INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600
Economies of Exchange: The Value of the Gift in U.S. Culture

by

Jennie Lynn Stearns

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Scott Derrick, Chair,
Associate Professor of English

Susan Lurie, Associate Professor of English

Jane Dailey, Associate Professor of History,
Johns Hopkins University

HOUSTON, TEXAS

MAY, 2002
ABSTRACT

Economies of Exchange: The Value of the Gift in U.S. Culture

by

Jennie Lynn Stearns

This dissertation establishes gift exchanges as a key concern of numerous nineteenth-century U.S. texts. An ideology of the free gift developed in the nineteenth century as both a defense against the market’s perceived threat to personal relationships and as a means of reconceptualizing these relationships in terms consistent with such capitalist tenets as possessive individualism and voluntary contract.

My introduction synthesizes multiple models of gift exchange offered by contemporary theory. I resist both idealizations of the gift that overlook important continuities between gift and commodity transactions and equally simplistic demystifications that ignore crucial distinctions: 1) the form of reciprocity each entails, and 2) their respective capacities for reproducing social relationships.

Chapter one compares Ralph Waldo Emerson’s arguments about gifts’ threat to individual autonomy and Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*. Melville, in contradistinction to Emerson, concentrates on gift rituals’ facilitating role within market transactions and suggests that individual autonomy might lie in self-consciously performing, not avoiding, gift exchange’s obligations. Chapter two examines the frequent depictions of gift-giving in popular domestic novels. Regardless of whether particular authors, such as Susan Warner and Maria Cummins, naturalize the dichotomy between private and public economic transactions by treating gift and commodity
exchange as specifically gendered practices, or whether, in the case of Fanny Fern and William Dean Howells, they problematize such oppositions, domestic fiction illustrates that gift practices shape commodity transactions as powerfully as such transactions transform social relations. The concluding chapter examines Harriet Jacobs's, Frances Harper's, and W. E. B. Du Bois's attempts to critique possessive individualism and a racist discourse of paternalism by constructing gift-based concepts of identity and citizenship. Because gift transactions generate a community's sense of mutual obligation, gift exchange's obligatory reciprocity provides an indispensable, if often problematic, metaphor for conceptualizing a national community.

The material practices of gift exchange thus provided the nineteenth-century U.S. with a powerful tool for theorizing—and for forging an apparent continuity between—a multitude of concepts, such as individualism, the relationship between private and public life, race relations, and citizenship.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In writing this dissertation, I have learned much about debts of gratitude, in large part because of those whose gifts of support and encouragement I have been nothing but happy to accept. I am particularly indebted to Scott Derrick, who has read every draft with patience, insight, interest, and friendship. I owe thanks to Susan Lurie and Jane Dailey who, as members of my dissertation committee, offered valuable feedback and helped me to see where I need to go from here. During the early stages of this project, Bill Schaniel offered an economist’s perspective of gift exchange, for which I am thankful. Shannon Leonard’s perceptive comments on several drafts, particularly of my third chapter, helped me overcome many obstacles. To her and Ann Kennedy I am indebted for the intellectual companionship and emotional support without which this dissertation would have been much harder to complete. I would like to thank my parents and sisters for encouraging me for as long as I can remember. Finally, I am grateful to my husband Johnny Collins, whose enthusiasm for Given Time was the reason I started reading about gifts in the first place and whose constant support has meant everything, and to my son Asher, for making me happy.
CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Chapter One

True Gifts and Bad Faith:

Emersonian Selfhood and Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* 40

Chapter Two

Santa Claus Visits the Happy Home:

The Gift and Domestic Exchange 104

Chapter Three

Gratitude and One-Way Gifts:

Jacobs’s, Harper’s, and Du Bois’s Responses to Paternalism 175

Notes 237

Works Cited 283
INTRODUCTION

Investigating the relationship between nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. texts and their economic context—an increasingly market-oriented economy and an emerging consumer culture—has long proven fruitful to literary critics, but this approach has often accepted and reinforced an oversimplified understanding of such terms as “exchange” and “capitalism.” In particular, we often forget that the commodity exchange of a market economy is not the only model of exchange—not even the only type of exchange in a market culture—and consequently conflate “exchange” with “capitalism.” As numerous anthropologists, such as Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, have demonstrated, “exchange” can be treated as a continuum of practices between gift and commodity exchange, acts that have no “hard and fast boundaries between them” (Humphrey 2). But while economic anthropologists have found that the study of gift exchange offers insight into what is and what is not unique about Western capitalism, their findings have yet to inform the critical discourse about how U.S. literature reflected and responded to changing economic conditions.

The dichotomy between gift and commodity has gone generally unexamined by literary critics, perhaps because of an assumption widely shared in capitalist societies, namely that commodities and market exchange are “economic” whereas gift-giving and related practices either are really market exchanges in disguise or are not really “economic.” Treating all forms of exchange as market exchange helped classical economists legitimize the claim that human behavior was universally profit-motivated; describing capitalism’s propensity to commodify all aspects of human existence,
contemporary cultural theorists have often too hastily accepted conventional economics’ reductive assumptions about exchange. These assumptions, as feminist economists such as Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann have pointed out, limit our ability to envision alternatives to existing socioeconomic structures; if only rational, self-interested market transactions are truly “economic,” then the alternative to the market’s negative aspects would be not only a world without capitalism, but an obviously impossible one without any economic transactions whatsoever.

Shaping assumptions of this dissertation are that gifts and their exchange differ substantively (but not unconditionally) from commodities and their exchange and that market culture includes economic practices that can be identified as gift, rather than commodity, transactions. When considering the relationship between U.S. texts and capitalism, it is therefore crucial to reformulate our concept of market culture so that it can account for how gift exchange functions within that system. Still another assumption of this dissertation is that communities protect their borders by treating trade with members and with outsiders as different phenomena. In the chapters that follow, I examine texts that illustrate the activities that define the borders marking gift and commodity exchange during the transition to a consumer culture and explore how exchange both constructs new social relations and exposes the assumptions on which those constructs are based. The opposition between gift and commodity, as the following chapters demonstrate, structures a variety of nineteenth-century texts, reoccurring as a means of testing an array of possibilities in democratic capitalism and of theorizing a multitude of interconnecting issues, including individualism and agency, domesticity, civil rights, and citizenship.
Since it is my position that the gift is a culturally determined concept informing in
diverse ways both the literature and the criticism that I discuss, and since no one
definition or theory can capture the varied meanings that the play of the distinction
between gift and commodity produces, I intend to offer a synthetic model of gift
exchange that draws from several existing ones. I thus begin with a short overview of
some of the various analyses of gift exchange that have contributed to my understanding
of the gift as a concept rooted in both material circumstance and ideology. This overview
is by no means meant as a comprehensive synopsis. I have chosen, for instance, to omit
accounts of some of gift theory's most enduring debates, such as those about the Maori
concept of hau or about the precise principles behind the Trobriand kula or behind the
exchanges of brides in particular cultures. An account of such matters, for those familiar
with gift theory, would be redundant with well-known texts readily accessible elsewhere
and, for those primarily interested in the gift practices of the nineteenth-century U.S.,
would be little more than distracting.

My brief summary of what is now a substantial, interdisciplinary body of work on
the subject of “the gift” aims primarily to define a few key concepts on which this
dissertation’s argument depends, but also to highlight how, in the words of John Frow,
“All readings of gift exchange [. . .] develop one or other of the poles of ‘interest’ and
‘generosity’” (116). Perhaps not all theories of gift exchange have done so—Frow’s
own work is part of a growing recognition that it is precisely the ambiguity of the
distinction between gift and commodity exchange that makes the gift such a compelling
concept—but certainly most have tended, to varying degrees, to stress either such
exchange’s similarities with market transactions (i.e., its utilitarian functions and
underlying self-interest) or its capacity for transcending the market altogether. Gift theory as a whole thus replicates the very tension—gift exchange's capacity to symbolize both the inescapableness of the market and the possibility of transcending it—that makes possible what is, I argue, a principal function of our culture's construct of the gift, namely to make available a practice of gift-giving that enables individuals to submit to commodity culture's totalizing force while simultaneously experiencing a form of autonomous resistance to it.

As I hope the nineteenth-century texts I discuss indicate, theorizing the gift has long been a popular endeavor. Modern gift theory, however, is generally said to have begun with Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le Don* (1950), an anthropological study of so-called primitive societies that identified three obligations that gift exchange, as practiced in such cultures, entails: "the obligation to reciprocate presents received" as well as "two other obligations just as important: the obligation, on the one hand, to give presents, and on the other, to receive them" (13). These obligations are fundamentally communal, in that, at least "in the economic and legal systems that have preceded our own," Mauss finds that "it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other" (5). Additionally, gift exchanges in primitive societies differ from modern forms of exchange, Mauss suggests, in that they are what he refers to as "'total' social phenomena," meaning that they simultaneously perform "religious, juridical, and moral," as well as "economic" functions (3).

While Mauss's descriptions of gift exchange's obligatoriness and its role in maintaining a community's solidarity became the cornerstones for subsequent models of gift-giving, the utopian undertones of his essay's conclusion, in which he argues that
we “must return to archaic society” and to “habits of ‘aristocratic extravagance’” in order to develop a “new morality” that will “limit” the “speculation and interest” that characterizes modern society (69, 68.), have been widely criticized. What Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen refer to as the “naïve Utopianism” marking Mauss’s work (29) has met with a number of objections, including critiques of his suggestion that archaic gift exchange provides a model for a social democracy rooted in state-based institutionalized giving, of his faith in political philosophy’s conventional wisdom that reciprocity ultimately neutralizes power and ensures social cohesion, of his attributing the obligation to return a gift to a mystical quality (the hau) associated with the gift itself, and of the “Rousseauist schema” underlying his advocacy of a “return” to archaic principles.11 Most relevant to my own argument, of the various criticisms of Mauss’s seeming utopianism, are the accounts of its underlying essentialism offered by such anthropologists as James Carrier and Annette Weiner.

Mauss’s approach and that of much subsequent work on gift exchange is essentialist, Carrier argues, in that it substantivizes the analytical distinctions between gift and commodity exchange into “different types of societies,” so that the gift transaction becomes “an essence that pervades and defines” all the complexities of tribal societies while the “alienation and autonomous individuals” that constitute market transactions become “the essence of the West” (191). As Weiner points out, to thus “analyze exchange practices as ‘wholes’ as ‘systems in their entirety,’ as Mauss once directed, reduces the scope of our inquiry to an old-fashioned cultural relativism,” one that overlooks such culturally specific practices of exchange as the gendering of particular practices and types of possessions (155). Mauss’s somewhat utopian exhortation that we
"return to archaic society" reflects a perspective that treats the modern West and so-called "archaic" societies as "mirror images" of each other, a perspective that inevitably "focuses on and heightens distinguishing features, and so exaggerates difference and denies similarities" (Carrier 201).\textsuperscript{12}

This aspect of Mauss's argument, as I elaborate below, is consistent with capitalist culture's tendency to construct the gift as a symbol of the possibility of transcending all that is unpleasant in commodity exchange, a construct of the gift also evident in the nineteenth-century texts this dissertation examines. Another element of Mauss's argument that appears traceable to the dialectical opposition between gift and commodity that was already prevalent in nineteenth-century thought is his repeated claim that gift exchange, because it manages to appear "voluntary," "free and disinterested" despite being in fact a matter of "obligation and economic self-interest," represents the possibility of reconciling such contrasting "concepts of law and economics" as "liberty and obligation" as well as "liberality and generosity, and luxury, as against savings, interest, and utility" (3, 73).\textsuperscript{13} Despite Mauss's demonstration that there is no such thing as a free gift, he, like others—most notably Emerson—before him, looks to the gift for a means of overcoming the irresolvable tension between freedom and obligation, between individual agency and social determinism.

Mauss's effort to thus suggest a "new morality" consisting of "a good but moderate blend of reality and the ideal" (69) is clearly an attempt to overcome the very polarization of gift and commodity that Carrier argues is ultimately reinforced by his essentializing approach to archaic and modern societies. As anthropologist Jonathan Parry argues, the construct of a "pure gift" generally works to "promote and entrench the
ideological elaboration of a domain in which self-interest rules supreme," and by repeatedly stressing "a combination of interest and disinterest, of freedom and constraint, in the gift" Mauss counters such an "ideological separation" of "interest and disinterest in exchange" (469, 456). However, to locate the resolution of this tension within the gift itself, a gift that remains contradistinguished to the utilitarianism of modern capitalism, is still to posit an idealized gift. Mauss demystifies the "pure gift," only to replace it with another version of the gift's transcendence.

As Jacques Derrida notes, the "happy medium" for which Mauss grasps is as "untenable" as the "pure gift" itself (65, 64). Moreover, Parry's convincing explanation of why Mauss should want to develop a model of exchange in which interest and disinterest merge does not account for Mauss's effort to reconcile freedom and obligation. Parry treats "interest and disinterest" and "freedom and constraint" as parallel pairs of terms ("Mauss repeatedly stresses a combination of interest and disinterest, of freedom and constraint"), but it is not at all clear why the second of these two pairs of terms should seem to follow naturally from the first, other than the fact that the same ideology that defines the market in terms of self-interest also, as Parry himself describes, defines individuals in terms of their ability to make "free and unconstrained" transactions (466). (Western capitalism constructs disinterest, no less than interest, as proof of autonomous control over one's transactions.) Archaic gift exchange, Mauss initially suggests, is voluntary only "in theory," "free" only "apparently" (3); it is only in the context of asserting the gift's relevance to "the individualistic and purely self-interested economy that our own societies have experienced at least in part" (76) that Mauss seems to see a need to suggest that this freedom is in any way substantive.
The significance of Mauss's critique of a gift that is imagined to be purely free and disinterested cannot be overstated: his formulation of the gift's threefold obligatoriness provides a starting point for all subsequent attempts to theorize the meaningful differences between gift and commodity exchange while still acknowledging their similarities. Nevertheless, in suggesting the gift as a foundation for a "mutual respect and reciprocating generosity"—in other words, as a model for an essentially non-exploitative form of reciprocity—that offers not only an alternative to "the cold reasoning of the merchant, the banker, and the capitalist," but that indeed lies altogether "outside the bounds of the so-called natural economy, that of utilitarianism" (83, 75, 72), Mauss's essay can be said to have equally informed subsequent idealistic, utopian treatments of the gift.\(^\text{16}\) Lewis Hyde's argument that the gift is an "erotic," "anarchist" form of property, fundamentally unlike the commodities whose exchange constitutes the modern market (e.g., xiv, 73-75, 84)\(^\text{17}\) and Richard Titmuss's that the practice of blood donation suggests the possibility of patterning the modern state on a purely disinterested gift are two of the most notable instances in this line of gift theory.\(^\text{18}\) The most influential formulation of the gift as a radical alternative to capitalist utilitarianism is that of Georges Bataille.

Gift-giving, for Bataille, is virtually synonymous with the potlatch and represents the possibility of an economy rooted, not in production and profit, but in consumption and expenditure. Whereas previous studies of gift exchange, by scholars as different as Bronislaw Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss, had all discovered in the gift further proof of the universality of the norm of reciprocity, Bataille countered that the essence of gift-giving was a "squandering without reciprocation" (38).\(^\text{19}\) This is not to say that
Bataille denies that gifts are returned: defining “giving” in terms of “an acquiring of power,” Bataille constructs the receiving of a gift as the accepting of a “challenge” by which “the recipient is obligated to nullify that power by repaying the gift” (69, 67, 70). This account of gift exchange as essentially agonistic, however, profoundly redefines previous concepts of reciprocity. Political economy has traditionally defined reciprocity in terms of equivalence and equilibrium; Bataille makes the crucial observation that despite the fact that gifts demand returns, primitive gift exchange can be said to dispute, not confirm, the conventional belief that reciprocity, understood as equivalence, is a universal principle, a belief that in the end always makes market exchange appear as a natural, universal activity.20 The gift is for Bataille that which transgresses an economy constituted by equivalences, an understanding of the gift that informs my own recognition of gifts’ incalculability as one element that meaningfully distinguishes them from commodities. Even so, Bataille’s model of the gift remains highly problematic.

Bataille’s theory is weakened by its lack of empirical support; as countless anthropologists (including Weiner, who generally commends his insights into gift exchange’s underlying power contest) have noted, the potlatch that so impressed him was not only a relatively anomalous form of gift exchange, but was a practice that had developed largely in response to European capitalism and colonialism.21 Moreover, while he does not—as do so many others, such as Hyde, Tittmuss, and even, to a degree, Mauss—romanticize the gift as the paradigmatic act of social altruism, Bataille nevertheless essentializes the differences between gift and commodity exchange, so that the gift becomes for him too a symbol of transcendence. (Describing the “absurdly contradictory aspect of potlatch,” for instance—how the “ideal would be that a potlatch
could not be repaid," how the aim of giving is "to lose," but how this loss inevitably "brings a profit to the one who sustains it"—Bataille suggests, for instance, that the "virtue of the potlatch is given in this possibility for man to grasp what eludes him, to combine the limitless movements of the universe with the limit that belongs to him" [70]).

This contradiction that Bataille describes points to the fragility of his distinction between an economy of expenditure and one of utilitarian rationality: if the loss involved in gift-giving is aimed at the acquisition of a social prestige that can easily be described as social capital, then it too seems motivated by self-interest and a desire for profit.22 Additionally, while Bataille’s focus on “the ‘expenditure’ (the ‘consumption’) of wealth, rather than production” (9) might constitute a convincing critique of classical economics, it does not adequately differentiate gift exchange from market exchange as described by the rational choice models of neoclassical economics (the approach of mainstream economists since at least the 1930’s), which itself explicitly privileges consumption over production.23

If some analyses of gift exchange, like the few I have described, have tended to overstate the case for regarding gift-giving as the foundation for an alternative to the self-interested rationality of capitalism, then they have understandably elicited readings of the gift that remind us that gift and commodity exchange are not entirely dissimilar. Such attempts to demystify the gift include structuralist accounts, such as Lévi-Strauss’s, that construe the circulation of gift and counter-gift as evidence of the universality of reciprocal exchange.24 Gift exchange’s parallels to market transactions have been emphasized by social exchange theory, which attempts to interpret all social transactions
according to economic models and thus regards gift-giving, as sociologist David Cheal
complains, as just one more activity "through which individuals rationally pursue their
self-interests" ("Moral Economy" 86). 25 Perhaps the most familiar example, to literary
critics at least, of an argument that counters idealizations of gift-giving with an analysis
that nearly completely flattens the distinctions between it and other forms of exchange is
Derrida's in Given Time. 26

Like Bataille, Derrida defines the gift in opposition to "reciprocity" and "return
exchange," to "symmetry" or the exchange of equivalents (12, 7); the absurd
contradiction that Bataille had described as a sustaining force behind the continuing cycle
of agonistic expenditure (e.g., 69, 70) becomes for Derrida one of many proofs of the
gift's impossibility. The obligatory reciprocity that for Mauss points to gift exchange's
social embeddedness, to its status as a "total social phenomenon," becomes for Derrida
the gift's undoing: the gift, according to Derrida, is "annulled each time there is a
restitution or counter-gift" (12). Moreover, the gift, Derrida notes, is always already given
in exchange, apart from the actual fact of reciprocation: to the one who "perceives or
receives" a gift, there is a recognition of a debt, a taking-back of the gift, and "the one
who gives [...] begins [...] as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself [...] to gratify
himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what
he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give" (14). "At the limit, the gift as
gift," Derrida writes, "ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor," which
is to say that the gift is impossible (14).

Defining "the gift, if there is any" as "that which interrupts economy," as that
which "in suspending economic circulation, no longer gives rise to exchange" (7),
Derrida necessarily comes to the counterintuitive conclusion that "Mauss's The Gift speaks of everything but the gift" (24). Mauss examines gift exchange as a social and economic system, and this is precisely not what Derrida means by "the gift," that ideal gift that would "not circulate," would "not be exchanged," and would "remain anecononomic" (7). Derrida's analysis of the logic of this ideal gift is unquestionably an important contribution to gift theory; his description of how the gift must not be recognized as such to the "donor 'subject'" lays the foundation for his argument that "the question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject" (23, 24). "The structure of this impossible gift," in other words, is for Derrida, "also that of Being" and "of time" which is "always defined in the paradoxia or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is only scarcely and dimly" (27).

This original formulation of the question of the gift is not, however, what most interests me in Derrida's argument; what must be recognized, I think, is that for Given Time's entire argument to make any sense at all, we must come to it already believing that a true gift is in fact defined by its opposition to so-called "economic" exchange. (For example, to one living in what Mauss describes as a gift society, a society in which gift exchange constitutes the primary means of distributing goods, Derrida's claim that the gift is that which "in suspending economic circulation, no longer gives rise to exchange" would appear nonsensical indeed [7].) Underlying Derrida's account of the gift's impossibility, of all the ways that gifts inevitably resemble every other kind of exchange, is an ideal gift that, like that described by so many other theories of the gift, would be fundamentally unlike exchange as we know it.
This is not to say that Derrida is unaware of this contradiction; indeed, it would seem to be precisely the sort of tension he wants to call attention to with descriptions of "the paradoxia or rather the aporia" that the "impossible gift" represents (27). The gift's very function is for Derrida precisely its ability to evoke the possibility of transcending exchange, even while demonstrating its impossibility: "For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this even if or because or to the extent that we never encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it, we never experience it in its present existence or in its phenomenon" (29). But this formulation of the gift's paradoxical logic begs what is, for this dissertation at least, a crucial question: why are we inclined to conceptualize the gift as "aneconomic" or as outside exchange in the first place?

"Mauss," Derrida argues, "does not worry enough about this incompatibility between gift and exchange," insisting that "the apparent, visible contradiction of these two values—gift and exchange—must be problematized" (37). But what Derrida thinks should thus "be interrogated" further is "precisely this being-together [...] the synthesis, the symmetry, the syntax, or the system [...] that joins together two processes that are by rights as incompatible as that of the gift and that of exchange (37-8). What this dissertation would problematize, in contrast, is the logic that separates gift and exchange, that makes them seem naturally incompatible, and that inevitably constructs the gift either as a utopian alternative to "exchange" or as an impossibility that proves the universality of self-interest. The gift that occurs outside exchange ("the gift" as Derrida understands it) is, as I describe below, but one particular construct of the gift, a construct that—as the nineteenth-century texts examined in the following chapters
illustrate—cannot be separated from the developing capitalist ideology it reflects and responds to.

In questioning this imagined opposition between gift and exchange or between gift-giving and economic transactions, I by no means wish to deny the meaningfulness of "gift" as an analytical term. On the contrary, I would underscore that such an opposition makes sense only if "exchange" and "economic" are presupposed to refer on face to a particular form of economic transaction, that of commodity capitalism (i.e., this opposition does not make sense when "exchange" is understood to include non-market forms of exchange, such as gift exchange or barter, or when gift exchange is understood to be in part a means of distributing goods). Such a narrow understanding of "exchange" and "economic" is problematic, I argue, because it thus encourages us not to examine the actual distinctions between gift and commodity exchange unless to exaggerate these differences to the point that gift exchange can only be regarded as an impossible, imaginary alternative to "real" (i.e., self-interested, calculated, individualist, strictly utilitarian) economic transactions. One corrective to this reductionist view of exchange (and of "the gift" as its opposite)—and what an examination of nineteenth-century texts can contribute to gift theory—is, as a growing number of scholars (such as Cheal, Carrier, Frow, Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé) have demonstrated in studies of twentieth-century capitalist societies, to study gift exchange’s function within capitalism.

Before turning to my own observations about how gift-giving was conceptualized in the nineteenth-century U.S., I will briefly outline my own model of gift exchange’s role in relation to our culture’s dominant ideology—an ideology that in many respects took form in the nineteenth century—beginning with a brief sketch of what I regard as
two primary, but interconnected, aspects in which gift and commodity exchange can be said to differ: 1) the form of reciprocity (for lack of a better word\textsuperscript{30}) each entails and 2) their respective capacities for reproducing social or interpersonal relationships. In thus formulating the distinctions between gift and commodity, I (like many others whose works I cite) am to an extent following anthropologist Christopher Gregory. Approaching gift exchange from both a Maussian and a Marxian paradigm, Gregory defines commodity exchange as “an exchange of alienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relationship between the objects exchanged” and gift exchange, conversely, as “an exchange of inalienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal dependence that establishes a qualitative relationship between the transactors” (100, 101).

Gregory’s distinction between gifts and commodities thus hinges on a particular understanding of what it means to describe an object as either “alienable” or “inalienable.” Despite his Marxian framework, Gregory’s concept of alienation, as Nicholas Thomas clarifies, owes less to the “materialist idea that objects are or should be inalienable from their producers” than to “Mauss’s general proposition that in ‘archaic’ societies [. . .] ‘objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them’” (16).\textsuperscript{31} My own understanding of gift exchange depends on this Maussian concept of inalienability, a concept that Carrier articulates particularly clearly.

In commodity transactions, Carrier explains, “objects are alienated from the transactors” in that these objects “are treated solely as bearers of abstract value or utility” and “are not especially associated with each transactor, nor do they speak of any past or future relationships between transactors” (20). In comparison, in gift transactions, the
object given "continues to bear the identity of the giver and of the relationship between the giver and the recipient" (24). Items we purchase generally do not remind us of the salespeople who happened to sell them to us; an item received as a gift typically does remind us of the person who gave it. Thus, "alienation" should not be understood to have solely negative connotations; it can also be regarded as a condition of freedom, or at least as something that, like inalienability, is desirable in certain contexts (Carrier 110). Many of us do not want, for example, enduring relationships with and obligations toward the people from whom we buy our groceries. Nor do most of us want to live in the sort of hierarchical social structures or closed communities associated with archaic rituals of gift-giving. (Indeed, during the U.S.'s early republican era, Americans consciously "rejected old forms of obligation and inequality" and sought to replace "the older vertical ties that bound unequal households together on unequal terms" with "new horizontal ties among households of similar social status, religion or political orientation" [Coontz 124, 116]).

Gregory's formulation of the difference between gifts and commodities is somewhat problematic; he defines each as what the other is not and aligns each with a particular type of society, clan-based and class-based societies respectively (e.g., 71). Clearly, this is the sort of essentialist approach to the gift that I earlier argued must be regarded with suspicion, particularly because it obscures the importance of gift transactions within modern capitalist societies. Nevertheless, I believe that Gregory's distinctions between alienability and inalienability and between reciprocal independence and reciprocal dependence provide a useful starting point for identifying what I regard as three general differences between gift and market reciprocity. First and foremost, the
reciprocity involved in gift exchange, unlike that of commodity transactions, works to obscure rather than to establish the quantitative equivalence of the things exchanged (a function highlighted by such rituals as the removal of price tags and wrapping).

If gift exchange has been construed both as a utopian alternative to modern market transactions and as proof of the universal inevitability of "exchange," it is in part because in common usage, "reciprocity" is often imprecisely used to refer to any form of exchange.\(^{35}\) On the one hand, it is possible to idealize gift-giving as a voluntary, disinterested act in part because in gift transactions "the equivalence prevalent in mercantile exchange tends to be replaced by a propensity to give more than one has received" (Godbout and Caillé 28), a phenomenon not readily explained by conventional economics' concept of a trade motivated by mutual desire for personal profit; on the other hand, when reciprocity is comprehended in strictly utilitarian terms, the mere exchange of gift and countergift seems sufficient evidence of gift and commodity exchange's postulated parallels.\(^{36}\) Although gift transactions do resemble commodity transactions in that they too "consist of a transfer and a counter-transfer," they differ, however, in that they express a "relationship that links transactors to each other and to the object they transact" (Carrier 20).\(^{37}\) Whereas commodities and the money that purchases them have unambiguous values determined by the market, a gift's value should be incalculable and uniquely recognized by the participants of a particular transaction (which is why an object whose value is primarily aesthetic often seems a more appropriate gift than one that is merely useful).

Gifts' relative inalienability,\(^{38}\) therefore, can be said to give them a value beyond their monetary or use value, a value that I will occasionally refer to as "bonding value," a
term suggested by Jacques Godbout:

To the traditional exchange-use opposition, we ought then to add bonding value. The gift always contains something beyond itself, a supplement, which is the value of the bond. [. . .] no economic scale is possible, for the value of the bond depends on the nature of people and on variables that economic value, in order to become purely quantitative, has had to eliminate.
Bonding value cannot be calculated, but that does not mean it does not exist. (174)\textsuperscript{39}

"Bonding value," in other words, is a concise way of referring to what Gregory describes as the "reciprocal dependence that establishes a qualitative relationship between the transactors" of gift exchange, as opposed to the "quantitative relationship" that commodity exchange establishes between objects. This "bonding value," I should emphasize, is neither inherently positive or negative—one gift, for instance, might represent mutual respect and affection while another might convey an awareness of a relationship of social inequality.

The distinction between the quantitative equivalence sought in commodity transactions and the incalculable "bonding value" of gift transactions is closely related to what I will treat as a second way of differentiating gift and market reciprocity: whereas reciprocity has conventionally been understood in capitalist societies as a source of social equilibrium and of personal profit, the reciprocity involved in gift exchanges tends to be conceptualized in terms of "alternating disequilibrium,"\textsuperscript{40} or debt. When a commodity transaction is completed, both sides, at least theoretically, have what they wanted, and no longer needing each other, are free to go their separate ways. Unlike this reciprocal independence resulting from commodity exchange, reciprocal dependence may be—but, contrary to what Gregory suggests, is not necessarily—gift exchange’s outcome. "The
gift economy,” according to Gregory, “is a debt economy” in that “the aim of a transactor in such an economy is to acquire as many gift-debtors as he possibly can and not to maximize profit, as it is in a commodity economy” and in that “what a gift transactor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates, and not the things themselves” (19).

Gregory’s argument is not quite complete. While gift-giving does reinforce personal relationships by producing feelings of indebtedness, this indebtedness can be experienced as a feeling both of having made others indebted to us and of having been given more than we ourselves have given: in modern capitalist societies the question of whether one feels she has given or received more is often determined by class and gender.41 Additionally, the recipient of a gift is not necessarily the one who experiences the debt; gifts can express and thus reinforce the indebtedness a giver may already feel toward a perceived superior.42 What I am claiming distinguishes gift exchange from commodity exchange, is not that gifts necessarily generate debts or a “reciprocal dependence” in fact, but that they, unlike commodity exchange, are often believed to do so—a belief that has actual consequences. Many theorists, for example, regardless of whether they define the debts resulting from gift exchanges as Gregory does or in terms of feeling indebted to others as Godbout and Caillé do (32), have characterized gift exchange’s capacity to produce feelings of indebtedness as a positive force in the maintaining of social relationships. This particular understanding of the gift has been, I will show, a popular one since the nineteenth century, one that has significantly contributed to the importance our culture places on acts of gift-giving.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz’s argument that “every gift-exchanging dyad (or
larger group) is characterized by a certain 'balance of debt' which must never be brought into equilibrium" since the balance "now in favor of one member, now in favor of the other[,] insures that the relationship between the two will continue" (77) and Godbout and Caillé's claim that whereas "the mercantile perspective encourages us" to regard reciprocity as "the need to settle one's debt," gift exchange puts off the settling of debts "indefinitely" since doing so "would be to interrupt the obligational cycle" (133, 130) are typical expressions of the common premise that the reciprocal debts of gift exchange sustain relationships.\(^4\) (Clearly, there is a tension in such definitions of the gift—on the one hand, the gift resists equilibrium, but on the other hand, the gift's "alternating disequilibrium" is what maintains the equilibrium of the relationship at a macroscopic level.) In this dissertation, I too assume that gift exchange, largely because of the indebtedness it can cause people to feel, emotionally bonds those who participate it in a way that commodity exchange does not; however, I also attempt to show that the debts that gifts generate always have specific meanings determined by the relationships of power between the particular people who exchange them. Indebtedness can reinforce either social cohesion or social distance, depending on its context.\(^4\)

A third distinction between gift and market reciprocity assumed in the following chapters is a simple one: the reciprocity involved in gift exchange is, relative to commodity exchanges, indirect. This difference too is more theoretical than real, which is not to say, however, that it has no substantive effect on how actual transactions are conducted and understood. Commodity transactions are generally conceptualized in terms of an immediate exchange (or one occurring within a clearly specified time period, as in the case of a contract for services) between two people or groups of people, such as
producers and consumers or sellers and buyers; gifts can be reciprocated after lapses of time and the return for a particular gift does not necessarily have to come from that gift’s recipient.45 Parents’ gifts to their children, for example, are seldom returned with countergifts of anything like an equivalent value, until years later when their adult children, as typically happens, begin to give their parents more than they themselves are currently receiving. Or, one’s gift to a particular person may never be returned by that person, and still one might feel compensated by God, by good fortune, by a tax deduction, or by one’s own conscience. Gifts are returned not only by the actual objects given in reciprocation, but also from such indirect, intangible effects of the gift, such as the feeling of “community” it creates (Hyde 37) or the “transformation” it brings about in the one who gives (Godbout and Caillé 97).

In reality, gift exchanges often take the form of an immediate exchange between two people—the swapping of gifts on Christmas Day or an intentional trade of favors, for example—but even in such instances, as the domestic fiction examined in my second chapter illustrates particularly clearly, there is a tendency to obscure what is straightforward about a transaction by explicitly highlighting those aspects of it that might be interpreted as indirect. Presents are wrapped, sometimes elaborately, to signify that although we might know with absolute certainty that we will receive gifts in return for our own (and sometimes might even know what they will be worth, as when family members or co-workers agree to exchange presents of a certain price), we should never be certain about exactly what we will receive (at the very least, we do not know how they will be wrapped) and that the gifts we receive have a value beyond (symbolized by the wrapping itself) their use or exchange value.46 The obligatory reciprocity of gift
exchange is denied by protesting “you shouldn’t have” and conveying surprise.

