

The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry

Pre-Reading Vocabulary Practice

Optional Post-Reading Quiz Included

Practice words: adorned, ardent, chronicle, coax, coveted, depreciate, faltered, mortal, prudence, yearned

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Vocabulary Preview 2

Answer Key — Preview 3

Caution: share only if self-checking

OPTIONAL POST-READING QUIZ

Vocabulary in Context 4

Answer Key — In Context 5

Caution: do not share with students

About the Pre-Reading Activity (open-dictionary; ungraded or completion grade):

Students preview 10 words from the upcoming reading, each in a sentence that supports understanding. They choose the best meaning from 3 choices.

About the Optional Post-Reading Quiz (use after reading, or skip):

Same words, now in real excerpts from the text, with questions that build reading and analytical skills.



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Vocabulary Preview

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Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Read each prompt. Then choose the best meaning for the bold word.

1. Flowers **adorned** all the tables.

- A. weighed down
- B. obscured (hid)
- C. decorated

2. She is an **ardent** defender of free speech.

- A. recently appointed
- B. publicly recognized
- C. intensely enthusiastic

3. The book is a **chronicle** of the team's historic championship season.

- A. an account of events in order
- B. a harsh public criticism
- C. a fictional retelling

4. Let's see if we can **coax** her into coming with us.

- A. trick
- B. drag forcefully
- C. gently persuade

5. She won the **coveted** award for best new artist.

- A. eagerly desired by many
- B. recently created and exclusive
- C. controversial and disputed

6. Don't **depreciate** your own achievements by comparing yourself to others.

- A. inflate the value of
- B. reduce the value of
- C. express deep pride in

7. Her voice **faltered** when she tried to describe what had happened.

- A. grew louder and more forceful
- B. became unsteady or hesitant
- C. changed to a sarcastic tone

8. Don't expect perfection of a mere **mortal**.

- A. human being
- B. young fool
- C. lowly servant

9. Courage is dangerous without **prudence**.

- A. good purpose
- B. good support
- C. good sense

10. She **yearned** for a chance to travel the world.

- A. longed for
- B. planned for
- C. worried about

Reading Helpers

(Not quizzed — helpful for this text.)

magi — the wise men who, in the Bible, brought gifts to the infant Jesus

fob chain — a short chain used to attach a pocket watch to one's clothing

tresses — long locks of hair

parsimony — extreme reluctance to spend money; stinginess

chaste — here, simple and restrained in style (a less common sense of the word)

meretricious — superficially attractive but actually cheap or tasteless

to beggar description — an idiom meaning to defy description; O. Henry then jokes that the flat was so poor even the word "beggar" feared arrest for begging

mendicancy squad — police squad that rounds up beggars

ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary Preview

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#	KEY
1	C
2	C
3	A
4	C
5	A
6	B
7	B
8	A
9	C
10	A

Vocabulary in Context

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Name _____ Date _____ Period _____ Score _____ / 10

Read each excerpt carefully. Then choose the best answer to each question.

1 *"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."*

In context, the word "mortal" emphasizes that...

- A. no human effort could make the doorbell work
- B. pressing the button required unusual strength
- C. the building's entrance was poorly lit

2 *"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."*

The information in this excerpt primarily functions to...

- A. establish the run-down condition of the couple's building
- B. suggest that the couple's landlord is neglectful
- C. explain why Della feels isolated from the outside world

3 *"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."*

It can reasonably be inferred that Della believes her hair...

- A. requires constant effort to maintain
- B. surpasses even a queen's finest treasures
- C. is admired mainly because of its length

4 *"Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet."*

As Della prepares to sell her hair, she is characterized as...

- A. physically exhausted from a long walk
- B. confused about what decision to make
- C. momentarily overcome by emotion

5 *"When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason."*

The author most likely uses the word "prudence" in order to...

- A. show Della shifting back to practical thinking
- B. indicate that Della's excitement has vanished entirely
- C. suggest that Della now regrets her purchase

6 *"They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession."*

Which statement is best supported by the passage?

- A. Della had been saving to buy the combs herself.
- B. Della had longed for the combs without hope of owning them.
- C. Della had only recently discovered the combs.

7 *"And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone."*

The irony in this passage most strongly suggests that...

- A. Della no longer cared about owning the combs
- B. Della gained the combs but lost the hair needed to wear them
- C. the combs were less beautiful than Della had imagined

8 *"And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone."*

The author most likely uses the word "coveted" in order to...

- A. imply Della envied others who owned similar combs
- B. stress how deeply Della had desired the adornments
- C. suggest the adornments were rare and exclusive

9 *"The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit."*

As it is used in this excerpt, the word "ardent" most nearly suggests that Della's spirit is...

- A. intensely passionate
- B. visibly glowing with light
- C. restless and unpredictable

10 *"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."*

Which choice best describes how this sentence functions in the text as a whole?

- A. It condemns the couple for their poor judgment.
- B. It warns the reader against making similar sacrifices.
- C. It offers the narrator's self-deprecating summary of the story.

ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary in Context

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#	KEY	TEACHER NOTE
1	A	
2	A	
3	B	
4	C	
5	A	"Intoxication" here is figurative (excitement from shopping), so the shift to "prudence" marks a return to clear-headedness, not recovery from regret.
6	B	
7	B	
8	B	
9	A	The metaphor links the dull metal flashing to Della's inner intensity; "ardent" carries the sense of passionate warmth, not literal brightness.
10	C	The narrator's tone is affectionate despite words like "foolish" and "unwisely"; "lame" and "uneventful" are directed at the narrator's own telling, not at the couple.