

The Nature of Sacrifice in O Henry's The Gift of the Magi, Wilde's The Nightingale and the Rose, and Ibsen's A Doll's House

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Abstract

This paper tackles three stories by three eminent writers. They are two short stories and a play; namely, The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry, The Nightingale and the Rose by Oscar Wilde and A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen. Besides an introduction and conclusion, the paper falls into two sections. Section one discusses the similarities amongst the stories; the authors' focus on irony, and the incentives for giving up one's most valuable possessions in life. Focused on the undertones and outcomes of sacrifices made in each story, section two brings to light the differences as regards the nature of the sacrifices therein. It illustrates how different prices are paid as a result of the main characters' sacrifices. It also examines the outcomes and underlying suggestions. The conclusion shows that there are technical and thematic similarities amongst the selected stories. It also shows that the nature of the sacrifice made in each case is questioned when one takes into account its outcomes. Furthermore, it shows that as a result of big sacrifices made we better understand the traits of the main characters as well as the socio-economic factors that affect their relations with each other in each story.

Key Words: Sacrifice, irony, love, marriage, self-realization, experience

Introduction

The concept of sacrifice is defined as the "destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else"¹ involving loss of precious things and perhaps sometimes loss of life. We often see people in real life willingly give up invaluable things and even life for the sake of loved ones, or for a major cause, be it an ideology, a deity, or for the

¹- Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 11th Edition. Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2004, p.1094.

sake of one's country; and from time immemorial, such themes have been well-reflected in literary works of art.

In the stories in question two main incentives push the characters to sacrifice abstract as well as concrete possessions for the sake of their loved ones; these are love, as the abstract incentive, and economic needs, as the concrete incentive. The authors' ironic treatment of the stories and the twisted endings are other similarities. However, the nature of the sacrifice seen in each story is different. While it shows a character's self-knowledge and maturity in one story, it exhibits a character's lack of self-realization and naiveté in another one. While the sacrifice is highly appreciated in one story, in the other stories, the characters for whom the sacrifices are made are shown to be rather indifferent.

Section One: Incentives for Sacrifice versus Ironic Ending

In the stories in focus, economic conditions make it necessary for the main characters to give up abstract and concrete possessions for the sake of each other. They do it for the sake of love as well. Both husband and wife in The Gift of the Magi² give up their most valuable possessions for each other. The wife, Della, decides to give up her most loved hair. She sells her long and beautiful hair to raise little money in order to buy a Christmas gift for her husband. Her hair is most precious to her. The writer's metaphorical description of the hair is a testimony to the beauty of it as well as of Della's pride in having it. This is obvious when she sheds tears while thinking of selling it:

So now 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. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet. (Thompson 20)³

Poor economic conditions create a challenge for the married couple in The Magi as they are financially not able to even afford a Christmas gift for each other. Though the wife

²- Henceforth abbreviated as The Magi in the research.

³- Thompson, Lesley and Ceri Jones (eds.) American Stories. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2009. All references for The Gift of the Magi are made thereafter to this edition in the research.

tries her best to save as much as she can, she literally saves almost nothing. The opening paragraph of the story shows that we are in the presence of a poverty-stricken family,

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheek burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. (Thompson 18)

They are actually penniless: "tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result" (Ibid 19). Finally, she buys a chain for his most valued possession, the watch left to him by his forefathers. Although she is gratified because she thinks that she will surprise him with the gift she bought, she is little worried because she thinks that her husband may not like her new and short hair, "If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl." (Ibid 21)

The gift-switching moment in the story has a shocking effect on the couple as one sees the writer's ironic treatment of the ending. Surprisingly enough, no one of them will make use of the gifts they buy for each other. Della does not know that her husband, Jim, has taken a similar step and has also prepared a surprise for her. He has sold the watch to bring her a set of combs for her hair. They both discover that at the very point of gift-switching on Christmas Eve,

For there lay The Combs - the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise-shell, with jeweled rims - just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. 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. (Thompson 23)

Apparently, poverty does not make a problem for the boy in The Nightingale and the Rose⁴ at the beginning of the story because what the girl needs is only one red rose, "She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses,' cried the young

⁴ - Henceforth abbreviated as The Nightingale in the research.