What matters, in terms of my own argument, is not the degree to which gift exchanges can be determined to be directly or indirectly reciprocal, but rather the rituals that enable us to experience reciprocity as indirect, and thus relatively free and unconstrained by external obligations. As Pierre Bourdieu explains (and as I elaborate below), while mutual exchange might be “the ‘objective’ truth of the discrete acts” associated “with the idea of the gift, it is perhaps not the whole truth of a practice that could not exist if its subjective truth coincided perfectly with its ‘objective’ truth” (*Logic* 105). “The theoretical construction which retrospectively projects the counter-gift into the project of the gift,” he convincingly argues, inevitably has the reductionist “effect of making mechanical sequences of obligatory acts out of the risky and but necessary improvisation of everyday strategies” (*Logic* 112). Practices that help us to experience the reciprocity of gift exchange as indirect contribute to our sense that we give voluntarily, to the “pleasure in the gift” that Godbout suggests enables the gift to be perceived as “proof that there is no constraint” and as “confirmation of a social bond” (185). Such practices also encourage us to recognize that although our gifts generally are returned in one way or another, we frequently cannot be certain about how and when (and sometimes even if) they will be. To Thus highlight uncertainty is to render gift-giving into a sign of confidence, into “an act of social faith” (Hyde 16).47

Underlying these three distinctions between gift and market forms of reciprocity, then, is the assumption that gift exchanges, more than do commodity exchanges, express personal relationships and social identities. This is likewise the core assumption behind what I have indicated I will treat as the second primary way in which gift and commodity
transactions differ, namely their relative capacities for reproducing interpersonal and social relationships. That gifts express, and therefore can reinforce, create, or—as a negative corollary to this observation—disavow the social ties between those who exchange (or who choose not to exchange) them with each other has become a central tenet of virtually all discussions of gift exchange. This is not to claim, however, that a consensus agrees that gift and commodity exchange differ absolutely in this respect; as Thomas correctly notes, "the relationship of 'reciprocal independence'" that commodity transactions produce "between transactors does not mean that there is no social relationship," only that it is a different sort of social relationship than we have with those with whom we exchange gifts (21). "Strangers are named as such," he remarks, "because one does have associations with them" (21-22).

Thomas's qualification of Gregory's model of gift and commodity exchange indicates one reason why this model, to the extent that it implies that the difference between these types of exchange is the difference between social and commodity reproduction, is an oversimplification. Nevertheless, on a theoretical level, such a distinction can be useful, especially in the effort to describe gift exchange's function within capitalist societies specifically. Indeed, defining gift-giving in terms of social reproduction is a common feature of the relatively few studies of gift transactions in industrial consumer societies. Cheal, for instance, argues that gift exchanges constitute a distinct "moral economy," a "system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable (i.e. moral), because through them social ties are recognized, and balanced social relationships are maintained" (91). Godbout and Caillé define "the gift" as "nothing less than the embodiment of the system of interpersonal social relations" (18),
and Frow, observing that “there is nothing inherent in objects that designates them as gifts” since a single object can be either a gift or a commodity at different times, similarly concludes that “gifts are precisely not objects at all, but transactions and social relations” (124).

Clearly the same can be said about commodities—if an object can be either a gift or a commodity at different times, then a commodity transaction is defined not by the objects exchanged but, at least in part, by the impersonal social relations it represents—but gift exchanges generally do express personal sentiments and an enduring relationship external to a particular transaction, whereas commodity exchanges do not. The indefinite boundary between gift and commodity exchange can thus be said to demarcate transactions between those who recognize an ongoing relationship with each other from transactions between those who do not. Gift exchange, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, therefore plays a critical role not only in the maintaining of relationships between friends and family, but also in the defining and even the formation of larger communities.

As the nineteenth-century texts I discuss illustrate, the intertwining of gift and commodity transactions in capitalist culture demonstrates that gift exchange cannot be regarded as an archaic form of exchange that is replaced as a society evolves; nevertheless, there is some truth in Hyde’s remark that when a society becomes “too large to be based on emotional ties, the gift-feeling must be abandoned as a structuring element” (267). The important point is not that in the past some small societies have been able to depend on gift exchange as their main system for distributing goods, something complex societies cannot do; what matters, and what remains true in our own
society is that gift exchange occurs *most easily* within a community small enough or homogenous enough for social relations to remain recognizable. Gift exchange is prevalent in modern industrialized societies, but typically occurs within networks of family and friends. True, there are also many gifts to strangers, such as donations to charitable organizations or aid sent to distant victims of a natural catastrophe, but such gifts can still be said to demonstrate the extent to which people are able to imagine unknown others as members of their own community. The gift to strangers, as the texts I discuss illustrate, becomes increasingly important as such forces as urbanization, population growth, and national expansion make interactions with anonymous others ever more necessary.²¹

But in describing gift exchange as an expression of community, I am not suggesting yet another version of the simplistic formula “gift-reciprocity-Good/market-exchange-Bad” that anthropologist Alfred Gell rightly complains is implicit in far too many accounts of gift exchange (142). “Gift exchange influences group boundaries by clarifying them” (Schwartz 80), but this must be understood to mean that it “is not only a mechanism of inclusion, but also has excluding effects” since “affirming ties between the members of one’s own group” often means “excluding others from participation within networks of mutual gift giving” (Komter “Netherlands” 118). Additionally, gift transactions, no differently than mercantile transactions, occur within the context of social relationships, relationships in which there is usually an asymmetry of power.

Moreover, my own sense that gifts express personal relationships in a way that commodities do not unavoidably reflects, I believe, a specifically capitalistic perception of the gift. I have indicated that I regard the gift as a matter of both material
circumstance and ideology; by this I mean that while it is possible to label some concrete phenomena as empirical examples of gifts and their exchange, it is also possible to treat the gift as a metaphorical construct on which even capitalist conceptualizations of exchange and other economic acts depend. Mauss's account of gifts as "total prestations" suggests that in precapitalist societies gift exchange was simultaneously a social and economic activity; in our own society, social and economic acts tend to be conceptualized as distinct, so we are inclined to regard gift-giving as an activity that is essentially either social or "economic." In the precapitalist societies analyzed by Mauss and others, "interest and disinterest are merged" in acts of gift exchange that are understood to carry obligations; such societies do not have the same conception of gifts as capitalist societies do because "they do not make the kinds of distinction that we make" (Parry 458).

In the Western capitalist imagination, in contrast, the ideal gift is one that conforms to what Carrier, following Parry, identifies as the "ideology of the gift."

First, the gift should be a pure possession: it should bear intensely the identity of the giver. Second, the gift should be purely disinterested: it should express only affection and carry no taint of obligation or expectation of return. [. . . ] The gift needs to be a possession, while the only objects that most people have to give are commodities. The ideology accommodates this contradiction by disembodying the object given, by asserting that the sentiment that the gift carries is important while the object itself, the vehicle, is insignificant. [. . . ] The other important element of Western society contained in the ideology of the perfect gift is the belief that people in gift relations are free and independent of each other. Like the disembodied gift, this belief also reflects historical circumstance [. . . ] and [. . . ] is associated with the spread of impersonal commercial capitalism around the end of the eighteenth century. (15-16).

I would add one other important element to this description of the ideology of the gift: the purely disinterested gift, while ever sought after, is generally acknowledged to be impossible. The ideal gift's impossibility is why it can symbolize utopia or transcendence
and simultaneously prove the ubiquity of "economic" self-interest.

An important factor contributing to the development of this ideology is the "separation of economic necessity from personal relationships" that generally results from the development of a market economy (Carrier 16). According to Karl Polanyi's classic history of the market system, prior to the establishment of a self-regulating market, an "economy" is "embedded in social relations" due to such practices as gift exchange that work "to enmesh the economic system proper in social relationships," whereas in societies with a developed market, "social relations are embedded in the economic system" (57, 52). Polanyi's formulation of this difference is compelling in that it identifies a distinguishing feature of market societies in terms that are concrete but that do not imply an absolute separation between "social" and "economic" activity. While in truth, any transaction can simultaneously have both economic and social significance, U.S. culture has since at least the second quarter of the nineteenth century increasingly regarded economic and social activities as essentially distinct.

The subordination of social relations to economic transactions described by Polanyi has commonly been conceptualized as their separation: "as economic transactions become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationships, the transactions appropriate to each become ever more polarized in terms of their symbolism and ideology" (Parry 466). Capitalist societies' propensity to regard economic and social activities as polarized, as Carrier similarly explains, is reflected in the exaggerated opposition they construct between gifts and commodities:

People came to construct and see the realm of the commodity, economy, as distinct from and opposed to the realm of the gift, society. However, the dominant cultural constructions of these realms exaggerate the changes that
occurred and the resulting differences between realms. Dominant understandings of relations and transactions proper to the social and economic realm appear to be defined in dialectical opposition to each other. (106)

My readings of a variety of texts written at different points during the nineteenth century's transition from an incompletely developed market to a fully realized consumer culture will show that these hyperbolic oppositions between "economy" and "society" and between "gift" and "commodity" not only reflect a capitalistic ideology but also fostered market expansion. Additionally, I will contend that textual analyses that emphasize instances of commodity exchange while overlooking gift exchanges (a feature of much recent scholarship on literary representations of consumerism) participate in this capitalistic ideology of the gift.

As Maurice Bloch and Parry argue, "the fact that our ideology of the gift has been constructed in antithesis to market exchange" is the primary reason that "so many [Marxist] anthropologists" have perceived a "radical opposition" between gift and commodity exchange and have idealized "the world of gift exchange as non-exploitative, innocent and even transparent" (9). Our ideology of the gift has, in other words, produced the idealization of precapitalistic economic transactions that one detects in so many accounts of the gift; a more significant consequence of this ideology, I will argue, is that it likewise encourages us to see our own economic (and social) practices in equally reductionist terms.

This ideology of the free and disinterested gift cannot be deconstructed merely by showing that gift exchange entails obligations and self interest. Arguments that stop there tell only half the story and, ironically, have much the same consequence as the ideology itself: to reinforce the notion that what capitalist cultures have regarded as
“exchange”—calculated, profit-maximizing transactions made by autonomous individuals—is natural and inescapable, except through some vague utopian impossibility. The Western ideology of the gift has not only worked to “entrench the ideological elaboration of a domain in which self-interest rules supreme” (Parry 469), but in thus characterizing the market, it has fostered a particularly narrow conception of “exchange” and even of “self-interest.” (The tendency of some to think of self-interest primarily in terms of a base selfishness intrinsically at odds with motives such as concern for others, is itself a notion that some have argued developed during the middle part of the nineteenth century.53) The damage wrought by the ideology of the gift is not the model of the gift it involves, but rather the model of the market with which it leaves us.

The belief that self-interest rules in the market and altruism at home is, of course, a core component of the separate spheres ideology that is so easily detected in so many nineteenth century domestic novels; this belief, however, remains a working assumption of many economists, whose models often reflect assumptions that “exaggerate both the atomistic, separative nature of behavior in markets and the connective empathy and altruism with families” (England 37). Folbre and Hartmann explain:

Within the neoclassical tradition, the assumption of a joint utility function has obscured the possibility of conflicts between individuals in the family. Within the Marxian tradition, the assumption that class interests are primary has obscured the possibility of conflicts between individuals within the same class. As a result, both paradigms idealized the family, placing very strict limits on the operation of self-interest there.” (185)

Consequently, mainstream economics, like our culture generally, conventionally regards the domestic sphere as a “‘noneconomic’ domain” (and thus women as “relatively ‘noneconomic creatures’”) and tends to conceptualize “economic interest” in a very
limited sense, one that fails to "encompass concepts like cooperation, loyalty, and reciprocity" (Folbre and Hartmann 185, 197).

Such a perspective cannot adequately explain nonmarket economic activities, as Gregory explains, referring specifically to neoclassical economists' theorizing of production and consumption: "Their categories either blind them to the phenomenon of gift exchange or force them to perceive it in terms of commodity exchange" (102). In contrast to Gregory, however, the alternative perspective that I suggest is not one that treats gift exchange's underlying economic principles as simply the mirror opposite of those of commodity exchange—contradistinguishing them in this way inevitably replicates the very opposition between social and market exchange that is, I think, the basic cause of the shortcoming Gregory perceives in certain economic models.

Modern gift exchange cannot be fully explained by any theory that assumes an absolute opposition between it and market exchange, not only because it too involves self-interest and calculation, but most simply because in market societies, gift and market transactions are inextricably intertwined. Much of our gift-giving is determined by what we can afford (by what we have earned in the market) and by what objects the market has made available, desirable, or fashionable; moreover, the boundary between gift and commodity transactions is indefinite, as is demonstrated, for example, by an employer's Christmas gifts to his employees or by the commercialization of charity. On the other hand, the very prevalence of gift exchanges within so-called market societies suggests that such transactions serve functions that commodity transactions cannot, that they have a significance beyond their similarities with market or contractual exchange. These functions are best described, I believe, by a theory of practice.
Gift exchange, as Bourdieu insists, cannot be reduced to either its objective or subjective meanings: "It is not possible to reach an adequate understanding of the gift without leaving behind both the philosophy of mind that makes a conscious intention the principle of every action and the economism that knows no other economy than that of rational calculation and interest reduced to economic interest" ("Marginalia" 234). Gift-giving must be explained by a theory of practice, which is to say that it cannot be explained by "a theory of the agent and of action," but must be approached rather as an act determined by individual and collective dispositions that reflect "the social structures [...] of which they are the product," social structures which they in turn "reproduce in a transformed, misrecognizable form" ("Marginalia" 231, Logic 95). Beyond their objective truth (the swapping of gift and countergift), gift transactions have significance in that "in contrast to the economy where equivalent values are exchanged," they make possible "a denial of the economic (in the narrow sense)" and "a refusal of the logic of the maximization of economic profit" even as they facilitate exchange ("Marginalia" 234).

Bourdieu’s theory has the advantage, as Alan Schrift observes, of permitting "an understanding of the agent of the gift exchange neither as a phenomenologically construed intending subject nor as a structurally constructed and self-deluded follower of social rules" (13). Nevertheless, as compelling as Bourdieu’s theory of practice is, I find it limited by his narrow definition of gift exchange. Drawing on his own fieldwork among the Kabyles, Bourdieu makes the familiar error of treating gift exchange primarily as a type of economy associated with a precapitalist society (e.g., "Marginalia" 234-35). I disagree with Bourdieu that "the gift economy has tended to shrink to an island in the
ocean of the equivalent-exchange economy” and with his suggestion that “the family” is somehow a “reserved sector” in which one finds exceptions to modern society’s general economic practices (“Marginalia” 235). I expand on Bourdieu’s work by examining the important role gift exchange has continued to play in capitalist culture; the literary texts examined in the following chapters suggest that various practices of gift-giving have enabled (and continue to enable) individuals in U.S. culture to experience a sense of both personal agency and community, despite society’s increasing complexity.

Catherine Bell, in an important contribution to practice theory, clarifies and expands Bourdieu’s theory by defining ritualized practices as acts that work to reproduce existing power relations while affording “the actor the sense of a sphere of action, however minimal;” practice, she argues, is “a process in which agents not only accede to a shared sense of reality but also effectively reproduce that reality in ways that continue to empower them to act” (84-85). It is primarily in this sense that I have come to understand gift exchange’s function in the production of individual agency. As I have explained above, the rituals of gift exchange highlight uncertainty—they encourage us to interpret the reciprocity involved in a particular transaction as indirect, to interpret a transaction in terms of incalculability rather than equivalence. Gift-giving tends “to include the element of surprise in its own procedures, so that we are constantly toying with the ritual even as we follow it” (Godbout and Caillé 50). Consequently, gift exchange can help us feel like our transactions are voluntary and disinterested even when they are in fact obligatory and strategic.

The problem of the gift, according to Derrida, stems from the fact that “there is no gift that does not have to untie itself from obligation, from debt, contract, exchange” (27).
What remains to be recognized, I think, is that this need to "untie" our gifts is largely a production of the market itself: it is the capitalist market that asks us to envision ourselves as free agents capable of making voluntary contracts. Our culture's ideology of the free and disinterested gift, I will show, developed in the nineteenth century as both a defense against what was perceived as an ever-encroaching market's threat to personal relationships and as a means of reconceptualizing these relationships (which had previously been conceptualized in terms of hierarchical bonds and obligations) in terms consistent with such tenets of market capitalism as possessive individualism and voluntary contract.

Paradoxically, this new ideology of the gift transformed the private sphere (where one's family relationships are hardly voluntary and where one's obligations to others are usually most strongly felt) into the site where individuals are most likely to experience the free transactions associated with the market. As Carrier remarks, "although capitalist labor may be free, it is so only until work starts" (159). In contrast, the practice of gift exchange, which most often occurs in the private sphere among family and friends, often affords individuals an experience of something like a voluntary transaction. (Parents' Christmas gifts to their children, for instance, might be conventionally obligatory and, like all gifts, inevitably reciprocated, but because parents typically do not expect their children to reciprocate with comparable gifts, they experience such gift-giving as a relatively voluntary and disinterested act.) Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that market transactions can be thought to be free only to the extent that individuals feel capable of giving free gifts at home.

The practices that enable individuals to "misrecognize" their gifts as free and
disinterested have important consequences for how individuals comprehend their relationships with others. Because "the giver of a gift does not aim at the reduction of uncertainty," the gift becomes, in the words of Godbout and Caillé, "the stage on which the freest social bond is played out" (189). Gift exchanges are a way of performing even the most nonvoluntary of relationships, such as those with family members, as if they were voluntary; they help us to perceive these relationships, at least for a moment, as free. 59 Gift-giving thus suggests itself as a way of forging voluntary relationships, and it is this aspect of gift exchange that has long made the gift a popular metaphor in attempts to imagine a national community. In the nineteenth century, in novels as different as Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1857) and Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), gift-exchange is explicitly suggested as a model for transforming a nation of strangers into a gift community (a term I borrow from Hyde to describe a community that is defined in part by its members’ recognition of a shared obligation to give, accept, and return each others’ gifts); this nineteenth-century troping of the gift continues to inform the way our nation frames debates over such issues as multiculturalism and the call for reparations for slavery.

My analysis of nineteenth-century theorizings of the gift thus complements Amy Dru Stanley’s recent account of “contract” as a nineteenth-century “worldview,” one that made contract “a dominant metaphor for social relations and [...] freedom” (x). Where Stanley emphasizes understandings of contract that developed from classical political economy’s construction of contract as a “model of economic exchange” capable of “supplanting the older cultural power of the gift” (13), 60 I try to show that the gift’s power was never supplanted, but rather was transformed in the popular imagination into a
paradoxical metaphor (and practice) that could simultaneously resist, reinforce, and redefine the competing, companion metaphor of contract.\textsuperscript{61} Recognizing gift exchange's continuing importance within the world of contractual transactions enables us to see that often what seems to be an instance of the commodification of social relations is actually an instance of the gift's challenge to the market; rather than subsuming all gift transactions into a market model of economic exchange, we should perhaps, as do many of the nineteenth-century authors I discuss, seek to find elements of gift exchange even in what might first appear to be a pure, straightforward commodity transaction.

It must also be recognized, however, that while gift exchange has provided and can continue to provide an alternative model for social and economic transactions, it is by no means an intrinsically more egalitarian one that provided by commodity exchange. Too often in market cultures the gift is mistaken for

the \textit{rêve inverse}, the 'inverted dream' of the relations of power, interest, manipulation, and submission involved in commercial relations and the quest for profit, on the one hand, and in political relations and the conquest and exercise of power, on the other. When idealized, the 'uncalculating' gift operates in the imaginary as the last refuge of a solidarity, of an open-handedness which is supposed to have characterized other eras in the evolution of human kind. Gift-giving becomes the bearer of a utopia (a utopia which can be projected on the past as well as into the future). (Godelier 208)

This idealized notion of "the gift" can be challenged by a Maussian approach that examines specific gift transactions and that foregrounds questions about how a particular object is associated with a particular transaction's participants and about how these participants are "linked and obligated to each other" (Carrier 36). Gift-giving must be approached as a complex act that can simultaneously express both "a relationship of solidarity" and "a difference and inequality of status" between giver and receiver
(Godelier 12). It is this complexity and ambiguity that has made the gift such a powerful metaphor for a national community.

That the shared rituals of gift-giving can provide the nation’s citizens with a practical means of establishing a mutual recognition of something like commonality (as opposed to the ideal gift and the utopia it often evokes) is the key hypothesis of Melville’s The Confidence-Man. This novel’s parody of the wariness of gifts Emerson expresses in essays such as “Self-Reliance” (1841), “Compensation” (1841), and “Gifts” (1844) is the subject of my first chapter. My readings of Emerson’s and Melville’s explicit theorizing of the gift introduce three interconnected themes that, as subsequent chapters of this dissertation show, reoccur in countless texts throughout the nineteenth century. Specifically, when read together, Emerson and Melville indicate that the distinction between gift and commodity is a fundamental component of the nineteenth-century U.S.’s separate spheres ideology, designate the gift as a constitutive challenge to and expression of individual autonomy, and explore gift exchange as a potential model for the foundation of a national community.

I begin with these essays of Emerson, despite their being written about a decade prior to any other work I discuss, because the gift is one of Emerson’s central themes, one that establishes as a cultural concern an anxiety about the tension between the gift and individualism. Emerson’s arguments about the gift’s threat to individual autonomy illustrate the paradoxes resulting from the exaggeration of the opposition between gift and commodity: positing an entirely disinterested “true gift,” Emerson necessarily interprets gift exchange’s reciprocal obligations as the commodification of personal relationships rather than as a potential source of social cohesion. In contrast, Melville’s
novel replaces the ideal gift with a performative, rather than essentialist, model of exchange in which the ritualized performance of gift-giving generates the confidence required to interact with others in the public sphere.

Melville’s suggestion that commodity transactions be performed as gift exchanges is not an uncommon one in nineteenth-century literature; a similar argument (minus Melville’s cynical acknowledgement of the dangers underlying such performances) is a defining feature of the domestic fiction my second chapter examines. Elaborate depictions of Christmas festivities and of the purchasing of gifts, for instance, instruct readers that the performance of gift-giving rituals can almost magically transform the strangers one meets in the market into friends and the impersonal commodities one buys into sentimental possessions. But unlike The Confidence-Man, novels such as The Wide, Wide World and Maria Cummins’ The Lamplighter (1854) do not make this argument in order to deconstruct private and public exchange; constructing gift-giving as a specifically feminine, non-market form of exchange, such novels helped popularize the ideology of the gift that upholds a hyperbolic distinction between social and economic transactions (and that gives women primary responsibility for managing gift exchange rituals62).

Not all domestic fiction equally treats the opposition between gift and market transactions in such absolute terms, so this chapter distinguishes between fiction such as Warner’s that reinforces the ideology of separate spheres and the related ideology of the gift, and less sentimental domestic novels, such as Fanny Fern’s and William Dean Howells’s, that deconstruct them in terms resembling Melville’s. Whether a particular text idealizes or deconstructs the interlinked oppositions between gifts and commodities
and between the private and public spheres, however, the domestic genre's frequent depictions of acts of gift-giving suggest ways in which recent deconstructions of the nineteenth century's separate spheres ideology lose sight of the distinctiveness of the domestic economy.

My final chapter, which examines the attempts of several African American writers to supplement the ideology of possessive individualism with a concept of identity rooted in the giving and receiving of gifts, returns to two themes introduced in my first chapter. Like Emerson, writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, and W. E. B. Du Bois, insist that the ability to give and receive gifts while maintaining control over the obligations they entail is the test of personal freedom. Like Melville, these writers depict gift exchange's crucial role in producing the bonds of confidence between people who need to interact with each other as members of a community but who currently perceive each other as outsiders. Countering a particular construct of the gift that developed from antebellum, paternalistic forms of gift exchange, these writers deploy an alternative trope of the gift, one that marks the tensions between the desire to become an autonomous individual and the desire to prove one's self as a valuable member of the national community.

This dissertation, then, aims to show that the material practices of gift exchange provided the nineteenth-century U.S. with a powerful metaphor that could be used to conceptualize a multitude of concepts, such as individualism, the relationship between private and public life, race relations, and citizenship. Our culture's ideology of the gift, in other words, has played an important role in creating an appearance of continuity between various components of the ideology of democratic capitalism. Since the
nineteenth century, the mutually reinforcing, exaggerated oppositions drawn between gifts and commodities, between home and work, and between society and economy have underpinned capitalism's narrow definition of "economics," often reducing alternative notions and forms of exchange to a futile utopianism. The following chapters therefore seek to deconstruct our ideology of the ideal gift—that free and disinterested impossibility—by, on the one hand, showing that gift and commodity transactions are not as different as we tend to think they should be, and, on the other hand, identifying some meaningful distinctions between them.
CHAPTER ONE

True Gifts and Bad Faith:

Emersonian Selfhood and Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*

In the conclusion of his essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss cites “the curious essay by Emerson entitled ‘Gifts’” as an instance of what he regards as modern traces of archaic gift principles, the principles to which he argues society “must return” in order to forge a “new morality” (65, 69). In this chapter, I hope to show that Emerson’s writings about gifts provide more than a mere piece of evidence of the persisting interest in gifts that Mauss discusses—Emerson’s own theorizing of the gift illustrates the paradoxes produced by most efforts to preserve a notion of a pure gift, the same notion of a free gift Mauss refutes. That Emerson’s acknowledgment of gift-giving’s dangers anticipates, as Mauss himself intimates, elements of Mauss’s argument, suggests the importance of uncovering the connections between Emerson’s seeming discernment of the obligations gifts generate and his simultaneous insistence that a “true” gift eludes such obligations (“Gifts” 537). Mapping these connections offers insight into the logic that leads Mauss beyond demonstrating that gift exchanges must be analyzed primarily in terms of social obligations, to recommending a new morality rooted in an effort “to give, freely and obligatorily” (71, my italics), a development in his argument that, as I have described in my introduction, has invited considerable scholarly debate.

In the second part of this chapter, on the other hand, I turn to Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1857) as a way of critiquing and extending Emerson’s argument. Emerson recognizes the network of obligations in which gift exchanges involve one, but
because he conceptualizes gifts in absolute contradistinction to the market and its commodities, these obligations appear to him, not as a source of social cohesion, but as the market's intrusion into personal relationships and as a challenge to individual freedom. Melville's novel demonstrates a more productive way of theorizing the gift than describing what it does in relationships imagined as distinct from the market. Melville, in a move that distinguishes him from many contemporary gift theorists, concentrates not on the gift's corruption by the market, but on the role within the marketplace of transactions usually understood as non-market gift exchanges. *The Confidence-Man* illustrates how practicing the rituals of gift exchange within the context of market transactions—in other words, performing commodity exchanges as if they were gift exchanges—often produces the mutual confidence that those conducting a transaction must have in order to complete an exchange and suggests that the possibility of individual autonomy lies not in avoiding gift exchange's obligations, as it does for Emerson, but in self-consciously performing them.

**Emerson and the Impossibility of the True Gift**

In numerous essays, including "Self-Reliance" (1841), "Friendship" (1841), and "Gifts" (1844), Emerson hypothesizes a true gift that he can deploy as an implicit counterpoint to the excessive materialism and constraining conformity that he faults the market for encouraging. Emerson's apparent ambivalence toward gift-giving becomes more comprehensible with a recognition that his sense that a true gift must be free and disinterested reflects the widespread belief that gifts, like personal interactions generally,
involve categorically different activities than does the market, which traditional economics maintains is constituted by contractual, purely self-interested transactions. It is the rigor with which Emerson pursues a mistaken concept of the gift, then, that, I shall finally argue, allows us to see that concept as the error that it is. I begin my analysis of the tensions in Emerson’s theorizing of the gift by turning to “Compensation” (1841), an essay in which the economic logic of his arguments is perhaps most evident.

“Compensation” expresses Emerson’s hope that love and a particular comprehension of selfhood can ease his anxieties about property and exchange: “The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of His and Mine ceases. His is mine. [. . .] I can yet love; I can still receive. [. . .] I make the discovery that my brother is my guardian . . . and the estate I so admired and envied is my own” (301). As with the claim in “Self-Reliance” that “in the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude” (271), this passage from “Compensation” conveys a yearning to transcend unsought debts and obligations through a recognition of the underlying unity of human existence. But whereas “Self-Reliance” insists on the wrongfulness of supposing “dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness” (276), most of “Compensation” seems aimed at illustrating that “an inevitable dualism bisects nature” (287). However, as usual with Emerson, this is not the contradiction that it first appears to be—in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson is referring to individuals’ need to recognize themselves as not disconnected in any way from the laws that govern all of nature; “Compensation” then defines dualism, the “polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature” (286), as one of those laws.

Emerson makes his case for the truth of such polarity in economic terms; “the
transactions of the street” and “debts and credit” are explicitly included among the “endless variety” of evidence from which he draws his doctrine of “Compensation” (285). The essay begins with a critique of a preacher whose recent sermon on the Last Judgment reflected thinking that, Emerson argues, wrongly “deferr[ed] to the base estimate of the market” (286). Emerson faults the preacher for in no way countering the market’s definition of “what constitutes a manly success” and for reinforcing the myth that the good who are miserable now will be rewarded in heaven with “like gratifications,” with the same “houses and lands, offices, wine, horses, dress,” as are presently “had by unprincipled men” (285-86). The essay’s introduction thus perhaps raises an expectation that Emerson will proceed to rebut economic thinking generally; instead, as Michael Gilmore notes, he offers “an ethical theory” articulated in the “very language” of “the accounting procedures of the marketplace” (80). But rather than reading this essay’s economic rhetoric as evidence for Gilmore’s verdict that Emerson is thus beginning here to reveal himself as the market’s “apologist” (81), I take it as an additional symptom of the struggle with the gift that confronts Emerson as a result of his tendency to interpret every instance of exchange in commodity terms.

It might be argued that Emerson’s concept of exchange should be described the other way around—that “Compensation” argues that our economic discourse must make room for a consideration of gift exchanges as well as of commodity transactions. After all, included in the list of proverbs whose familiarity signifies for Emerson the truth of the principle of compensation is “Give and it shall be given you” (293). However, Emerson himself clarifies that he views the return of what one gives as indistinguishable from the market’s demand for reciprocal, balanced trades by using the language of gifts
and that of buying and selling as synonyms: Emerson's compensation is "the absolute balance of Give and Take, the doctrine that everything has its price" (296). This conflation of giving and selling leads, as it always does, to the impossibility of the gift: "In nature nothing can be given, all things are sold" (292). Just as for Derrida the gift is "annulled each time there is a restitution or countergift" (Given Time 12), for Emerson the gift returned is a thing bought and sold, a thing very unlike the true gifts that in "Gifts" and "Friendship" simply "flow" and "emanate," sometimes even "without due correspondence," between friends (537, 354). And yet these two opposing conceptions of gift-giving that recur throughout Emerson's work are two sides of the same coin—when gift exchange is defined in the abstract as a free and disinterested activity, then the reciprocal obligations produced by gifts will almost necessarily appear to be a gift's commodification, which in turn reinforces the desire for a purely generous "true" gift.

Certainly such is the case in "Compensation." On the one hand, this essay argues that it is a law of nature that every action is rewarded by its consequence, that all that one gives is returned, and that "a perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life" (289). On the other hand, it underscores Emerson's discomfort with such reciprocity. More precisely, it indicates his sense that if everything given must be returned, then to receive is to accept obligations whether one wants to or not: "I no longer wish to meet a good I do not earn, for example, to find a pot of buried gold, knowing that it brings with it new burdens" (300). Thus the principle of compensation that Emerson detects throughout nature alerts him to the problem of indebtedness, which is the problem of the gift: "Has a man gained any thing who has received a hundred favors and rendered none? [. . .] There arises on the deed the instant acknowledgement of benefit on the one part, and of debt on
the other; that is, of superiority and inferiority” (295).

In insisting that no debt can be evaded, “Compensation” makes clear that Emerson’s argument is by no means just a naïve affirmation of a right to deny one’s obligations. Rather, Emerson explores a challenging question: if the inevitability of unavoidable obligations is one feature of a general principle of compensation, what form of autonomous selfhood is then possible? This question puts the gift at the core of Emerson’s project. Recognizing compensation as a principle of nature is crucial, Emerson suggests, because an awareness of the gift’s obligations is necessary if one is to maintain control over them:

A wise man will extend this lesson to all parts of life, and know that it is the part of prudence to face every claimant, and pay every just demand on your time, your talents, or your heart. Always pay; for, first or last, you must pay your entire debt. Persons and events may stand for a time between you and justice, but it only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt. If you are wise, you will dread a prosperity which only loads you with more. [. . .] He is great who confers the most benefits. He is base—and that is the one base thing in the universe—to receive favors and render none. In the order of nature we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom. But the benefit we receive must be rendered again, line for line, deed for deed, cent for cent, to somebody” (295-96).

Communicated here is a wanting not merely to avoid unsought obligations, but also to oblige others to one’s self by achieving a greatness associated with giving the most and, presumably, from giving first.2

This line of reasoning, which culminates in the essay’s remarkable exhortation to “put God in your debt” (298), anticipates Nietzsche’s account in Zarathustra of the “gift-giving virtue”3 and Georges Bataille’s theory of dépense. The significant similarities between Emerson’s concept of the gift and the concepts of these philosophers has been noted by only a handful of critics, including Richard Grusin, John Wikse, and Gary
Shapiro, and the question of how Emerson's theorizing of the gift might be developed and critiqued by comparing it to alternative models (such as critiques of Bataille's theory) remains unexplored. For example, Grusin persuasively demonstrates in an essay that takes Emerson's recommendation to "put God in your debt" as its title that Emerson describes in "Compensation" and elsewhere a "sacrificial economy of expenditure" similar to the potlatch privileged in Bataille's theory of the gift (Grusin 37). "If the logic of gift exchange has anything to teach us about Emerson's economy of the soul," Grusin rightly remarks, "it is that this economy aims neither to extricate the world from its economic obligations nor to figure it according to 'the base estimate of the market' but [...] to humiliate and obligate not only one's fellow, but even the most powerful of all rivals—God" (42).

Grusin overlooks, however, the ways in which Emerson undermines his own effort to thus position the gift as an economic model untainted by "base" market values. If the gift represents for Emerson, as it does for Bataille, the possibility of an economy rooted in "expenditure and loss" as opposed to the "production and acquisition" understood to be the goal of market exchange (Grusin 36), then underlying anything Emerson might say about the gift as a means of satisfying the world's "economic obligations" (Grusin 42) is the assumption that the gift should be defined as the market's near opposite. This manner of theorizing the gift and the related issue of indebtedness leads to the assertion of a "true" gift, a construct which, as becomes especially clear in the later essay "Gifts" (an essay Grusin mentions but does not examine), inevitably points to its own impossibility. Grusin is right that Emerson turns to gift exchange for a strategy for dealing with the fact "that character is [not] autonomous but [...] is embedded in a
network of social and spiritual obligations within which individuals must strive to discharge their debts” (42), but what must be added to Grusin’s analysis is that Emerson’s particular model of gift exchange is not up to this job because it is shaped by a discourse that defines the gift as free and autonomous. What is most valuable in Emerson’s writings about the gift is that he himself makes clear his own theory’s limitations by plainly acknowledging that a gift as he defines it is impossible.

