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Wise Sacrifice: An Analysis of Henry and Hurst

Authors often use their platforms in order to convey a positive message to their readers. The idea of sacrifice is commonly explored in literature, sometimes as a positive character trait and other times as a fatal flaw. The short story “The Gift of the Magi” is O. Henry’s tale of sacrifice between poverty-stricken spouses who sell their most prized possessions in order to buy each other Christmas gifts. James Hurst’s short story “The Scarlet Ibis” describes an older brother’s desire to teach his younger disabled sibling to walk, run, and swim so he can be “normal.” In both “The Gift of the Magi” and “The Scarlet Ibis,” the authors use symbolism and details to explore the motif of sacrifice; sacrifice, when driven by selfless motivation, reveals the wisdom of the giver, but a selfish sacrifice can yield detrimental results.

A symbol is a literary device authors use that has a deeper meaning than what the reader sees as literal, and symbolism is used in “The Gift of the Magi” and “The Scarlet Ibis” to represent specific characters so the reader learns more about their personalities and characteristics. The magi are historically and Biblically known as a group of wise men who brought gifts to baby Jesus when he was born in a manger. The magi symbolize the characters Jim and Della in “The Gift of the Magi.” Jim and Della sacrifice their most prized possessions in order to buy each other Christmas gifts: “of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. […] They are the magi” (Henry par. 45). The magi in the Bible were selfless givers, and they brought precious, expensive, rare gifts to a baby, whom they believed to be the savior of the world, as a sign of respect and adoration for him. They received nothing in return, and truthfully, a baby could not use their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Similarly, Jim and Della could not use the gifts they were each given because they sold what was needed to enjoy the gifts: Jim sold his watch, so his watch chain was useless, and Della sold her hair, so she could not use her hair combs. Regardless, each gave to the other selflessly, and their love and joy was their reward. Unfortunately, sacrifice in “The Scarlet Ibis” is not rewarded. The character Doodle is symbolized by the scarlet ibis bird, which flies from South America to North Carolina just to collapse and die once he reaches safety from the storm he is outrunning. When Doodle collapses after vigorously rowing the boat in order to outrun the storm approaching them, his older brother leaves him; when his brother returns, Doodle is gone, and his brother “l[ies] there crying, sheltering [his] fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy of rain” (Hurst par. 47). Like the scarlet ibis, Doodle is pushed too hard and his body cannot withstand the physical exertion of trying to meet his brother’s expectations. Though the narrator, Doodle’s older brother, sacrifices his time and energy into helping Doodle walk, run, and swim, his motivations are selfish, and they ultimately lead to Doodle’s death. Both stories use symbolism to explore the motif of sacrifice; however, the motivation for sacrifice is not the same in both texts, and only selfless sacrifice is rewarded and encouraged.

Like symbolism, the details of both stories reveal the authors’ thoughts on sacrifice. Della sold her hair for twenty dollars, and she spent almost all of that to buy Jim’s Christmas gift: “Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents” (Henry par. 19). This minor detail, the fact that Della began with only $1.87 and returned home with only the 87 cents, shows how little Della has to buy Jim a gift before selling her hair. Her hair is worth almost ten times more than what she originally has to spend on his gift, so her sacrifice is emphasized by this small detail: she has so little, and she selflessly gives so much. Similarly, the details in “The Scarlet Ibis” reveal that sacrifice is made in the text, but the motivation and result are drastically different than “The Gift of the Magi.” The narrator gains “knowledge that Doodle’s and [his] plans had come to naught,” and ultimately this thought is why he leaves Doodle, exhausted and unable to move, in the rain (Hurst par. 42). This detail reveals that the older brother’s sacrifice of time and energy to help Doodle was selfish, and he grows angry with Doodle for not achieving his—the older brother’s—goals. Both stories reveal the authors’ comments on sacrifice through their use of details, and they also reveal the characters’ motivations: Della’s motivations are good and pure, and the older brother’s motivations are selfish and irrational. Their motivations lead to different outcomes: joy for the Dillingham-Youngs, and suffering for Doodle’s family.

In both O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” and James Hurst’s “The Scarlet Ibis,” the act of sacrifice, which is portrayed through symbolism and details in the stories, plays a major role in the plots’ development, and the reader learns that selfless sacrifice is rewarded, but sacrificing due to selfish motivation can end in disaster. Both tales are commonly analyzed in literature classrooms across the world, and the authors’ intent is realized by adolescents and adults alike. The influence of the written word on students varies greatly, but these texts and others like them have earned “classic” status for their positive messages and lasting impact on readers, and their influence cannot be denied.

Works Cited

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Hurst, James. “The Scarlet Ibis.” 1960. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/15vNRHFeVhTeM25Mz2hfgkC2_7qXS5ld-xFzl0AemrzE/edit?usp=sharing>.