

INTENSITY OF DELLA'S CHARACTER IN 'THE GIFT OF THE MAGI' BY O. HENRY: A STUDY

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Abstract:

The Gift of the Magi, a highly acclaimed short story by an American short story writer O. Henry is about a young married couple named Della and Jim and their sacrifices to buy each other the Christmas gifts. The present paper focuses on the importance of Christmas gifts, the custom behind gift-giving and examines the impact of gift-giving tradition on the characters, Della and Jim. This article looks to analyze the element of sacrifice in both the characters but proves that sacrificial nature is utmost in Della compared to Jim. The concept of 'Beauty sacrifice' is the focal point of this article. This paper attempts to bring out the character Della in a completely new light, like never before. The article projects the facet of Love in an entirely new dimension.

Keywords: Tradition, short story, epitome of love, sacrifice, Christmas gifts.

Introduction:

William Sydney Porter, well known by his pen name O. Henry, has ruled the genre of short story with his remarkable and witty narration. Known for surprise endings and twisted plots, the short story The Gift of the Magi, published in the year 1905 is no escape. This story does not have uncountable characters but has just two characters Della and Jim. To be precise, Della alone creates an uncountable effect on the audience, gripping the audience till the very end. In fact, this is the story of the sacrifices made by a poor couple to present Christmas gifts to each other. But Della's sacrifice takes over that of her husband Jim. To accept this argument, it is certainly necessary to understand the importance given to long hair by women, for ages.

Significance of Women's tresses:

The opening sentence of the Time Magazine's article titled, "Now you know: how did long hair become a thing for women?" says, "Though hair fashions may change season to season, the association between women and long hair is an ancient one."(Fabry) Nobody can dare to separate the bond between women and long hair, such a holy one! Secondly, Hair is not only a part of Woman's body but embraces huge social significance as,

“Anthony Synnott, a sociologist who has written that hair is a personal symbol with ‘immense social significance.’” (Fabry) It is surprising and quite astonishing to see that Holy Bible has particular mention of hair. St. Paul’s Letter to Corinthians reads, “Doth not nature itself teach you that if men have long hair it is a shame unto him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her.” (Holy Bible, 11.14-15). And the celebrated puritan writer John Milton in Paradise Lost, Book 4, has given reference to Eve’s hair while adoring eve’s beauty. These lines read:

She, as a veil down to the slender waist
 Her unadorned gold entresses wore
 Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets wav’d,
 As the vine curls her tendrils, which impli’d
 Subjection, but requir’d with gentle sway,
 And by her yielded, by him best reciev’d,
 Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
 And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (4.304-311)

Alexander Pope’s Mock Epic ‘The Rape of the Lock’, is about the long estrangement caused between two families due to epic reason i.e., Baron Cuts Belinda’s lock of hair. It is beyond imagination as to what hair can do!

Through the pages of history, women’s hair has been adored, admired, cherished and worshipped with a huge reverence. Majority of women find their beauty in their lustrous tresses. In this short story, Della too holds cascading length hair. The narrator describes it as “...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.” (p. 03) Furthermore, the narrator gives an epic account of Della’s hair as, “Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window someday to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts.” (p. 02) Della’s waterfall braids are enough to suppress a queen’s precious possessions. Such coiffure they are!

No Woman on earth would dare to lose such a classy hair. But Della, who loves her tresses, gets ready to cut off her hair in return for money. Money, neither to root out their poverty, nor to spend their expenses. In fact, Della is also not ready to forgo her hair for such trivial reasons. Rather decides to give up her hair for the reason close to her soul i.e., a Christmas gift to her husband Jim. Della’s act of sacrificing her hair, microcosmic sacrifice of her macroscopic beauty is matchless and beyond comparison. Jim did sacrifice his exquisite watch, but at the end it is a material possession! Della, in turn, gave up her own aesthetic possession.

What should one call it? A Generous act? Selfless Love? No, this act proves Della's spiritual bonding with Jim. Della is introduced, as she counts the saving, done by bargaining up and down, it is a Dollar and 87 cents she is left with. This amount would not fetch a Christmas gift for her husband Jim. Standing in front of the mirror, "... 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." (p.02) Her eyes reflect deep sense of joy as she found the way to buy a gift for her husband. Even though her face is unable to accept the fact that her long hair would soon disappear, Della clearly chose her husband over her gorgeous hair. Another notable incident that proves Della's transcendent love towards Jim, is at Mne. Sofronie's shop. Della and Jim are a poor couple with income of \$20 per week, Della tries really hard by bulldozing the grocers, vendors etc., but at Mne. Sofronie's shop, she does not! "'Twenty dollars,' said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand. 'Give it to me quick,' said Della." (p.03) Della takes the specified amount without uttering a word. This incident proves the strong determination of Della to buy a Christmas present to her husband.