Student” (The Nightingale 3)⁵, but what leads to the sacrifice made by the Nightingale is the unfeasibility of obtaining a red rose in the icy winter. Similar to the earlier story, the Nightingale here is moved by love as the real incentive for self-sacrifice. Having understood the meaning of true love, the Nightingale is willing to give up its life for it:

Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market-place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, 'or can it be weighed out in the balance for gold. (Wilde 3)

Wilde’s hyperbolic and romantic description of love is to justify the Nightingale’s sacrifice. The Nightingale makes it clear that life is dear to all creatures: “and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl” (The Nightingale 5), but love is dearer, it goes on; it is the source of wisdom and power,

Love is wiser than Philosophy, though she is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense.’ (The Nightingale 5)

Moreover, the problem of poverty is very present in this story as well. It is revealed at the end of the story when the girl prefers jewels to the red rose; which is an implicit reference to the problem of classes. The ending is twisted here like The Magi because the girl does not keep her promise and she prefers the jewels offered to her by the Chamberlain’s nephew. The girl states, “the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers” (The Nightingale 7). The boy is thus rejected because he is a poor student and does not have jewels and silver like the Chamberlain’s nephew. The girl indifferently says to him, “and, after all, who are you? Only a student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has.” (The Nightingale 7)

⁵https://moodle201213.ua.es/moodle/pluginfile.php/12052/mod_resource/content/1/Oscar_Wilde_-_The_Nightingale_and_the_Rose.pdf. All references are made thereafter to this source.

In A Doll's House, Nora Helmer puts her reputation at stake when she forges a document in her father's name and signature in order that she may secure money to save her husband's life as his health is deteriorating. The reason why Helmer falls sick is because of overworking himself. The readers thus get to know about the economic background of this family in the past, which did not seem to be good at all. His wife makes this clear in a conversation with Mrs. Linde,

But during the first year he over-worked himself dreadfully. You see, he had to make money every way he could, and he worked early and late; but he couldn't stand it, and fell dreadfully ill, and the doctors said it was necessary for him to go south. (Ibsen 11)⁶

Nora tries different kinds of jobs to make money as she continues stating that she has done "odds and ends, needlework, crotchet-work, embroidery, and that kind of thing" (A Doll's House 11). Similar to the wife in The Magi, Nora does whatever she can to save money without letting her husband or children notice that, adding yet another sacrifice to what she already did. She says to Mrs. Linde:

I have had to save a little here and there, where I could, you understand. I have not been able to put aside much from my housekeeping money, for Torvald must have a good table. I couldn't let my children shabbily dressed; I have felt obliged to use up all he gave me for them, the sweet little darlings. (Ibsen 16)

Moreover as a dedicated worker she pays back the money to her father's account in installments. However, a change of fortune is seen in this story as the husband, eight years after Nora forged her father's signature, is now promoted to become the manager of the bank and thus one expects Nora's worries about money to be over. This economic improvement, however, does not help the couple in terms of familial relation adjustment. The twisted ending of the play shows how Nora is disappointed in her husband's reaction upon discovering what she did. Not only he is not ready to take the blame on himself as Nora has always expected, but he also accuses her of infidelity as well as senselessness. He states that Nora has inherited her father's "want of principle"

⁶ <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/h-ibsen/dolls-house.pdf>. All references henceforth are made to this source in the paper.

and that he should not have winked at his father-in-law's actions in the past whereby unwittingly confessing his own immorality,

What a horrible awakening! All these eight years—she who was my joy and pride—a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all—For shame! (Nora is silent and looks steadily at him. He stops in front of her.) I ought to have suspected that something of that sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it!—all your father's want of principle—be silent! —all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty. How I am punished for having winked at what he did. I did it for your sake, and this is how you repay me. (Ibsen 70)

It is indeed shocking, yet an awakening for Nora who now realizes that she has been living with a stranger telling Helmer that she “can receive nothing from a stranger” (A Doll's House 80). Eventually, she decides to leave the house and leave the past behind; making yet another great sacrifice as she also leaves her three children behind.

Section Two: Underlying suggestions

The sacrifice seen in The Magi has a paradoxical nature. On the one hand it seems futile as each spouse does not make use of the gift of the other. While she gets a set of combs, Della has already lost her hair. Simultaneously, Jim does not benefit from the chain as he already has sold his most precious watch. Accordingly, they are depicted, ironically of course, as a foolish couple as O. Henry says that he has related to us the “uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house” (The Magi). On the other hand, they both are not affected by the loss of their material possessions because their losses assert their maturity as well as love for each other. While they lose their “greatest treasures of their house”, they find out there is a worthier treasure in their marital life, which is real love. It shows that a healthy marital relationship that is based on real love does not value material possessions. The terrible economic condition they suffer from not only does not affect their marital relationship, but it also strengthens it as such relation is based on love. This why the writer finally asserts, “of all who give gifts these two were the wisest” (The Magi), a description that obviously contrasts the writer's earlier words about the couple when he calls them “two foolish children.”

In their paper entitled “Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes,” Scott M. Stanley et al discuss the concept of sacrifice and show its positive nature in an experimental

study in which married couples are involved. Though they hypothesize that sacrifices can sometimes be harmful, they generally conclude that it often enhances marital and familial relationships (⁷). This quite applies to the story of The Magi. Each spouse's act shows that they favour the interest of the couple to self-interest; supportive of the interdependence theory (⁸) discussed by Stanley et al. Thus, though material loss is involved, moral gain is asserted in The Magi after the mutual sacrifices of the couple.

