

The gift of the magi essay



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One of the reasons why short story The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry continues to enjoy an undermined popularity with contemporary readers is that, despite its apparent shortness, it presents a high literary and philosophical value. In its turn, this can be explained by the fact that, while exposed to this story, readers become enlightened of what accounts for the actual qualities of a truly loving relationship between both spouses and what can be considered the discursive significance of the act of gift-giving.

The short story in questions also contains insights, as to what can be thought of as the observable indications of one's endowment with the sense of nobleness. In this paper, I will aim to explore the validity of the above-statement at length.

The plot of The Gift of the Magi is rather straightforward. While experiencing the acute shortage of money, Della Dillingham decides to cut off and sell her luscious hair, so that she would be able to buy her husband a respectable Christmas gift - a platinum chain for his pocket-watch. However, by the time Jim returns back home and is being presented with his gift, Della realizes that he had sold his pocket-watch, in order to be able to buy his wife the set of jeweled combs for her hair.

Given the fact that, as it was implied earlier, ever since it was first published in 1906, The Gift of the Magi never ceased appealing to readers, we can well assume that the themes and motifs, contained in the story, are thoroughly consistent with people's unconscious anxieties, in regards to the notion of love.

Apparently, O. Henry knew perfectly well that the strength of the romantic involvement between husbands and wives (men and women) is being reflective of their willingness to sacrifice for each other, while deriving a strong emotional satisfaction out of the process.

Therefore, even though that, as a narrator, O. Henry does refer to the way in which Della and Jim went about exchanging gifts as 'foolish', he nevertheless cannot help considering it utterly wise, at the same time: "Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they (Della and Jim) are wisest.

Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi" (1906, 9). The reason for this is quite apparent - in order for a particular gift to be appreciated by the person that receives it, he or she must be perceiving it as such that proves the gift-giver's unquestionable loyalty. In this respect, the gift's utilitarian value comes second in importance.

Therefore, Della's choice for a gift is explainable. By presenting her husband with a platinum watch-chain, she unconsciously strived to assure him of the fact that being a remarkable individual; he well deserved to be sacrificed for - the considerations of practicality did not bother Della, whatsoever.

In the similar manner Mary Magdalene treated Jesus - even though that the oil, with which she washed Jesus's feet was ridiculously expensive, she did not hesitate even for a second buying it. It appears that Della used to perceive her husband in terms of a godlike figure, whose existential significance did not have anything to do with his de facto social status.

The message that is being conveyed through the story lines, in regards to the acts of gift-giving, on the part of both characters, can be interpreted as follows: the condition of poverty, which loving husband and wife get to experience, as they go through life, has no effect on the actual quality of their relationship. In fact, it is something that allows this relationship to thrive - whatever illogical it may sound.

That is, of course, for as long as the individuals in question are thoroughly noble, in the discursive sense of this word. The way the characters of Della and Jim are being represented in *The Gift of the Magi* leaves no doubts that, despite their poverty, both spouses were capable of not allowing their worrisome financial situation to affect their sense of self-identity.

Hence, the philosophical significance of how the author describes the appearance of the room, in which the couple resided: "It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad" (3). Apparently, he wanted to promote the idea that, even while experiencing hardships, existentially noble people never allow the resulting sensation of frustration, on their part, to begin defining who they actually are.

We can well speculate that the earlier mentioned description serves as the proof that Della and Jim used to be endowed with the so-called 'Faustian' mentality, concerned with people's ability to overcome their animalistic instincts, while striving to realize what accounts for their true calling in life.

herefore, there is nothing incidental about the fact that in his story O. Henry made a deliberate point in accentuating Della's artistic aspirations, "Della,

being slender, had mastered the art" (4). By having done this, he succeeded in ensuring that readers would never doubt the psychological plausibility of Della's sacrificial gesture.