On the one hand, it is obvious that Della would like to gift her husband, out of pure love. She received 20 dollars by selling her hair. This sum would have met their week expenses. She knows the value of income and is capable to run the family in financial crunches as well. Surely, she is aware that these 20 dollars would be of tremendous help to the family, but what actually drove her to choose gift over poverty? Apart from love, this choice is backed by the tradition of Gift-giving.

The tradition of Christmas Gift-giving:

The tradition of Gift-giving originated in Christianity and dates back to the birth of Jesus Christ. An article titled, "Christmas Traditions and Customs" says "One of the main reasons we have the custom of giving and receiving presents at Christmas, is to remind us of the presents given to Jesus by the Wise Men: Frankincense, Gold, and Myrrh." (Cooper) Christmas itself is really about a big present that God gave the world about 2000 years ago - Jesus! One of the most famous Bible verses, John 3:16, says: "God loved the world so much, that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him may not be lost but have eternal life." (Joh.3.16-18) Another article by Greg Garrison which featured in 'Alabama Life and Culture', titled "Christmas is about giving and the importance of gift, pastors say", showcases the significance of gift and the necessity to give gifts. "'The real meaning of Christmas is that it is literally more blessed to give than to receive,' said the Rev. Van Moody, senior pastor of the Worship Center Christian Church, with branches in Birmingham, Anniston and Bessemer."(Garrison) And Rev. Jeremy Steele, teaching pastor at Christ United Methodist Church says, "Every Christmas gift has a sacred symbolism". (Garrison) Gift-giving is not a mere materialistic activity but carries a sense of belonging to a culture. As Christine Ricks, a

Freelance Writer opines, "One part of belonging to a culture is participating in its traditions." Della hence, does not want their poverty to break the long chain of tradition. The ultimate act of love and tradition drives Della to relinquish her tresses.

Della's incessant quest for Jim's jouissance:

Della's generosity does not end with her hair sacrifice, rather begins straight after the act of sacrifice. After acquiring twenty dollars, Della, "...was ransacking the stores for Jim's present." (p. 03) Della scoured almost every store for purchasing the right Christmas present. Ultimately, Della came across a gift, which seemed fantabulous. "It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation..." (p.03) the exemplary appearance of this chain precludes Della's habitual haggle.

Della is au courant with the fact that Jim needs a new overcoat and new gloves. She could have presented the aforementioned needs but chose luxurious want over need. The reason being, "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." (p. 04) None except Della can notice and feel her husband Jim's inner intuitions. Thereby, desires to make Jim confident in the public, now with the platinum fob chain watch! This reveals the limitless extent of cosmic love for Jim.

Another noteworthy event occurs right after Della arrives at home. She rushes to get her curling irons to dress her hair and "Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy." (p.04) Della hurriedly finishes what she calls 'A tremendous task... a mammoth task' and eagerly waits for her dear husband to arrive.

Her mind turned into haphazard. Despite trying all her means and ends to please her husband, she is still in an ambivalent state. Will Jim find Della pretty even after her hair being cut short? Della, answers Jim's fixed stare as "'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.'" (p. 04-05) Della stresses on her hair growth repeatedly, as she says "My hair grows awfully fast" (p.05) and eventually tries to deviate Jim's attention towards her hair saying "Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," (p. 05) she ceaselessly continues, "but nobody could ever count my love for you." (p.05) the aforementioned dialogues of Della manifest her innermost urge to please Jim.

Della's countenance then takes a quick shift from "ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails." (p.05) this sudden shift in her temperament is due to the priceless Christmas gift, given by her husband Jim. It is that gift

Della was craving and yearning to possess. Jim bought Expensive combs, made of pure tortoiseshell, with jeweled rims. Della turned awestruck for a while, followed by uncontrollable tears. As Della now does not have long tresses to ornament her hair with those beautiful gifted accessories. Yet, Della does not want to double Jim's pain and hence repeats "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"(p.05) a selfless character!

Della, then eagerly presents her treasured gift, the dazzling watch-chain to Jim. End of the day, Della is left downhearted, as Jim's watch is sold for Della's present. Putting aside the fact that their presents cannot be used now, but what should not be kept aside is the couple's love and admiration towards each other. On this account, their gifts, even though unused at present can be equaled on par with the gifts of Magi to newborn Jesus because of the intangible and fathomless love behind them. Della, throughout this work of art, has undergone a near odyssey to gift Jim. She has sacrificed her tresses without a second thought. Her love towards Jim remained static but her physical appearance took dynamic form, in fact a happier dynamic form. Della stands for epitome of love.

Conclusion:

The Gift of Magi, hence should not be read as a plain text with a twist but should be read as text packed with immeasurable love, selfless care, and commitment towards religion. Jim's role in the text is nanoscopic but he has taken a macroscopic part in the psyche and heart of Della. In the entire text, there is no one specific circumstance wherein Della thinks about her own self. She thinks of, runs for, and imagines only about Jim. Della remains through the pages of history as another 'Sita'.

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