

Hildegard Hoeller, *From Gift to Commodity: Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012. 279 pp.

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In the preface to her insightful study of nineteenth-century American fiction, Hildegard Hoeller describes the concerns that have driven her project as “the most fundamental questions about human existence” (xi). In truth, Hoeller’s second monograph, *From Gift to Commodity: Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, explores the social, political, and economic contradictions of nineteenth-century America through the most fundamental—and priceless—aspect of humanity: the importance of gift exchange in an increasingly capitalist culture. As she examines the literary expressions of the gift in this sweeping study of nineteenth-century American fiction, Hoeller poses a question that encapsulates the stakes of her inquiry: “Can we tell *any* stories without gifts? How can we offer and accept sacrifices in an increasingly capitalist culture?” (xi).

The intersections between narrative and economy allow her to reconstruct the literary history of nineteenth-century America around the tension between capitalism and the gift. Hoeller’s approach combines a materialist take of American culture with a

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theoretical perspective that draws on Marcel Mauss's and Lewis Hyde's anthropological reflections on the gift, as well as Jacques Derrida's philosophical meditations on the aporetic nature of gift exchange. Though her work is largely indebted to the interconnectedness between literature and economy that the new economic criticism has brought to the fore, it has a wider critical resonance; it addresses the universality of a transhistorical concept (such as the gift) while doing justice to the historical context that has shaped it. Thus, Hoeller's text accomplishes an admirable feat: it offers a well-balanced discussion that straddles comfortably between the historicist vein of Americanist criticism and the transhistorical leanings of critical theory. Throughout the book, Hoeller's use of theory is well contextualized within important socioeconomic issues of the long nineteenth century: slavery, gender inequality, the Native American question, the market panic of 1837, and the gold standard debate.

Hoeller examines the literary expressions of these questions in a remarkable array of genres: seduction novels, historical romances, sentimental fiction, slave narratives, abolitionist works, seafaring adventure novels, realist texts, and naturalist literature. Her study follows a chronological continuum that is organized thematically in three parts. The first part, "Sacrifices of a Nation," addresses the tension between economic and moral responsibility in early sentimental fiction. Hoeller's analysis begins with Hannah Foster's *Coquette* (1797), though her argument acquires momentum in the discussion of Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) and *The American Frugal Housewife* (1829). Hoeller traces a progression in Child's work, where unconditional sacrifice gives way to self-interested preservation. She aptly stresses the pragmatic foundation of this shift; much as

Child values the gift, she acknowledges its pharmacotic effects for Native Americans and women, who are most prone to sacrificial rites and most vulnerable to gift exchange.

In the second part, “Panic Fictions,” Hoeller examines the controversial politics of the gift in mid-nineteenth century America. Her reading of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) as a response to the 1837 panic suggests the increasing vulnerability of women to the market. The aporetic nature of the gift—its secular form promises survival while its sacred form implies the unspeakable gift of death—allows Hoeller to complicate the distinction between emotional and monetary costs and read the novel beyond the separate spheres ideology that has dominated the critical approach to sentimental fiction. Hoeller’s style reflects the flowing, counterintuitive circularity of gift exchange: “[a]nd the lesson of the gift is hard to learn because where we lose we gain, where we hate we must love, and where we give away we may not find a return” (100). At the end of the chapter Hoeller makes a poignant remark that warrants even further investigation, namely, that the gift allows Warner’s heroine to assume agency even as—or perhaps *because*—she seems to be submissive to others. Though this agency is inscribed within the context of religion (a dominant trope in sentimental fiction), it is illuminative of the contentious issues of gender and power that Warner’s novel poses—and Hoeller’s study foregrounds.

The following chapters elaborate on the question of power in William Wells Brown and Herman Melville. Hoeller argues that they both destabilize the boundaries between fact and fiction as a response to an unstable economy. In a society of shinplaster money, Brown circulates what Hoeller ingeniously calls “shinplaster fiction,” namely, “semibacked fiction created to circulate as a professional commodity” (116). Hoeller

traces the move from the alleged truthfulness of the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847) to the rhetorical manipulations of this veracity in Brown's autobiographical preface to *Clotel* (1853). She draws a similar narrative in Melville's fiction—from the gift-giving community of *Typee* (1846) to the erratic structure and the various personae of *The Confidence Man* (1857). Both novels are Melville's reflections on "the (im)possibility of the gift in light of the impossibility of the market" (145).

The aporetic relation between capitalism and the gift finds its ultimate expression in the late nineteenth-century realism and naturalism that Hoeller takes up in the final part, "Fading Gifts and Rising Profits." First, she uses the gift to account for the seemingly inconsistent plot of William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). In a similar vein, she argues that the meandering structure of Howells's essay "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business" (1893) reflects the breakdown of language due to the absence of the gift in a capitalist society. The last section, where Hoeller discusses Howells's essay "Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver" (1895), is excellent in its close reading of "tribulations" as Derridean moments of aporia. Hoeller remarks that Howells's essay demonstrates "how his writing about capitalist America virtually deconstructs around the central question of the gift, and it is brilliant and moving because of it" (207). I would add that Hoeller's deconstructive reading of Howells's work is all the more brilliant and moving as it juggles the historical complexities of late capitalism with the thematic and narrative complexities of realism as a genre.

The book concludes with a discussion of Frank Norris's naturalistic novel *McTeague* (1899), which demonstrates the depletion of the gift in an inhuman, market economy that Hoeller calls the "antigift" (209). Hoeller's reading of the final scene—an

absurd lethal duel in the apocalyptic landscape of a desert—captures the essence of Norris’s naturalism: man’s regression to animality is not so much a result of an undercurrent bestiality but rather the depletion of the gift that makes us human. Thus, Hoeller ends on the humanistic note that triggered her project, that is, the role of art in defining—and questioning—the limits of our existence.

It would be safe to say that her study is a remarkable addition to this inquiry and a significant contribution to Americanist scholarship. In fact, the book raises questions about literature, economy, and art that are of interest to scholars of all humanistic disciplines. Though Hoeller’s prose can sometimes adopt a slightly intricate, Derridean register, it is remarkably clear in its style and carefully close in its reading. All in all, her text offers a refreshing fusion of historicist critique and theoretical inquiry that will hopefully pave the way for more studies of this nature.