Unlike a Maussian approach that defines gift exchange in terms of a threefold obligation to give, accept, and return, the model of gift-giving offered by Emerson attempts to extricate acts of giving and of receiving from gift exchange’s circuits of obligation. In other words, Emerson acknowledges the obligations gifts generate but then seeks forms of giving and of receiving that are each separate expressions of autonomy; one should give and receive, he argues, not out of compliance to the rules of a quid pro quo paradigm of exchange, but rather unconstrainedly at both ends. Only a comprehension of what it means that “the soul is not a compensation [. . .] not a relation, or a part, but the whole,” can make possible the perspective that permits one to say “I can yet love; I can still receive” (299, 301). In “Compensation,” an ability to give and receive freely—a true gift that represents a higher principle of exchange than that valued by the “base estimate of the market”—is thus hypothesized as a decisive index of achievement of the selfhood Emerson envisions, an argument that foreshadows the observation in “Gifts” that “he is a good man, who can receive a gift well” (537).

There is thus more behind Emerson’s appropriation of economic rhetoric than unconscious complicity with commodity culture. His “use of the language of the economic marketplace itself—particularly concepts such as commodity, property, profit,
wealth, and price,” as Richard Teichgraeb er argues, suggests an attempt to redefine “certain key categories of economic discourse [...] in order that they might be employed to express purposes higher than mere production and exchange,” a rhetorical strategy consistent with Emerson’s characteristic practice of criticizing the market “from the inside by invoking what [he] took to be [his] society’s shared values as the grounds for criticism” (10, xii). Even as thorough a reader as Teichgraeb er, however, omits the gift from his list of the economic concepts informing Emerson’s assessments of the market. Teichgraeb er is right that for Emerson, “keeping one’s place in the market [...] does not preclude the possibility of realizing other nobler, noneconomic aims” (36), but it is precisely the gift that for Emerson represents this possibility. Simultaneously symbolizing for Emerson an alternative to the market and the perpetual elusiveness of that alternative, the gift marks the key tensions in Emerson’s economic thought which have provoked much debate about his attitude toward the nineteenth century’s increasingly capitalistic culture.6

One means of reconciling the apparent contradictions in Emerson’s economic thought is, as Howard Horwitz points out, to recognize that for Emerson “commerce and property are not in themselves lapses from virtue; virtue or sin lies in one’s relation (mastery or dependence) to property” (101).7 In theorizing what mastery over commerce and property would entail, however, Emerson contemplates the market—and exchange in general—primarily in terms of the challenges they pose for the individual.8 The antagonism Emerson posits between the market and the self generates the tensions and contradictions that have made him appear to be at times a critic of commodity capitalism, and at others its proponent. An anxiety about gifts surfaces in his writings then as both a
marker of this antagonism and as a primary challenge to his theorizing of selfhood. The gift might be Emerson’s symbol for a purer form of exchange than that the market offers, but it simultaneously stands for the obstacles that the necessity of market transactions presents to one’s pursuit of these higher ideals. If Emerson occasionally offers the gift as a comparatively noble mode of exchange, he more frequently evokes it as a symbol of the inner self’s vulnerability to obligations imposed from without.

Such discrepancies in Emerson’s descriptions of gifts can largely be explained by his distinction between common and true gifts (common gifts, according to him, express market values; true gifts transcend them), but it is also the case that these ambiguities stem from the very paradoxes that constitute his larger culture’s ideology of the gift. Emerson, as Anita Patterson insightfully observes, critiques the prevalent Lockean understanding of property by offering a “model of the self-owning subject” that is described through a “contradictory invocation and denial of private property” and by playing with “the contradiction between owning and not owning,” particularly in his discussions of friendship, in order “to express an ideal relationship between persons in society” (45, 108). What I would stress is that such contradictions are not an idiosyncrasy of Emerson’s rhetorical strategy. One of the fundamental functions of the prevailing ideology of the gift is to provide the contradictions and slippages in our economic discourse that make such a critique possible: the obvious impossibility of what this ideology holds up as the ideal gift ensures that any critique made in such terms, as I have explained in my introduction, will ultimately naturalize “exchange,” as capitalist cultures define it. If Emerson’s “critique of American democracy” is a “utopian” one (A. Patterson 7), it is in no small part because of his culture’s ideology of the gift.
To illustrate how this ideology contributes to the contradictions noted by Patterson and others, I turn now to "Self-Reliance," "Friendship," and "Gifts," three essays that further develop Emerson's theory of the gift. An idealized gift is one of Emerson's primary tools in his effort to redefine economic discourse so that it might express "nobler noneconomic aims" (Teichgraeber 36), and yet this ideal gift is not immediately apparent in his essays since the gifts to which he usually refers explicitly are the everyday gifts that, like market exchange, ensnare one in webs of obligations. Thus Emerson depicts both the market and the gift as potential threats to personal autonomy. For example, in "Self-Reliance," Emerson defines society in market terms: "Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity" (261). Here, a metaphor taken from the world of market activity provides Emerson with an apt symbol of society's demand for conformity. That Emerson's aversion to the market and its commodities might be more than metaphorical is suggested by another of the essay's lines: "And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance" (281).

The paragraph from which this line comes is noteworthy not merely because it brands "the marketplace as the realm of instability and chance" (Gilmore 73), but also because of its explicit inclusion of gifts among the forms of property most damaging to self-reliance. In contrast to the reliance on property, self-reliance produces a "living property, which does not wait the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man breathes," which is why, Emerson argues,
a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, out of new respect for his nature. Especially he hates what he has, if he see that it is accidental,—came to him by inheritance, or gift, or crime; then he feels that it is not having, it does not belong to him, has no root in him, and merely lies there, because no revolution or no robber takes it away. (281)

Here, gifts, which Emerson’s “cultivated man” resents because unlike the “living property” acquired through being “what a man is” (281) they are easily lost, figure not in opposition to “Property” in general, but as the epitome of the sort of alienation usually associated with commodities.

The obstacle that gifts present to self-reliance, the essay argues, is double-sided. Gifts received can mislead a person into a shortsighted sense of what actually “belong[s] to him,” and the gifts a person gives may reflect nothing more than an incapacity to withstand social pressures:

do not tell me as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies;—though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold. (262-63)

At stake in this often-quoted attack on charity, I think, is not so much an argument against charity or other forms of gifts, as an effort to define what might be regarded as ethical motives for giving.

What is wrong with the sorts of charities he lists, Emerson asserts, is that they involve giving to those who “do not belong to [him] and to whom [he does] not belong” for no other reason than social custom. To those with whom he shares a “spiritual
affinity," he does not mind giving because in such cases he is motivated by feelings of a personal and spiritual obligation—a feeling of being "bought and sold"—to another individual. Emerson’s choice of the words "bought and sold" is an instance of his penchant for investing the language of the marketplace with new meanings; here "bought and sold" describes the bond Emerson feels with those with whom he feels a deep affinity, the very sense of "likeness" between true friends that his later essay "Gifts" actually contrasts to being "bought and sold" ("There are persons, from whom we always expect fairy tokens [. . .]. For the rest, I like to see that we cannot be bought and sold. [. . .] No services are of any value, but only likeness" [538]).

Vital to the "manhood" Emerson desires to achieve is not the simple ability "to withhold" charity, but mastery over gift exchanges and the obligations they entail. Thus Emerson clarifies his self- absolution for his willingness to "neglect" his obligations to "father, mother, cousin, neighbour, town" by immediately adding: "I have my own stern claims and perfect circle. It denies the name of duty to many offices that are called duties. But if I can discharge its debts, it enables me to dispense with the popular code" (274). The question, Emerson claims, is not whether one is obligated to others, but to whom one is obligated and what is the nature of this indebtedness. Underlying Emerson’s attempt to answer this question in "Friendship" and "Gifts" is the idealized notion of a free gift.

Arguing that "the end of friendship is a commerce the most strict and homely that can be joined" (348), Emerson, in "Friendship," makes use of an economic rhetoric that reveals his ambivalence toward the debts and demands for reciprocity that he worries taint even the most noble of relationships:
I wish that friendship should have feet, as well as eyes and eloquence. [. . .] I wish it to be a little of a citizen, before it is quite a cherub. We chide the citizen because he makes love a commodity. It is an exchange of gifts, of useful loans; it is good neighbourhood; it watches with the sick; it holds the pall at the funeral; and quite loses sight of the delicacies and nobility of the relation. But though we cannot find the god under this disguise of a sutler, yet, on the other hand, we cannot forgive the poet if he spins his thread too fine, and does not substantiate his romance by the municipal virtues of justice, punctuality, fidelity, and pity.” (348)

This passage demonstrates Emerson’s refusal to reconcile in any way what he regards as competing aspects of one’s personal relationships. Emerson might desire his friendships “to be a little of a citizen,” but he acknowledges the difficulty of “find[ing] the god” in this mode of friendship that sometimes, in the practicality of its exchanges, reminds him of a “sutler” (a person who follows an army in order to sell provisions to soldiers). For Emerson, who defines friendship’s various “exchange[s] of gifts” as the commodification of love, “exchange” seems to inherently connote commodity transactions—the obligation that gifts be returned, the reciprocity required by gift exchange, necessitates that the very activities that express friendship are themselves the means by which friendship is commodified.

Emerson has two strategies for coping with this inherent danger of friendship. First, he characteristically appropriates the language of the marketplace for his own ends. Unlike “girls and boys” who “regard a friend as property” to be simply “suck[ed for] a short and all-confounding pleasure, instead of the noblest benefit” (351), Emerson aims to achieve through his friendships the same sort of “living property” he describes in “Self-Reliance” (281). “I must,” he insists, “feel pride in my friend’s accomplishments as if they were mine,—and a property in his virtues” (343). A true friend “who hears me, who understands me, becomes mine,—a possession for all time” (342), unlike the
“accidental” property, also described in “Self-Reliance,” that is too easily lost (281). Second, and more important, Emerson proposes that true friendship transcends the circuits of exchange that constrain most of our interactions with others: “So I will owe to my friends this evanescent intercourse. I will receive from them, not what they have, but what they are. They shall give me that which properly they cannot give, but which emanates from them” (354).

If one receives from one’s friends “what they are,” rather than the things “they have,” then he can overcome the need for reciprocity that Emerson alleges customarily sullies our relationships:

It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew, to carry a friendship greatly on one side, without due correspondence on the other. Why should I cumber myself with regrets that the receiver is not capacious? […] true love cannot be unrequited. True love transcends the unworthy object, and dwells and broods on the eternal, and when the poor interposed mask crumbles, it is not sad, but feels rid of so much earth, and feels its independency the surer. (354)

While Emerson can envision friendship rooted in a “true love” that bolsters, not undermines, feelings of “independency,” this passage also implicitly indicates that overcoming the problem of the gift—the expectation that things given will be requited and the resultant capacity of gifts to generate feelings of indebtedness—is a necessary test of true friendship. Emerson takes up this question of the gift’s challenge to his ideal of friendship in “Gifts.”

Like previous essays, “Gifts” explores what would constitute mastery over the gift and its intrinsic risks. Emerson’s first step toward mastering the gift is to classify it; he distinguishes first between suitable and unacceptable gifts and then between “common” and “true” gifts (although as is typical in Emerson’s texts, his argument is by no means
linear—his classifications and the examples that illustrate them overlap.) Gifts, the essay
insists, are not commodities, even if it is virtually impossible to give something that is not
also a commodity: “Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. [. . . ] it is
a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not
represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith’s” (536). In contrast, “Flowers and fruits
are always fit presents,” avers Emerson in one of the essay’s first sentences (535).

This sentence may sound less like philosophy than an etiquette book’s cliché, but
even so it points to what modern gift theorists have identified as a definitive aspect of
gifts, specifically that they express a value beyond mere equivalence.10 Emerson’s
explanation of why such gifts inevitably please—“flowers, because they are a proud
assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world. [. . . ] Fruits [. . . ]
because they are the flower of commodities, and admit of fantastic values being attached
to them” (535)—makes explicit his sense that in its ideal form, gift exchange operates
according to its own economic logic, one that is clearly different from that governing
commodity exchange. Thus the reason Emerson offers for the appropriateness of gifts of
fruit and flowers is entirely consistent with the model of ideal gift-giving between true
friends that, as we will see, the rest of the essay sketches. Grusin seems right that, as
with Bataille, gift exchange represents for Emerson the possibilities of an economy of
expenditure, but what remains to be determined, I think, is the extent to which such a
theorization of the gift reflects the same ideology of the gift that requires the frequent
giving of such cliché tokens as fruit and flowers.

In defining “common gifts” (535), Emerson elaborates on what makes a gift a
good one; one can be sure of giving a wished-for gift when one gives something
“necessity” demands (535). For instance, “if the man at the door have no shoes, you have not to consider whether you could procure him a paint-box” (535). Further, when trying to give a wanted gift, Emerson continues, “next to things of necessity, the rule for a gift [. . .] is, that we might convey to some person that which properly belonged to his character, and was easily associated with him in thought” (536). For Emerson, though, just because a gift is well-chosen does not mean that it is necessarily desirable. Conjecturing why Emerson might regard gifts of necessity with suspicion is not difficult; they result in a very obvious form of indebtedness, which is surely part of what Emerson has in mind in stating, “We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten” (536). But the difficulties Emerson sees in giving gifts suited to the recipient’s personality are more complex.

Emerson connects the need to give a gift demonstrating one’s familiarity with the recipient’s character to the gift’s function as a symbol of both the giver and recipient and of their relationship by immediately following this mention of the second rule of gift selection with

The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to its primary basis, when a man’s biography is conveyed in his gift, and every man’s wealth is an index of his merit. (536)

In other words, even in their “common” form, gifts, in order to be “fit” must say something about the recipient’s character and that of the giver.11

Emerson himself, however, senses the inadequacies of the common concept of the gift and even suspects the limitations of his own effort to reformulate it. As his
declaration "thou must bleed for me" should suggest, despite acknowledging that it "is right and pleasing" when a gift intensely represents its giver and recipient, Emerson does not consider the giving and receiving of common gifts of affection any less dangerous than gifts of necessity—regardless of whether the object given causes him to "rejoice or grieve," some "violence" seems done (537). "Gifts" is a very short essay, but it nevertheless anticipates most of the observations made by subsequent gift theorists about the perils of gift-giving. Not only does a gift and the obligations it brings cause a recipient's "independence" to be "invaded," but for Emerson, a gift he does not like becomes an unpleasant reminder that the friend who gave the gift did not really "know [his] spirit" and thus has no right to put him in his debt (537). A gift that "pleases [...] overmuch," on the other hand, causes him to "be ashamed that the donor should read my heart, and see that [he] love[s] his commodity, and not him" (537).

This anxiety about the giver's ability to "read" his "heart" suggests that Emerson's concern is not merely that the pleasing gift threatens to commodify friendship by infecting its love with the love of material objects, but also, as Shapiro comments, that receiving a gift truly suited to one's character causes one to feel exposed, to feel that another has "understood him all too well" (28). A gift that so demonstrates an accurate sizing up of its recipient's character is acceptable only if it comes from a beloved friend ("We can receive anything from love, for that is a way of receiving it from ourselves" [536]), but the very act of giving a material object undermines the unity Emerson locates in true friendship. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson professes that the desire for things destroys the unity of self, or rather, the unity between self and nature: "Prayer that craves a particular commodity,—any thing less than all good,—is vicious. [...] prayer as a
means to effect a private end . . . supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness” (275-76). Similarly, “Gifts,” asserts the difficulty of finding a gift that does not suppose dualism between friends: “All his are mine, all mine his. I say to him, How can you give me this pot of oil, or this flagon of wine, when all your oil and wine is mine, which belief of mine this gift seems to deny? Hence the fitness of beautiful, not useful things for gifts” (537). And, finally, Emerson observes, giving a gift is no less an “onerous business” than receiving one—“the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged person. It is a great happiness to get off without injury and heart-burning, from one who has had the ill luck to be served by you” (537).

In describing what he refers to as “these discords” in acts of giving (537), Emerson resembles contemporary theorists who deconstruct the gift/commodity binary by highlighting the ways in which gift exchange involves the same self-interested motives that characterize commodity exchange. Emerson’s account of the difficulties of giving and receiving stems from his awareness of what has since been referred to as the impossibility of the gift; he writes, for example: “You can not give anything to a magnanimous person. [. . .] he at once puts you in debt by his magnanimity” (537). Emerson’s solution to the gift’s impossibility is the model of friendship put forward in “Friendship.” The assertion in “Gifts” that “the gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him. When the waters are at level, then my goods pass to him, and his to me” (537) echoes the claim in “Friendship” that “true love cannot be unrequited” since true friends “give [. . .] that which properly they cannot give, but which emanates from them.” Furthermore, the concern expressed in
“Gifts” about the effect feelings of indebtedness and dependency have on personal relationships and the yearning indicated for a friendship in which “the waters are at level,” reaffirms the earlier essay’s insistence that “I ought to be equal to every relation” (345). Remarking that “the best of hospitality and of generosity is also not in the will, but in fate” (“Gifts” 538), Emerson suggests that a true gift not only transcends calculation but flows from one’s very being. As in the criticism of charity in “Self-Reliance,” these two essays argue not that gifts are inescapably antithetical to individualism, but rather that a certain mastery in the face of the gift’s “discord,” the ability to exchange true gifts, marks a superior sort of individual and friendship.

In this respect, Emerson’s sense of the gift, as Shapiro elaborates, shares with that of Nietzsche and of Bataille a certain “delight in the contest and circulation of gift exchange” (29). At times, as when he proclaims, “put God in your debt” or comments, “A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me” (“Self-Reliance” 267), Emerson does seem capable of delighting in the rivalry in which the gift obligates one to participate. But more often than not, his emphasis is not reciprocity’s pleasures, but its dangers. The claim in “Gifts” that “the service a man renders his friend is trivial and selfish, compared with the service he knows his friend stood in readiness to yield him” (537) exemplifies the “element of rivalry in Emerson’s economy of expenditure” Grusin detects in other essays (42),12 but in this instance there is no victory in the giving. Similarly, his claim that “compared with that good-will I bear my friend, the benefit it is in my power to render him seems small” (537-38) casts acts of friendship as acts of rivalry, but a rivalry that ultimately signifies an inability to accept his friend’s thanks “without some shame and humiliation” (538).
Only a true gift between true friends could avoid such an outcome by transcending it.

Emerson’s argument resembles Derrida’s description of the gift’s impossibility in that it, on the one hand, critiques idealizations of gifts that deny the obligations they incur, and on the other, preserves the sense that a “true gift” would be unmarred by such mundane limitations. Emerson (and Derrida, as I have argued in my introduction) therefore critiques common notions about gifts, but does so within what Carrier identifies as the Western ideology of the gift that insists that a gift’s “material expression is immaterial” and that idealizes gifts as “free, unconstrained and unconstraining” (149).

As Carrier remarks,

This is a powerful ideology, one that is able to disembody objects, divest them of their material aspect and transmute them into pure, spontaneous expressions of being and love. Not only can it do away with the material nature of presents, it can create a wholly new form of relationship, in which people can be related but independent, joined but separate, linked fundamentally but in no way bound to or restricted by each other. We give the thing which is not, and so are joined but free. (150)

Despite the fact that for Carrier, Emerson (to whom he devotes little more than a paragraph) is merely a relatively minor illustration of this ideology he finds permeating capitalist culture, Carrier’s description here superbly captures the utopian dynamic in Emerson’s account of the gift.

Earlier in this chapter I suggested that this ideology of the gift is at least partly responsible for the sorts of contradictions that Patterson has identified as fundamental to Emerson’s critique of prevailing notions of property and the market. Specifically, this ideology obfuscates the differences between the obligations associated with varied forms of exchange. According to Carrier, “from the Maussian perspective, and in contrast to much popular and scholarly belief, gift transactions are obligatory: the parties are
obligated to give, receive and repay. On the other hand, commodity transactions are voluntary, for relations in the marketplace are free: we may buy and sell as we like and where we like” (11). But a constitutive contradiction of the ideology of the gift is that in idealizing the gift as disinterested, it denies the obligations which in fact characterize gift exchange and interprets a gift’s obligations as telltale signs of market-like calculations, while simultaneously reinforcing the cultural understanding of the market as a realm theoretically free from social obligations.

In defining the gift as free and voluntary, this ideology expresses the liberal concept of independent, autonomous selfhood, a notion of the self that developed with the rise of capitalism and that is at the heart of classical economic theory (Homo economicus must be free to act according to rational self-interest). Thus the ideal gift, one given out of pure generosity rather than because of feelings of obligation or a desire to obligate others, expresses not a notion of selfhood shaped by the network of social relations reproduced by gift exchange, but rather the autonomous self celebrated by laissez faire liberalism. If at first it seems that the ideology of the gift maintains that social obligations both are and are not a feature of commodity exchange, on closer inspection it seems more accurate to say that the ideology of the gift is the mechanism by which commodity culture rationalizes the presence of social obligations in a supposedly free market. If exaggerating the distinctions between gifts and commodities causes the obligations of gift exchange to be confused with the calculation and self-interest of the market, it is equally true that such an exaggeration enables us to dismiss the importance of personal relationships and social obligations within the market as anomalous intrusions of private transactions into the commercial sphere.
The true gift, which is the product of the ideological polarization of gifts and commodities, as Emerson shows, initially appears to offer a compelling critique of the market; Emerson's description of the "flowing" of gifts between an ideal giver and recipient powerfully evokes the possibility of an exchange motivated by better principles than calculation and self-interest, which is why Emerson's attention to gifts should be recognized as a significant element in the redefining of economic language which critics such as Teichgraeber and Patterson have discerned in his writings. The gift provides an alternative model of exchange that seemingly destabilizes, at least temporarily, the dominant economic discourse. The Western ideology of the gift obscures, as I have argued, the meaning of obligation so that a gift's obligations paradoxically seem to resemble the commodification of personal relationships despite the fact that conventional economic theory has characterized commodity transactions as voluntary, not obligatory. Attention to the gift highlights the ambiguities and slippages present in our economic language generally. Certainly we see such a slippage in the apparently contradictory meanings Emerson assigns to the phrase "bought and sold" in "Self-Reliance," where it refers to a form of societal obligation he desires (262) and in "Gifts," where it refers to the disagreeable market-like motives he sees in common gifts (538).

Nevertheless, because the true gift is the flip side of our culture's concept of commodities, it in no way challenges our understanding of commodity exchange as inescapably self-interested, even as it seems to offer an alternative model of exchange. The opposition between commodity and gift works to reinforce several more fundamental conceptual oppositions in capitalist culture, namely that between the "economic" and the "social" and the overlapping opposition between the public and private spheres. In
particular, the insistence that true gifts are somehow purely disinterested upholds capitalism's definition of "economic" as "self-interested." Paradoxically, it is, of course, this narrow definition of "economic" that makes gift exchanges so problematic in our culture; if economic conduct—exchange—is defined in terms of calculation and rational self-interest, then the very fact that gifts are exchanged, or even indirectly reciprocated, makes them suspect.

For example, when Emerson claims in "Man the Reformer" that "the general system of our trade [. . .] is a system of selfishness; is not dictated by the high sentiments of human nature; is not measured by the exact law of reciprocity; much less by the sentiments of love and heroism, but is a system of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving but of taking advantage" (137-38; my italics), his identification of the market's "selfishness" is obviously bolstered by his explicit juxtaposing of economic conduct with the "high sentiments" that he associates with acts of giving. Ironically, this passage also suggests that "our system of trade" lacks reciprocity, which here Emerson aligns with the "high sentiments" to which he aspires although elsewhere, as we have seen, he regards the expectation for reciprocation of gifts even among friends with much suspicion. As I have shown in my introduction, one of the substantive, albeit subtle, distinctions between gift and commodity exchange is the type of reciprocity which characterizes each, but because the ideology of the gift insists that gifts and commodities are polar opposites, it tends to downplay the importance of identifying what these subtle differences are and, rather, encourages efforts to define reciprocity as a feature of either gift or commodity exchange. Emerson's seeming inconsistency in his attitude toward the notion of reciprocity is not surprising then—once again Emerson illustrates the paradoxes
resulting from his culture's tendency to exaggerate the opposition between gift and commodity.

If the ideology of the gift is part of an economic discourse that defines the market as intrinsically self-interested, then the "true gift," such as that Emerson theorizes, can have the effect of in part excusing the more brutal realities of commodity exchange. The very notion of a pure gift is produced by the hyperbolic opposition between gift and commodity which reflects a belief that economic, public behavior is fundamentally different than social, private behavior; therefore, even as the hope for a true gift suggests a ground for critiquing the unpleasant selfishness of "economic" conduct, it permits the sense that selfish calculation is an unavoidable, inherent aspect of any transaction occurring outside the private sphere of one's personal relationships, or even, as Emerson implies, outside the very narrow realm of ideal friendship.

That Emerson himself recognizes the limits of his utopian model of exchange is indicated by his frequent acknowledgement that the friendship he seeks is probably unattainable. As he admits in "Friendship:"

The higher the style we demand of friendship, of course the less easy to establish it with flesh and blood. We walk alone in the world. Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables. But a sublime hope cheers ever the faithful heart, that elsewhere, in other regions of the universal power, souls are now acting, enduring, and daring, which can love us, and which we can love" (352).

Emerson discovers "what a perpetual disappointment is actual society, even of the virtuous and gifted" (345), and it seems that for him the impossibility of the gift and the impossibility of friendship begin to represent each other.

For Emerson, only a completely disinterested gift—one given neither from a sense of obligation nor in an attempt to obligate others—enables one to avoid
dependency and to remain unconstrained by duties defined by others. Such a gift thus becomes for Emerson an important symbol both of the very notion of individual autonomy as well as of the obstacles to achieving it. Undoubtedly, the gift Emerson describes differs greatly from that which Mauss evokes as a corrective to utilitarian political theory; Emerson’s gift typifies the imaginary free gift that Mauss critiques. Perhaps, however, given Emerson’s evident recognition of such a gift’s likely impossibility, it is more fair to say that Emerson’s theorizing of the gift, like that of most subsequent gift theorists, works within the constraints of Western capitalism’s ideology of the gift, even as it confronts that ideology’s logical fallacies. Emerson is not alone in his efforts to identify the obligations in which gifts ensnare one while simultaneously preserving some faith in the personal freedom that the ideal of the true gift represents. Emerson, it might be said, was among the first of many to construct the gift as a symbol of an irresolvable tension between freedom and obligation, between individual agency and social determination.

After all, Mauss himself begins *The Gift* by setting these two concepts in opposition (“in theory [gifts] are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” [Mauss 3]), but then repeatedly defines the gift as a means of reconciling them (“a form that is both disinterested and obligatory” [33]; “where obligation and liberty intermingle” [65]; “to emerge from self, to give freely and obligatorily” [71]). A capacity for symbolizing such a paradox is the force behind the standing of “the gift” as a compelling theoretical problem. Pinning down the self and its relation to the world requires defining the nature of individual transactions with the world, but the gift (or rather, the indeterminacy it represents), as Emerson vividly illustrates, is a limit to doing
so. We know that when we start defining the gift, other concepts, such as that of "commodity," begin crumbling. Another such concept would seem to be Emersonian selfhood, as Melville indicates in *The Confidence-Man*’s response to Emerson.

The Gift as Practice: Melville and the Problem of Confidence

That Melville’s *Confidence-Man* contains a response to Emerson’s writings on friendship has long been noticed by critics, who generally recognize two characters, the transcendental philosopher Mark Winsome and his disciple Egbert, as caricatures of Emerson. The rest of this chapter aims to show that reading *The Confidence-Man* as an answer to Emerson can enhance our understanding of not only this novel’s characters and themes, but of its very structure. I have argued that because Emerson’s writings about friendship are inextricably connected to his conceptualizing of the gift, they must be understood to have an economic component; correspondingly, I attempt to read the sequence of apparent con-games comprising *The Confidence-Man*’s plot as a series of economic transactions and dialogues about economic principles that test and develop Emerson’s theorizing of the gift.

Depicting a variously disguised confidence-man’s generally successful attempts to con fellow passengers on a Mississippi steamboat named the Fidèle (part of the novel’s play with concepts of “faith and “confidence”), *The Confidence-Man* is as slippery a text as one can read. (Among the most enduring debates about the novel have been those about simple factual questions. Are the various con-men guises of a single character? Is it certain he cons anyone, given the lack of definite evidence that he fails to give his
apparent victims whatever he promises in return and that on some occasions he gives money rather than takes it [91, 223]?¹⁷ Is the confidence man the novel’s hero or villain?¹⁸) The novel not only resists attempts to pin down its meaning, but explicitly mocks those who would try to do so, as is perhaps suggested most simply by the fact that not only the novel’s setting but its publication date is April Fools’ Day. The text lacks a conventional plot, taking the form of a series of dialogues occurring over the course of a single day. In several of these dialogues, characters relate stories in which they claim to be primarily quoting someone else. The novel’s narrator, like the title character, constantly makes claims that he then qualifies or negates through a highly stylized rhetoric. When reading The Confidence-Man, one can never be sure who exactly is saying what, and, therefore, one must be even more careful than usual not to mistake any one statement for the novel’s “message.”

Therefore, in examining the novel’s discussions of loans, gifts, charity, and con-games, I in no way intend to suggest that Melville makes one particular argument about such matters; rather, I hope to draw attention to his charting of the difficulties faced when one takes up the question of the gift in Emersonian terms. The Confidence-Man compels readers to doubt every character, while simultaneously suggesting that perhaps they really should heed the confidence man’s arguments against distrust and adopt the charitable mottos, such as “Charity thinketh no evil” (4), listed in the opening chapter. What interests me is what the novel suggests we should do and how it suggests we should understand the gift in such an uncertain context. Melville’s novel takes seriously Emerson’s charge in “Man the Reformer” that Americans have replaced “faith” with “the power of a dollar” (146), and explores what effect this altered form of faith has on social
and economic conduct.

Discussing the transactions that comprise The Confidence-Man's plot, particularly those of the novel's first half, can be an arduous task since these transactions are brief, numerous, conducted by often nameless characters, and in many ways repetitive (by contrast, the novel's second half depicts a single guise of the confidence man, the cosmopolitan Frank Goodman, during a series of dialogues not involving the taking of money). To avoid tediously re-narrating this series of exchanges, I will briefly comment on a few sample episodes using the chart below, which suggests that many of these transactions share a particular structure. Specifically, Melville's confidence man repeatedly establishes confidence by giving it; in one unusually blatant instance, he bolsters his credibility as an herb-doctor by giving away two dollars, claiming he customarily gives half his proceeds to charity and promising "confidence in whoever" takes his money "in need of help" because they "have given or done more than may ever be given or done to them" (90-91). Moreover, it might be said that the confidence man does give his victims something further in return for the confidence they give him, even if that something is nothing more that a vague sense of fellow feeling or of hope. As the herb-doctor, he claims, for instance, "How much confidence you give me, so much hope do I give you" (81).

As the principle confidence man of David Mamet's House of Games explains to a would-be protégé, "it's called a 'confidence' game. Why? Because you give me your confidence? No. Because I give you mine. [...] everybody gets something out of every transaction" even if that something is nothing more than an "opportunity to feel like a good man" (34, 37). Mamet suggests that a con man's overtures toward confidence can
be described as a sort of gift that his apparent victims, for better or worse, return, and I chart those of Melville’s confidence man in the novel’s first half according to such a framework (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guise of Con-Man</th>
<th>“Victim”</th>
<th>Confidence Proffered</th>
<th>Confidence Returned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>man with the weed, who sometimes calls himself John Ringman</td>
<td>Mr. Roberts, a country merchant</td>
<td>convinces Roberts he is an old acquaintance and fellow mason; then confessing need for “a friend in whom I can confide” (21), he relates tale of personal misfortune</td>
<td>Roberts gives him a bank note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man in gray, a solicitor for various charities</td>
<td>minister, looking for those Black Guinea (a former guise of con man) had offered as references lady, reading bible</td>
<td>attests to Guinea’s trustworthiness; counsels clergyman to adopt more confident outlook kindly hands lady her dropped bible; intimates he is drawn to her because in need of Christian fellowship</td>
<td>minister gives money to pass on to Guinea as apology for suspicions; contributes to charity lady donates to charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Truman, president and agent of Black Rapids Coal Company</td>
<td>college sophomore</td>
<td>confessing to “hav[ing] been so [...] prosperous lately [...] that [...] it is but fair [to make] a charitable investment” (47), portrays himself as trusting others by claiming to seek Ringman (previously rebuffed by sophomore), in order to give him money; offers info about company</td>
<td>sophomore invests in company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guise of Con-Man</td>
<td>“Victim”</td>
<td>Confidence Proffered</td>
<td>Confidence Returned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invalid miser</td>
<td>responds to miser's cry for water; suggests bringing his “friend” the herb-doctor’s aid (74); offers to invest miser’s money out of seeming personal concern</td>
<td>miser invests $100, despite significant doubts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herb-doctor</td>
<td>crippled man</td>
<td>gives medicine, which the man refuses to buy because he suspects it fake, as a gift</td>
<td>man buys additional medicine, confidence won “by so unexpected an act” (99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For brevity’s sake, my chart omits many episodes, several of which admittedly do not fully adhere to this structure. Not included, for example, are episodes (e.g., ones involving the deaf-mute, Black Guinea, and the herb-doctor) that, because the confidence man appeals to a crowd, are too complex to analyze as single transactions (although individual passengers’ responses to these guises of the confidence man are not). Unincluded too are instances in which the confidence man fails (e.g., the sophomore’s and the wealthy man’s respective rebuffs of the man with the weed and the man in gray and the Missourian bachelor’s refusal of the herb-doctor’s “free gift” [109]). Such exceptions do not, however, contradict the general claim this chart illustrates, namely that Melville’s confidence man is most successful when he finds a means of making an initial overture that induces another to accept some sense of obligation to him. In other words, the confidence man exploits opportunities for encouraging others to overcome the wariness one feels when “thrown among strangers, utter strangers” (21). Read in this light, even his failures are partial successes; if he first fails to dupe the sophomore and the
bachelor, he nevertheless convinces them to drop their guard and share information with an unknown fellow passenger, making them vulnerable to his subsequent guises.

If we momentarily ignore that the confidence man is apparently scamming people, what then becomes noticeable is that some of his cons, superficially at least, resemble gift exchanges (e.g., those in which he represents himself as an object of charity or as an old friend in need or in which he solicits charitable contributions), while others more resemble commodity transactions (e.g., those in which he poses as someone selling stocks, as a herb-doctor, or as an employment agent). But due to the confidence man’s effort to structure all his cons as exchanges initiated by gifts of confidence, both types of con game contribute to the novel’s deconstruction of the simplistic opposition between gift and commodity that occurs when they are uncritically aligned with trade either between kin and community or between strangers, or with acts of friendship or acts of business.

