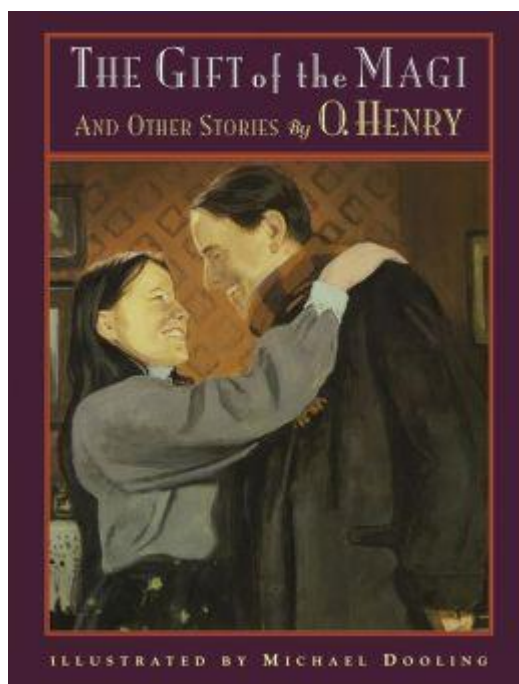


Gifts-Giving: A Mythical Reality

Dr. Olive Thambi



Abstract

The paper deals with the myth associated with the giving of gifts. The custom of gift - giving has been passed down the ages. Gift- giving custom dates back to early civilizations. Gifts symbolise love, respect and regard. They make someone feel important. They are given to reaffirm ties and strengthen bonds. A myth encapsulates within its purview a story, especially one revolving around the early history of a nation. It may describe a natural or social phenomenon and may typically involve supernatural beings or events.

Key words: Myth, gift-giving myths, symbolization, supernatural, affirmation of bonds.

Myth – a Story Revolving around the Early History of a Nation

A myth encapsulates within its purview a story, especially one revolving around the early history of a nation. It may describe a natural or social phenomenon and may typically involve supernatural beings or events. It could be handed down for generations. Myths can be spectacular and they can regale the old and the young with their interesting episodes. They have fascinated people. They are priceless and they are enshrined in the hearts and minds of people.

Focus of This Paper – Giving of Gifts

The paper deals with the myth associated with the giving of gifts. The custom of gift-giving has been passed down the ages. Gift-giving custom dates back to early civilizations. Gifts symbolise love, respect and regard. They make someone feel important. They are given to reaffirm ties and strengthen bonds. The gift-giving tradition perhaps could be traced back to 4th century when Saint Nicholas, today known as Santa Claus, generously gave away gifts to children and even rehabilitated families. Later in the 16th century, in Dutch folklore, the Santa Claus was named as ‘Father Christmas’ who reached out to even the older generation. Soon, the figure of Santa Claus took an iconic dimension.

O. Henry’s Della and Jim

The concept of giving gifts perhaps began with the three Magis who presented the Christ child with precious gifts. O. Henry writes a moving story of the selfless love of Della and Jim in his story, “The Gift of the Magi”. The story vividly records an act of love. Della and Jim are a couple whose immense love for each other is quite incredible. Christmas Eve is the time when their love for each other would be put to the test. “One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies” (1).

For Jim and Della, poverty is not a hindrance in reaching out to each other. Despite their poverty, both try ways and means of giving each other a gift. Della rushed to the store to buy a watch chain for her dear Jim, the watch which would even make King Solomon envy him. Having bought the watch chain for Jim, she waits anxiously for his arrival. As she waits, she prays hoping that Jim would still love her just as she is. She is not worried about the way she looks. She only hopes that Jim’s love for her would not diminish in any way.

When Jim enters the house with his Christmas gift in his arms, he is surprised to see Della in a different hairstyle. He is shocked because, he had bought her a set of combs which she would not be able to use, at least for the time being. When Della opens the packet, she is just as happy as she is heartbroken too. Later, Jim opens his Christmas gift only to find that the watch chain that Della had bought would be of no use to him because he had just sold his watch to buy Della a beautiful set of combs for Della.

The genuine love of both Jim and Della has become legendary.

Emphasis on the Inner Man

The story of the Magis who bought expensive gifts for the Christ child echoes in different dimensions, one of which is O’ Henry’s ‘Gift of the Magi’. It is clear from the story the extent to which the couple adored each other. There is yet another aspect which is addressed time and again and that is the spirit of love which owes its origin to God. Besides, narrating a story of true love, the author subtly stresses on the inner man. The sacrifice as can be seen is pure and

unconditional. It was a pure act of love which completely surpassed all other concerns. More than anything else, Della and Jim were giving over themselves to each other. Whether the gifts they bought for each other were of any use to them or not for the moment, they liked to express their love rather palpably. What they finally found was common ground---love which needed no language to make its presence felt.

