



The Representation of American Cultural Values in Gift-Giving Practices in The Gift of the Magi

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Abstract. This study examines the representation of gift-giving as part of American culture in O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi* and explores how cultural values are reflected through this practice. Gift-giving in literature is not only viewed as a material exchange but also as a symbolic expression of love, sacrifice, sincerity, and emotional connection. This research aims to identify how gift-giving is represented in the story and how American cultural values are reflected through the characters' actions. The study uses a qualitative descriptive method and applies Stuart Hall's theory of representation as the main theoretical framework. Data were collected from dialogues, narrative descriptions, character actions, and symbolic elements related to gift-giving. The findings show that gift-giving is represented as an emotional and symbolic act rather than an economic activity. The story highlights four main representations: love and emotional expression, sacrifice as a cultural meaning, reflections of American cultural values, and the symbolic significance of gifts beyond material usefulness. The study concludes that emotional sincerity is more important than material value. Furthermore, the story reflects American ideals such as generosity, togetherness, selflessness, and devotion, especially within Christmas traditions.

Keywords: American Cultural Values; Gift-Giving; Representation; Sacrifice; Symbolism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the most significant cultural products that reflects social realities, values, beliefs, and traditions existing within society. Literary works are not merely forms of artistic entertainment but also media through which meanings are constructed and communicated (Hall, 1997; Mauss, 2002). Through literary narratives, readers are able to understand social conditions, cultural values, and human experiences represented in stories, characters, and symbols. According to Eagleton (2011), literature is closely connected to ideology and social reality because literary texts often reflect the conditions and values of the society in which they are produced.

As a cultural product, literature also functions as a representation of social practices and cultural identities. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is the process through which meaning is produced and exchanged within a culture through language, symbols, and signs. Therefore, literary texts can be analyzed not only from their intrinsic elements but also from the cultural meanings represented within them.

One cultural practice frequently represented in literature is gift-giving. In general, gift-giving is understood as the act of exchanging objects or presents between individuals. However, within cultural and literary contexts, gift-giving has meanings beyond material exchange. It can symbolize affection, emotional attachment, social relationships, moral

obligations, and sacrifice. Belk (1993) states that gift-giving reflects emotional and symbolic meanings that express relationships between individuals.

In American culture, gift-giving is strongly associated with Christmas traditions and family values. During Christmas celebrations, exchanging gifts becomes an important cultural activity that symbolizes love, generosity, gratitude, and togetherness. The act of giving gifts is not merely about economic value but also about emotional significance and social bonding.

One literary work that strongly represents the cultural meaning of gift-giving is *The Gift of the Magi* written by O. Henry in 1905. The story focuses on a married couple, Jim and Della, who sacrifice their most valuable possessions to buy meaningful Christmas gifts for each other. Della sells her long beautiful hair to buy a platinum chain for Jim's watch, while Jim sells his watch to buy decorative combs for Della's hair. Ironically, the gifts lose their practical functions because of the sacrifices they make. Nevertheless, the story emphasizes emotional value and sincerity over material usefulness (Storey, 2018; Tyson, 2015; Wellek & Warren, 1956).

Previous studies on *The Gift of the Magi* have mostly focused on themes such as love, sacrifice, irony, and moral values. However, there is still limited research that specifically examines gift-giving as a form of cultural representation and analyzes how American cultural values are reflected through this practice. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the research gap by analyzing gift-giving using Stuart Hall's representation theory.

This study aims to answer two research questions. First, how is gift-giving represented in *The Gift of the Magi*? Second, how are American cultural values reflected through the practice of gift-giving in the story? Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to literary and cultural studies, particularly in understanding how literary texts represent cultural meanings and social values.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation Theory

This study uses Stuart Hall's theory of representation as the main theoretical framework. According to Hall (1997), representation is the process of producing meaning through language, symbols, and cultural signs. Representation enables people within a society to communicate and exchange meanings. Meaning is not naturally fixed in objects or events; rather, it is constructed through social and cultural systems.