Accordingly, even when his appeals to their inclinations to give gifts are most obvious, the confidence man encourages many potential victims to rethink the charity they decide to bestow from a market perspective. For example, the man in gray speaks of the “charity business;” making his case for a global “benevolence tax,” he avows, “Missions I would quicken with the Wall street spirit [. . . ] for if [. . . ] spiritual ends are to be gained but through the auxiliary agency of worldly means, then, to the surer gaining of such spiritual ends, the example of worldly policy in worldly projects should not by spiritual projectors be slighted” (38, 40). Conversely, when his masquerade is designed to tempt hopes for financial profit, as when he presents himself to the sophomore and miser as the coal company agent, he nevertheless encourages others to treat their
transactions with him as acts of friendship by initiating his con game with an act of seeming generosity (the boy peddling locks and money-belts in the novel's final chapter similarly uses gifts in a spiel that otherwise appeals to the distrust the confidence man always denounces: "I give [a 'Counterfeit Detector'] to all my customers who trade seventy-five cents' worth; best present can be made them" [246]). That most of the transactions this novel depicts are likely frauds does not diminish their capacity to illustrate what conditions allow an exchange to be completed. In fact, perhaps they do so with greater clarity precisely because they are cons—the confidence man succeeds by overtly playing to his victims' expectations for an acceptable exchange.

Intended to deceive, the confidence man's gifts of confidence are obviously more performed than real. Beyond their capacity for persuading others to enter questionable transactions, these initial shows of confidence facilitate the confidence man's schemes by setting in motion a mutual performance of the rituals of social etiquette and of gift-giving that often mask the true stakes of a given exchange, even for those participating in it. Giving his bank note "with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-giving," to the "stranger" who accepts his charity "with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-taking," the merchant Roberts seems more concerned with the "decorum" required by the "circumstances" than with questioning John Ringman's story (21-22). Reflexively inquiring how he might "repay" a kindness as small as a glass of water, the miser makes possible the confidence man's ensuing claims (74). The most notable feature of these various swindles is their excess.

The confidence man's schemes are so elaborate that they hardly seem worth the few dollars they typically procure, and they usually continue well after a victim's money
is taken. (For example, the herb-doctor explains in detail to one customer how to detect counterfeit medicines, a warning oddly unnecessary to his con game, given that he has already taken the man’s money [83], and the coal company agent goes great lengths to establish friendships of sorts with even over-eager speculators, both before and after a sale.) As the man in gray asks, refuting charges that the beggar Black Guinea “was some white scoundrel, betwisted and painted up for a decoy,” why would “a man with brains, sufficient to act such a part [. . .] take all that trouble, and run all that hazard, for the mere sake of those few paltry coppers” (31, 32). Or as the bachelor similarly comments to himself, second-guessing his capitulation to the Philosophical Intelligence Office’s agent’s promises of an employable boy, “Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dirty dollars the motive of so many nice wiles?” (130). Such excesses of the confidence man’s performances result from his efforts to induce others to operate according to, not the quid pro quo structure of simple commodity exchange, but rather the more personal rules of gift exchange.

In other words, if the confidence man overcomes others’ suspicions about monetary transactions with strangers by tricking them into thinking that they are engaging in a gift exchange, and if gifts generate stronger social ties between those who exchange them, then his cons inevitably have the side-effect of producing some degree of social feeling between him and his victims, one outlasting the con itself. Although occasionally, victims such as the miser and the bachelor quickly regret having surrendered their confidence, it is more often the case that victims willingly prolong their interactions with the confidence man. For example, as the coal company’s president, the confidence man discusses philosophy at length with the sophomore after their “business
[is] transacted" (49-51), and long after his "transaction" with Roberts is "concluded," "the two still remained seated, falling into familiar conversation, by degrees verging into that confidential sort of sympathetic silence, the last refinement and luxury of unaffected good feeling" (58). Once persuaded by the herb-doctor, even the unsociable miser begins physically "leaning against" his swindler with an "air of trustful fraternity" until asked to stop (108, 111). However, if the rituals of gift exchange sustain feelings of friendliness beyond a transaction's conclusion, then they therefore also provide a confidence-man such as Melville's further occasions to deceive. Roberts's gift of charity, for instance, provides the man with the weed a pretense for showing gratitude by informing Roberts of an investment opportunity in the Black Rapids Coal Company, whose president just happens to be aboard.

Time and again the confidence man uses the exchanges of pleasantries that support his various schemes to set up subsequent cons, which might suggest that ultimately The Confidence-Man is wholly cynical about the rituals and performances that it depicts as means of lubricating interactions between strangers. To cynically believe, as does the college sophomore, that "no appearances can deceive me" is to blind oneself with a false sense of security (48). As numerous readers have demonstrated, if this ambiguous novel is clear about anything, it is that one is just as likely to be duped as the possessor of unqualified misanthropic cynicism as the exemplar of foolish trust.\textsuperscript{21} I will argue that this critique of both "false misanthropy" and "false geniality" (Bryant 245) has a specifically economic component, one whose importance becomes evident when one puts aside the question of the confidence man's motives and instead focuses on the novel's overarching structure at its most basic level, namely as a series of completed or
attempted exchanges and of dialogues underscoring the principles underlying those exchanges.

The discussions about loans and friendship, about commercial and personal forms of credit that comprise the novel’s second half make apparent that *The Confidence-Man*, like Emerson’s essays, turns to the economics of gift exchange for a potential means of reconciling the tensions between the market and social obligation and of meeting the challenges these tensions pose to personal autonomy. But whereas Emerson’s discomfort with gift and market exchange’s inextricable similarities leads him to posit an ideal gift-giving and friendship that he himself hints is impossible, Melville treats the competing but interconnected demands of personal and public exchange as a game to be enjoyed, rather than transcended. If, as others have argued, the deconstruction of faith and skepticism is one part of this game, its key component is a related deconstruction of gift and commodity; Melville’s critique of faith, in other words, takes aim not only at abstract philosophical questions but also at the economics of everyday transactions.

At the core of Melville’s analysis is his critique of the model of friendship sketched by Emerson as a remedy to gift exchange’s market-like characteristics. In the conversation between Frank Goodman, the final guise of the novel’s title character, and Egbert, Winsome’s “practical disciple” (201), Egbert agrees to illustrate his mentor’s philosophy through a hypothetical “real life” case that Goodman poses as follows (201):

There are two friends, friends from childhood [. . .]; one of whom, for the first time, being in need, for the first time seeks a loan from the other, who [. . .] is more than competent to grant it. And the persons are to be you and I: you, the friend from whom the loan is sought— I, the friend who seeks it; you, the disciple of the philosophy in question— I, a common man, with no more philosophy than to know that when I am comfortably warm I don’t feel cold. (201)
Egbert refuses the loan requested by his "hypothetical friend," first on the grounds that there is no "friendliness" in "a loan of money on interest" (202, 203), and then, when Goodman subsequently requests an interest-free loan, on the grounds that it would be "an alms [...] of [...] the interest" (204). This antipathy toward almsgiving recalls portions of Emerson’s "Self-Reliance," and, more generally, indicates that Egbert’s aversion to loans applies to gifts as well.

As particular types of exchange, loans and gifts have, of course, concrete differences, but for Egbert, as for Emerson and countless others who reluctantly discover the free gift’s impossibility in the inevitability that all gifts accomplish some form of return, these differences are eclipsed by the detection of gift exchange’s "economic" aspects. The danger Egbert perceives in loans between friends are, at bottom, identical with the danger Emerson identifies in gifts—from their perspective, such forms of exchange threaten the sanctity of the personal with the materialism of the economic. From a proper paradigm of the gift, however, rather than an Emersonian one, economics and friendship are not distinct realms of behavior. Egbert argues that loans to friends—even when interest-free or freely-given—dangerously mix friendship and economic self-interest, an argument that Melville treats as odious, absurd, and itself economically self-interested. Emerson, Melville rightly suggests, conflates gifts and loans because he cannot get beyond seeing the self-interest they both serve.

Lewis Hyde has described how in commodity culture, gifts are sometimes regarded with suspicion since whereas "gentlemen [...] loan money to each other," one gives charity to people worse off than oneself (137). Egbert, like Emerson, illustrates this line of thought taken to its extreme—even loans between gentlemen become
suspicious if they can be possibly regarded as having been motivated by charitable feelings, if they too closely resemble gifts. Like Emerson, Egbert and his mentor worry that gifts threaten self-reliance. When Goodman casually uses the word “favor,” for example, Winsome retorts, “the word, as you employ it, strikes me as unpleasingly significant [. . .] of some poor, unheroic submission to being done good to” (194). Moreover, like Emerson, Winsome and Egbert connect their concern about gifts to a distinction between ideal and mundane individuals and friendships.

Egbert, in a blatant allusion to Emerson, professes agreement with his “master, who in his Essay on Friendship, says so nobly, that if he want a terrestrial convenience, not to his friend celestial (or friend social and intellectual) would he go; no: for his terrestrial convenience, to his friend terrestrial (or humbler business-friend) he goes” (204). This distinction forms the basis of Egbert’s refusal of Goodman’s requested loan:

I give away money, but never loan it; [. . .] the man who calls himself my friend is above receiving alms. The negotiation of a loan is a business transaction. And I will transact no business with a friend. What a friend is, he is socially and intellectually; and I rate social and intellectual friendship too high to degrade it on either side into a pecuniary make-shift. To be sure there are, and I have, what is called business friends [. . .] But I draw a red-ink line between them and my friends in the true sense [. . .] a true friend [. . .] should have a soul above loans. (202-03)

But as Egbert and Goodman’s conversation ultimately illustrates, this rigid distinction between ideal friendships and business relationships (a distinction I classify alongside the ideology of the gift’s hyperbolic opposition between true gifts and commodities) results in an inability to act within the realms of either friendship or business since, in actuality, the social and the economic are not so neatly opposed.

When Goodman says that “sore need” makes him willing to relinquish Egbert as a
“friend celestial” and to “accept the alms of the interest,” Egbert agrees, saying “to oblige you, I’ll do it. We are business friends; business is business. [. . .] Will you pay three per cent. a month? Where is your security?” (204). Goodman offers as security their “being fellow-academics, and friends from childhood,” an offer Egbert refuses as “the worst of securities,” insisting “You forget we are now business friends” (204). When Goodman reminds him “that as your business friend I can give you no security; my need being so sore,” Egbert simply says, “then no business loan” (204-05). Goodman asks, “Since then [. . .] neither as the one nor the other sort of friend you have defined, can I prevail with you; how if combining the two, I sue as both?” a possibility the other rejects, insisting “that friendship in the ideal is to lofty for you to conceive” (205).

And yet, even Egbert’s ideal friendship is not as unmaterialistic as his distinction between “celestial” and “business” friends would suggest. He is a “thriving young merchant” who tries to take the “business-like view” of things (199, 201), so it should not surprise much when he confesses

Though our friendship began in boyhood, think not that [. . .] it began injudiciously. [. . .] You, I [. . .] picked out [. . .] for your favorable points at the time [. . .] your good manners, handsome dress, and your parents’ rank and repute of wealth. In short, like any grown man [. . .] I went into the market and chose me my mutton, not for its leanness, but its fatness. (205)

Egbert remains oblivious to his self-contradictions; nevertheless, his own argument thus depends on an inadvertent acknowledgement that one’s social and economic interest and conduct are mutually dependent, exposing just how circular its logic is.

Egbert is, after all, “the last person in the world that one would take for the disciple of any transcendental philosophy; though indeed something about his sharp nose and shaved chin seemed to hint that [. . .] he might, with the characteristic knack of a true
New-Englanders, turn even so profitless a thing to some profitable account” (200). This characterization of him, as well as Winsome’s claim to be “a man of serviceable knowledge, and a man of the world,” who keeps “one eye on the invisible” and “the other on the main chance” (198), might suggest Melville is merely taking a jab at the materialism of Emerson’s transcendentalism. More accurately, however, Melville is commenting on how unavoidably these two elements of Emerson’s thought intersect. Although Egbert’s comparison of choosing a friend to going “into the market” exaggerates the argument, we have seen that the friendship Emerson idealizes as transcending the market’s calculations and obligations can never quite do so because calculation and obligation are as much features of friendship itself as of the market. Emerson’s trope of the gift, remember, signals this impossibility of ideal friendship because while it evokes the hypothetical true gift’s unconstrained generosity, it also refers to “common” gifts’ economic attributes.

Egbert’s distinction between friends and its ultimate unraveling is what locates this conversation about loans within an ideology whose idealization of the gift’s difference from commodities depends on a socially constructed belief in a fundamental difference between social and economic life. The novel deconstructs such oppositions in many ways, not the least of which is its thematizing of “confidence” and related concepts, most notably those of “credit” and “trust.” Melville, for instance, plays with the word “credit,” using it to discuss whether something is believable (e.g., 162, 243), whether a person has acted respectably (e.g., “with [. . .] credit” [155]) or in a way fitting his reputation as a businessman (e.g., 234), and whether it is at all beneficial to “sell a thing on credit” (203). Melville highlights that “trust” and “credit,” like “confidence,” have
connotations relating to both economic and social conduct, one effect of which is the suggestion of a concept of credit resembling what Pierre Bourdieu labels “symbolic capital” (exemplified also by Egbert’s rationale for choosing a friend and Charlie Noble’s gloss of Polonius’s advice about holding onto friends whom one has “use for” [170]). Furthermore (and why a reading of The Confidence-Man can valuably expand Bourdieu’s account of the gift), Melville illustrates how credit and/or symbolic capital functions, not in an archaic society easily identified as a gift economy, but in the US’s developing capitalist marketplace.

Not until the middle of the twentieth century did the credit card make an objective assessment of wealth virtually the only basis for credit transactions (Carrier 91). Formerly, the willingness to sell to someone on credit had stemmed from “a personal relationship of trust;” acknowledging “previous transactions and anticipating future ones,” store credit reinforced a personal relationship between customer and shopkeeper and thus “carried an air of gift, rather than just commodity, transaction” (Carrier 92-93). But such a personal form of credit was already beginning to disappear by the mid-nineteenth century (Carrier 90-91), a fact on which The Confidence-Man’s narrator comments in the novel’s opening scene—the “No Trust” sign with which the ship’s barber advertises his refusal to sell his services on credit is a sign, he remarks, “not unfrequently seen ashore gracing other shops besides barbers” (5). As many have demonstrated, gift exchange (and related practices, such as store credit) occurs most easily within a community small or homogenous enough for social relations to remain recognizable, while commodity exchange characterizes trade with strangers as distrust produces the need for such phenomena as pricing indexes, interest, and credit ratings.
Interestingly, this observation is often articulated in terms resembling Melville’s. Bourdieu writes, “The closer the individuals and groups are in genealogy, the easier it is to reach agreements [. . .] and the more they are entrusted to good faith.” (Logic 115).²⁵ Hyde argues that gift exchange depends on “confidence” in the counter-gift, whereas “bad faith” results in usury (128). If gifts are understood to be obligatory (as they are in Maussian models), then clearly confidence is key in gift exchanges—the faith that a gift will eventually be returned is what enables people to misrecognize exchange as an act of giving.

But the world of The Confidence-Man is a society already too complex to rely on such faith, which is one reason, perhaps, the word “stranger” appears nearly 100 times in the novel. As historian Karen Halttunen documents, in antebellum U.S. society, the figure of the confidence man commonly signified anxiety about “an expanding market economy” that was replacing the “limited economic exchange” clearly tied to “social relationships” and about urbanization’s creation of a “world of strangers” in which “appearances were valued more than realities” (19, 34), an anxiety one guise of the confidence man voices: “did you never observe how little, very little, confidence, there is? I mean between man and man—more particularly between stranger and stranger” (27). Melville’s novel’s setting is certainly a “world of strangers;’ at each port, “the huge Fidèle still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange” (8). Melville’s novel, which in noting that “merchants on ‘change seem the passengers that buzz on her decks’ explicitly connects the strangeness of those aboard the Fidèle to the impersonality of the market, bears out
Haltunnen’s claims about the relation between the popular conception of the confidence man and anxieties produced by a burgeoning market economy (8). Melville’s confidence man (particularly as the cosmopolitan for whom “no man is a stranger” [132]) not only symbolizes this anxiety about strangers and the primacy of appearances over reality, however; he also suggests that one means of easing it is, ironically, to master appearances through acts of performing. In other words, according to The Confidence-Man, performance is both cause and cure for one’s uneasy relation to this world of strangers.

According to Bourdieu, the gift’s “good-faith economy” requires the “disguis[ing of] [. . .] ‘economic’ interest and calculation” and “the complicity of collective bad faith” (Logic 115, 114). It depends “on a collective labor devoted to maintaining misrecognition with a view to perpetuating [. . .] a form of individual and collective bad faith (in the Sartrean sense of lying to oneself) and on a permanent investment in institutions that, like gift exchange, produce and reproduce trust in the fact that trust, i.e., generosity, private or civic virtue, will be rewarded” (“Marginalia” 232). But the need to maintain such a misrecognition is not unique to economies in which gifts are the predominant mode of exchange; even capitalism requires some belief that others are motivated by some principles other than simple self-interest—otherwise the fear of being conned would be an absolute obstacle to exchange.

Doing business on credit is risky—as the Fidèle’s barber advertises—and yet distrust of strangers must somehow be checked, as the confidence man, appearing as the man from the Intelligence Office, explains: “Confidence is the indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions. Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would like a watch, run down and stop” (128). Other guises of the
confidence man likewise preach of confidence’s importance within the market. As
Ringman, he sets up the later Black Rapids Coal Company sting by describing to Roberts
how that company is recovering from a recent “panic contrived by artful alarmists” (i.e.,
men who lacked confidence), but how “confidence will be more than restored; there will
be a reaction; from the stock’s descent its rise will be higher than from no fall, the holders
trusting themselves to fear no second fate” (22). As the company’s president, he
denounces the “bears” responsible for his company’s recent crisis: “these same destroyers
of confidence [. . .] are yet true types of most destroyers of confidence and gloomy
philosophers [. . .]. Fellows who, whether in stocks, politics, bread-stuffs, morals,
metaphysics, religion—be it what it may—trump up their black panics [. . .] solely with a
view to some sort of covert advantage” (48).

But what in the marketplace of commodities and strangers offers the basis for
confidence? As Miranda Joseph proposes in an essay on the performativity of production
and consumption, Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”—the “regulated improvisations” that
tend to reproduce norms but also provide the potential for innovation (not necessarily
subversive)—can generally be connected to theories of performativity (Bourdieu Outline
78, Joseph 28). More specifically, his account of the misrecognition entailed in gift
exchange illuminates the ways in which distrust can be transformed into confidence in
commodity culture. Melville’s confidence man suggests that performing faith—by a
misrecognition that allows strangers to treat each other as fellow members of a gift
community—can potentially generate the social relations and consequent feelings of
obligation that produce the confidence necessary even in market transactions.

Melville’s cosmopolitan, upon leaving Egbert, goes to the ship’s barber whom he
tries convincing to take down his sign reading "No Trust," on the grounds that this sign of "distrust" and "no confidence" betrays "a disrespect for man" (226). The barber justifies his policy of doing no business on credit: "I [. . .] wouldn't say, that I suspect all men; but I do say that strangers are not to be trusted" (229). Questioning the practicality of such qualified distrust since "the mass of mankind, are [. . .] necessarily strangers to each individual" (229), Goodman persuades the barber to agree to try "trusting men for this one little trip" (230) by signing a contract promising to compensate any loss thereby suffered. Until now, Goodman has preached confidence but, unlike the confidence man's previous guises, has not done so in an apparent attempt to con anyone for profit, so when he leaves the barber without paying for the shave he himself has just received, any inclination we might have developed to agree with his arguments is tested. Is Goodman, despite the sympathetic positions he takes with Charlie Noble and Egbert, just another con man? Deciding so, the barber re-hangs his sign and tears the contract, but Melville's narrator, characteristically, is explicitly ambiguous about whether the barber's "impression proved well-founded or not" (236).

Goodman's tactics are a clear case of overkill if his goal is merely a free shave, but they are well suited to illustrating how the market can compel one to act as if with trust, despite the obstacles to certainty in both matters of confidence and distrust. In the absence of personal knowledge of one's customers' trustworthiness, doing business on credit makes it difficult to discern even when one is cheated: in buying a shave on credit, Goodman has not failed to pay, but has just not paid yet. In impersonal commodity exchange, therefore, credit can be extended only when a contract takes the place of personal trust. But a contract itself requires one to presume, at least for a specified time,
that the contract's terms will be fulfilled; those who have signed a contract must act as if already possessing the confidence it is meant to ensure but which it cannot truly guarantee until its terms either are or are not fulfilled.26 While the barber will know for certain whether he has been swindled when, at the Fidèle's final port, Goodman does or does not return to pay him, until then, having signed the contract, he legally must act as if believing Goodman's payment is certain. In tearing the contract and restoring the sign it prohibits, it is the barber, not Goodman, who indisputably violates the market's rules for ensuring secure transactions; despite the probability of his being cheated when at a future time Goodman fails to make good on his side of the contract, the doubt the barber displays in tearing the contract is, legally and economically, at least as wrong as his lapse into trusting an unknown customer.

Contracts, like a loan's interest, are one means of fabricating a substitute for the types of confidence supposedly lost in commodity culture. The Confidence-Man, however, points to the difficulty of defining the forms of confidence that characterize market exchange by asking whether the means by which such confidence is fabricated are activities generally associated with social, not market, transactions. We have seen the confidence man's prior guises win sufficient trust to sell such risky commodities as stocks and herbal tonics by interacting with his "customers" so as to create a semblance of a personal relationship convincing enough that it often leads to social interactions that outlast a transaction's completion. Goodman's encounter with the barber might be regarded as the confidence man's attempt to teach a fellow businessman this effective way of treating customers.

Goodman's taking his shave on credit "is the necessary act that validates the
contract” since “it forces the barber to exercise the necessary emotion of confidence” (Bryant 241). Goodman thus succeeds at making the barber demonstrate, at least temporarily, a confidence he does not really feel, and while the subsequent tearing of the contract indicates this success is short-lived, this contract nevertheless highlights The Confidence-Man’s call for the recognition of the performativity of economic transactions, a point the contract’s actual language further underscores. Goodman’s contract stipulates not only that the barber remove the sign, but that he “by all proper and reasonable words, gestures, manners, and looks, evince a perfect confidence in all men, especially strangers” (235). The barber might be a victim, but he is also a recipient of instruction in the methods of the confidence man’s success. Would he have continued to comply with the contract for the trip’s remainder, he would be performing—and likely producing—confidence much as the confidence man himself does.

As the novel’s subtitle, “His Masquerade,” suggests, and as the text incessantly reminds us from its first page where passengers gather around a wanted poster for a “mysterious imposter” “as if it had been a theatre-bill” (3), the confidence man is a performer. In fact, the novel keeps suggesting that although the confidence man proficiently outperforms everyone else, everyone is somehow performing (e.g., the narrator’s commenting that the crowd “could not resist [...] acting the part” of Black Guinea’s “judges” [12, my italics] or the barber’s attributing his lack of trust to his “trade [...] too much letting [him] behind the scenes” [231]). The novel’s theatrical motif is too ubiquitous to describe here in any detail, but the conversation with Egbert sufficiently illustrates the novel’s insistence that all its characters be regarded as actors.

Suggesting his hypothetical case, Goodman proposes that they “as much as
possible, talk and behave just as if the case supposed were a fact,” and tells Egbert that for the purposes of this role-playing he should go by the name “Charlie” (201), thereby making their conversation in part a reenactment of the previous encounter with Charlie Noble, another confidence man whose own inferior role-playing had failed to con Goodman. Moreover, he tells Egbert to play the role of “the disciple of the philosophy in question” (201)—thus asking Egbert to act as if he were what he in fact is, Goodman invites Egbert to view his own identity as a performance. Goodman himself eventually leaves Egbert wondering “where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any resumed” and quoting Shakespeare: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (223-24).

Egbert is not alone in voicing this sentiment. The wooden-legged man, the novel’s most vociferous skeptic, argues that “to do, is to act; so all doers are actors” (31). The confidence man, who in this instance wishes to win a clergyman’s trust for both himself (here the man in gray) and his predecessor, the crippled beggar Black Guinea, rejects the wooden-legged man’s allegations about Guinea as “a singular credulity,” ironically stating that it would take “pretty good acting” for a “white [to] look the negro so” (31). The confidence man’s incredulous rebuttal of the wooden-legged man’s claim that all people “perform acts” (“Does all the world act? Am I, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?”) is on one level just an attempt to protect his own performance as the man in gray, but it seems more accurate to say that here, as throughout the novel, Melville’s protagonist simultaneously promotes confidence and skepticism by subtly encouraging others to view their own actions as performances (31).

For example, after the wooden-legged man departs, the man in gray continues
preaching confidence to the clergyman who is regretting that doubts about Guinea had kept him from behaving charitably. The clergyman’s response—“You advance a principle, which if I had acted upon it this morning, I should have spared myself what I now feel” (32, my italics)—suggests that the preceding conversation about acting has done more than allay doubts about the beggar. He now indicates an openness to the idea that acting as if one has confidence matters more than having it, an idea the man in gray encourages by telling him to “strang[e] the least symptom of distrust, of any sort, which hereafter, upon whatever provocation, may arise in you” (33, my italics). Similar to when he later, as Goodman, urges the barber to demonstrate confidence not truly felt, “by all proper and reasonable words, gestures, manners, and looks” (235), the confidence man here argues it is not distrust itself that must be strangled, but its outward signs.

Admittedly, the clergyman’s new insight seems less reliable than his previous doubts, given that Black Guinea is in fact an earlier incarnation of the confidence man, just as in retrospect the barber’s wisdom in signing Goodman’s contract seems questionable. Nevertheless, the clergyman is likely correct that had he acted with confidence rather than doubt, he might have spared himself his present misgivings. Perhaps, even, if the barber had stopped acting so as “to discourage men from soliciting trust” (235), he would have begun conducting business in a way making customers want to return his trust, as Goodman implies, albeit ironically returning the barber’s jab about his memory: “how ingenious we human beings are; and how kindly we reciprocate each other’s little delicacies [. . .] What better proof, now, that we are kind, considerate fellows?” (235). At any rate, despite—perhaps because of (since otherwise the confidence he inspires might seem based more in substance than performance)—its
protagonist's apparent deceptions, *The Confidence-Man* raises the possibility that the performance of confidence, expressed through the performance of the sort of social interactions that supposedly distinguish gift from commodity exchanges, perhaps can forge social relations that are themselves the foundation of actual confidence.

The acting or staging of confidence is an element of gift exchange since as Bourdieu explains, "the counter-gift must be deferred and different. [...] the functioning of gift exchange presupposes individual and collective misrecognition of [...] a truth which an immediate response brutally exposes. [...] it is all a matter of style, which means in this case timing and choice of occasions" (*Logic* 105). And again: "The 'way of giving', the manner, the forms, are what separate a gift from straight exchange" (*Logic* 126).27 And although Bourdieu's theory of practice differs from sociological and anthropological models in which performance is a central analytical concept, he nevertheless finds speech act theory's terminology useful when defining the ritualized practices of which gift exchange is one example; a rite, he argues, is generally a "performative practice that strives to bring about what it acts or says" but does so "through performative words or deeds which make sense without any signifying intention," through the application of "a practical logic, produced without any conscious intention" (*Logic* 92, 95).

Commodity culture has somewhat similarly, although with different connotations, been characterized in terms of performance. For instance, Jean-Christophe Agnew, whose history of Anglo-American attitudes toward the market and theatre concludes with a short reading of *The Confidence-Man*, describes "the plastic, polymorphous, performative figure that is both the ideal and the nightmare of modernity [...] the
collective dream work of commodity culture” (14). Similarly, Gary Lindberg detects in The Confidence-Man Melville’s commentary on “the daily fictionalizing [. . . ] that makes up the game of identity in a new and protean society” (19). Whereas in accounts of precapitalist exchange such as Bourdieu’s, the words “performance” and “performative” call attention to the conventional nature of collective social practices, within discussions of market culture, “performance” usually suggests a more individualistic conception of human conduct, a difference that Agnew’s own history helps explain. With the rise of the market, Agnew argues, came a tendency for “performance” to connote, not “the ceremonial execution [. . . ] of a[n] [. . . ] obligation” as previously, but rather “illusion and imposture,” a connotation that reflected a developing sense of the self as something “autonomous” but “mercurial” and a concomitant anxiety about one’s ability to decipher the motives of others (83) (which is, recall, the anxiety Haltunen connects to the figure of the confidence man).

That “performance” has such different connotations and has been used in various theoretical models within multiple disciplines often makes “performativity” a rather unwieldy theoretical concept, as Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick indicate, noting the “stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of ‘performative’” (2).28 One of the compelling features of The Confidence-Man’s performance motif, especially as it functions within Melville’s depiction of economic transactions, is that it suggests ways in which disparate, yet overlapping, concepts of performance might be relevant to theorizing exchange.

First, The Confidence-Man reminds us that it is not only pre-capitalist exchange that requires performances that perpetuate misrecognition or self-deception, as Bourdieu
suggests. A distinction between the ritualized performances of non-capitalist cultures and
the performance of individual identity that Agnew identifies as a feature of market
culture in many ways just repeats on a broader scale the common distinction between gift
and commodity, namely that gifts express and produce the social relations binding a
community whereas commodities are alienated objects exchanged by autonomous
individuals for purely “economic” reasons. Such exaggerated distinctions, often
accomplished through comparisons of “archaic” and “modern” economies, ultimately
uphold our culture’s dominant economic ideology because they relegate alternative
economic practices to an irrecoverable past. (Emerson, for example, himself defines
modern notions of property by comparing them to those of a culture whose “archaic”
economic practices have subsequently become the focus of much of the scholarship on
gift exchange: “Society acquires new arts, and loses old instincts. What a contrast
between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a
bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a
spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under!” [“Self-Reliance”
279]).29 If such distinctions do exaggerate, then the ritualized performances
characterizing gift exchange are unlikely completely absent from the theatricality and
protean, performing selfhood of modern commodity culture.

Second, the confidence man’s repeated insinuations that acting as if with
confidence by observing gift exchange’s forms when conducting commodity transactions
is an indispensable means of producing the confidence necessary to their success
resembles theories of ritual that have developed from linguistic models of performatives,
particularly those emphasizing the nonreferentiality of performative acts (e.g., Bourdieu’s
mention of a “performative practice that strives to bring about what it acts or says”).

Third, within the context of the confidence man’s theatrical-like performances (his “masquerade”)—which differ significantly from similar performances by most of the novel’s other characters in that the confidence man appears cognizant of the effects they are structured to produce—the novel’s suggestions about the performative function gift rituals can play in commodity exchanges also call to mind postmodern models of performativity, such as that popularized by Judith Butler. When Melville’s characters manage to interact as if bound by personal relationships, the confidence and sense of social obligation with which they seem to act are “enactments” that are “performative in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler Gender Trouble 136). Economic and social confidence, of which the gift has been idealized as a natural expression, as Melville depicts it, might be categorized as a “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler Gender Trouble 141). And yet, the confidence-man somehow seems to transcend the “mundane social audience;” his self-conscious enactments and manipulations of the confidence-generating rituals of gift exchange and social etiquette evoke something of “the strategies of subversive repetition” described by Butler (Gender Trouble 147).

Finally, while the interplay between The Confidence-Man’s theatrical motif and its representation of the little social rituals that facilitate various economic transactions does suggest points of comparison with more conventional performance models of ritual (such as those associated with the work of anthropologist Victor Turner), the novel’s
theorizing of exchange seems closer to the theories of "practice" formulated by scholars such as Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. As Catherine Bell argues in her indispensable analysis of ritual theory, performance theory's limitations present compelling reasons for distinguishing it from "practice theory" (e.g., 37-46, 74-88). In fact, recent theories of performativity are actually more like Bell's own theory of practice than the examples of performance theory she critiques (as is indicated perhaps most simply by some performativity theorists' treating de Certeau's "tactics" of everyday practice as synonymous with "performative" and "performance" [e.g., Roach 46, Patton 182]). (Such models of performativity might also help answer gift theorist Marilyn Strathern's critique of earlier "performatives" models of symbolic activity [e.g., 174].)

Butler's sense of performatives as "ritualized practice" ("Burning Acts" 205), for instance, resembles portions of Bell's theorizing of "ritualization" and the ritualized body, Bell's insistence on a far narrower definition of ritual notwithstanding. I will discuss Bell's theory of practice, particularly her concept of "redemptive hegemony" and her explanation of practice's blindness to its own strategies and to "what it produces" (85-88), in greater detail in the following chapter. Here, it suffices to note her emphasis on how "ritualization as practice distinguishes itself from other practices" by "drawing [. . .] a privileged distinction between ways of acting, specifically between those acts being performed and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow," a phenomenon she illustrates by contrasting "the routine activity of buying some regularly used article of clothing for a spouse or child [. . .] and the ritualized version of buying a similar but different article [. . .] and giving it as a gift" (89, 90, 91). "The gift" (which, as she indicates, can include the market transactions that precede the actual giving of a
gift) is, Bell suggests, a "strategic" practice, a "way of acting," which is to say that it is constituted in the very "performing" of it as a special transaction (91). The confidence man's strategies for persuading others that the exchanges he urges are safe might be said to make use of such a practice.

Performing gift exchange within the context of commodity transactions, or rather, perhaps, performing commodity exchange with an inflection of gift exchange, Melville's confidence man transforms both categories by destabilizing them—but always in terms recognized and allowed by the broader social context and collective practices which grant the performative act its power. As Butler argues, a performative succeeds, "not because an intention successfully governs the action" but "because that action echoes prior actions and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices" ("Burning Acts" 205). In thus describing the constraints placed on the supposed intentions behind a performative by the conventions on which its success as a "ritualized practice" necessarily depends, theories of performativity posit a dynamic between individual intention and social convention that suggestively intersects with considerations of intention and convention, or ritual, within gift theory.

