

Hildegard Hoeller

*From Gift to Commodity. Capitalism and Sacrifice
in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*

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From Gift to Commodity is an interdisciplinary study of the tension between gift and market exchange in nineteenth-century American culture. It raises some of the most fundamental questions about human existence: What are we given – life, talent, love, friendship, objects or faith? Who gives these gifts and why? What, if any, are the obligations that come with these gifts? In what way can gifts be blessings, curses, or mixed blessings? Can we tell stories without gifts? How can we offer and accept sacrifices in an increasingly capitalist culture? Hoeller demonstrates that nineteenth-century American writers were engaged in brilliant and complex explorations of the role of the gift in a culture based on self-interest, market transactions and economic reason. With sacrifice at the centre of her discussion, Hoeller taps into the discourse of modes of exchange, revealing central tensions of American fiction and culture.

Divided into three parts – “Sacrifices of a Nation”, “Panic Fictions”, “Fading Gifts and Rising Profits” – Hoeller discusses the works of Hannah Foster, Lydia Maria Child, Susan Warner, William Wells Brown, Herman Melville, William Dean Howells and Frank Norris. Two chapters are of particular interest: “Self-Sacrifice or Preservation: Lydia Maria Child’s Reflections on the Gift in *Hobomok* and *The American Frugal Housewife*” (chapter three), and “Panic, Gifts and Faith in Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World*” (chapter four). In her discussion of *Hobomok*, Hoeller points to Child’s conviction that women and Indians respectively are to some extent excluded from an economic system that is governed by self-interest and exploitation of resources; they have tended to sacrifice themselves to the interests of white men. *Hobomok* asks us to recognize the Indians’ and many women’s noble sacrifices – sacrifices that have made it possible for the white man to settle and prosper in the new world. *Hobomok*’s sacrifice, however, is all too easily forgotten. Hoeller concludes that the novel unfolds “outside of conscious reason and within the logic or spirit of the gift” (55); sacrifice is an important but much underestimated part of this logic.

In her later work *The Frugal Housewife*, Child thought more clearly about the deathly dangers of the gift. Hoeller argues that in this novel, Child’s writing disintegrates into open chaos: she formally refuses any vision beyond economic accumulation. The reader is invited to read the text only with his own self-interest and survival at heart. The gift cannot defend itself against the exploitation that dominates American’s growing capitalist order.

The discussion of Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World* in chapter four focuses on how the novel explores exchanges and communities that might rescue the characters, especially the female ones, not only from poverty but also from what Hoeller describes as “the meaningless volatility of the market” (84). Unlike other critics, Hoeller does not focus on the endorsement of female submission but explores the role of the gift in America’s economic and spiritual life, concluding that “[t]he meaning of the novel and its central struggle lie in its focus on the motion of the gift” (85). Different gift rituals are examined as alternative

economic spaces to market capitalism. Hoeller demonstrates that far from being a novel about submission, *The Wide, Wide World* is about flux and motion, between inside and outside, life and death, private and public. There are two kinds of gift: secular and sacred. While the secular gifts are devoid of transformative power, the sacred ones are transformative and powerful but also frightening.

From Gift to Commodity is a scholarly work of the highest order. As the first book to examine in detail the gift in nineteenth-century American fiction, it fills an important gap in American literary scholarship. Meticulously annotated and with a comprehensive bibliography and index, *From Gift to Commodity* is an invaluable aid to students and researchers of American literature and culture on both sides of the Atlantic and an important addition to the “Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies” series published by the University of New Hampshire Press.

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