Hall explains that language plays an important role in representation because it allows people to interpret and understand concepts. In literary works, representation appears through narrative descriptions, dialogues, characters, symbols, and events that reflect social realities and cultural values. In this study, representation theory is used to analyze how gift-giving is represented in *The Gift of the Magi* and how cultural meanings are constructed through the actions and sacrifices of the characters.

Literature and Culture

Literature and culture are closely connected because literature often reflects the values, traditions, and ideologies of society. Eagleton (2011) explains that literature cannot be separated from social and cultural contexts because literary works are produced within particular historical and cultural conditions. Similarly, Storey (2021) argues that culture is related to meaning-making processes within society. Literary texts become important cultural artifacts because they provide representations of social values, human relationships, and cultural identities. In the context of this study, *The Gift of the Magi* reflects aspects of American culture, especially values related to family relationships, sacrifice, generosity, and Christmas traditions.

Gift-Giving as Cultural Practice

Gift-giving is an important cultural and social practice found in many societies around the world. Anthropologists and cultural theorists have argued that gift-giving carries symbolic and emotional meanings beyond material exchange. Belk (1993) states that gift-giving is an expression of emotional attachment and affection. Gifts are often used to communicate love, gratitude, respect, and social connection. Similarly, Komter (2007) explains that gift-giving reflects moral obligations and social relationships because individuals exchange gifts to strengthen interpersonal bonds.

In modern society, gift-giving is also connected to consumer culture and symbolic consumption. According to Shukla and Purani (2022), symbolic consumption emphasizes emotional and symbolic meanings rather than practical functions. Within American culture, gift-giving is strongly connected to Christmas traditions. Christmas celebrations often involve exchanging gifts among family members and loved ones as expressions of affection, generosity, and togetherness.

Previous Studies

Several previous studies have analyzed *The Gift of the Magi* from different perspectives. Some studies focus on themes of sacrifice and love, while others discuss irony and moral values within the story. Research conducted by Nurhayati (2020) analyzed moral

values and cultural phenomena in *The Gift of the Magi*. The study found that the story emphasizes sincerity and selfless love. Another study by Pratiwi (2021) focused on the symbolic meaning of sacrifice within the story and argued that sacrifice represents emotional devotion. However, previous studies rarely analyze gift-giving as a form of cultural representation using Stuart Hall's theory. Therefore, this study provides a different perspective by combining literary analysis with cultural representation theory.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method. Qualitative research is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, symbols, and cultural representations within a literary text. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is used to explore and understand social or cultural phenomena through textual interpretation and descriptive analysis. In this study, the researcher analyzes narrative elements related to gift-giving practices in *The Gift of the Magi*.

Data Source

The primary data source of this study is the short story *The Gift of the Magi* written by O. Henry in 1905. Secondary data are obtained from books, journals, and previous studies related to representation theory, literary criticism, and cultural studies.

Technique of Data Collection

The data are collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. The researcher carefully reads the story several times to identify dialogues, narrative descriptions, and character actions related to gift-giving.

The selected data include dialogues between characters, narrative descriptions explaining the emotional conditions of the characters, symbolic elements related to gifts and sacrifice, and various actions that reflect cultural values. These data are analyzed to understand how gift-giving is represented in the story and how cultural meanings are conveyed through the characters' interactions, emotions, and symbolic practices.

Technique of Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study follows the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the first stage, relevant data related to gift-giving practices are selected and categorized based on the research objectives. In the second stage, the categorized data are organized into thematic discussions focusing on representation and cultural values reflected in the story. In the final stage, the researcher interprets the meanings represented

within the narrative and draws conclusions based on the findings. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is used as the primary analytical framework to analyze how gift-giving reflects emotional meanings and American cultural values in *The Gift of the Magi*.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Love and Emotional Expression

The analysis reveals that gift-giving in *The Gift of the Magi* functions primarily as a representation of love and emotional expression. The gifts exchanged by Jim and Della symbolize affection, devotion, and emotional attachment rather than material value.

One important quotation from the story states:

“There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl.”

This quotation reflects Della's emotional struggle because she wants to buy a meaningful Christmas gift for Jim despite her financial limitations. Her sadness demonstrates how deeply she cares about expressing love through gift-giving.