Gift theorists, particularly those whose focus is the gift's impossibility or inevitable corruption by commodity, problematize agency and intention by describing the competing and even contradictory personal motives and societal obligations gifts represent. Others have identified the ritualized practices of "archaic" gift exchange, but unfortunately, adequate attention has not, until recently at least, been given to the ways in which similar gift rituals shape individuals' understanding of their transactions in the modern marketplace that is the domain of Agnew's "performative figure" and where
"appearances [are] valued more than realities" (Halttunen 34). (As I elaborate in my next chapter, Christmas provides one example of behavior that might be regarded as both a ritualistic performance of gift exchange and as a performative practice that transforms commodities into gifts.) The Confidence-Man's insistence on gift rituals' importance within commodity exchange and its critique of the Emersonian ideal of selfhood illustrate a dynamic between convention and intention that resonates with the tensions within models of performativity that describe performance as the repetition of socially determined forms that somehow offer the possibility of somewhat autonomous resistance.

On the one hand, Melville's novel seems merely to illustrate the ways in which commodity exchange requires the practice of misrecognition, an unconscious, collective performance of confidence-generating rituals. On the other, there is something about its seductive protagonist that might tempt us into hoping that performances of the type he seems capable offer a grounds for taking control of transactions in a world of strangers, for resisting what often seems to be the market's totalizing force. The Confidence-Man's conceptualization of individual agency remains ambiguous because its characters seemingly operate within two entirely different paradigms. While the actions of most characters in The Confidence-Man seem intentionless performances of the kind associated with ritual and socially determined forms, the confidence man himself apparently understands perfectly what he is doing. He is the character most explicitly depicted as performing, and he acts with an agency everyone else lacks (even if this is only a fictional agency, produced by the novel itself).

The relation between intention and action is notoriously difficult when it comes to gift exchange since, as Bourdieu and Derrida show, the intentions behind a gift must
always be misrecognized or forgotten (Derrida, in *Limited Inc.*, specifies the gift as an example of the "indecidability" that renders impossible the notion of "intention" necessary to John Searle’s conception of performatives [75]). In some ways then, the question of whether it is possible to transact exchanges with good faith and with conscious intent is the question of the gift. Bourdieu suggests that one answer to this question is that paradoxically, people do know why they exchange gifts, but act, even to the point of self-deception, as if their intentions (e.g., the self-interest involved) are other than what they are: "No one is really unaware of the logic of exchange [. . .] but no one fails to comply with the rule of the game which is to act as if one did not know the rule" ("Marginalia" 232). Melville’s Goodman makes a similar point: "one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" (133). Recognizing that "in being social, each man has his end," should not preclude one, Goodman insists, from being "genial" (137). In *The Confidence-Man*, to play the fool yet remain "sensible," requires recognizing that people are motivated by self-interest, that their willingness to enter into virtually any act of exchange generally stems from a hope that the exchange will prove profitable, that the self is not a fixed entity so certain faith in others is impossible, that one is thus always vulnerable to cons, and yet, despite this recognition, acting as if one has confidence.31

As John Bryant observes, "as a 'genial misanthrope,' Goodman uses his benevolence to subsume a deeper awareness of iniquity. [. . .] By containing his own misanthropy [. . .] within a philanthropic heart, he can 'play along' with Noble's scam. This balance allows Goodman his genial aspirations while guarding him against iniquity" (239). The confidence man’s relative autonomy and authority ironically rests on an
acceptance that appearances and performances matter and that the self is not stable enough to support Emerson’s hypothesis that self-reliance entails “one will” making “harmonious” all of one’s actions, “however unlike” and inconsistent they superficially “seem” (“Self-Reliance” 266). Renouncing “appearances” and “customs” as legitimate reasons for performing social duties (“Self-Reliance 273) or distinguishing between ideal friendships of the soul and friendship’s more mundane forms (or Egbert’s distinction between celestial and terrestrial friends), Emerson, as Lindberg argues, posits a “soul [. . .] invulnerable to the contingencies of mundane life,” an argument that “represents an assumption about the self that is widespread in American literature and thought: outward attributes and gestures do not provide an index of the inner self” (38-39).

Goodman insists he is not “a god, a being who in himself holds his own estate,” but rather “a man who being a man is the sport of fate’s wind and wave”—a suggestion that Egbert, as a disciple of self-reliance and a believer in possessive individualism, rejects: “Man has a soul; which, if he will, puts him beyond fortune’s finger” (206). As Emerson would say, a “true man” is one who can “make all circumstances indifferent” (“Self-Reliance” 267). The confidence man, as Lindberg persuasively puts it, “does without being” and demonstrates “against the assumptions of Winsome and Emerson, that all inner men get caught in outward shells,” a performance that might be regarded as an enactment of “the public side of Emerson’s system” that is its necessary complement since “if Emerson’s theoretical self, split between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ manifestations, actually existed, he would, to all social appearances, be like the Confidence-Man” (43).

Melville’s move is not to privilege the social over the inner self; rather, he rejects
“such splitting of the self” by illustrating how the “cultural predisposition” to privilege “the innermost man [. . .] a being who can exist quite independent of social relations” is “precisely what allows social relations to remain con games” (Lindberg 46, 43). It is their refusal “to take their outward gestures seriously” that causes other characters to “get caught in their own masks” and fall prey to the confidence man (Lindberg 38). Melville’s protagonist’s successes lie in recognizing that what matters is not the content of a particular transaction, but rather “the informing game pattern;” characters “who cannot make such transferences [. . .] [from] the immediate reference, are repeatedly shown up as fools” (Lindberg 26). Emersonian selfhood might be said to require the inverse of Bourdieu’s formulation of the misrecognition of which gift exchange—as “one of the social games” in which the participants must not “acknowledge the objective truth of the game” and the motivations underlying their actions—provides “the paradigm” (Logic 105, 110). The sovereign self that is the Emersonian ideal resists any such constraints on intention and understanding.

Certainly, however, the self Emerson posits is by no means static or unchanging. After all, when The Confidence-Man’s fourteenth chapter refutes the common assumption that characters should act consistently (e.g., “no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has” [70]) or when Winsome avers “I seldom care to be consistent” since “nature” itself is not (193), it is perhaps Emerson’s declarations that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” and that men should strive to be “plastic and permeable to principles” higher than themselves (“Self-Reliance” 265, 272) of which we are first reminded. It might even be said that for Emerson, individualism itself is a performative rather than essential category since he
suggests it exists in its most vigorous form as a consequence of our affirmations—our performance—of its possibilities. Emerson then, probably more so than the ever cynical Melville, insists on the importance of confidence, at least during certain phases of his career. Emerson’s individualism is confidence.

But if Emerson suggests individualism can be achieved through the performance of confidence, he nevertheless does so in terms more narrow than Melville’s. The Confidence-Man, it might be said, inquires whether it is in any way possible—or advantageous—to extend Emersonian self-confidence to include performances of confidence in others. The confidence man’s endless transformations into whatever person might be effective in a given situation hardly seems the sort of performance to find favor with the Emerson who writes, “insist on yourself; never imitate” (“Self-Reliance” 278). The Confidence-Man’s suggestion that the performance of gift exchange’s rituals and similar customs that express confidence in others is a necessary, even if risky, means of social interaction does not quite tally with Emerson’s condemnation of the “conformity” society’s “customs” produce (“Self-Reliance” 261). According to Emerson:

This conformity makes them [ . . . ] false in all particulars. [ . . . ] We come to wear one cut of face and figure, and acquire by degrees the gentlest asinine expression. [ . . . ] I mean [ . . . ] the forced smile which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease in answer to conversation that does not interest us. (“Self-Reliance” 264)

Melville’s protagonist’s masquerade perhaps epitomizes the type of conduct Emerson condemns here as a deadly social mask or even “the poor interposed mask” of friendship that “true love transcends” (“Friendship 354”).

In fact, in “Compensation,” Emerson rejects the very possibility of the confidence
man. "Because of the dual constitution of things," he writes, "there can be no cheating. The thief steals from himself. The swindler swindles himself. For the real price of labor is knowledge and virtue, whereof wealth and credit are signs. These signs, like paper money, may be counterfeited or stolen, but that which they represent, namely, knowledge and virtue, cannot" (296). He elaborates: "Men suffer all their life long, under the foolish superstition that they can be cheated. But it is [...] impossible for a man to be cheated by any one but himself [...]. There is a third silent party to all our bargains. The nature and soul of things takes on itself the guaranty of the fulfillment of every contract, so that honest service cannot come to loss" (298). *The Confidence-Man*, however, ironically appropriates such arguments for its own ambiguous purposes.

An early guise of the confidence man offers Emerson’s theory of compensation as evidence for his own argument that the generosity and good intentions of others can be presumed: “what creature but a madman would not rather do good than ill, when it is plain that, good or ill, it must return upon himself” (40). Whereas compensation is for Emerson a natural law that suggests a foundation for an ethics of personal conduct, the confidence man proclaims it as a grounds for trust, for assuming that since others have a personal interest in treating everyone well, they will do so. The irony, of course, stems from the confidence man’s own unreliability and the fact that he offers this proof of humanity’s general goodwill in order to pull off a successful con. On one level, Melville seems to be just having fun with Emerson’s pronouncements that we can only swindle ourselves, but in context of the novel as a whole, he also seems to be insinuating that Emerson’s arguments can, for better or worse, be expanded to make room for more public forms of confidence.
Whereas, as I have described above, the Emersonian self resists misrecognition of the kind involved in gift exchange, Melville’s confidence man embraces it: “A fresh and liberal construction would teach us to regard [. . .] this whole cabin-full of players—as playing at games in which every player plays fair, and not a player but shall win” (55). If blindness to “‘economic’ interest and calculation” is what it takes to produce a “good-faith economy,” which is to say, a “collective bad faith” (Bourdieu Logic 115, 114, “Marginalia” 232)—so be it, he seems to say. Granted, in the novel’s first half, the confidence man appears to advocate such a position as a means to his own gain, but the same can not be said so easily about the cosmopolitan Goodman, who endlessly makes similar arguments. This is not to say that The Confidence-Man, or even its cosmopolitan protagonist, denies the possibility that outward performances of confidence and trustworthiness do nothing more than hide the “enmity couched in the friendship,” as Egbert labels a loan between friends (203). It is again worth stressing that neither the confidence man’s exhortations of confidence nor any other elements of the novel should be read as Melville’s instructions for ethical, or even socially advantageous, conduct. But it does not seem wrong to regard the confidence man and his transactions as a sort of hypothesis that we are asked to examine seriously, with a mind open to both its truths and limitations.

The cosmopolitan of the novel’s second half, whose performances remain largely unmitigated by any apparent pecuniary motives, seductively encourages us to rethink our inclination to dismiss confidence and misrecognition as fundamentally naive, an inclination which the relatively transparent self-interest of the confidence man’s previous operations had seemed to justify. Then, when he leaves the barber’s with his unpaid-for
shave, and again when in the novel’s closing scene, he “kindly” leads an old man into a darkened room in what might very well be a pretext for robbery and possibly even murder, the cosmopolitan gives cause to reconsider once again any sympathy for his arguments that might have developed (251). Should we practice confidence and give Goodman the benefit of the doubt? Or do we heed our suspicions and decide once and for all that he too is a crook?

As Bryant argues, just as it would be wrong to accept Goodman’s “benevolism uncritically,” it would be likewise wrong to distrust him completely—“if we play along with Melville’s hoaxing, we find in Goodman’s indeterminacy the very model of survival for our own immersion in doubt” (250).37 While I myself am not quite ready to endorse *The Confidence-Man* as a practical survival manual or the cosmopolitan as a “moral hero” (Bryant 231), I do find intriguing its suggestion that by performing the rituals of gift exchange, we might create or sustain more congenial social and economic interactions than those associated with simple commodity exchange. If the gift can at all be defined as those social relations actually produced by acts of gift exchange (as Hyde does, defining the “community” that “a circulation of gifts creates [. . .] out of individual acts of goodwill” as one of three forms of the “increase of gifts” that, as opposed to an object that is merely a gift’s “vehicle,” comprise the gift itself [36-37]), then the fact that the exchange is a performance, perhaps even a deceptive one, does not matter. What matters is whether such a performance can produce social relations which are themselves substantive. At the very least, the confidence man’s frequent efforts to convince others to regard their transactions with him as gift exchanges demonstrate just how pragmatic, from a business perspective, such tactics can be.
Unlike theories that, at root, depend on an idealized notion of a "true" gift, *The Confidence-Man* theorizes exchange in performative rather than essential terms. In Melville's novel, commodity exchange is facilitated, for better or worse, by a performance of the social ties that gift exchanges supposedly express and commodity exchanges by definition do not and functions most smoothly when those transacting it act, not as the alienated, self-interested individuals who theoretically engage in capitalist transactions, but *as if* bound by the sorts of obligations underlying gift exchanges. Melville's suggestion that the rituals of gift exchange help foster the confidence necessary to successful commodity transactions is not nineteenth-century literature's only, or even most radical, formulation of the idea that gift exchange rituals play an important role within the market. As my next chapter will show, countless pieces of fiction by his women contemporaries instruct readers that performing commodity exchanges as gift exchanges actually diminishes the alienation and selfishness of market transactions, an argument that reinforces the ideological oppositions between private and public, social and economic, the very oppositions that in *The Confidence-Man* such performances seem to destabilize.
CHAPTER TWO

Santa Claus Visits the Happy Home: The Gift and Domestic Exchange

In *Women and Economics* (1898), Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes that "speaking collectively, men produce and distribute wealth; and women receive it at their hands" (9)—evidence of a nineteenth-century recognition of a correspondence between the separate spheres and different forms of economic activity, men with capitalist production and women with consumption and, specifically, with the receiving of gifts. Indeed, a defining feature of most nineteenth-century domestic literature is an explicit construction of a feminine, domestic model of gift exchange that is deployed in a critique of masculine economic conduct, a critique that in many respects resembles Melville’s theorizing of exchange. Like *The Confidence-Man*, domestic fiction often suggests that the rituals of gift exchange can generate the confidence and social feeling that the market undermines. However, whereas in Melville’s novel such an argument works to deconstruct the dichotomy between private and public economic transactions, in sentimental domestic fiction, the treatment of gift and commodity exchange as specifically gendered practices naturalizes this opposition and idealizes the gift in terms ultimately more like Emerson’s than Melville’s. Sentimental fiction has been an important vehicle for the construction of our culture’s ideology of the ideal gift.

My argument in this chapter involves what might initially appear to be two paradoxical claims. First, generally speaking, many practices associated with domesticity can be classified as gift exchange, which is a specific type of economic transaction distinct from market exchange, and readings of domestic fiction that stress domesticity’s
complicity with the market tend to lose sight of the domestic economy's distinctiveness, particularly its privileging of incalculability, rather than equivalence, as a rule of reciprocity. Second, sentimental fiction exaggerates the differences between gift and market exchange by participating in the ideology of the gift that denies the gift's economic functions. Recognizing that gift transactions are "economic" but nevertheless different from commodity transactions, I argue, allows one to see that domestic practices can be "economic" without necessarily signaling the complete congruence between the domestic and the marketplace and to avoid overstating either domestic fiction's complicity with market values or its reformist power.

The first part of this chapter discusses sentimental domestic fiction, primarily Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), to demonstrate how explicitly nineteenth-century culture associated domestic values with gifts and to demonstrate how the oppositions between the separate spheres, between home and work, and between gift and commodity duplicate each other and similarly exaggerate the tensions between different aspects of actual experience. The second half of this chapter turns to two less sentimental novels, Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) and William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), that acknowledge just how illusory these oppositions are and problematize them accordingly. But regardless of whether domestic fiction sentimentalizes or deconstructs the binarisms between gift and commodity, between the domestic and the market, it illustrates one of this dissertation's fundamental contentions. The processes by which market forces seem to commodify the domestic are reciprocal; as components, not anomalies, of market culture, gift practices shape commodity transactions as powerfully as such transactions
transform personal and social relations.

Gifts and Commodities: Sentimental Fiction and Separate Spheres Economics

'Twas the night before Christmas, and in Metta Fuller's temperance novel *The Senator's Son* (1853), that is a suitable night for an alcoholic mother to die in an agonizing fit of delirium tremens. Such a Christmas tragedy is witnessed by Mrs. Madison, who nurses the dying woman before returning home to relate the sad tale to her children Alice and Parke (the senator's son of novel's title). The drunkard's husband, she explains, had tried repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to persuade various merchants to stop "selling their poison to his wife" (37). "There ought to be some punishment," Mrs. Madison opines, for those who so sacrifice others to their own pecuniary motives (41); she insists, "Selling liquor is not an honest business [. . .] The person who trafficks in [. . .] ardent spirits takes money, friends, house, home, character, health, and life and soul; in exchange he gives madness, disease, murder, riot, blasphemy, ruin" (42). Mrs. Madison's critique of the liquor trade thus stems from a sense that in a fair exchange what one takes is commensurate with what one gives and that, more importantly, monetary value cannot be the sole measure of an honest trade.

This moral that Mrs. Madison attaches to her story partly explains this cautionary tale's Christmas setting—what the liquor salesman "gives" his customers appears even shoddier when compared to Santa's giving Alice the presents she "wanted most" (57). Moreover, Fuller's depiction of Christmas contributes to one of the novel's principle structural patterns, specifically, an emphasizing of gifts and gift-giving as a means of
differentiating masculine misconduct (the novel treats the woman who dies on Christmas Eve as an unnatural exception to a rule that drunkards are men) from domestic, feminine virtue. Parke's elaborately dressing as Santa and distributing gifts to poor children on this Christmas illustrates the novel's repeated claim that were it not for his excessive drinking, he would act consistently with the principles of his wife, sister, and mother, a woman on whose "boundless" charity the novel frequently comments (91). That Parke's charity typifies domestic values is underscored when his companion, Alfred, not the most enthusiastic of Santa's helpers, teases, "you're a fine, philanthropic youth, mother's own darling" (51) to convince Parke to submit to some less honorable Christmas carousing. Time and again, the novel demarcates the feminine and masculine spheres by juxtaposing women's self-sacrificing gifts with men's financial greed and self-indulgence, respectively signified by gambling and drunkenness. Alice, for example, proves her selflessness by marrying Alfred (a marriage Parke had previously promised his friend as "a holiday present" [67]) when Parke's gambling debts provide Alfred an opportunity for blackmailing him. Parke's wife lovingly paints a miniature of her and Parke's daughter, but on "that birthday, when Lucy designed to surprise him with the exquisitely-finished portrait [. . .] he came home, for the first time, in a disgraceful condition" (213).

*The Senator's Son* thus engages in a discourse that frequently shapes nineteenth-century U.S. domestic fiction, one that explicitly associates domestic ethics with gifts and their exchange and contrasts them with stereotypically masculine values and conduct. This discourse participates in what Jonathan Parry and James Carrier identify as the "ideology of the gift:" Western capitalist culture's tendency to conceptualize the relationships between "gift" and "commodity," "economy" and "society," and "home"
and "work" as more polarized than they actually are. The separate spheres ideology generally regarded as a feature of nineteenth-century domestic fiction should be recognized both as a product of this larger ideology of the gift and as an important instrument by which it took hold over the popular imagination.

Indeed, depictions of gift-giving can be regarded as a defining structural element of the genre. The Christmas setting with which Fuller's novel opens is common, and not only in the short works appearing in nineteenth-century periodicals and gift books at Christmas time. More than a quarter of Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867), for example, is concerned with a single Christmas. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69) not only begins with the ever-popular Christmas Eve scene—"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," Jo grumbles in the novel's very first line (1)—but concludes with another gift-giving occasion, Marmee's sixtieth birthday, on which her grandchildren present her with handmade presents whose very "defects" make them more valuable than store-bought things, gifts which like those Jo receives one Christmas are "all the better for being made instead of bought" (488, 343).

Such fiction offers countless examples of the aligning of gifts with the domestic and thus makes an important contribution to those processes that counteract, to variously successful degrees, the market's commodifying of personal and social relations. As Carrier argues, "the spread of industrial and commercial capitalism has meant the spread of alienated relations and objects," but has therefore made "people's need to have their objects be possessions in personal relationships" only "more urgent," a need that has been met in part by a proliferation of gift exchanges (11). Even as occasions for gift-giving produce needs for commodities, they simultaneously provide, as domestic fiction
didactically illustrates, opportunities for the ritual transformation of those commodities' meaning. Domestic fiction, in other words, shows that the forces of commodification are in part offset by, for lack of a better term, the domestication of commodities that can be accomplished through the performance of gift rituals, as well as other domestic practices.

This suggestion that the market's ability to change social relations also works in reverse offers a valuable reminder of the shortcomings of traditional theories in which, as sociologist Viviana A. Zelizer observes, "personal relations" are thought to "inevitably ben[d]" through the medium of money exchange "in the direction of instrumental rationality;" "whereas the reciprocal transformation of money by values or social relations is seldom conceptualized or else explicitly rejected" (11, 12).

However, most domestic fiction likewise falls short of depicting the reciprocalness of this dynamic between the market and the domestic, but rather merely emphasizes the redemptive potential of domestic economic practices at the expense of realistically depicting market transactions. In its sentimental treatment of gift-giving, in particular, domestic fiction generally upholds, rather than critiques, an elemental assumption of conventional economics, namely that there is a fundamental distinction between social or moral values and those underlying economic conduct, which are defined primarily in utilitarian terms.

Nineteenth-century women writers highlight gift-giving rituals like Christmas and birthdays not to illustrate the pleasures of consumerism, as some have argued, but to suggest a means of ensuring that goods brought into the home will function as expressions of social relationships rather than as alienated commodities. In other words, in emphasizing gifts, domestic texts offer a fiction with which to mask commodities' actual status as artifacts of the capitalist marketplace, and it is as an example of their
doing so that the shopping Ellen Montgomery does in Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* is best understood. Ellen’s shopping is problematic, given the novel’s message that worldly, materialistic pleasures ought to be sacrificed to those achieved through Christian, feminine virtue. As Ann Douglas notes, Warner ambivalently depicts her heroine’s general “unwillingness […] to participate in the ‘wide, wide world’ of masculine competition and business” while nevertheless illustrating in the scenes in which Ellen purchases a Bible and writing desk “the quintessential pleasure of the consumer” (63, 64). Douglas concludes: “Ellen’s obvious love of the act of possession is here sanctified. Shopping for necessities […] is painful, even unnatural; shopping to furbish the refined pursuits of religion and literature is delightful, and somehow not shopping at all (64). Jane Tompkins similarly finds *The Wide, Wide World* marked by a “contradiction between Warner’s commitment to a life of selfless service to the Lord and her desire for […] the power and position conferred by the ownership of expensive commodities” (602).

Read with a recognition of the gift’s centrality in Warner’s text, however, the tale of Ellen’s adventures in shopping shows that the sanctification of possession depends on more than the nature of commodities themselves—Ellen’s acquisition of a Bible and desk transcends mundane shopping not only because these items serve noble purposes, but because Ellen’s mother buys them as gifts. Warner’s suggestion that shopping can become “somehow not shopping at all” is not an accidental product of her distinctions between commodity types, but is, more accurately, a crucial element in an argument that gift exchange rituals provide one means of combating the evils of the marketplace. Rituals of gift exchange are the method by which, again in Douglas’s phrase, “the act of
possession is [. . .] sanctified," or at least that is what every purchase made on Ellen's shopping trip suggests.

The first purchase is a Bible, which Ellen has difficulty selecting from "so many tempting" choices; she finally selects a red Bible because, as she tells her mother, "it will put me in mind of yours" (31). Ellen’s choice thus teaches the first rule of gift exchange—from a Maussian perspective, gifts should remind their recipient of the giver. When Mrs. Montgomery buys a dressing-box, a writing desk, and a work-box, Ellen is once again nearly overcome with the pleasures of consumerism: "the articles displayed on every side completely bewitched her" (32). But as in the bookstore, consumerly desire yields to gratitude for her mother's gifts. Of the dressing-box, she exclaims, "You don’t mean to give it to me? Oh, mother, how good you are!" (32). Of the desk, Ellen cries, "you’re giving me too much” (32). And perhaps her mother is, for Warner devotes four pages to describing just the desk’s accessories. This excess has rightly led readers such as Douglas to note the consumerist values underlying this novel that elsewhere preaches against materialism, but I would add that the novel contains the excesses of Ellen’s shopping excursion within an excess of another sort, namely the elaborate discussion of gratitude and gifts in which the shopping spree culminates.

Leaving the store where they purchased the desk, Ellen claims to be overwhelmed by gratitude, saying, “I cannot thank you, mamma” (36). Back home, her mother confesses, “the whole affair has given me as much pleasure, Ellen, as it has you” (37), expressing one way even the most disinterested of givers can find her gifts returned in the act of giving itself (as Derrida describes in his account of the gift’s impossibility). The ensuing conversation maps the means by which gifts, as symbols of the relationships
between their givers and recipients, reinforce those relationships. Ellen promises “I will take the greatest possible care of my new treasures;” her mother responds, “If I had doubted it [. . .] I should not have given them to you [. . .] you see you have not established a character for carefulness in vain” (37). Ellen replies, “I will try to use them in the way that I know you wish me to; that will be the best way I can thank you” (37). Her mother tells her “my gifts will serve as reminders for you if you are ever tempted to forget my lessons. If you fail to send me letters [. . .] the desk will cry shame upon you. And if you ever go an hour with a hole in your stocking, or a tear in your dress or a string off your petticoat, I hope the sight of your work-box will make you blush” (37). In other words, the gifts signify Ellen’s good character by demonstrating her mother’s recognition of it; furthermore, the gifts will remind Ellen of her mother’s desires for her conduct even after their separation.

That gifts can so intensely symbolize relationships that they can seem almost substitutes for persons (in her mother’s absence, Ellen’s desk will be able to discipline her with cries of shame) contributes to gift exchange’s ability to mask commodities—being given as a gift ensures that a thing’s meaning as commodity will become secondary to its “bonding value,” to the personal relationship it now represents. Gift-giving can transform commodities into possessions since “a person who gets an object in a durable, personal relationship is likely to see it as bearing a personal identity and being embedded in a social relationship, even if the object is produced by anonymous factory workers” (Carrier 61). Ellen’s shopping trip matters not because she buys new things, but because those new things express her and her mother’s feelings for each other, a point Warner underscores.
Admiring her work box’s contents, Ellen asks whether the scissors “belong to the box” or whether her mother chose them especially for her. When her mother says she chose them, Ellen says, “I might have guessed it, mamma, it’s just like you. And here’s a thimble—fits me exactly” (40). The box and its contents are no longer anonymously produced commodities that any shopper could have found on a store’s shelves: Mrs. Montgomery’s selection of the scissors and thimble make it seem as if she herself somehow created the box especially for Ellen. Moreover, because Mrs. Montgomery successfully chooses gifts that seem “just like” her and that demonstrate that she knows her daughter well enough to have picked items that fit her “exactly,” her presents will serve as reminders of her when she herself is no longer present. The gift-giving act confers specificity on what would otherwise be just another commodity; the given object acquires the supplemental, incalculable value of sentiment, which can in no way factor into the quantitative equivalence of market exchanges.

All this is not to say that Warner, in emphasizing the attributes that Mrs. Montgomery’s purchases take on as gifts, ignores their status as commodities. On the contrary, Warner notes the realities of shopping and the initial commodity status of Mrs. Montgomery’s gifts. She does not overlook that Mrs. Montgomery “paid for the red Bible” (31) and “paid the bill” for the other items (36). Attention to Warner’s interest in gifts, nevertheless, reveals that more occurs in these chapters about shopping than the supposed, inadvertent betrayal of her and her heroine’s desire for possessions. The complexities of the novel’s message about commodities become more apparent with a recognition of its juxtaposition of money and gifts, a juxtaposition present even in the novel’s opening scene. When Ellen inquires whether she is troubled by Captain
Montgomery's loss of a lawsuit, Mrs. Montgomery replies, "I am not apt to concern myself over-much about the gain or the loss of money. I believe my Heavenly Father will give me what is good for me" (11, my italics). While this statement is obviously an instance of the novel's contention that worldly goods matter less than one's spiritual good, it also typifies the novel's suggestion that thinking in terms of gifts, not money, offers a powerful check on one's materialistic desires, or rather, perhaps, rehabilitates such desires by releasing them from the materialism of everyday transactions.

This juxtaposition of gifts and the realities of the marketplace appears most poignantly in Warner's account of the stop in a jewelry store with which the shopping trip begins. Needing money to buy her gifts for Ellen, Mrs. Montgomery sells a ring which her own mother had given her, selling it "after a little chaffering" for "about three-quarters of its real value" (28-29). Clearly, this attention to the act of negotiating the ring's price reflects an appreciation of the heirloom's market value (and simultaneously points to the limitations of Warner's conception of gift exchange as a corrective to the market—Warner's materialism surfaces in her apparent assumption that the best gifts are also expensive), but ultimately, the ring's monetary worth underscores what is necessarily its greater worth as a gift. The ring, like all gifts, has been invested with the bonding value of sentiment, which means, on the one hand, that the market could never pay Mrs. Montgomery for its full value and, on the other hand, that it has an added value that remains inalienable even when the ring itself is sold. As Mrs. Montgomery characteristically insists, "jewels in themselves are the merest nothings to me; [...] I can remember my mother without any help from a trinket" (29).

As tangible wealth, jewels might appeal little to Mrs. Montgomery, but as gifts,
such things have a spiritual value that even she can acknowledge. Mrs. Montgomery might be able to remember her mother without the ring, but selling her mother’s gift does mean parting with a valued token of her mother: “There were tears, however, in Mrs. Montgomery’s eyes that showed the sacrifice had cost her something” (29). And yet, these tears underscore that while the incalculability of sentimental value means that one can never get full value for one’s gifts in the market (even had the pawn shop paid what the ring was technically worth, it could not have reimbursed Mrs. Montgomery for its sentimental value), it also means that unlike commodities, gifts have a value unaffected by the market’s vagaries, a value one can retain even after losing ownership. Mrs. Montgomery can remember her mother even after selling her gift; she will remember all her mother’s ring symbolized when it is no longer in her possession. Moreover, the initial gift of the ring actually accrues value when sold since departing with the ring itself provides Mrs. Montgomery with a new, additional gift, that of being able to give gifts to her own daughter; as she tells Ellen, “this use of my ring gives me more pleasure on the whole than any other I could have made of it” (29). Selling her mother’s gift in order to purchase gifts for Ellen thus situates those purchases within a series of gift exchanges among women, making the shopping expedition seem more like an appropriately feminine, domestic activity than an act of consumerism. Mrs. Montgomery can think of shopping as such because she thinks of the things she buys (and even the money with which she buys it) primarily as gifts—she shops motivated not by a desire for possessions, but by a desire to give her daughter presents.

Some days after purchasing these various gifts, Ellen ventures out alone on a second shopping expedition to purchase still needed fabrics for new clothing. As
Douglas observes, Ellen’s efforts to buy something as mundane as apparel prove far more “painful” (Douglas 64) than her previous experiences shopping for items as exciting as a Bible and writing materials. The opposition between the two shopping trips, however, is not as absolute as Douglas argues since even this negative shopping experience is transformed into an example of the redemptive power of gift exchange by a nameless gentleman who rescues Ellen from a troublesome store clerk. Confronting alone the impersonality of commodity exchange, Ellen cannot prevent herself from becoming another nameless face in the crowd of anonymous consumers in a store that, in Warner’s phobic rendering, represents a total absence of gift relations. When a clerk eventually does wait on her, he is not only rude, but he lies about the prices of several fabrics. While the obstacles Ellen faces during her attempt to purchase fabric, particularly the ill-mannered clerk, certainly are part of the novel’s critique of the market, it is also true that this tale of the market’s unpleasantness ends happily. An elderly gentleman comes to Ellen’s aid by ordering the clerk about with ease, and, more importantly, by transforming her errand into another occasion of excessive gift-giving.

First, as a gift, he himself purchases more fabric than her mother had wanted. Next, he buys Ellen a bonnet. He then asks “Would you rather have something for yourself or your mother, Ellen, if you could choose, and have but one?” (52). Ellen dutifully prefers a gift for her mother, so he accompanies her to a grocery where he buys fruit for Mrs. Montgomery. Incredibly, the gentleman’s generosity toward Ellen, a stranger, continues, when the next morning he sends birds with a note indicating that they are for Ellen. Reading this note, Ellen says, “Now I know what he meant yesterday, when he asked me if I would rather have something for myself or for you. How kind he
is! To do just the very thing [. . .] he knows would give me the most pleasure. Now, mamma, these birds are mine, you know, and I give them to you” (53). Thus the gentleman’s greatest gift to Ellen is that he enables her to return her mother’s gifts to her, thereby firmly establishing all the gifts purchased during the two shopping trips as part of a series of gift exchanges.

The story of the painful incident in the fabric store thus mutates into a story of the joys of gift-giving and of a stranger’s limitless generosity. That the man’s gifts are in fact gifts and not charity, which provides only what is needed, is established (as were Mrs. Montgomery’s previous gifts to Ellen) by their excess.7 For two weeks “there was scarcely a day that the old gentleman’s servant did not knock at their door, bearing a present” (54). That the old man remains nameless (Ellen’s mother forbids her to find out his name: “the old gentleman wishes to keep it secret, and to try to find it out in any way would be a very unworthy return for his kindness” [55]) underscores the fundamental point of his intervention at the fabric store—gift exchanges can make friends of even fellow shoppers and otherwise alienated consumers. The story of the old gentleman thereby serves to ease an anxiety that, as Karen Halttunen has shown, was produced by the antebellum United States’ developing market economy and urbanization, specifically a concern about the necessity of frequent interaction with strangers, a concern Ellen expresses several times in the novel.

Countless gifts, too many to describe fully here, are given and received in The Wide, Wide World; the novel’s single Christmas offers sufficient examples of the types of gifts with which it is concerned. Like the shopping narrative, Ellen’s first Christmas after leaving her mother positions gift-giving as a sort of mediator between what the novel
generally portrays as the categorically different worlds of the domestic and the market. Ellen spends this Christmas with the Marshmans, wealthy friends of Ellen’s friends, Alice and John Humphreys. This visit is Warner’s opportunity to depict the kind of Christmas posited as ideal by mid-century U.S. domestic ideology and described so often in nineteenth-century domestic fiction. As historian Stephen Nissenbaum documents, beginning in the second quarter of the century, these rituals of “a new domestic Christmas” mediated “between family life and a commercial economy,” helping to “intensify and legitimize a commercial kind of consumerism” (318-19, 139).