The rationale behind this suggestion is simple - one's affiliation with art naturally causes the concerned individual to seek what can be considered the surrounding reality's hidden (metaphysical) aspects. As a result, the manner in which he or she addresses life-challenges and relates to others ends up being increasingly perceived by conventionally minded people as somewhat 'odd'.

Yet, even though that these people may well think of Della's gift as a rather impractical one, deep on an unconscious level, they nevertheless realize that, while choosing her husband a gift, she could not act in any other way than she did. Being an essentially 'Faustian' individual, Della was naturally presupposed to think of her husband in terms of what he should have been, rather than in terms of what he was in the reality.

Nevertheless, even though that, formally speaking, O. Henry does not seem to wholeheartedly approve the sacrificial acts of gift-giving, on the part of Della and Jim (hence, his reference to them as 'foolish children'), he nevertheless does admire both characters. Partially, this can be explained by the particulars of the author's biography, as a man with extensive life-experiences.

That is, the fact that throughout the course of his life, O. Henry never ceased taking an active stance on the matters of a socio-political importance, while

suffering a number of setbacks, such as having been in jailed for the duration of 5 years, naturally endowed him with the sense of perceptual wisdom.

Hence, the discursive significance of how he reflects on the integral components of one's life: " Life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating" (p. 3). The above-quotations suggests that, having been an analytically minded person, O. Henry was capable of deconstructing even the most complex phenomena, such as the phenomena of people's existence, down to their basic elements.

Given the fact that, being a wise man often causes the concerned individual to look ' deeper' in the discussed subject matters, as compared to what it is being the case with ordinary people, there is nothing too surprising about the author's tendency to approve the earlier mentioned ' foolishness', on the part of Della and Jim.

Apparently, he knew that people's endowment with ' Faustian' mentality does not only enable them to ensure the continual vitality of their marital relationships, but that it also makes them the agents of the ongoing social and cultural progress.

After all, it was due to Della and Jim's belief that there are ' higher' things in life, worthy to be sacrificed for, that the plot's unraveling is being perceived by the majority of readers as emotionally intense and intellectually stimulating. In its turn, this implies that Della and Jim were more than capable of operating with utterly abstract categories, while having the voice of the ' monkey from within' suppressed.

After all, as the story's context suggests, the sensation of hunger was certainly well known for both characters. Yet, instead of finding a more practical use for the money that she received from selling her hair, Della end up buying a watch-chain. Yet, as we are well aware of, it is specifically people's ability to transcend beyond the physiological aspects of their existence, which makes it possible for them to act as the society's productive members.

Therefore, there can be only a few doubts that, while exposing readers to the characters of Della and Jim, O. Henry strived for nothing less than promoting the idea that, contrary what it is being commonly assumed, it is only those individuals that radiate 'nobleness' around them, who deserve attaining a social prominence in life.

Unfortunately, this is rarely being the case. Hence, the strongly defined tragic overtones to the story of Della and Jim - apparently, the author wanted to emphasize the sheer unfairness of the situation when, due to poverty, existentially noble individuals are being denied the chance to make their lives count, in the social sense of this word.

The very same overtones, however, cause The Gift of the Magi to emanate the spirit of humanism. This simply could not be otherwise, because the story's themes and motifs do prompt readers to think that the pathway towards ensuring the fairness of the society's functioning is being concerned with establishing social preconditions for people, capable of acting as the agents of progress and justice, to be able to advance in life.

The story also specifies what can be considered the indications of people's 'qualification', in this respect - their endowment with the 'Faustian' sense of idealism, which naturally causes them to adopt the altruistic mode of existence.

I believe that the earlier provided line of argumentation, as to what can be considered the discursive significance of the themes and motifs, contained in *The Gift of the Magi*, is fully consistent with the paper's initial thesis. In light of what has been argued, there indeed appears to be a good rationale in referring to this particular story by O. Henry, as such that will continue representing an uncompromised literary value well into the future.

Henry, O. 1906, *The Gift of Magi*. PDF file. 3 Oct. 2013.