Another important scene occurs when Della decides to sell her hair:

“Will you buy my hair?” asked Della.

This action symbolizes sacrifice motivated by love. Della willingly sacrifices her most valuable possession in order to buy a gift for Jim. Similarly, Jim sacrifices his watch to buy combs for Della. According to Belk (1993), gift-giving often functions as emotional communication. In this story, the exchanged gifts represent sincere affection rather than economic exchange. The emotional significance of the gifts becomes more important than their practical usefulness. Even though the gifts eventually cannot be used, Jim and Della still appreciate each other's sacrifices. This indicates that emotional value is prioritized over material value.

Sacrifice as Central Cultural Meaning

Sacrifice becomes the central meaning represented through gift-giving in the story. Both Jim and Della demonstrate selflessness by sacrificing their prized possessions. Della sacrifices her long hair, which is described as her greatest beauty, while Jim sacrifices his gold watch, which is one of his most valuable belongings. These sacrifices emphasize sincerity and devotion.

The story suggests that true love requires willingness to sacrifice personal comfort and possessions for the happiness of others. Komter (2007) explains that gift-giving often involves moral obligations and emotional commitments. The sacrifices made by Jim and Della also symbolize emotional maturity and commitment within marriage. Their actions show that love

is measured not by wealth or material possessions but by sincerity and willingness to give. Furthermore, sacrifice in the story reflects moral values admired in society, such as generosity, selflessness, and devotion. The story encourages readers to value emotional sincerity above material success.

Reflection of American Cultural Values

The practice of gift-giving in *The Gift of the Magi* reflects several important American cultural values, particularly those associated with Christmas traditions.

Generosity

Generosity is one of the main values reflected in the story. Jim and Della both prioritize each other's happiness over their own personal interests. Their willingness to sacrifice valuable possessions demonstrates generosity and emotional commitment.

Love and Togetherness

The story emphasizes the importance of family relationships and emotional togetherness. Christmas traditions in American culture often focus on strengthening family bonds and expressing affection through gift-giving. Jim and Della's actions demonstrate that emotional connection is more valuable than financial wealth. Even though they are economically poor, they are emotionally rich because of their love and devotion.

Sincerity and Selflessness

The exchanged gifts symbolize sincerity and selflessness. The story suggests that genuine love involves giving without expecting rewards. This value is strongly connected to cultural ideals associated with Christmas celebrations, where generosity and compassion are emphasized.

Symbolic Meaning Beyond Material Value

Another important finding is that the gifts possess symbolic meanings beyond their practical usefulness. The platinum chain purchased by Della and the decorative combs purchased by Jim become practically useless because both characters have sacrificed the items necessary to use the gifts. However, the symbolic meaning of the gifts becomes more significant. The irony within the story emphasizes that emotional sincerity is more valuable than material usefulness. The gifts symbolize love, sacrifice, and devotion rather than economic value.

Shukla and Purani (2022) argue that symbolic consumption emphasizes emotional and symbolic meanings rather than practical functions. This concept is reflected clearly in the story because the exchanged gifts represent emotional values rather than material benefits. The

symbolic meaning of the gifts also strengthens the moral message of the story. O. Henry suggests that the true value of gifts lies in sincerity and emotional intention.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that gift-giving in *The Gift of the Magi* is represented as a symbolic and emotional cultural practice rather than merely a material exchange. Through the actions of Jim and Della, the story emphasizes the importance of love, sacrifice, sincerity, and emotional devotion. The findings reveal four major representations of gift-giving within the story: representation of love and emotional expression, sacrifice as central cultural meaning, reflection of American cultural values, and symbolic meaning beyond material value.

The study also demonstrates that American cultural values such as generosity, togetherness, sincerity, and selflessness are reflected through Christmas gift-giving traditions. The exchanged gifts symbolize emotional attachment rather than economic value. This study contributes to literary and cultural studies by showing how literary texts represent social meanings and cultural practices through symbols and narrative elements. However, this study is limited to textual analysis and the use of representation theory. Future researchers are recommended to apply different theoretical approaches, such as semiotics or cultural materialism, or compare similar literary works from different cultural contexts.

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