The children visiting the Marshmans have an exciting plan for New Year’s gifts (the exchange of which was often part of Christmas season celebrations during the nineteenth century): “we are going to make presents this year! [. . .] and let nobody know anything about it” (289). These homemade gifts, as is usually the case in domestic fiction, receive much more attention than the other store-bought things also exchanged (the praise of handmade gifts has always been helpful in the effort to construct “the holiday gift exchange [as] something deeper and more ‘authentic’ than the dynamics of the marketplace” [Nissenbaum 173]).8 Discussing their recent discovery of Santa’s nonexistence, Ellen and another child conclude that Santa is “a great many people—he’s whoever gives you anything” (289). Such a mature understanding of Santa, even while seemingly acknowledging the “truth” of the Santa myth and custom, preserves the custom’s primary function, namely the mystification of the process by which commodities are distributed within the home.9 Additionally, as an orphan to whom a wealthy family gives gifts, Ellen illustrates the novel’s frequent suggestion that gift-giving can turn strangers into friends.10
Descriptions of Christmas stockings and New Year's surprises retell the shopping chapters' story about how the giving of gifts can domesticate commodities and tame crass desires for them. Moreover, the novel calls attention to the unexamined assumptions that make such an argument possible, with the tale of Ellen's greatest trial at the Marshmans'. When one particularly materialistic girl receives a pair of earrings for Christmas, she asks Ellen if she "wouldn't [...] give a great deal if somebody would send [her] such a pair." Ellen answers, "I don't think I care much for such things,—I would rather have the money" (318). She later explains to Alice that she meant she "would a great deal rather have the money they cost, to buy other things with, you know, that I would like better," not that "she'd rather have money than any thing else for her present" (322, 319), as the other girl had promptly tattled to Mr. Marshman. Ellen agonizes over her fears that her host will think her materialistic: "What will Mr. Marshman think of me? He will think I expected a present, and I never dreamed of such a thing" (322). Indeed, Marshman confesses he is "disappointed" in Ellen (319). When he does give Ellen money as her New Year's gift, she announces her mortification: "I am very much obliged to you, sir, but [...] if you will please be so good as to let me give it back to you" (327). She explains, "I never thought of [...] your giving me any thing, sir, till somebody spoke of it, and I had rather never have any thing in the world than that you should think [...] I wanted money for my present" (327). Whereas she had told Alice simply that she would prefer money to earrings so that she could buy other things, she now confesses that she wanted "the money they would cost to buy something for Alice" (328).

Ellen, in other words, claims to desire money not because she is materialistic but because she is so not materialistic that she not only does not expect a present, but she
would rather be able to give someone else a gift than receive one (just as she does when the man who helps her purchase the fabrics gives her the choice of a present for herself or for her mother). Wanting money is nothing to be ashamed of if the money will be spent on gifts. Ellen’s generosity impresses all the adults, but it is important to remember that her stated preference for money had troubled them not so much because it betrayed an expectation of a present as because it suggested something crass about her character (319). Regardless of whether she wants money to spend on herself or to spend on Alice, she still prefers money for her present, a preference that the novel has condemned. Clearly calling attention to the fact that most gifts are in reality commodities purchased with money (money that women and children often could acquire only through the gifts of men), Ellen’s Christmas ordeal should raise important questions about the relationships between money, commodities, and gifts. Why is a gift of money crass? Why does spending money on someone else seem less like spending money? If it really is so “pleasant […] to make Christmas and New Year presents” (270, my italics), then why is Ellen so desirous of being able to give store-bought ones? We might expect, for instance, that The Wide, Wide World would elaborate on (as it does about so many of its other moral lessons) how Ellen’s desire to be able to purchase a gift for Alice shows that wanting money is not intrinsically wrong and perhaps comment on Ellen’s feelings about being financially dependent on others.

Perhaps surprising then, is the novel’s complete disregard for such questions—Ellen’s explanation can satisfy the adults (who now admire her previously unacceptable wish for money) because the novel simply takes it as a given that money is fundamentally transformed when spent on gifts, as are the goods thus purchased. Ellen’s wish for
money, in other words, just no longer seems a wish for money. Homemade gifts are important in Warner’s novel because such gifts (especially those made by children) seldom have any value beyond the attachment their recipients feel toward those who give them; they therefore illustrate the dictum that “it is the thought that counts” and provide the purest example of the unquantifiable sentimental value that gifts are expected to embody. If gifts can thus express sentiment, and money does not; then, The Wide, Wide World suggests, gifts of money and money spent on gifts can be regarded as something other than money. A similar assumption is operating in Elsie Dinsmore, a novel that preaches that the “work” of one’s “own dear little hands” will be “more prized [ . . . ] than a costlier gift” and will be “valu[ed] [. . .] ten times more” simply “because it is a gift” (45, 52) while simultaneously celebrating the fact that Elsie has a remarkable ninety dollars to spend on Christmas gifts. Novels like The Wide, Wide World and Elsie Dinsmore cannot acknowledge, much less answer, the questions they themselves suggest about the relationship between gifts and commodity exchange because mystifying this relationship is one of such texts’ fundamental investments. These texts’ obliviousness to such questions should not surprise but rather encourage us to explore why our culture still prefers not to contemplate these issues. (How many of us, for instance, have anxiously wondered whether money would be an appropriate gift for someone and then purchased a gift certificate as if that magically solved the problem?)

Domestic fiction’s use of the gift as a means of masking the domestic sphere’s dependence on the market is further illustrated by another “night before Christmas,” this time in Cummins’ The Lamplighter. Gertrude, the novel’s young protagonist, mentions to Willie, her childhood friend and future husband, that it is the two-year anniversary of
her coming to live with the lamplighter True (80, 82). Thus disclosing for the first time that Gertrude’s rescue from her cruel foster mother Nan Grant had occurred on Christmas Eve, The Lamplighter firmly locates Gertrude’s rise from poverty and neglect within the gift economy; as Willie observes, “that was Santa Claus carrying you to good things, instead of bringing good things to you, wasn’t it?” (82). Gertrude predicts similar good fortune for Willie, who has been crying because of his difficulty finding employment: “perhaps Santa Claus would come for you tonight [. . .] and carry you to some place where you’ll have a chance to grow rich” (82). Sure enough, when True arrives home, Christmas presents in hand, he has a note inviting Willie to meet with a wealthy man named Mr. Clinton, an “utter stranger,” who offers him a position that eventually develops into a profitable career (83).

Mr. Clinton says he has “heard good accounts” of Willie but will not reveal from whom (84), leaving Willie’s friends and family to solve the “great mystery” of how he “ever [. . .] heard of Willie at all” until “they finally conclu[d]e to do as Gertrude did” and attribute it “to the agency of Santa Claus” (85-86). The mythical figure of Santa Claus is paramount among the rituals that transform commodities into domestic objects; here, he serves to mystify not consumption, but the fundamental relationship of capitalist production, that between employer and employee. The revelation many years later that Willie’s Santa Claus was an elderly woman who told Mr. Clinton of how Willie aided her after she had fallen on an icy sidewalk (213-15) only further underscores that Willie’s rise from rags to riches begins with a job that is generated, not by the market itself, but by the gift economy’s requirement that one receive compensation, even if indirect, for gifts of kindness. When Willie returns after six prosperous years of working for Mr. Clinton
in India, he is “not blind to the advantages of wealth” but still feels that his “ambition” cannot “find its gratification in [such] rewards” (347). The reward he seeks is “a home,” which can be achieved only in marriage to an ideal woman such as Gertrude has become (347).

Willie’s and Gertrude’s virtue, then, is seemingly rewarded by material wealth, but _The Lamplighter_, like _The Wide, Wide World_, takes pains to contain its narrative of worldly gains within the domestic gift economy’s terms. The gift’s capacity for feminizing what might otherwise seem tales of mere financial success is asserted in other novels as well, such as _Little Women_, which depicts Jo’s pleasure in a profitable writing career, but quickly connects that pleasure to gift-giving: “She saw that money conferred power; money and power, therefore, she resolved to have; not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than self. The dream of filling home with comforts, giving Beth everything she wanted [. . .] and always having _more_ than enough, so that she might indulge in the luxury of charity” (345). Such attempts to rescript the narrative of financial success within the gift economy are part and parcel of the argument that the gift as practice can transform one’s relation to the market.

There is some truth to this argument. Gift-giving, as Catherine Bell indicates, is an instance of the “ritualization” that “establishes a privileged contrast” between “ways of acting within any particular culture” by “differentiating itself as more important or powerful” (90). “The ritualized version” of shopping and giving what one buys as a gift, Bell points out, _does_ feel different from the shopping one does every day, even when the items purchased in each instance are similar (91). According to Bell, such ritualized practices are instances of “redemptive hegemony” in that while they work to reproduce
existing social relations, they also help people "envision the efficacy of acting within that ordering of relations;" as practice, ritualization, Bell argues, contributes to "a process in which agents not only accede to a shared sense of reality but also effectively reproduce that reality in ways that continue to empower them to act" (84-85). Carrier's account of Christmas shopping as "an annual ritual activity through which we convert commodities into gifts" (178) and Zelizer's demonstration that money is in fact usually treated differently when perceived as a gift illustrate Bell's theory and suggest its relevance to domestic fiction.

Such analyses of gift-giving, recently coming from multiple disciplines, suggest that the discourse about gifts so easily detected in novels such as Warner's and Cummins's cannot be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Gift exchange, whether through rituals as elaborate as those performed at Christmas or through those that earmark the money enclosed in a birthday card for a special purchase, allows people to "demonstrate to themselves that they can celebrate and recreate personal relations with the anonymous objects available to them, and this demonstration serves to strengthen and reassure them as they undertake the work of appropriation in everyday life during the rest of the year" (Carrier 178). In other words, such practices are what Bell terms "redemptive;" they express and reinforce commodity culture's dominant ideology, but in a way that "affords the actor the sense of a sphere of action, however minimal" (Bell 84). The gift economy was not diminished by the nineteenth-century's transition to a consumer economy—instead, ritualized gift exchanges became more prevalent because they offered the feeling of somehow resisting society's commercialization even while participating in it, and it is no accident that the popular fiction of the time instructs
readers in how such rituals of resistance might be performed.

In a limited sense this resistance is real: although capitalism has undeniably transformed the social relationships among family and community, it is also true that the "tyranny of the market" has been countered by practices that transform "material possessions [. . .] into socially meaningful objects" integrated "into personalized networks" (Zelizer 215, 211). This reciprocal transformation is possible in part because, theoretical accounts of the homogenizing force of commodity logic notwithstanding, in real life we generally do regard things received as gifts differently than other commodities. Warner's heroine is not being any more sentimental than most of us when she reassures Alice that the unruly Nancy will not "sell" the Bible Ellen plans to give her for Christmas "for something else" because of its being a gift from a friend if for no other reason (271). The Lamplighter's casual mentioning of countless small gifts is best understood as such an effort to recast material objects as gifts, a motif that supports Willie's distinction between the rewards of wealth and of domesticity.

Taken in by the wealthy Emily Graham and her father following True's death, Gertrude becomes accustomed to previously unknown luxuries, but she does not value her new possessions any more than her broken statue of Samuel, "Uncle True's first gift," and various "gifts from Willie" that she regards as "valuables" because "endear[ed] [. . .] by the charm of old association" (116). Gertrude repeatedly demonstrates that she appreciates the things she is given primarily because of the relationships they represent, as when her grief at a temporary separation causes her to leave Emily's "parting gifts" unwrapped and "besmeared with tears" (68) or when "so sweet and acceptable a gift" as a bouquet assures her of "the motives of kindness and sympathy" of the "fatherly" Mr.
Phillips (subsequently revealed to be Philip Amory, Gertrude's father and Emily's stepbrother and former lover) (302). Hardly an opportunity is missed for emphasizing that Gertrude's fortune is comprised of gifts; even as mundane an act as giving someone the time gains significance with Gertrude's "glancing at her watch (a beautiful gift from a class of her former pupils)" (326).

Among The Lamplighter's central lessons is that regarding one's advantages as gifts and valuing them accordingly is key to one's spiritual and emotional life. Emily, for instance, regards being blinded as a blessing since prior to her blindness she "enjoy[ed] the beautiful and glorious gifts that were showered on [her] pathway" but "forgot to thank and praise the Giver" and "with an ungrateful heart, walked sinfully and selfishly on" (397). Such ingratitude is the ultimate sin in Cummins's novel; more frequent than its mentions of gifts are its discussions of the gratitude gifts engender. Gratitude, of course, is only one among numerous emotions that give force to the obligation to return gifts (even unwanted gifts are often returned, for instance, to avoid empowering their givers with the belief that they are owed anything), but in The Lamplighter's idealistic representation of the economics of gift-giving, only as noble a feeling as gratitude will do to illustrate the claim that all gifts and kind acts are rewarded, a claim central to its Christian message about good deeds and self-sacrifices.

As Bell explains, drawing on Bourdieu's theorizing of the misrecognition involved in gift exchange, if ritualization is "redemptive," it is also "designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking" (93). Novels such as The Lamplighter provide instruction in the practice of gift exchange, in the ritualization that helps an array of activities be experienced as socially
embedded transactions,¹⁴ and in doing so they illustrate culturally specific forms of the misrecognition that make it possible to perceive the gift as a voluntary act of generosity. This perception is not necessarily wrong; misrecognition, as Bourdieu suggests, is not a matter of being simply mistaken. While gifts typically are met with some form of compensation, it is also true that “the series of acts” that can be objectively described, after the fact, “as a cycle of reciprocity,” appears otherwise to those participating in it; it “may be interrupted at any stage” and “each of the inaugural acts that sets it up is always liable to fall flat” (Logic 105). This uncertainty—the impossibility of calculating how a gift will be received and how or when it will be paid back—is precisely why, Bourdieu argues, gift exchange is among those “institutions that [. . .] produce and reproduce trust in the fact that trust, i.e., generosity, private or civic virtue, will be rewarded” (“Marginalia” 232).¹⁵ To speak of the misrecognition involved in gift exchange, then, is to speak of those practices that highlight a transaction’s uncertainty so that it can be experienced as an act of social trust, rather than of economic calculation.

The ambiguous, paradoxical logic that made such misrecognition possible for many nineteenth-century Americans is particularly apparent in Cummins’s novel; specifically, it illuminates the unwieldiness of an ideology that deploys a Christian concept of self-sacrifice in the effort to construct the gift as disinterested. The Lamplighter uses the rhetoric of Christian duty and heavenly rewards to make its case for the gift economy’s superiority to the market, but without sufficient attention to the inherent tensions between this rhetoric and the notion of a gift given freely, without expectation of return.

Gertrude’s “gratitude” toward True and her “grateful” desire “to do something in
return” for his kindness (16, 88, 34), the “little gifts” with which she attempts “to repay” the “goodness” for which she is ever “grateful” to Emily (109, 56), and the “sense of obligation” she takes “pains” to demonstrate to Mr. Graham to whom she is “deeply grateful” (142), are but a few of countless examples of the gratitude to which Gertrude herself attributes her ever-developing virtue: “if there is a person in the world who owes a debt to society, it is myself. [...] I should be ungrateful if I did not cherish a spirit of universal love” (185). Willie is a deserving match for Gertrude, because he too is characterized by “a beautiful spirit of grateful love” (48), as evidenced by the “gratitude too deep to express itself in words” he feels when Mr. Clinton hires him (85) or the “gratitude” he feels toward Gertrude for her nursing his dying mother and grandfather while he was abroad (359), a “gratitude” that his mother, from her deathbed, had hinted he should show by marrying Gertrude (173).

The novel’s attention to the subject of gratitude is taken to almost absurd lengths in the protracted exchange of polite, cliché expressions of mutual gratitude that occurs when Willie conveys Mr. Clinton’s thanks for saving his daughter from a fire to Amory and in the ensuing discussion of Willie’s reasons for marrying Gertrude; the words “grateful,” “gratitude,” “thank(s),” “owe,” “debt,” “obligations,” and “repay” occur twenty times in their conversation (341-360). Willie refutes Amory’s concern that his fidelity to Gertrude stems from a naïve belief that “the offer of himself” will repay his “obligations” to her by explaining that he loves her not because of “gratitude merely” but also because of her “purity of character” and “grace that is a gift of Heaven” (352, 359). Willie’s claim that his “truest love” for Gertrude expresses not so much a debt to her as his appreciation for “a gift of Heaven” (359) enables Cummins’s novel to define marriage
within the discourse of the gift without suggesting that marriage is an "economic" relationship through which husband and wife make direct payment for each other's services.

More important than Willie and Gertrude's marriage stemming from their mutual obligation, *The Lamplighter* suggests, is that it reflects their gratitude for God's gifts, an interpretation of their marriage that counters the economic view Amory takes when asking whether it would not be "an unequal bargain" for a man as successful as Willie to marry someone of "unacknowledged birth, without beauty or fortune" (354, 352). This depiction of marital love as the love of virtues that are gifts from God is an instance of *The Lamplighter*'s effort to identify the domestic with an ideal gift that is imagined to transcend mere exchange. More importantly, it is an example of those practices, which in asserting the indirectness of a transaction's reciprocity (as opposed to the direct reciprocity that characterizes market exchange), make possible the misrecognition that ensures that gift exchanges have a meaning beyond their economic functions.

The viability of our culture's longstanding ideology of the gift, a construct without which it would be far more difficult to equate "economics" and "exchange" with capitalism, requires constant work to preclude the ever-threatening perception of "the gift" as just an isolated moment in an ongoing cycle of reciprocal exchanges. *The Lamplighter* contributes to this cultural work primarily through two common strategies for obfuscating the obligatory reciprocity that renders the "true" gift impossible; it obscures the elements that risk making gift exchanges appear as *quid pro quo* transactions by highlighting the indirectness of the reciprocity involved and, second, it denies the obliatoriness of giving and returning gifts by insisting that most gifts are
given with no expectation of return. Only in the absence of such expectation can the gift be imagined to transcend economic and social obligation.

Willie’s claim that his marriage evidences appreciation of God’s gift but does not repay Gertrude’s gift of nursing his relatives is typical of Cummins’s strategy for depicting instances of even relatively direct reciprocity as indirect; the novel’s Christian paradigm makes it possible to displace the obligations involved in a particular gift relationship to an individual’s relationship with God. For example, True’s telling Emily that “if the Lord rewards you as he has done me, there’ll come a time when this child will pay you back in love and care all you ever do for her” reformulates Gertrude’s repayment of their kindness as coming from God (93). Gertrude, in other words, might owe her friends what she gives them, but her acts of kindness are not straightforward attempts to discharge her debts if they are also the means by which God rewards the faithful; True and Emily do not intentionally oblige Gertrude to themselves if their gifts are motivated not so much by desire that she return their love and care as by desire that they will fulfill their own moral obligations so that they will deserve God’s rewards.

Such a displacement of the gift’s obligations is common in nineteenth-century sentimental texts. Innumerable passages in The Wide, Wide World (e.g., God has said “Ask and it shall be given you” [153] and “have you ever made any fit return to God for his goodness to you?” [72]) link the gift and the Christianity advocated by domestic ideology. Elsie Dinsmore repeatedly preaches “the glad news of salvation offered as a free, unmerited gift” (23) and like Warner’s novel proclaims “Thanks [to] God for his unspeakable gift” (Warner 276, 278; Finley 24). The Bible teaches, as Finley’s protagonist twice tells us, that the “Heavenly Father is more willing to give His Holy
Sprit to them that ask Him, than parents are to give good gifts unto their children” (149, 237).

While Elsie might be right to regard this “wonderful gift” as “unmerited,” it is less clear why it would be “free” (240, 23). The sinner is, after all, expected to return it. The same scriptures that provide a discourse of gift-giving and self-sacrifice also contain a financial rhetoric that might undercut sentimental fiction’s effort to obscure the obligatory exchange of gifts and countergifts were such texts not apparently oblivious to their potential contradictions. Warner’s novel, for instance, juxtaposes metaphors of gift and commodity exchange—as when describing “the God who had [. . .] given them all, and that Redeemer whose blood had been their purchase-money” (405, my italics)—without comment.  

What makes it possible to ignore such tensions between Christian theology and the ideology of the free gift is the paradigmatic incalculability of the gift of salvation itself: there is no equivalent (except perhaps one’s own life) that can be given for so great a gift. The divine gift, which is mirrored in The Lamplighter by such acts as True’s saving of Gertrude and Amory’s and Gertrude’s risking their lives to save others, thus provides a model of reciprocity that is fundamentally unlike that of market transactions. Reparation for such gifts can never be complete and can thus never be expected, at least not in full; hence such gifts can simultaneously represent both the ever-present obligation to reciprocate and a form of exchange situated beyond reciprocity, as commonly understood.

The doctrine that good works are rewarded similarly bolsters the construct of the free gift while potentially undermining it. This doctrine allows a novel like The Lamplighter to represent virtually all instances of reciprocity as indirect, but it also
suggests that Cummins's characters do not really give without expectation of return since they believe God will reward their efforts. *The Lamplighter*'s principle lesson is that the "highest" "happiness" that "earth affords" is the "feeling that [one] ha[s] been instrumental in giving joy to another," a happiness greater than that of having "almost any gift or favor [. . .] bestowed upon" oneself (27-28). Just as True and Emily find their kindness to Gertrude repaid, Gertrude repeatedly discovers that in "sacrific[ing] [. . .] her own comfort [. . .] in her efforts for the happiness of others, she would at last find her own," and Willie seeks "his reward" for his labors not in "his own gratification," but in his family's (178, 47). In suggesting that service to others provides a pleasure that is its own reward, that following "the path of duty" leads to being "rewarded by the approbation of [one's] own conscience, if in no other way" (135), *The Lamplighter* risks exposing the impossibility of a "true" gift. *The Wide, Wide World* takes a similar risk by describing how difficult it sometimes is "to say whether the giver or receiver" of a particular gift "had the most satisfaction" (333), as does *Little Women* in depicting Amy's realization that "virtue was its own reward, after all" (305).

Observing that "From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as what it is [. . .] it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt" and that "The simple consciousness of the gift right away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity" (23), Derrida concisely identifies the fundamental contradiction that inevitably destabilizes conventional constructions of the gift, such as that *The Lamplighter* offers. (Derrida's account of the gift's impossibility, as previously explained, does not really show that there can be no gift, but does powerfully describe why there can be no gift as the Western
ideology of the gift defines it.) Gertrude’s remark that “nothing” she does “for Emily’s sake can be called a sacrifice” since aiding Emily is her “greatest pleasure” (185) suggests the impossibility of giving without return as succinctly as Derrida does, but for the opposite purpose. The Lamplighter insists that the pleasure of self-sacrifice and the approbation of one’s own conscience are sufficient rewards not to deny the truth of the ideology of the gift but to uphold it; its characters’ denial of their sacrifices is a form of misrecognition that works to hinder what Derrida refers to as “consciousness of the gift,” the awareness of being owed a return.

The Lamplighter’s first strategy for maintaining the fiction of the true gift—emphasizing gift exchange’s indirect reciprocity—thus leads to its second, rather contradictory strategy of simply insisting, despite evidence to the contrary, that gifts are given without expectation of return.19 Perhaps it is the possibility that its characters’ selflessness will seem diminished because of their belief that they will inevitably be repaid, if only by the pleasure of giving, that produces The Lamplighter’s seemingly anxious, incessant repetition that they act with complete “disinterestedness.” Willie and Gertrude have no “selfish motives,” but are “occupied” with utter “disinterestedness and generosity” (48). Gertrude consciously works, sometimes through “desperate effort” to “turn all her mental and all her physical energy into [. . .] disinterested channel[s]” (339), and her “noble and disinterested conduct” is frequently noted by others (291), such as Willie’s mother who praises her “disinterested [. . .] devotion” (173), Willie who prays “that Heaven would [. . .] reward her disinterested and self-denying efforts” (201), and Philip Amory (351, 352). Before discovering that Amory is her father, Gertrude admires him as “the noble, disinterested stranger, who had risked his life” during the fire (336,
also 337). Willie expresses gratitude for Amory’s “disinterested exertions” in saving Isabel Clinton, and in turn Amory gives Willie “disinterested” advice (343, 348). And this, by no means, is an exhaustive list of such passages.

*The Lamplighter* treats such disinterestedness as a feminine virtue, even while depicting such men as True and Willie whose selflessness equals that of its heroines. Emily teaches Gertrude that a capacity for “sacrifice” is “one of the noblest and most important traits [. . .] a woman can possess” (134). Dr. Jeremy, a friend of Gertrude, regards her conduct as proof of the premise “that women [a]re self-forgetful in their friendship” (185). The implication that women are generally more inclined than men to demonstrate selflessness reinforces its construction of an ethics of gift-giving as what distinguishes the domestic from the market, as what makes “a home” more “worth striving for” than “precarious wealth” (347). Moreover, Cummins’s novel further aligns selflessness such as Gertrude’s with the domestic sphere by contrasting it with the calculating benevolence of the “wealthy [. . .] merchant,” Mr. Graham, who although “generous” and “liberal” is nevertheless “selfish,” “possess[ing] neither the disinterested [. . .] spirit of Uncle True, or the saintly [. . .] self-sacrifice of Emily” (14, 142).

Outraged when Gertrude declines accompanying Emily on a certain trip he has planned so that she might nurse Willie’s family, Mr. Graham repeatedly accuses her of being “ungrateful” (e.g., 140). Gertrude’s explanation that her decision is “not a matter of preference or choice” but of “duty” (140) illustrates the unwieldiness of *The Lamplighter*’s construction of the gift; if, on the one hand, it represents acts of generosity as motivated by a sense of moral obligation, it nevertheless persists in claiming them to be voluntary and disinterested. The novel evades such tensions by juxtaposing Mr.
Graham's economic analysis of the question "what makes it a duty?" (140) with Gertrude's more appealing notion of moral duty. Mr. Graham's allegation that Gertrude thinks she "must forfeit [her] own interests to take care of [Willie's] sick relations" simply because "that boy [. . .] has sent [her] home a camel's-hair scarf, and a cage-full of miserable little birds" is, from a Maussian perspective, not entirely incorrect: feelings of personal obligation often do stem at least partially from the gifts one receives (140).

Mr. Graham, however, violates the ideology of the gift by explicitly asserting the economic logic of gift exchange; "I can't say that I see how their claim compares with mine," he says before proceeding to enumerate what he has "given" Gertrude (140). Mr. Graham, in other words, openly acknowledges what the ideology of the gift requires be misrecognized, that his gifts entitle him to expect something in return, and Gertrude counters him with a declaration of her own unconsciousness of his logic's relevance to matters of the gift: "I did not think, [. . .] of counting up the favors I had received, and measuring my conduct accordingly. In that case, my obligations to you [. . .] would certainly have the greatest claim upon my services" (140, my italics). Clearly, however, Gertrude does not really regard Mr. Graham's "claim" to her loyalty as "the greatest," since she stands firm in her belief that she must leave his family to help Willie's. Mr. Graham's claim outweighs theirs, she suggests, only according to the rules of the market. On the one hand, this episode in *The Lamplighter* correctly points to a distinction between the economies of the gift and the market: the two have different standards of value, and Mr. Graham should know better than to speak as he does if what he seeks, as he confesses, is not Gertrude's "services," but her "company" (140). On the other hand, however, this episode typifies domestic fiction's tendency to exaggerate this distinction:
the merchant Mr. Graham appears incapable of speaking any language other than that of financial accounting and self-interest, and the domestic heroine Gertrude appears completely insensible ("I did not think") to the fact that certain principles of exchange do contribute to her sense of moral and social obligations.

This tendency to define the domestic in terms of moral altruism and the market in terms of calculation and self-interest is not simply a feature of the nineteenth century’s ideology of separate spheres; as feminist economists such as Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann have argued, “the traditional conceptual segregation of self-interest and altruism” is a fundamental, persisting shortcoming of mainstream economics (185). An underlying contradiction of neoclassical economic theory, as sociologist Paula England observes, is that “it presumes that humans are autonomous, impervious to social influences, and lack sufficient emotional connection to each other to make empathy possible,” when acting “in ‘the economy’ or the market” but are “altruistic” within the family (37). These assumptions are problematic, not only because the presumption of altruism within the domestic sphere has allowed economists to ignore “the ways in which typical arrangements between men and women perpetuate women’s disadvantage both in their families and in labor markets” (England 38), but also, because, as Folbre and Hartmann point out, they “fend off the argument that moral and altruistic concerns might apply to the capitalist marketplace” and thus work to “protect the marketplace from moral criticism” (186).21 Indeed, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a small number of economists, such as John Bates Clark and Richard Ely, had themselves criticized the “the moral dualism of separate spheres” for similar reasons, arguing that “these realms had to remain spatially separate but become ethically one, with the ethos of the home transposed
into the market" (Stanley 169-70).

Nineteenth-century sentimental fiction frequently, of course, depicts characters, such as Mr. Graham, whose altruism fails even within the domestic sphere, but it treats them as exceptions proving the rule that so-called "economic" conduct defines the masculine market, not the home. And although sentimental fiction depicts many men who give gifts and perform generous acts, it nevertheless categorizes gift-giving as women's work (such fiction, after all, often privileges men—Uncle Tom, for instance—who represent "feminine" values), and thereby reinforces this opposition between the market and the domestic. The market remains open to men as an arena in which they can engage in "economic"—which is to say self-interested—behavior, no matter how generous they are at home. The Lamplighter's critique of Mr. Graham's mercantile logic is in no way absolute; it merely suggests that it is inappropriate to interactions within the home. The novel praises Willie's altruistic treatment of friends and family members without suggesting that he should behave similarly in his business transactions, the details of which the novel can simply ignore. Confined to the domestic, women, on the other hand, are expected to act altruistically at all times.

The Lamplighter, for instance, depicts several women who fall short in this regard, but criticizes them, as Nina Baym explains, for failing in their womanly duty to uphold domestic values (xxii). Women who act self-interestedly—whether in as extreme a manner as the violent Nan Grant, whose greed is so great that she commits "foul robbery" (388), or as the merely vain and frivolous Isabel Clinton—are demonized. Nan Grant's murder of the kitten, the "gift" that marked the start of True's relationship with Gertrude (10-11), is perhaps the most extreme example of a trope common in domestic
fiction; an inappreciativeness of the importance of gifts, sometimes even the willful
destruction of others’ gifts, frequently symbolizes women’s failure to live up to the
domestic ideal, a failure against which a heroine’s virtues can be defined.

The Graham’s often unkind housekeeper, for instance, occasions Gertrude’s “first
instance of complete self-control” when she destroys various gifts from True and Willie
as junk, an act that greatly angers Gertrude (118). The heroine of Elsie Dinsmore
similarly learns to control her anger when confronted with such injustices as a
stepgrandmother who mocks as “nonsense” her belief that handmade gifts have particular
value and forces her to give a purse she has been making for a beloved friend to her own
daughter (47), a spoiled girl who demonstrates her own disregard for Elsie by
intentionally scratching “Elsie’s little rosewood rocking chair—a recent present from her
papa, and highly prized [. . .] on that account” (200). Occasionally, women characters’
shortcomings are established through a less literal depiction of their insensitivity to the
principles of the feminine gift economy; such is the case in Little Women, where one of
the challenges the March sisters face is Aunt March, a generous, but difficult old woman
who lacks the “gift” of “giving and receiving friendship in the sweetest way” (191).

Sentimental fiction does not rely solely, of course, on such negative examples to
define domesticity in terms of the gift and the values it symbolizes. Another important
means of its doing so is to characterize marriage itself as a gift exchange of sorts.
Willie’s lengthy explanation in The Lamplighter about why his desire to marry Gertrude
should not be thought to stem from mere gratitude perhaps seems to point to an inherent
tension in defining marriage and the domestic sphere in terms of the gift: unless care is
taken to downplay or even deny the knowledge that gifts obligate their recipients to
return them, constructing marriage as a gift relationship might still permit an "economic" interpretation of marriage as an exchange between husband and wife. Marital exchanges, however, are not easily quantified or even identified (most couples do not keep accounts explicitly calculating the relative value of each spouse's various contributions\textsuperscript{22}), and they thus stand as an example of the unquantifiable equivalence and indirect reciprocity of gift transactions. The discourse of the gift that frequently frames sentimental depictions of courtship and marriage underscores that marriage is not reducible to a \textit{quid pro quo} exchange of services. Even so, by representing marriage in such terms, sentimental fiction does ultimately reinforce its culture's dominant economic ideology, as becomes apparent in \textit{Little Women}, a novel in which this motif is particularly well-developed.

Among Jo's reasons for not marrying Laurie is one that recalls Willie's acknowledgement that his gratitude toward Gertrude is not sufficient reason for marrying her: "I couldn't fall in love with the dear old fellow merely out of gratitude, could I?" (\textit{Little Women} 330). If Alcott's novel resembles Cummins's in that it critiques gratitude as a foundation for marriage while generally asserting its importance, it is less cautious about suggesting that marriage be regarded as a gift \textit{exchange}. Laurie's and Amy's courtship, for instance, is described in terms of exchange; it begins with the "new impressions which both of them were unconsciously giving and receiving" when they meet in Europe after a long absence from home (387). Amy is "grateful for the many pleasures [Laurie] gave her, and repaid him with the little services to which womanly women know how to lend an indescribable charm" (400). Jo's marriage to Friedrich Bhaer is similarly constructed as an exchange of gifts. Bhaer's first visit to the March
household is referred to as Jo’s “birthday gift” (450); they become engaged just after shopping for gifts for mutual friends (472-73); and Bhaer proposes in these words: “If this is not too poor a thing to gif for what I shall hope to receive, take it, in Gott’s name” (479). Meg’s marriage similarly demonstrates the “treasuries of real home-love and mutual helpfulness, which the poorest may possess, and the richest cannot buy” (399).

Emphasizing the “giving and receiving” and “mutual helpfulness” that occurs within a marriage, *Little Women* certainly depicts marriage as a more egalitarian form of gift-giving than does *The Wide, Wide World*, in which John and Ellen both speak of their marriage as Ellen’s “giving herself” to John (563). Nevertheless, Alcott’s novel suggests that the achieving of the domestic ideal depends on women’s particular talents in the arts of gift-giving. Laurie, for example, learns to love Amy because, as he tells Jo, “she is the sort of woman who knows how to rule well [. . .] and makes you feel as if she was doing you a favor all the while” (447). Moreover, *Little Women* affirms the conventional distinction between the self-interest that defines “economic” conduct and the altruism that supposedly characterizes the domestic sphere. Mrs. March teaches her daughters that the “comfort” of “home” “depends on each doing their share faithfully” as opposed to “every one think[ing] only of herself” (117). She instructs Meg that “the secret” of a good marriage and “home happiness” is for the husband to “not let business wean him from the little cares and duties that affect us all” and for the wife “not to let domestic worries destroy [her] interest in his pursuits” (392). “Each do our part alone in many things,” she explains, “but at home we work together, always” (392, my italics).