Through Gift - Reaffirmation of Valued Presence

Most people feel neglected if they are not given a gift on Christmas. So gifts actually reaffirm loved ones of their valuable presence. They help people bond together very well. Gifts are so symbolic that they reveal a lot about the personality of the giver. Russell W. Belk says in his article, "Possessions and the Extended Self" "that possessions are an important component of a sense of self" (139). Gifts become an integral part of a person's self and so if these material possessions are lost, then a piece of self is lost. In the story, 'Gift of the Magi', Jim and Della were poor in the worldly sense but as they sacrificially bought each other gifts, they were extending their very selves in true adoration of each other.

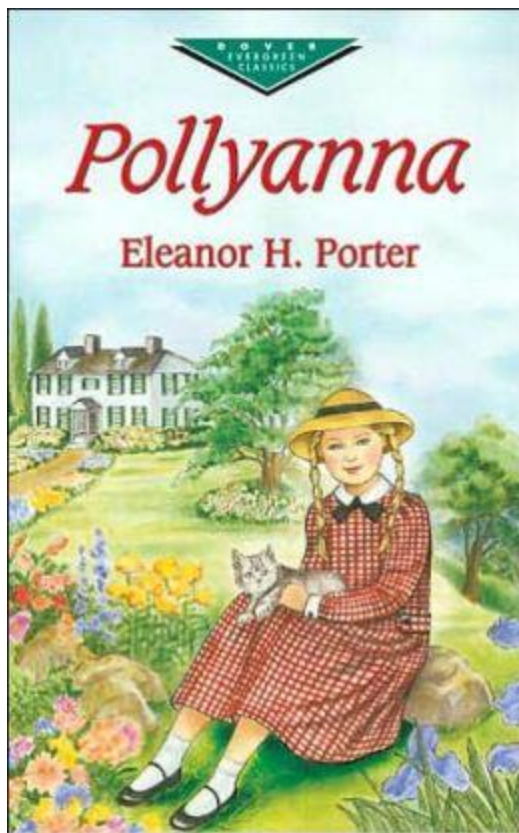
Perception of Needs – Being Looked at versus Being Seen

Aafke Komter says in his article "Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanism of Social Reciprocity", 'What one gives is not dependent on what one has received, but springs from one's perception of other people's needs' (98). Jim and Della were so close to each other that they knew what the other needed. The gifts, though useless for the moment, spoke much about what they meant to each other. In his article 'What Joy to the World really means,' Dr. Kelly Flanagan, a psychologist says that there is difference between "being looked" at and "being seen". To put it in the psychologist's own words, "being looked at, is our greatest sorrow, while being seen is our greatest joy".

According to Dr. Flanagan, when a person is looked at, it is done rather in a casual manner. On the other hand, when he is being seen, he is noticed and is given the lot of attention.

A precious gift can in its unique way express rather tangibly this idea of being seen and recognised. A person could be far away and yet give the impression of just being close to the loved one. St. Paul in the Bible conveys the same idea when he writes a letter to Thessalonians (I Thessalonians 2:17) "But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire".

Another Novel on Gift-giving: *Pollyanna* by Eleanor H. Porter



There is yet another interesting novel which revolves around the subject of gifts. This novel is entitled *Pollyanna* by Eleanor H. Porter. The main character is named Pollyanna Whittier, a young orphan who goes to live in Beldingsville, Vermont, with her affluent but arrogant Aunt Polly. Pollyanna's philosophy of life revolves around what she calls "The Glad Game," an optimistic attitude, she got from her father. The game is just about finding something to be glad about in every situation of life.

In the novel *Pollyanna*, the protagonist Pollyanna herself is a gift to Beldingsville, a town in New England. With her remarkable optimism, she infuses a new hope in the inhabitants of the little town which had been overshadowed by a pall of gloom. Her encouraging words revive people who are living on the fringes of society. Pollyanna meets a lady called Mrs. Snow, who is on her deathbed, making preparations for her impending funeral. In the beginning, the lady is hostile to Pollyanna. When nothing that Pollyanna says convinces her, Pollyanna retorts saying that she need not worry about her death as long as she lived. She reassured her that she was as alive and vibrant as any other living person on the earth. Pollyanna's positive words revived Mrs. Snow's sagging spirits finally.

Proverbs 18:21 says, 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue. And they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.' Pollyanna had been persuading the lady to say positive words which would infuse new life into her. When she finally complied, she found it worthwhile ultimately.

Charles Cabbs says in his book, *Tongue: A Creative Force*, "words are the most powerful things in the universe! The words you speak will either put you over in life or hold you in bondage. Many people have been held captive in their circumstances by their own words" (1).

Pollyanna brings joy and hope to the haughty and miserly bachelor, Pendleton. In the beginning, he drives her out of his huge mansion. But as Pollyanna leaves the place, she leaves behind something for Pendleton to ponder about. Her eyes fall on an beautiful object which has a prism effect on the wall. She points out the effect to Pendleton. Pendleton might have seen it many times but then when he sees it through the bright eyes of the bold Pollyanna, his attitude towards life itself changes.

There is a divine touch that most people miss out on. They need people like Pollyanna to find the lost light which could enlighten their eyes. People should make the most of what they have. The entire universe is full of God's splendour and grandeur. The truly amiable find it and receive the gift of joy and happiness they actually deserve.

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