should Jim and Della be buying gifts for each other when they can barely put food on the table? Organize a class debate around this topic, dividing the class into two factions. One side will argue that Jim and Della should have bought the gifts; the other side will argue that the money would be better served in a bank or a savings account. To challenge students, try placing them on the side of the debate that they don’t agree with.

h. **Activity** *(W.9-10.4, 9)*. After reading, organize a white elephant gift exchange with the class: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_elephant_gift_exchange](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_elephant_gift_exchange). Each student will be asked to bring something of value to them for the gift exchange (within reason). After the exchange, you can have students write a journal response discussing how it made them feel to give something of personal value to someone else.

4. **Think** *(10 minutes)*

a. **Respond** *(W.9-10.1, 4)*. Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. **Write** *(50 minutes)*

a. **Discuss** *(SL.9-10.1)*. Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.

b. **Organize** *(RL.9-10.1 and W.9-10.1-2, 5)*. Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you’ve worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.

c. **Write** *(W.9-10.1-2, 4-6, 8-10)*. Have students go through the writing process of planning, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.

d. **Review** *(W.9-10.4-6)*. Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas?
Extension (additional 100 minutes)

e. **Write** *(W.9-10.1-2, 4-6, 9-10).* For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not choose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.

f. **Write** *(W.9-10.3-6, 9-10).* Write a 300-word personal narrative about a time in which you learned a powerful lesson about the importance of giving or sacrifice. It can be a story about Christmas or a story about something else; the only requirement is to discuss a lesson you learned through personal sacrifice and giving.

g. **Write** *(W.9-10.1, 4-6, 9-10).* Address the following in an argumentative essay of at least 300 words:

Ignoring the last paragraph of the story, does “The Gift of the Magi” have a happy ending? Think about the role of the narrator in shaping the tone and the message of this story, frequently addressing the reader directly and offering his take on a number of different events. Is another “reading” of this tale possible? How might the story be different if the narrator didn’t have a “point” he was trying to make?
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. imputation (n.) – An accusation or suggestion of blame
2. parsimony (n.) – The state of being reluctant to spend money; stinginess, frugality
3. instigate (v.) – To cause something to happen
4. mendicancy (n.) – The practice of asking for alms or begging
5. vestibule (n.) – An entrance hall between the outer door and the inside of a building
6. sterling (adj.) – Excellent, genuine
7. chaste (adj.) – Pure, not sinful
8. meretricious (adj.) – Falsely attractive; tacky or cheap
9. prudence (n.) – The state of being cautious in a way suggesting wisdom or forethought
10. patent (adj.) – Obvious, clear

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. “Pennies saved one or 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.”

This quote suggests that Della ___________________.
   a. tries to haggle prices with store vendors
   b. is ashamed of the fact that she is poor
   c. both a and b
   d. neither a nor b

2. “It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.”

A good substitute for the underlined word would be _________________.
   a. defy
   b. request
   c. include
   d. solicit

3. The narrator suggests that James' uses his middle name, Dillingham, ____________________.
   a. as a fake identity
   b. to sound more dignified
   c. to confuse the mailman
   d. all of the above
4. This story takes place on _________________.
   a. Christmas morning
   b. Christmas Eve
   c. the day after Thanksgiving
   d. a Tuesday

5. King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are both _________________.
   a. known for their notorious wealth
   b. characters in the Bible
   c. used to illustrate the value of Jim and Della’s possessions
   d. all of the above

6. Della chooses the platinum fob chain for Jim because of its _________________.
   a. expensive price tag
   b. understated authenticity
   c. old-fashioned look and feel
   d. all of the above

7. “If Jim doesn’t kill me,” she said to herself, “he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl.”
   We can infer from this quote that Della sees Coney Island chorus girls as _________________.
   a. undignified
   b. admirable
   c. untalented
   d. strange

8. Which of the following statements about Jim and Della is NOT true?
   a. They are both concerned about their image.
   b. They are both willing to make sacrifices for each other.
   c. They are both self-conscious about their poverty.
   d. They are both working full-time jobs.

9. Jim initially reacts to Della’s new, hair-less appearance with _________________.
   a. anger
   b. shock
   c. bemusement
   d. joy

10. “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.”
    We can infer that the underlined word above means _________________.
    a. jewels
    b. ribbons
    c. locks of hair
    d. chains
Answer Key

1. C
2. A
3. B
4. B
5. D
6. B
7. A
8. D
9. B
10. C
Further Assignments

1. After completing this StudySync Premium Lesson, have students read other O. Henry short stories—including *The Ransom of Red Chief*, also available in the StudySync Library. Continue to discuss and expand upon the themes and issues that came up in the initial discussion of “The Gift of the Magi”, and once completed, have students write critical responses to the text, including a 300-word essay comparing and contrasting the two (or more) O. Henry stories. What signature styles or trademarks do these stories possess? How do they differ? *(RL.9-10.1-5, 9-10 and SL.9-10.1-3 and W.9-10.4, 9)*

2. In the SyncTV episode, one of the students questions the potentially anti-feminist implications of this passage: “Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.” In discussion and written analysis, have students address these issues. Is Della referring to herself or to the gift she’s seeking? Is this in any way an anti-feminist story? How does “The Gift of the Magi” portray the woman’s role in the household, as well as in society? Are these portrayals simply endemic of the time in which the story was written, or is there more to it? *(RL.9-10.1-2, 4 and W.9-10.1, 4, 9 and SL.9-10.1, 3)*

3. Have students read and complete the StudySync Premium Lesson for Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, another classic Christmas-themed story in a similar vein as O. Henry’s. Once students have completed both Premium Lessons, have them compare and contrast the two stories and their worldviews in both discussion and written analysis. How are the messages of the two stories similar? How do they differ? Similarly, how do the writing styles of Dickens and O. Henry compare? *(RL.9-10.7 and W.9-10.2, 4, 9)*

4. Screen for the class one of the many film adaptations of “The Gift of the Magi”, a complete list of which can be found at IMDB: http://www.imdb.com/find?q=the+gift+of+the+magi&s=all. After the screening, have students write an essay of at least 300 words comparing the story to the movie and talking about some of their respective differences. Be sure students are giving specific examples from the text in their essay responses. What are some of the choices the filmmakers made in translating the story to the screen? What are some additions, changes, etc.? Which version do students prefer? Is it a faithful adaptation of O. Henry’s original? Why or why not? *(RL.9-10.7 and W.9-10.2, 4, 9)*

5. Ask students to re-write “The Gift of the Magi” from Jim’s perspective. They should pay close attention to trying to imagine Jim’s concerns and thoughts as he decides to sacrifice his beloved pocket watch for a set of combs his wife has long coveted. How does this shift in perspective change the story and the concerns of the central protagonist? What remains unchanged? Finally, discuss why you think O. Henry chose to focus on Della? Does it make a difference, and if so, what? *(W.9-10.3-4, 9 and SL.9-10.1, 3)*

6. English language learners may struggle with some of O. Henry’s narration, which is written in a frequently self-conscious, folksy prose. Try to eliminate this obstacle to comprehension by selecting key passages and having students re-write them in more direct, straightforward language. *(ELL)*