Alcott’s novel thus asserts the advantages of altruism and mutual concern, but relegates them to the home, where the husband, no less than his wife, is expected to heed
less self-interested impulses than those that presumably determine his "business" conduct. *Little Women*, in other words, shares the assumption that Folbre and Hartmann have identified as a constant of most economic theory beginning with Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, specifically the assumption that while individual self-interest motivates market transactions, it is not a motivating force within the home, where the family as a whole supposedly pursues an “aggregation” of “interdependent utilities” (188). This “assumption of a joint utility function,” they show, is problematic because it has inevitably “obscured the possibility of conflicts between individuals in the family” and has thus contributed to the inequality of women, whose interests have all too often been presumed to be sufficiently attended to by a benevolent husband or father (185).

The ideology of separate spheres defined the domestic in contradistinction to, among other things, the capitalistic activities of the market, and thereby, according to both histories of this ideology and some deconstructions of it, attempted to construct domestic values in opposition to “economic” ones. A recognition of the centrality of a particular understanding of the gift in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction’s articulation of this ideology illuminates its inherent unwieldiness but also points to something problematic in the argument of many literary critics that the essence of such fiction’s complicity with capitalism lies in its encouragement of female consumption.24 If domestic fiction connects consumption to a practice of gift exchange—by definition a type of *economic* distribution—then the mere fact that it promotes consumption or even depicts personal relations in economic terms does not on face signal its collusion with the forces of capitalism.

My argument is not that nineteenth-century sentimental domestic fiction is in no
way illustrative of its culture's capitalistic ideology; rather, I wish to refine such an argument by acknowledging that such texts also exemplify what Zelizer has described as the reciprocal transformation of the market and of social practices and values. Additionally, it should not be overlooked, I think, that although the gift, as a trope marking Christian conduct, appears as non-economic in novels such as The Wide, Wide World, such texts nevertheless do evoke particular economic principles which have often been regarded as precapitalist or as alternatives to capitalism. The rural setting of most of Warner's novel, for example, contrasts with the urban marketplace encountered in previous chapters and illustrates ways in which the domestic economy might be said to operate according to principles of gift exchange. The countryside where Ellen goes to live is a place where if one performs tasks such as spinning yarn and knitting for her neighbors, she is paid "not often in money; more commonly in various kinds of matters that she wants,—flour and sugar, and Indian meal, and pork, and ham, and vegetables, and wool" (194-95). It is a place where "when people [ . . . ] have so much of any kind of work to do that their own hands are not enough for it, they send and call in their neighbours to help them" at the type of party known as a "bee" (237).

Recognizing the gift's importance in domestic fiction such as Warner's thus suggests the shortcomings of attempts to deconstruct the separate spheres by identifying domesticity's underlying desire for possessions, as Gillian Brown, for instance, does in showing domesticity's commitment to possessive individualism. Brown notes that domestic novelists, Stowe in particular, distinguished between "maternal possessions" and "market articles" but argues that this distinction is consistent with "the liberal tradition of possessive individualism, in which individual rights are grounded in the
principle of self-ownership" (41, 39). If one assumes all possessions are owned by individuals, then Brown's claim is true, but understood as a gift, a possession is not just "self-reflexive of its owner" as Brown would have it (42). When a gift, a possession belongs not to one owner only since it is the nature of gifts to express the giver, the recipient, and the relationship between the two. In this respect, gifts have a fundamentally different meaning than commodities.

However, sentimental domestic fiction such as Warner's and Cummins's idealizes this difference as an absolute one, obscuring that gift exchanges are nevertheless economic transactions, and as such can be self-interested assertions of power as well as expressions of familial affection. The gift that is idealized as completely disinterested and divorced from the marketplace is a fiction domestic literature frequently affirms. This one is in some ways reasserted by contemporary critics who, in assuming that the "economic" aspects of domestic transactions automatically signal the market's intrusion into the domestic or an inherent capitalism underpinning domestic ideology, seem to posit some originary domestic practice situated outside of exchange. Such critics follow the same logic that undermines Emerson's critique of the market; whenever "exchange" is virtually equated with commodity transactions, then gift exchange's obligatory reciprocity will ensure that the very activities that express and sustain personal relationships will themselves appear to signal such relationships' commodification, a line of logic that does more to further the sense that commodification is inevitable than anything else.
Gifts and Commodities: The Separate Spheres Undone

Some nineteenth-century domestic works, however, might be said to be more realistic than sentimental in their treatment of the interlocking oppositions between gift and commodity, home and work. While most instances of domestic fiction idealize the gift in terms that contribute to the ideology that insists on distinguishing between personal and economic conduct, a text such as Fern’s *Ruth Hall* shows the family and the marketplace to be equally capable of fostering both loving relationships and mercenary behavior and explicitly attacks, in a manner recalling Melville’s satire of the Emersonian distinction between “business friends” and “friends celestial” (*Confidence-Man* 202-04), the idea that “business is one thing—friendship is another” (147).

This is not to say that the emphasizing of gifts’ sentimental importance, which seems a defining element of domestic literature, is absent in *Ruth Hall*. Like so many other nineteenth-century women writers, Fern links the economics of gift-giving with Christianity. Ruth is one who “could not look upon this wealth of sea, sky, leaf, bud, and blossom; she could not listen to the little birds, nor inhale the perfumed breath of morning, without a filling eye and brimming heart to the bounteous Giver” (29). Ruth’s grieving for her dead husband Harry and the injustices she consequently suffers are signified by her being forced to part with gifts the two had given each other. Ruth mourns when her in-laws have Harry’s clothes handed over to them, including a “smoking cap, Ruth’s gift” and other items, each having “its own little history, each its tender home associations” (78). When necessity compels her to sell a piece of jewelry to her cousin, who suggests that she should “be very glad to part with it for money,” Ruth’s
lament that "It was Harry's gift" underscores her cousin's insensitivity and (like the ring Mrs. Montgomery sells in Warner's novel) reminds readers that the value of sentiment always exceeds what the market, which can recognize only quantifiable equivalences, will pay (97). The emptiness of "her small purse (Harry's gift)" is the novel's poignant symbol of Ruth's poverty (126).

But despite the significance Ruth Hall assigns such gifts, it departs from domestic fiction's typical aligning of gifts with women's sphere. Although Fern gives occasional lip service to separate spheres truisms, as when remarking that "counting houses, like all other spots beyond the pale of female jurisdiction, are comfortless looking places" (74), one of Ruth Hall's principle messages is that while gift transactions are a relatively desirable form of exchange, both men and women participate in economic transactions of both the gift and commodity sort, and, therefore, gift and commodity exchanges cannot be neatly classified in terms of either gender or a distinction between the domestic and the market. Ruth Hall might first appear to make this argument through a straightforward reversal of common expectations about where gift and commodity exchanges generally occur; for example, Ruth, we are told, "had always shrunk from female friendship" due to a "wholesale disgust of the commodity" (50). However, the care with which the novel depicts the domestic and commercial spheres as each the site of multiple forms of economic conduct indicates that its problematizing of the separate spheres is not so simplistic.

Many episodes in Ruth Hall initially seem to typify domestic fiction's familiar demonizing of women who ignore the rules of the feminine gift economy, but the relative frequency of such women in this novel, combined with the absence of a conventional
self-sacrificing heroine, suggests that Fern’s goal is not so much to commend gift-giving ethics through negative examples as to attack the notion that women naturally possess superior skill in the arts of gift-giving. This attack begins early in the novel with Ruth’s mother-in-law’s disapproval of Ruth’s wedding gifts. Commenting, “Presents to her! Well, why don’t people make sensible presents,—a dozen of dish towels, some crash rollers, a ball of wick-yarn, or the like of that?” (18), Mrs. Hall exhibits an insensibility to any measure of value other than utility that betrays her own shortcomings as a giver of gifts. She constantly disparages her son’s gifts to her daughter-in-law as evidence of Ruth’s alleged greed and imprudence, while herself greedily insisting that Ruth hand over the pin-money Harry gives or covetously planning to outdo Ruth in decorating her parlor (20, 31).25

If Ruth and Harry’s frequent gifts to each other represent the possibility of domestic happiness, then the lack of respect shown to these gifts by Mrs. Hall and the cousin who purchases the jewelry given by Harry critiques other domestic texts’ suggestions that women have a special talent for bringing about such happiness through the artful management of the gift economy. Furthermore, as she learns from her friend Mrs. Leon, the gift exchanges between husband and wife are not always that different from the market’s commodity transactions. When told that other women have observed that her husband “denie[s] her nothing in the way of dress, equipage or ornament,” Mrs. Leon succinctly responds, “they, equally with myself, are necessary appendages to Mr. Leon’s establishment” (51).

In Ruth Hall, the domestic is never a haven from the market—not only after Harry’s death when Ruth’s family members quarrel incessantly about who will support
her, but even during the happy days of her marriage, when Ruth must spend mealtimes listening to her father-in-law narrate “the market prices he paid for each article of food upon the table” (24). Additionally, Fern’s novel satirizes another of domestic fiction’s sacred concepts, that of sympathetic female friendship. When Ruth seeks employment in a store where Harry had often shopped, the store’s owner, Tom Herbert, unable to hire her, asks his wife if she or any of her friends could provide Ruth with some employment, such as needlework. Mrs. Herbert is not moved by sympathy for a fellow woman’s plight, but rather reveals that women are no less capable than men of thinking in the basest economic terms: she informs her husband of his request’s impracticality by approvingly quoting a friend who has said “that she never employed any of those persons who ‘had seen better days;’ that somehow she couldn’t drive as good a bargain with them as she could with a common person, who was ignorant of the value of their labor” (81). Mr. Herbert’s rebuke, “God help poor Mrs. Hall, [...] if all the sex are as heartless,” does not prevent his wife from backing out of a proposed visit to Ruth, choosing to go shopping instead of visiting her former friend in her new “vulgar” circumstances (81, 82).

Despite such jabs at the tenets of domesticity, Ruth’s marriage nevertheless serves as a reminder that a model home can be more conducive than the market to personal happiness, so that Ruth herself, even after enjoying her success as a “regular business woman,” can say with apparent sincerity, “No happy woman ever writes” (173, 175). Domestic fiction’s ideal of an economy comprised of equitable exchanges motivated by feelings of friendship and familial love remains, after all, the standard by which Ruth Hall assesses its characters’ conduct in the commercial sphere. Whereas in The Wide, Wide, World, strangers bearing gifts represent gift exchange’s capacity for transforming
impersonal market transactions, in *Ruth Hall* strangers’ gifts—such as the aid offered to Ruth by Mr. Kendall, who introduces himself to Ruth’s brother as “an entire stranger,” by the man who identifies himself only as a friend of Harry’s, and by an unknown neighbor (59, 92, 127)—suggest that the strangers one encounters outside the domestic sphere should not necessarily be distrusted in the first place.

When Ruth’s brother refuses not only to publish her works in his magazine, but even to recommend her to others, Ruth is reluctant to enter the literary marketplace unassisted, wondering, “how can I ask of strangers a favor which a brother’s heart has so coldly refused?” (122). She learns, however, to overcome her hesitations about “receiving a favor from a stranger” (127), particularly after an unknown, unsolicited editor, John Walter, befriends her. The letter with which Walter initiates his relationship with Ruth is, on the one hand, very business-like in its proposal to inform Ruth of

> your market value—to speak in business phrase—as a writer; so that in case you are not receiving a just compensation, as things go, you might know it and act accordingly. [...] I might benefit you and myself at the same time [...] I have made a calculation as to what I can afford to give you. (142)

On the other hand, Walter’s claiming to write out of “a warm, brotherly interest in [Ruth’s] welfare” (143) bespeaks a concern not generally expected to be found in a business transaction.

Having discovered just how tenuous “brotherly interest” and other domestic protections can be, Ruth doubts Walter’s sincerity, but is consequently more desirous of the personal concern he promises. Walter requests that Ruth inform him of her current salary, but she recognizes that from a business perspective alone, it would not be quite “prudent to entrust so much to an entire stranger,” especially “the very first time he
even if, as the years passed, the old man's affection for the boy had dimmed, the boy would always remember. (144)

Like Melville's confidence man, then, Fern's protagonist reminds us that commercial success utterly depends on one's ability to portray oneself as worthy of others' confidence. Ruth's strategy for acquiring Walter's confidence likewise resembles that of Melville's cosmopolitan whose willingness to "assume a character, [and] stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" illustrates how confidence might be gained by acting as if with confidence even while recognizing that others' self-interest generally outweighs their benevolence (Confidence-Man 133).

Submitting to hopes that Walter might "really feel" such a brotherly interest in her and her desire "again to put faith in human nature," Ruth overlooks her "ungenerous doubts" about writing "to a stranger" and answers the letter "as though Mr. Walter had indeed been her brother, who having been away ever since before Harry's death, had just returned, and consequently, had known nothing about her cruel sufferings" (144, my italics). Ruth, in other words, follows Walter's example of acting as if with familial concern while acknowledging hopes of benefiting personally from their new relationship. Ruth and Walter's mutual performance of sibling affection produces the real feelings of familial obligation that they eventually do have for each other; their willingness to acknowledge the possibility of such obligations—obligations generally believed to be restricted to the domestic economy of gift exchange—produces a more enduring and
more profitable business arrangement than those between Ruth and her previous publishers.

Mr. Lescom, Ruth’s first editor, had refused to increase her pay, even after her articles win new subscribers for his newspaper. “Mr. Lescom’s view of the case” might be that which “almost any other business man would have taken, viz.: to retain her at her present low rate of compensation, till he was necessitated to raise it by a higher bid from a rival quarter” (131), but Walter’s “brotherly” willingness to pay Ruth ten times as much (146) reveals that a more successful businessman than Lescom might take a less parsimonious view of the matter. When Ruth again suggests to Lescom that if she has brought him “new subscribers,” then “friendship, if not justice,” should “induce [him] to raise [her] salary,” he replies,

*Friendship* has nothing to do with business [. . .]. The law of supply and demand regulates prices in all cases. [. . .] I have to regulate my arrangements according to my own interests, and not according to the interests of others. You, of course, must regulate your arrangements according to your interests; and if anybody else will give you more than I do, you are at liberty to take it. As I said before, *business* is one thing—*friendship* is another. Each is good in its way, but they are quite distinct. (147)

This “business-like and logical speech” (147) makes plain precisely why it should come as no great discovery that the absolute distinctions drawn between personal and commercial transactions by most nineteenth-century domestic writers do more to preserve commodity culture than to critique it. Such distinctions inevitably help justify regarding the market as a realm of pure self-interested competition.

This distinction asserted in Lescom’s little lecture about supply and demand is a cornerstone of conventional economic theory. As feminist economist Julie Nelson explains, contemporary mainstream economics defines itself “in mathematical models”
representing “the individual welfare or profit maximizing choices of autonomous agents;” in “focusing on choice,” traditional economics approaches “human decision as radically separated from physical and social constraints,” and in “stressing material well-being” it “ignores non-physical sources of human satisfaction” (22, 25, 32). Conventional economic theory, in other words, is able to approach its subject matter mathematically, to assume that reciprocity is quantifiable and that there is such a thing as “rational choice,” only because it hypothetically assumes that factors as unquantifiable as friendship and personal obligations do not influence one’s self-interest.26 Ruth, like Melville’s cosmopolitan, pokes fun at the effort to separate business and friendship in the name of logic; she reveals Lescom’s logic to be too confining to be really profitable by immediately turning his words against him, using them to notify Lescom of her decision to leave his employ for Walter’s in terms that his own argument has committed him to accept (148).

Thus depicting Lescom’s commitment to maintaining a distinction between business and personal relationships as a blindness, Ruth Hall criticizes conventional understandings of market conduct, even while unquestionably encouraging women to become active participants in the commercial sphere.27 Justifying his refusal to acknowledge personal obligations on the grounds of a businessman’s supposed right to protect his self-interest, Lescom resembles another target of the novel’s condemnation, Mr. Develin, an executor of Harry’s will. Believing that “a man must look out for No. 1” and “for his own interest” and that “keep[ing] on the right side” of Harry’s parents will prove more financially advantageous than assisting the impoverished Ruth, Develin agrees to send Harry’s clothes to Ruth’s in-laws even though doing so means
disregarding his legal duty in handling Harry’s estate (he knows that the law entitles Ruth to all of Harry’s property) and overlooking any personal obligation to Harry, who had been his “friend to be sure” (76-7).

Lescom’s and Develin’s unscrupulousness stems from the common belief that the interconnectedness of the economic and the social can be ignored. *Ruth Hall* counters this belief by depicting the domestic and the market as equally likely sites of both altruistic affection and self-interested economic calculation and, moreover, by showing the market’s capacity for actually producing the sort of personal relationships against which the market is often defined. Not all businessmen, Fern’s novel insists, are as reluctant as Lescom to acknowledge the friendships that can naturally develop between business associates. Ruth’s daughter Katy, for instance, encounters a man who gives her a bag of money because of the friendship he had had with her father, a friendship that grew out of their business relationship: “I used to go to his counting-house to talk to him on business, and I learned to love him very much” (89). Ruth and Walter likewise build a “true friendship” (210, italics in original) out of their relationship as employer and employee.

Ruth’s realization that she can capitalize on Walter’s declaration of brotherly interest by responding to him “as though” he is “indeed [...] her brother” as a means of increasing the likelihood that he will in fact, unlike Lescom, treat her as a friend rather than a mere commodity is an instance of domestic fiction’s frequent proposition that performances of gift exchange can transform capitalistic transactions. Assuming the roles of siblings, and thus accepting obligations beyond the terms of the contract they sign, Ruth and Walter commit themselves to a gift, rather than commodity, relationship;
because they do so voluntarily, this relationship appears more binding, more reliable than those Ruth has with her actual family members. This performance of kinship thus contributes significantly to Ruth Hall's deconstruction of the gift/commodity binary but nevertheless signals its limitations as well.

Ruth and Walter's performance of sibling affection reconfigures familial obligations as voluntary, and in this respect, Ruth Hall is consistent with the conventional ideology of the gift. This ideology understands gifts as freely given and thus as transcending the obligatory reciprocity that is the limit to the freedom required for market transactions; Maussian models understand gift exchanges as obligatory because transacted within the context of social relationships, such as those of kinship, which are in no way voluntary (Carrier 11). The familial relationship Ruth and Walter perform, like Ruth's idyllic relationship with her husband but unlike her ties to her callous father, brother, and in-laws, is voluntary; it becomes truly obligatory only with the signing of a contract, market exchange's paradigmatic act. Thus rescripting domestic ties as voluntary, Ruth Hall arguably preserves a space for the "true," freely given gift.

Nevertheless, Fern's novel significantly departs from sentimental works that privilege transactions within the domestic or private sphere as an intrinsically superior mode of exchange. Unlike fiction that posits, as even Emerson's critique of the gift ultimately does, an ideal exchange that transcends both the market and social obligations, Ruth Hall resists idealistic constructions of family and friendship and avoids privileging either the domestic or the market, either gift or commodity exchange. For example, Harry's friend's instruction that Katy should tell Ruth that his anonymous gift of money "is something I owed your dear papa" (89) affirms in some respects the notion that gifts
transcend charity, but in designating the gift as something owed, it simultaneously connects the gift to social obligations and avoids suggesting that the gift somehow occurs outside the circuits of exchange. Moreover, this gift from a business associate of Harry demonstrates that the commercial sphere is no less likely than the domestic to generate the sort of bonds that form a gift community.

Ruth and Walter have a “true friendship” that affords each “the perfect freedom” of revealing their true “moods” and “thoughts” to each other (210), but even this ideal friendship in no way transcends their business relationship. Acting “as though” they are “indeed” siblings, Ruth and Walter demonstrate that the foundations for economic transactions, whether of the gift or commodity sort, are more performative than essential; Ruth’s actual family’s failure to support her, it might be said, is a failure to perform in the roles the domestic economy offers. Formalizing their relationship both by professing a sense of familial responsibility toward each other and by signing a contract, Ruth and Walter reconfigure domestic and market obligations as extensions of each other, as mutually inclusive, not competing, responsibilities. Their contract itself symbolizes this undoing of ideological distinctions between domestic and market ethics; explaining to Ruth that he wishes her to sign a one-year contract so that she “may be able to take advantage at that time of better offers, which [she] will undoubtedly have” Walter establishes their contract as both a vehicle for protecting the interests of both parties in the transaction (which is how contracts are conventionally understood) and as evidence of the brotherly concern and friendship he feels for Ruth (146). Similarly, the picture of the stock certificate printed near the novel’s conclusion illustrates that even the most straightforward financial documents are no less capable than gifts of becoming
sentimentalized objects: the certificate's image appears in *Ruth Hall* not as a mere receipt for the stock shares Ruth's earnings purchase, but as a symbol of how "proud" she, her daughters, and Walter are of her success (209).

Ruth's success as not only a writer but also as a businesswoman completes *Ruth Hall*'s critique of the popular distinction between a feminine sphere and a masculine market, a distinction that has given much support to the gift/commodity binary that comprises Western capitalism's ideology of the gift. In her introduction to *American Literature*'s "No More Separate Spheres!" special issue, Cathy Davidson suggests that one problem with the separate spheres metaphor has been that in seemingly justifying literary histories which "focus exclusively on women writers," it perpetuates the binaric thinking that has divided the canon into men and women's texts (444, *passim*). A recognition of the interconnectedness of such oppositions as those between feminine altruism and masculine self-interest, home and work, and gift and commodity suggests compelling reasons for supplementing my discussion of domestic fiction with a novel that is no less concerned with domestic life because written by a man.29 William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, like Fern's novel, deconstructs such binaries by demonstrating the economic nature of social obligations and, more importantly, the social and domestic implications of economic transactions.

Readers of *Silas Lapham* have always recognized that Silas's "rise" is a moral rise that comes at the price of a financial one. As James M. Cox puts it, "Lapham is morally falling as he is rising financially, and morally rising as he is financially falling" (118-19). Such a trade-off does seem to be the force behind Silas's rise, and, nevertheless, describing the novel's plot in these terms reflects the common presumption of a natural
opposition between morality and finance, social ethics and economic logic. This presumption is apparent even in Wai-Chee Dimock’s argument that Howells’s novel resists this opposition through its formulation of “a model whose claim to ‘justice’ rests on its ability to conjoin the moral and the economic, or rather, on the fact that, under its dispensation, the moral and the economic need no conjoining at all” (“Economy” 67-68). In discussing Howells’s “economy of pain” as an attempt to reconcile the moral and the economic, Dimock presupposes that the moral and the economic are normally at odds with each other and that their intertwining is the product of capitalistic ideology and the commodification of social life. 30

Like Walter Benn Michaels, who reads the novel’s conclusion as a “return to the precapitalist (and in most respects the anticapitalist) ideals of his beginnings” (41), John Crowley connects Silas’ rise to the ethics of a “pre-industrial and precorporate past” (xxii). Concurring with Dimock, and quoting Bromfield Corey, one of Howells’s character’s who believes that “money” has become “the romance, the poetry of our age” (65), Crowley argues that Silas Lapham illustrates “the dematerialization of cash” that in our culture ensures that “moral values have an economic basis and economic values have moral implications” (xxv), a formulation of the novel’s depiction of the relationship between the moral and the economic that seemingly describes a reciprocal relationship between the two, but does not really: both saying that “moral values have an economic basis” and saying that “economic values have moral implications” are ways of stating that economics has an impact in the moral sphere, and neither statement accounts for the reciprocal effect that moral, or social, concerns have on “economics.” The capitalist market is not the novel’s sole source of values, “economic” or otherwise; hence
attributing its depiction of the inextricability of economics and morality to a uniquely
capitalistic problem perhaps requires too hasty a generalization about the very meaning of
“economic.” Approaching Howells’s novel as an illustration of the tensions between
precapitalist and capitalist ethics or as a commentary on the commodification of social
relations, as such readings do, does not fully account for the complexity of its economic
argument.

_The Rise of Silas Lapham_ consists of two primary plots—the tale of Silas’s
gained, then lost wealth and the tale of the merging of the Lapham and Corey families—
and two subplots—Silas’s dealings with his former business partner, Milton K. Rogers,
and with Zerrilla Dewey. A close reading of the novel shows that all four plots are
stories of favors given, sacrifices made, and debts accrued, and all four thus seem to
illustrate gift exchange’s triple obligations identified by Mauss. Time and again,
Howells’s novel—whether in Mrs. Corey’s giving a dinner because she feels indebted to
the Laphams or in Tom Corey’s offering to “give” Silas money in an attempt to win
Penelope (282)—illustrates that social interactions are always part of a circle of exchange
and as such are themselves economic. In other words, Howells demonstrates that there is
no real opposition between the moral (and social) and the economic—people always act
with expectations of return—and thus problematizes the gift by illustrating that there are
no real boundaries between gifts, self-sacrifice, and exchange.

The novel’s courtship plot is critical to Howells’s depiction of exchange because
it highlights that the exchanges that concern him are not merely the exchanges of
commodities. Mauss’s analysis of tribal gift rituals shows that:

In the economic and legal systems that have preceded our own, one hardly ever
finds a simple exchange of goods, wealth, and products in transactions concluded by individuals. First, it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting parties are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another either in groups [...] or through their chiefs. (5)

Rarely, I would add, are the parties involved in economic exchanges the autonomous individuals of conventional free market theory; most economic transactions are conducted by persons whose conduct is circumscribed by personal and social obligations. That this is true can be observed not only in the “systems that have preceded our own” that Mauss describes; one need not evoke precapitalist cultures in order to suggest that an individual’s motivations in a particular economic transaction might be socially situated. As both the dinner and the marriage in Silas Lapham suggest, gift-exchange has, in various forms, remained a means of forging family and class solidarity as well as creating and defining relationships between classes. Silas Lapham might be said to illustrate not the ethics of an individual capitalist, but rather, that even in capitalist societies, exchange is really a matter of families and classes.

The “Lapham tribe,” as Bromfield Corey calls them (277), and the Coreys meet while vacationing in Canada. Mrs. Lapham and her daughter Irene come to the aid of fellow Bostonians Mrs. Corey and her two daughters who have lost their luggage and are seriously ill, an act of kindness that makes Mrs. Corey feel indebted to Mrs. Lapham and that thus produces a series of exchanges between their two families. The Laphams give Mrs. Corey a check for a charity for which she is collecting and her son Tom a job and a wife. In return, the Coreys give the Laphams a dinner and a rise in social status. Perhaps the Coreys’ best gift to the Laphams is Bromfield Corey’s visit to Silas’s office. Silas is thrilled by the opportunity to sit “face to face with Bromfield Corey, praising his son to
him, and receiving his grateful acknowledgments as if he were the father of some office-boy whom Lapham had given a place half out of charity” (146).

Silas’s employment of Tom Corey offers a clear example of how financial and social exchanges occur simultaneously. Silas, of course, pays Tom, but he also gives him opportunities to socialize with Penelope and the chance to have what Bromfield Corey describes as “a future of industry and self-reliance” (70). Tom, as inexperienced in business as he is, can offer Silas much in return. He can benefit Silas in business matters; since he speaks and writes several languages, he can represent the paint company in many countries “and place it to advantage” (77). More importantly, he offers Silas access to a higher social status. Silas “had always said that he did not care what a man’s family was, but the presence of young Corey as an applicant to him for employment, as his guest, as the possible suitor of his daughter was one of the sweetest flavours that he had yet tasted in his success” (93).

The novel’s primary plots hinge not only on the Coreys’ obligation to the Laphams, but also on the Laphams’ obligation to Silas’s former partner, Milton K. Rogers. Silas is uneasy about having bought back Rogers’s share in his paint company, and his uneasiness is that of an unpaid debt:

It was a moment of terrible trial. Happy is the man for ever after who can choose the ideal, the unselfish part in such an exigency! Lapham could not rise to it. He did what he could maintain to be perfectly fair. The wrong, if any, seemed to be condoned to him, except from time to time his wife brought it up. Then all the question stung and burned anew, and had to be reasoned out and put away once more. (51)

Silas claims that his “conscience is easy as far as he’s [Rogers] concerned,” but Persis sees things otherwise. “You crowded him out. A man that had saved you! No, you had
got greedy, Silas. [. . .] I don’t say you meant wrong exactly, but you took an advantage” (47, 48).

These differences in Silas’s and Persis’s perspectives of their standing with Rogers are important because they indicate that Howells’s novel, despite highlighting the commonalities of business and social conduct, makes a more complex argument than simply suggesting that the ethics of capitalism and of social exchange are ultimately identical. Whereas Silas is certain of having treated his former partner fairly, Persis, who has known Rogers primarily in a social rather than business context, insists that Silas still owes Rogers for the help he once gave him. The two have competing systems of determining value—Silas that of the market, Persis that of the gift and the personal obligations it represents. Moreover, in some ways, Silas’s obligation to Rogers becomes a separate, personal obligation to his wife whom he owes for her having helped him in earlier days when business was rough. Significantly, Silas distances himself from Persis’s viewpoint by appealing to the doctrine of separate spheres: tired of her complaints about his treatment of Rogers, he tells her, “If you’ll ’tend to the house, I’ll manage my business without your help” (48). Persis’s response implicitly calls into question the truth of such logic: “You were very glad of my help once” (48). Silas’s dilemma about Rogers becomes without question a domestic matter as well as a business one when, after Silas lends Rogers money, Persis compels Silas to make a personal promise to her: “I want you should promise me this: that you won’t let anything tempt you—anything!—to ever trouble Rogers for that money you lent him. No matter what happens—no matter if you lose it all” (135-36).

Howells’s Boston is a world in which people must always be suspected of acting
out of self interest. When Tom Corey, for example, offers to help Silas by investing in his failing business, Penelope suspects that he does so to encourage her to reconsider her rejection of his marriage proposal. Her mother believes otherwise: “He might want to please you without wanting to change you by what he did” (314). But as generous as Tom might be, he does act with ulterior motives; he is well aware that giving Silas money is an “opportunity to prove the unselfishness of his constancy” (282). Penelope tries to be fair to Tom by distancing herself from him after her father begins losing money, only to be suspected by Mrs. Corey of acting strategically. When Mr. Corey comments that Penelope “has behaved very well,” Mrs. Corey insinuatingly replies, “she has behaved too well. If she had studied the whole situation with the most artful eye to its mastery, she could not possibly have behaved better” (317). If it is impossible to determine whether another has given selflessly or selfishly, then one must be skeptical of all generous acts and must wonder, as does Mrs. Corey in this instance, whether one will eventually be compelled to pay them back at a later date and, moreover, how much one will be obligated to repay.

Describing the Trobriand kula, Mauss describes how when the recipients of gifts are unable to reciprocate enough, they offer a basi, “a kind of advance present, whose purpose is to delay. It appeases the former donor, now the creditor; but does not free the debtor, the future donor” (26). Such a counter-gift suggests that even in its purest forms, gift exchange involves something like the interest on a loan, but it also exemplifies a real difference between gift and market transactions: unlike a market transaction, into which a person enters knowing with certainty what price or amount of interest she will be have to pay, a gift exchange leaves it to the recipient to determine how and when to repay an
obligation. The Coreys' first visit to the Laphams' home on Nankeen square, as is Silas's initial reimbursement to Rogers for his share of the partnership, is, like a basi, an insufficient compensation for a received benefit of necessarily indeterminate value.

The incalculability of her debt of gratitude is a source of unease to Mrs. Corey, who struggles to tally just how much she owes the Laphams in terms better suited to market transactions:

nothing had really yet been done to wipe out the obligation to the Laphams helplessly contracted the summer before, and strengthened by that ill-advised application to Mrs. Lapham for charity. Not only the principal of their debt of gratitude remained, but the accruing interest. […] What harm could giving the dinner possibly do them? They might ask any or all of their acquaintances without disadvantage to themselves. (178)

It is difficult to know when one has finished reciprocating for something whose value cannot be quantified, which is why gifts (which typically have a significance beyond their monetary value) tend to produce some sort of social relationship. The interest that Mrs. Corey owes the Laphams is to show interest in them, and she keenly feels her failure to do so: "she had always been a little ashamed of using her acquaintance with them to get money for her charity, and then seeming to drop it. Besides it seemed to her that she ought somehow to recognize the business relation that Tom had formed with the father; they must not think that his family had disapproved of what he had done" (168).

In other words, it is not just the obligations themselves that motivate her, but also the fact that whether or not she repays her debt will determine what the Laphams think of the Corey family. Similarly, she is motivated by her suspicions that her son has a romantic interest in Irene, fearing that without a dinner, Tom's involvement with the Laphams will have a "clandestine appearance" (176). This fear of appearances indicates
what is really at stake—the Coreys must maintain their social authority over the Laphams and cannot, therefore, afford to let their debts go unpaid. Mauss frequently points out that in tribal societies, generosity stemmed from a desire to exhibit one’s wealth and power, resulting in the potlatch’s agonistic giving: “To give is to show one’s superiority [. . .]. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant” (74). It is to display superiority and to escape the subordination of indebtedness that Mrs. Corey hosts a dinner in the Laphams’ honor. As she tells Tom, “we owe it to ourselves not to be afraid to show that we have felt their kindness to us, and his appreciation of you” (182). “Owe” and “appreciation,” are economic words, echoing her earlier concern that the debt of gratitude was accruing interest. To Clare Eby, such language indicates that Mrs. Corey “tellingly imagines that she is settling an economic transaction. [. . .] The business ethos has invaded the Corey home even before the Laphams arrive” (49).

As should now be obvious, Eby’s vague terminology—“economic transaction”—risks positing a utopian reality in which dinner parties and other gifts, ideally having no economic purposes, are in fact separate from a sphere in which “the business ethos” more rightfully belongs. Certainly, that Mrs. Corey assesses her debt through the language of market transactions indicates that she thinks within the primary economic discourse of the culture in which she lives, but her recognition of the economic aspects of her social transactions should not be mistaken for evidence of a uniquely capitalistic attitude. Just because the dinner in question is a party held by members of Boston’s elite rather than a Tlingit potlatch is no reason to expect it to be given outside the circle of exchange. Even Silas, a novice in the customs of such parties, recognizes that one function of such
dinners is to bind members of a community through a cycle of reciprocal exchanges: “If we’re ever going to be anybody at all, we’ve got to go and see how it’s done [. . .] and this gives the chance to ask ‘em back again” (186). And he is right; according to the rules of gift exchange, the “invitation must be returned, just as ‘courtesies’ must” (Mauss 65). However, there is usually more to social and domestic transactions than the straightforward, direct reciprocity that characterizes commodity exchange. Too readily interpreting a concern with reciprocity as evidence of the commodification of social relations, often means giving inadequate attention to the distinctions between different forms of exchange.