The Nightingale's story is quite different. The sacrifice is made by a third party who is in no way involved in the relationship between the girl and the boy. The nightingale's sacrifice is for the sake of love. It is neither appreciated by the boy for whom the nightingale chooses to die so that he might get a red rose, nor by the girl to whom the rose is given and who prefers jewels to roses. Therefore; it does in no way affect the relationship between the girl and the boy. Apart from the moral significance of the Nightingale's act, the futility of it lies in the fact that the sacrifice goes even unnoticed by any human character in the story. It is only noticed by the tree; which, like a good friend offers to help the Nightingale. The boy throws the rose into the street, and it falls into the gutter and is run over by a cart-wheel (The Nightingale 7). Therefore; quite contrary to story of The Magi in which the outcome of the sacrifice asserts maturity of the couple, in The Nightingale the outcome of the Nightingale's death eventually shows the naiveté of both of the boy and the girl. In this story, the world portrayed by Wilde, though a world of children, is clearly a materialistic one. In such a world, spiritual relations are not appreciated at all. Spiritual values are very significant to the Nightingale, while they are not appreciated by the boy and the girl. The sacrifice, therefore, attests to the deterioration of moral values in a materialistic society and shows the writer's frustration against human beings in an age when materialism prevails. Despite the fact that loss of life is involved, there is no hope for moral adjustment. In fact, moral loss is brought to focus instead.

We seem to be in the presence of writer who is quite against the concept of marriage in *A Doll's House*. However, in this story, both egoism and lack of self-understanding prevail as destructive tools to a marital life based neither on spiritual values, nor on

⁷ Scott M. Stanley and others. "Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes" Family Process : EPI, Inc. (Vol. 45, No. 3, 2006) P. 290.

⁸ According to this theory marital relationships usually become altruistic as the spouses forego their own interests for the sake of each other. Stanley et al state that "with growing interdependence, an individual's motivation undergoes a transformation from self-interest to the interest of the relationship." See Stanley and others p. 290.

understanding. It becomes clear at the end of the story that Nora Helmer was given a piece of property, literally a gift, to Helmer as he helped her father in the past. The interdependence theory discussed above seems to apply only to the wife in A Doll's House. The altruistic characteristics Nora has drastically differ from her husband's egoistic character. Quite contrary to The Magi, the sacrifice made by the one party here destroys the marital relationship at the end of the story. However, significant lessons are gained by Nora. First of all, Nora's self realization is emphasized. She realizes that she has never been happy in that house. She says, "I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so" (A Doll's House 74). She clearly can make the difference between merry-making and real happiness stating that their house was only a "playroom". Focusing on such realization, Henrik Ibsen censures the seemingly stable marriages, which if scrutinized it becomes crystal clear that they are very fragile. The result of Nora's sacrifice unmasks the seemingly stable marital life of the Helmers. It shows that such marriages are indeed very shaky. In fact, she describes their marital relation as a children's play. Addressing her husband, Nora states,

I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald. (Ibsen 75)

Thus, Nora realizes what she has considered real love has been merely an illusion. And for Helmer, it is simply based on physical pleasure rather than love and understanding. Most often Helmer's compliments address the physicality of his wife such as that when he says, "This time I needn't sit here and be dull all alone, and you needn't ruin your dear eyes and your pretty little hands" (A Doll's House 8). Henrik Ibsen is not against the idea of sacrifice. On the contrary, sacrifice is the means by which Ibsen's heroine gains experience. Ibsen tries to bring to light the concept of what one could consider a bad or an unsuccessful marriage, and that it is in the interest of society if such bonds are broken sooner rather than later. He dives deeper than that by focusing on the significance of experience, which leads to self-understanding and self-respect, the lack of which might clearly result in the of act un-requited sacrifice such as that by Nora Helmer.

Conclusion

The concept of sacrifice seems self-explanatory at a first glance. However, this view might be deceptive when one attempts to find explanations as to why people give up their most valuables for the sake of others. The different causes and effects of sacrifice

teach us much about the people who do it and the society and the world in which the sacrifices are made. Despite the similarities in the three stories discussed above in terms of the use of irony and other thematic issues, the differences in the underlying suggestions behind sacrifice in each story shows that the concept of sacrifice can tell us about the differences in the human traits, their natures, their understanding of the self and of others, as well as the value of their experience. There is always one common ground for the sacrifices made in each story under study, and that is love. It shows the maturity of the marital relationship in O Henry's story, one which is based on love. However, for *The Nightingale*, it shows the dominance of material values over spiritual ones, and the writer's disappointment in human beings, who seem not to care except for material possessions. In Ibsen's story, sacrifice conveys much about the significance of experience and self-realization. The endings in the three stories discussed show how altruism and egoism of the characters shape our understanding of the nature and value of sacrifice.

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