The Coreys’ dinner party is not the only instance of Howells’s characters demonstrating an awareness that gifts are opportunities to exhibit one’s wealth and social power. Persis resists giving Mrs. Corey’s charity a check for an overly generous amount because she does not “want to show off before them” (33). Tom too recognizes that generous gestures have the potential to humble others. Having dismissed Silas’s apology for his drunkenness at the dinner with the assurance that he had done nothing which for which he need apologize, Tom then realizes that his thus taking “the gentlemanly ground, sparing himself and asserting the superiority of his sort,” has only made Silas feel worse since “Lapham’s humiliation came from the sense of wrong, which he had helped to accumulate upon him by superfinely standing aloof and refusing to touch him” (219). In other words, his attempt to comfort Silas by suggesting that he cares nothing about his behavior, like many gifts, is an assertion of superiority.31

The social interactions in Silas Lapham might be said to resemble bartering, a form of exchange that, according to some, has characteristics of both gift and commodity
Bartering occurs when both parties wanting to trade are each interested in something the other has. For example, the Coreys, despite their professed reluctance, are interested in the Laphams' money and the Laphams, despite their professed reluctance, are interested in the Coreys' social status; all of their interactions (at least those up until Silas's financial problems are known) comprise a series of trades through which each side gets what it wants. The Coreys succeed in getting Tom into a lucrative business; they owe it to Silas that Tom gets a job in the Kanawha Falls paint company. The Laphams, despite their financial hardship, get what they wanted all along. They had pursued social status because, as Persis puts it, "we ought to do the best we can for the children, in every way [. . .] we ought to try to get them into society" (30). Penelope does marry Corey, thus giving the Lapham family a stronger tie to society than their money alone would have ever purchased. Additionally, they succeed in gaining the Coreys' admiration. Bromfield Corey finds "a delicate, aesthetic pleasure in the heroism with which Lapham had withstood Rogers and his temptations" and even writes Silas a letter telling him so (373).

My point is not that Silas Lapham is a book about bartering—"bartering" is ultimately just another label used in the problematic categorizing of exchange—no more than it is that the self-interest underlying social transactions proves the tyranny of the market. Rather, my argument is that this novel illustrates how exchange both constructs new social relations and exposes the assumptions on which those very constructs are based, a dynamic that anthropologists Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones describe particularly clearly in what happens to be an account of bartering. Bartering, they argue, creates social relations because it "uses goods to create a relationship of
mutual estimation between the self and a partner who is representative of an ‘other’ set of values,” but at the same time compels those who wish to barter to view each other “as a source of what is desirable to them” and thus to insist on their difference (10, 18). This simultaneous production and exposure of social relations is a key tension in the Lapham and Corey families’ interactions.

Etiquette, the rules for which play an important role in the ritualization of exchange, similarly enables and limits the production of social relationships. Formalized manners—which in many cases foreground the rules of gift exchange—can help those who wish to construct gift relations across class boundaries by ensuring some degree of calculability within their transactions and thus compensating for the trust that diminishes as one moves outside one’s own social group.33 Examining the nineteenth century’s increased concern with good manners, an interest demonstrated by the proliferation of etiquette books of the type the Laphams purchase in their frantic efforts to prepare for Mrs. Corey’s dinner, John Kasson describes how nineteenth-century etiquette ritualized social—and sometimes business—exchanges and thus played a critical role in class relations in nineteenth-century America. Manners, Kasson argues, were sometimes regarded as a democratizing force in that they could eliminate distinctions in the behavior of different classes, but this also made etiquette a tool for maintaining class hegemony.34 The Laphams, for example, are well aware of etiquette’s exclusionary power; they fear exposing themselves as social frauds and losing future chances to join the Coreys’ social circle. The Coreys’ dinner thus repays the Laphams for their kindness, but is also a sort of potlatch, a demonstration that despite their debts to the Laphams, they are still the Laphams’ social superiors.
Class and family interests are a primary motive of many transactions, ones that are not always given sufficient attention by neoclassical economics, whose hypothetical calculations tend to assume autonomous agents with more obviously utilitarian interests. Rational choice theory has difficulty accounting for such motives because once self-interest is conceived as including such hard to qualify sources of personal satisfaction as concern for family members, economic decisions begin to appear less rational, less likely to be adequately explained with mathematical models. On the other hand, the ideology of the gift that facilitates the capitalistic equating of "economic" with "self-interest" by reinforcing the construction of familial and interpersonal exchanges as altruistic, has difficulty acknowledging the self-interest involved in nonmarket transactions. *Silas Lapham* highlights these intertwined difficulties by urging suspicion of others’ generosity and self-sacrifices, even as it illustrates how a supposedly noneconomic concern for others can influence one’s conduct within the market.

At his dinner party for the Laphams, Bromfield Corey jokes about one guest’s, Miss Kingsbury’s, charities: “Her tender mercies are cruel [. . .]. Beware of her and all her works. She calls them works of charity; but heaven knows whether they are. It don’t stand to reason that she gives the poor all the money she gets out of people. I have my own belief [. . .] that she spends it for champagne and cigars” (199). Accusing Miss Kingsbury of such selfishness might be a friendly joke, but it also underscores Bromfield’s own selfish notion of sacrifice, something he demonstrates, for instance, in telling Tom that “it is a world of sacrifices and compromises,” by which he means merely that if his son is willing to live economically by making some sacrifices, he need not ever work (98). Mr. Corey’s cynicism is excessive, but perhaps not altogether unwise. The
charitable Miss Kingsbury says of *Tears, Idle Tears*, an imaginary sentimental novel, that its characters make "the most wildly satisfactory and unnecessary sacrifices for each other. You feel as if you'd done them yourself" (203). This is precisely Howells's criticism of sentimental novels—such fiction institutionalizes sacrifice.

Sacrifice, Howells suggests, must be held suspect because it defies human instinct and common sense. When Penelope reads *Tears, Idle Tears*, she criticizes its ridiculous sacrifices (224); when finding herself in a situation similar to that novel's heroine, she talks herself into attempting the same sacrifices. Persis instinctively comprehends the economy of pain; when Penelope tells her she intends to reject Tom's proposal for her sister's sake, Persis answers, "No! If there's to be any giving up, let it be by the one that sha'n't make anybody but herself suffer" (237). However, Persis, like Penelope, changes her mind and accepts the sentimental view of the case. Mr. Sewell, the minister who later appears as a central character in Howells's *The Minister's Charge* (1886), advises the confused parents to turn to the principles of the "economy of pain" for guidance: "One suffer instead of three if none is to blame [. . . ] That's sense, and that's justice. It's the economy of pain which naturally suggests itself, and which would insist upon itself, if we were not all perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality" (249). He continues, "we are all blinded, we are all weakened by a false ideal of self-sacrifice" (249), and his message that self-sacrifice is not inherently selfless since it can create more, rather than less, suffering is one the novel as a whole endorses.

The ideology of the gift encourages us to believe that sacrifices, such as the sort Penelope contemplates, are by definition selfless and hence outside the realm of debt-imposing, harm-inflicting gifts, but the gift of self actually provides a paradigmatic
example of the true gift’s impossibility, as Derrida indicates when describing how the
gift’s “sacrificial, or economic structure” ensures that “simple consciousness of the gift”
rewards the giver with “the gratifying image of goodness or generosity” (23). When a
person consciously intends to give a gift, he also unavoidably intends, Derrida points out,
“to pay himself” by returning “to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he
thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give” (14). Penelope’s attempt to sacrifice
her own happiness for Irene, *Silas Lapham* suggests, is as foolish as it is impossible.
Howells critiques the ideology of the gift not merely by showing that the gift, as this
ideology defines it, is impossible, but by suggesting that the gift be defined in different
terms altogether.

“The economy of pain,” according to Dimock, refers in part to the way “moral
responsibilities tend to get out of hand by mutating into financial liabilities” thus
requiring a “solution [that works] in the opposite direction, which is to say, [that tries] to
rectify the moral by way of the economic” (“Economy” 79). But the reverse is also
ture—financial responsibilities produce social (moral) relationships.35 When the gift is
recognized as one transactional mode among others comprising the more general
phenomenon of exchange, then it becomes clear that exchange, broadly understood, must
be understood to entail virtually always both types of responsibility. Conversely,
defining exchange so that it is exclusive of “social” matters cannot avoid leading to zero-
sum analyses of transactions of the sort *Silas Lapham* depicts, analyses in which social
and/or moral motives are necessarily at odds with “economic” ones. The minister’s
philosophy of an economy of pain clearly represents an attempt to subsume social
conduct and moral responsibilities into an economistic model that presupposes that
human behavior can be reduced to rational sense, and it is thus the sort of critique of sentimentalism that one might expect to find in a realist novel written by a man. Howell's argument, however, is more complex than his minister's; Mr. Sewell emphasizes the economic logic of social conduct, but the story of Silas's rise suggests that there is no rational, "economic" logic that is not already determined by social concerns.

Silas's "rise" can be summarized as follows. When Rogers asks him for a loan, Silas gives it to assuage his guilt for his past treatment of him. Silas then begins to have financial difficulties—he is losing business to a new competitor, has spent too much building a new house, and has lost money in stocks. As security, Rogers has given him some property, which, as Silas discovers, is practically valueless because it is wanted by a large railroad company that has the power to purchase it for much less than it is worth. Silas has opportunities to sell the land to wealthy investors in England who can afford losing a large amount of money and to sell half his paint company to a man who is unaware that it will soon lose much of its market to new competitors. Although Silas desperately needs the money that could be made by taking advantage of the ignorance of these potential investors, he decides that he prefers financial ruin to doing something unethical.

The difficulty in accounting for Silas's rise in "economic" terms or in explaining why Silas makes such financial sacrifices despite having learned in the context of the novel's romance plot of self-sacrifice's supposed foolishness,\textsuperscript{36} stems partly from the fact that Silas makes a business decision that takes into account familial, personal, and moral obligations and interests not easily accounted for by the rational choice models of
mainstream economics. That he feels morally obligated to consider others, even strangers, does not fit neatly within conventional distinctions between the domestic and the market. At the same time, if Silas' moral heroism serves such obligations and interests, then it cannot be explained by a sentimental discourse that idealizes disinterested gifts and self-sacrifices either.

Even Silas's remarkable sacrifice cannot be said to be entirely disinterested since it does have some rewards, most of which factor into his decision. His troubles begin with his loan to Rogers, a loan that points to the self-interest that even his final sacrifice does not fully escape: he hopes to ease his misgivings about having failed to "choose the ideal, the unselfish part" in past dealings with Rogers (51), and he seems to have waited until he sees how aiding Rogers might benefit himself since he lends Rogers money when he thinks, albeit mistakenly, that he can profit from the stocks and property offered as security. Similarly, it cannot be overlooked that in sacrificing himself financially, Silas improves the Coreys' impression of Penelope's family, provides his creditors with evidence of his good character so that they give him time to pay off his debts, contributes to his new competitors' friendly feelings for him so that they hire his new son-in-law (which Silas regards as his "proudest consolation" [367]), and, most importantly, affords himself a feeling of having "been no man's enemy but his own," of having "come out with clean hands," a feeling that gives him "great pride" (375). Silas's sacrifice is not self-interested in the conventional economic sense, but it is not disinterested either since, as Silas himself implies to Mr. Sewell, he decides not to take advantage of his potential investors' ignorance more to preserve his own conscience than from some altruistic desire not to hurt others (378). He sacrifices himself, in other words, with the
consciousness of self-sacrifice that is the inevitable condition of the gift's impossibility. Rather than asking how exchange might transcend either self-interest or social obligation, Howells explores what it means to act ethically, given that true altruism is impossible.

The unwillingness to acknowledge the inherent selfishness of gifts and sacrifices—the denial that our culture's construct of a true gift is anything more than a "figment of the shallowest sentimentality" (Silas 249)—has significant ramifications not only in the domestic lives of individuals, as Silas Lapham illustrates, but in society as a whole, as others of Howells's novels insist, such as The Minister's Charge and Annie Kilburn (1888). In The Minister's Charge, for example, Sewell encourages insincerely, but out of kindness, the literary pursuits of a boy, Lemuel Barker, who takes Sewell's praise seriously and moves to Boston to pursue a literary career. To Mr. Evans, a friend of both Sewell and his charge, Sewell's generally counterproductive attempts to help Lemuel exemplify his theory about "Complicity" (160). Although Evans is interested in Complicity primarily as a factor in sweeping social issues—not just as it affects individuals and families as is Silas Lapham—he is concerned with "the frauds that we practice upon ourselves in order to be able to injure others" (162-63) or, in simpler terms, the common reluctance to acknowledge that we give out of self-interest. Silas is exemplary not just because he acts more selflessly than not but because of his newfound willingness to acknowledge and even disclose what he has to gain in a given situation—even when everything is at stake, as it is in his dealings with the English investors. Howells gestures toward the same sort of solution to the problem of the gift in Annie Kilburn. At the end of that novel, discovering that she cannot be purely charitable, Annie decides to accept a small salary for her charitable work. Instead of giving to the poor
from her superior social position, she admits that she wants something out of the arrangement as well, that “she is a pensioner upon the real members of the Social Union for a chance to be useful” (863).

All this is not to say that Howells’s novels are a cynical lament that no matter what people do they act selfishly. Rather, Howells shows that it is wrong to attribute self-interest solely to market exchange—doing so maintains a misleading dichotomy between morality and economics, between social and capitalistic ethics that ultimately serves to excuse unethical conduct within the market rather than to critique it productively. After all, were the characters in Silas Lapham to believe that economic conduct was one thing and personal, social conduct another, then they could find no reason to fault Silas were he to decide to profit from others’ bad investments. Moreover, Silas’s final decision and his subsequent feelings about it suggest a crucial qualification to Sewell’s theory of the economy of pain: Sewell’s “common sense” philosophy (249) is necessarily limited by the indeterminacy of self-interest and by our inability to know for sure what will cause pain and or how much pain will be caused.

As an attempt to protect himself from feelings of guilt, for example, Silas’s sacrifice might be regarded as self-interested, and yet this does not ensure that he will therefore feel that his sacrifice has in fact been compensated by “the gratifying image of goodness or generosity” (Derrida 23) that is said to reward a gift or sacrifice. When he tells Rogers of the decision that means Rogers’ financial ruin as well as his own, Silas experiences pain, not pleasure: “This was his reward for standing firm for right and justice to his own destruction: to feel like a thief and a murder” (344). And while in the novel’s concluding sentence, Silas tells Sewell that he would make the same decision had
he to do it over again, he also confesses, “I don’t know as I should always say it paid” (379). His gift, in other words, might have been neither disinterested nor free, but the incalculability of its benefits nevertheless means that it cannot be explained by a rational, economistic model of exchange.

Howells’s characters give, lend, entertain, and sacrifice for each other—but simultaneously, they do these things for themselves; Howells’s argument is not so much, I think, that the selfish, individualistic ethics of capitalism have regrettably intruded into the social sphere as it is that a certain degree of self-interest is unavoidable even in the most noble of social ideals—self-sacrifice. Like Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, Howell’s novel attempts to look beyond the impasse to which a recognition of the gift’s impossibility often leads; it attempts to identify a basis for action, even for trust in others, that allows for an acknowledgement that virtually every transaction is motivated by some degree of self-interest. Conversely, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, again like Melville’s novel and also Fern’s, points to the advantages of an understanding of the gift that does not seek to transcend social and economic obligations to others—a theory, in other words, that acknowledges exchange to be both self-interested and socially situated.
CHAPTER THREE

Gratitude and One-Way Gifts:

Jacobs's, Harper's, and Du Bois's Responses to Paternalism

In a culture in which selfhood is commonly understood to be connected to property, the position of those to whom ownership has generally been denied is, to say the least, a difficult one, as slavery and the subsequent experiences of African Americans suggest. This chapter examines the attempts made in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to forge an alternative basis for selfhood and citizenship, one that affords even those who possess nothing with something to give. Masking the commodity relation between masters and slaves as a gift relation, slavery's paternalistic ideology enabled slaveholders to feel that they had more than compensated for any wrong inflicted, and this aspect of pro-slavery discourse continued to influence thinking about relations between blacks and whites even after slavery. Responding to a particular racist conceptualizing of gift-giving and attempting to construct a concept of self and racial identity rooted in the giving and receiving of gifts, Jacobs, Harper, and Du Bois counter, but do not reject, the dominant culture’s ideology of possessive individualism.

To one believing that he already owned his slaves, their labor, and anything else they might give to or do for him, acknowledging any form of indebtedness to his slaves was a logical impossibility. For those feeling some compulsion to do things for their slaves, it was ideologically safer to imagine that they were motivated not by any sense of debt or guilt, but by a desire, or even a moral duty, to conduct themselves as slaveholders
with benevolence and generosity. Thus, many slaveholders were inclined to regard as gifts the basic necessities and occasional favors provided to slaves, as historian Kenneth Greenberg describes:

Between master and slave, gifts could only flow in one direction. A slave could own nothing and therefore could give no gifts. One of the central characteristics of the condition of enslavement, as seen through, the eyes of masters, involved the inability to give gifts. Similarly, since a slave could make no contractual or other demands on a master, everything he or she received came as a gift. According to the logic of the slave regime, masters did not give gifts to slaves only at Christmas. All transactions involved the giving of gifts; food, clothing, and shelter were supplied as gifts by the master. [. . .] Every “howdy” or other kind word that a master bestowed on a slave assumed the form of a gift. (65)

Consequently, as Greenberg claims, “‘Gave’ may have been the single most common verb used by planters to describe their relations with slaves” (66). Such rhetoric was necessary to protect a belief system which enabled them to “deny to themselves that in fact they did cause suffering and [to] assert that their domination liberated the slaves from a more deprived existence” (Genovese 91).

As I have argued previously in describing Western capitalism’s ideology of the gift, gift exchange is not an intrinsically more “pure,” generous, or less oppressive category of exchange than commodity exchange. Rather, capitalism makes such an idealized gift a useful construct, a phenomenon that antebellum paternalism clearly illustrates. For example, what Greenberg describes as “a one-way gift-giving relationship” between masters and slaves (65) reflects slaveholders’ idealization of the gift, a denial of the obligations gift exchange actually entails that aided their perception of their slaves as commodities. Conversely, slavery itself seemingly substantiated slaveholders’ ideal of the gift—if slaves cannot give, then it is easy to imagine “gifts” to them as “freely” given without expectation of return. From a Maussian perspective,
however, there is no “true gift” since gifts always produce obligations; indeed, it is the obligatory reciprocity of gift exchange, I will argue, that makes it a compelling, although often problematic, metaphor for white Americans’ moral obligation to accept African Americans as their equals.

Notwithstanding Orlando Patterson’s explanation of such a definition’s limitations (2), slavery, obviously, provides the clearest example of human commodification and therefore offers a useful place to clarify the relation between commodification and the practice of gift exchange within commodity culture. As an explicit trope in several key texts by African American authors, the gift is meaningful, not because it suggests an unequivocal form of resistance to capitalism’s commodifying force, but because it demonstrates how intertwined gift and commodity exchange are in actual practice. After all, in a capitalist society, all material gifts are generally first commodities and all commodities potential gifts. Slaves themselves were exchanged not only as commodities, but as gifts as well.

Harriet Jacobs, for example, was given, not sold to her mistress; Margaret Horniblow’s will stipulates “that my negro girl Harriet be given to my niece Mary Matilda Norcom” (Yellin 213). The slaveholders’ dual definition of their slaves as both gifts and commodities, and, even more significantly, paternalism’s insistence that the care and occasional kindnesses that slaves received were generously bestowed as gifts (as opposed to wages earned) provided slaves such as Jacobs with a rhetoric they could turn against slaveholders to resist being defined as commodities. But as Horniblow’s will illustrates, it is no less oppressive to be regarded as a gift than as a commodity,¹ and therefore, to Jacobs, it seems that avoiding objectification requires becoming an active
participant in the exchange of gifts. To argue that one could give as well as receive gifts was, I will demonstrate, to argue that blacks should be integrated into the larger community, and thus this rhetoric remained useful even after slavery to writers such as Harper and Du Bois.

“Santa Claus ain’t a Real Man:” Jacobs’s Repudiation of Slavery’s Gifts

Through her narrator, Linda Brent, Jacobs describes in Incidents her gradually growing resistance to the prospect of gaining one’s freedom by purchase. Although throughout most of her story, Linda acts with misplaced faith in her lover’s, Mr. Sands’s, plans to purchase and free their children and her, she gradually realizes that such an exchange ultimately legitimizes slavery by conceding that humans can be bought and sold. By the time that Dr. Flint’s family finally decides to “give her a chance to buy her freedom” (198), Linda no longer wishes to “pay [...] for her freedom, because she thinks she has a right to it” (198). For Mrs. Bruce’s subsequent offer to buy her freedom, Linda feels “grateful” but discovers “the idea [...] not so pleasant [...] as might have been expected” since “the more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property” (199). She writes Mrs. Bruce, “thanking her, but saying that being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery; that such a great obligation could not be easily cancelled” (199). Jacobs’s recognition of the dangerous irony of buying one’s freedom is not unique among abolitionist texts;² what is interesting about her formulation of such an acquisition’s pitfalls is that it not only explains the problem in terms of the commodification of the freedom to which the
ideology of possessive individualism holds that all humans have an inalienable right, but it also situates the problem within an alternative discourse about gifts and the obligations they entail. Her obligation to Mrs. Bruce is a double one: she is indebted for both the gift of her freedom and the money spent to purchase it, which is why it is such "a great obligation."

Whereas possessive individualism conceives of autonomy as self-ownership, in Jacobs's model of selfhood, identity is shaped not only by concepts of ownership but also by relations of gift exchange; freedom is not something one owns, but is achieved through and limited by the obligations gifts produce. Jacobs's changing attitude toward being bought reflects her growing awareness of a potential dissonance between the ideology of possessive individualism and the notion of inalienable rights—if selfhood and freedom are owned, then the possibility of alienation already exists, at least as long as the type of ownership in question is of the commodity sort. Throughout Incidents, especially through Linda's justifications for rejecting the many gifts Flint offers, Jacobs argues that individual autonomy is not contingent on property ownership, but can be achieved through ceasing to accept passively another's property as gifts, through a recognition of the power that one can assert by identifying what gifts one is capable of giving and by making discerning choices about which gifts to give, and perhaps even more important, which to accept.

That Jacobs's depiction of Linda's refusals of Flint's proffered favors reflects an attempt to locate in gift exchange a means of resisting slavery becomes apparent with a recognition that Jacobs repeatedly specifies that gifts mark the differences between whites and the slaves they claim to own. The most obvious reason gifts can register
social inequalities, Jacobs reminds her readers, is simply because the most common sorts of gifts are a privilege of those who already own things. Describing the custom of hiring out and selling slaves at New Year’s, for example, Jacobs implores:

O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year’s Day with that of the poor bond-woman! [. . .] gifts are showered upon you. Even hearts that have been estranged from you soften at this season, and lips that have been silent echo back, “I wish you a happy New Year.” Children bring their little offerings [. . .]. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you.

But to the slave mother New Year’s day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning [. . .] (16)

The point of this comparison is not merely that free women receive presents and slaves do not. For Jacobs, the slave woman’s exclusion from such holiday exchanges signals the tenuousness of her ties with others. The primary feature of gift exchange, remember, is generally considered its capacity to strengthen social and familial bonds. Not only are slaves not given presents, but they face losing what they already have—and their loss is not the loss of things, but the loss of family members. Conversely, the exchange of New Year gifts affords free women the opportunity to renew their relationships with even “estranged” family members and friends.

The hiring and selling of slaves at New Year’s undermines an even more important gift giving occasion: “Were it not that hiring day is near at hand, and many families are fearfully looking forward to the probability of separation in a few days, Christmas might be a happy season for the poor slaves” since “Even slave mothers try to gladden the hearts of their little ones on that occasion” (118). The slaves’ efforts to celebrate Christmas within the family is further undercut, Jacobs suggests, by the fact that for slaves, holidays are generally not opportunities to give presents to family members.
but to receive them from whites. From the slaveholders’ point of view, holidays were a chance to demonstrate their benevolence—many chose Christmas as the best time to distribute basic necessities to their slaves. Their doing so is one of the clearest examples of their pretending that simply providing for their slaves was a generous gift.\textsuperscript{4} Jacobs describes Jonkonnu, a Christmas custom during which large groups of slaves “generally of the lower class” go “begging for contributions.” “It is seldom that any white man or child refuses to give them a trifle” (118-19). To Jacobs, the gifts of money and liquor the slaves receive therefore underscore their dependence on their masters and the fact that even children have more to give than they.\textsuperscript{5}

The Christmas stockings that Linda manages to fill for her own children while in hiding are thus for her important symbols of the sacrifices she makes to hold her family together despite slavery’s challenges:

Their imprisoned mother could not have the privilege of witnessing their surprise and joy. But I had the pleasure of peeping at them as they went into the street with their new suits on. I heard Benny ask a little playmate whether Santa Claus brought him any thing. “Yes,” replied the boy; “but Santa Claus ain’t a real man. It’s the children’s mothers that put things into the stockings.” “No, that can’t be,” replied Benny, “for Santa Claus brought Ellen and me these new clothes, and my mother has been gone this long time.”

How I longed to tell him that his mother made those garments, and that many a tear fell on them while she worked! (118)

Santa Claus gained popularity during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Stephen Nissenbaum explains, among middle class parents who found the “pretense” that their presents did not come “from family members themselves” an effective way “to obfuscate their commercial origins” (172-73). A slave mother, such as Linda, for whom gifts to her children is a privilege that comes with great effort, has little need for such a myth; there is nothing she would like more than the luxury of having her children know
that their gifts come from her.

Accordingly, *Incidents* is Jacobs’s declaration of the slave’s ability to give and her unmasking of the power relations underlying the unidirectional gift exchange that paternalistic ideology held defined the master-slave relationship. It begins with the tale of Linda’s grandmother’s attempt to save enough money to “purchase some of her children.” She fails to do so because when she manages to save three hundred dollars, her mistress “begged [it] as a loan, promising to pay her soon” (6). Jacobs reminds her readers that “no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, being property, can hold not property” (6). Even when they manage to possess something, slaves remain unable to give or lend anything to others because the fact that they have property to give is denied. Moreover, it is because her right to own property is not recognized that the grandmother must lend, or, rather, forfeit her money in the first place. To beg one’s slave to do something is only one means of requiring her to do it while pretending otherwise; grandmother’s money is “never repaid” by anything other than Mrs. Flint’s “grievous wrongs” (11, 124).

The significance of the story of the lost three hundred dollars lies not, however, merely in its illustration of the injustice caused by the absurd belief that “a slave, being property, can hold not property.” More interesting is Jacobs’s use of the example of the unpaid loan to introduce the argument that, despite their lack of property, slaves have gifts to give. In the sentence immediately following the description of how her grandmother “lent her hard earnings to her mistress,” Linda mentions how “indebted” she and her brother are to their grandmother “for many comforts,” including not only “portions of the crackers, cakes, and preserves, she made to sell” but also, after they
“ceased to be children [. . .] many more important services” (6). Juxtaposing the mistress’s debts with the indebtedness Linda herself feels for these “comforts” and “services,” Jacobs suggests that even if financial debts to slaves go unacknowledged, some debts remain that the absurd property law still has trouble discounting: slaves and free blacks are also owed for gifts that are not necessarily material in nature and that thus do not depend on the possession of property. Certainly many white children received such gifts from their black nurses, as Linda’s mother’s and grandmother’s kindness to their mistresses and their children illustrates. That even these gifts go unrecognized, due to a paternalistic discourse that enabled slaveholders to ignore them or, at most, to treat them as countergifts, tokens of gratitude for the far greater gifts their masters had already given to them, is for Jacobs one of slavery’s primary injustices.6

Linda’s first mistress treats her kindly, so much so, that Linda can say of herself at age twelve, “I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me” (7). However, when her mother-like mistress dies, Linda discovers the limitations of the mistress’s supposed familial affection. Linda and her friends have believed that she will free her and her brother; the mistress, however, wills the children to her niece, which leads Linda to comment: “My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ [. . .] But I was her slave and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor” (8).7 Jacobs dissects such contradictions in slaveholder behavior by exposing not only the falsity of claims that slaveholders and slaves could be “almost”8 family, but also more generally by calling attention to how paternalistic rhetoric’s emphasis on gifts and gratitude masks these contradictions.

The mistress’s failure to give Linda her freedom shows that beneath this rhetoric
is the slaveholder's belief that blacks are commodities, or "machines" (8); like Linda's mistress, slaveholders generally did not recognize slaves as "neighbors," as members of their own community—if they did, they would feel obligated to reciprocate their slaves' gifts. It is not only the Flints who fail to repay their intangible debts to slaves—years later when Linda has escaped to the North, she encounters a former neighbor from the South who is a guest in the home in which her daughter Ellen is staying. Linda worries that he will notify the Flint family of her whereabouts, but he reassures her that "he owes thanks to good old Martha for too many little acts of kindness to be base enough to betray her grandchild" (178). Nevertheless, he quickly informs the Flints where they can find their runaway and tries to seduce Ellen: "Though he professed too much gratitude to my grandmother to injure any of her descendants, he had poured vile language into the ears of her innocent great-grandchild (179).

The slaveholders' narrow understanding of community facilitated and was facilitated in turn by the belief that while they gave presents to slaves, they did not actually exchange gifts with them. An actual gift economy keeps goods in circulation because of the threefold obligation to give, accept, and return gifts. As many anthropologists, such as Caroline Humphrey, Stephen Hugh-Jones, and James Carrier have demonstrated, defining gift and commodity exchange in absolute terms that equate gifts with social relations and commodities with contractual relations and economic exchanges between independent agents, is naive since the imagined opposition between the social and the economic is itself little more than a myth. 9 Nevertheless, because gifts are given to those with whom one wants to maintain a particular social relationship and because the obligation to return gifts means that, generally speaking, gift exchange
strengthens and produces the bonds between members of particular communities, such theorists also argue that differentiating particular forms of exchange in such terms remains useful. As Jacobs shows, however, under the rules of paternalism, gifts were given to widen the gap between whites and blacks, not to forge a community between them. Slaveholders gave presents to their slaves in order to indicate that they did not view them as members of the same gift community.

Greenberg writes, “Gifts flowed in only one direction in the master-slave relationship. [...] To be immersed in a system of reciprocal gift giving was to be part of a community of free men. In fact, gift exchange was one of the defining features of that community” (70). Gifts, I have argued, can appear to be unidirectional only if one accepts an idealized definition of them, a belief that gifts can be given with purely altruistic motives and no expectation of return—a belief that can enable one to avoid acknowledging the return that one actually does get, either directly from the gift’s recipient or indirectly from another source (the approval of one’s peers or one’s own conscience, for instance). If by “gift exchange” one is referring to a system of socially obligatory exchanges (as I am), then the slaveholders’ unidirectional gifts cannot really be referred to as “gifts” since they are not given as part of such a system. Rather, as Greenberg observes, they were efforts to exclude slaves from the wider community’s system of exchange, either by attempting to steal the slaves’ right to return the gifts they received or by denying that slaves actually did manage to give gifts of their own. One-way gifts are not truly gifts since they would impose crushing obligations, debts that would outweigh any potential advantage to the recipients who are denied the opportunity to repay them.10
Greenberg’s discussion of gift giving as one of the primary ways Southern “men of honor distinguished themselves from slaves” (xiii), while useful and thought-provoking, rests, however, on an unwieldy definition of gift exchange. Greenberg suggests, “Perhaps the single most important feature of gift exchange is that it is not identifiable through any specific set of behavioral criteria” (51), and he therefore argues repeatedly that the intentions behind exchanges are the key to distinguishing gift and market exchanges: “One must examine the spirit and intent of the parties engaged in the exchange [. . .]. One of the key features of gift giving is that it must be undertaken in a spirit of generosity (or a simulated spirit of generosity)—without any overt calculation that it will produce some beneficial return to the giver” (52). To avoid the ambiguities produced by defining gifts solely in terms of consciousness of motive, it helps to focus on gift exchange’s capacity for shaping the borders that delimit communities. People are more likely to intend to exchange gifts with “a spirit of generosity” with those whom they regard as members of the same community. On the other hand, the belief that a gift is true and that one is generous whenever one can manage to give without expecting something in return is precisely the belief that allowed slaveholders to insist that they were generous and benevolent. Of course they expected nothing in return—their slaves had virtually nothing and what they did have, their masters already regarded as belonging to themselves.

To the slaveholder, Greenberg notes, slavery’s brutality “seemed to pale next to the far more frequent instances of generosity. That is why so many could lament the lack of gratitude on the part of disloyal slaves” (66). This belief of many slaveholders that slaves failed to show proper gratitude was of course self-serving in that it reinforced their
sense that that they gave to their slaves without expectation of return, and it provides a context for Jacobs’s (and subsequently Harper’s) strikingly frequent explanations of why or why not she regards particular acts of whites as meriting gratitude. Jacobs’s repeated claims that she and her fellow slaves have shown sufficient gratitude to whites obviously serve rhetorical purposes more than they reflect a genuine concern about whether former slaveholders feel adequately thanked for their supposed kindness. Because Jacobs’s (as will Harper’s) own arguments for blacks’ inclusion into the wider community likewise deploy a certain conceptualization of gift-giving, it is necessary that she not leave herself open to the charge of having ungratefully failed to repay the “gifts” some whites claim to have given. The issue of gratitude must be addressed because, as Eugene Genovese documents, a reproaching of African Americans for “ingratitude” was a common feature of pro-slavery and, later, of anti-civil rights rhetoric.¹⁴ (This allegation is alive and well today, as David Horowitz’s recently much publicized “Ten Reasons Why Reparations for Blacks is a Bad Idea for Blacks—and Racist Too” demonstrates; writing that African Americans enjoy “one of the highest standards of living of any people in the world [. . .] the most thoroughly protected individual rights anywhere,” Horowitz asks, “Where is the gratitude of black America and its leaders for those gifts?”¹⁵)

Jacobs thus has cause to argue simultaneously that slaves are sufficiently grateful and have therefore returned any gifts they might have received and that they have no reason to be grateful since slavery has offered them nothing that can be regarded as a gift. She does so by never losing an opportunity to emphasize that blacks are appropriately grateful; she frequently calls attention to their sincere appreciation for genuine acts of kindness, and, more cautiously, she explains why particular actions that the Flints and
other slaveholders allege are favors are not worthy of gratitude. Describing her earliest
years in the Flint home, for example, Linda mentions how she “was accustomed to share
some indulgences with the children” and comments that “though this seemed to me no
more than right, I was grateful for it, and tried to merit the kindness by the faithful
discharge of my duties” (27). She thus expresses gratitude while simultaneously
suggesting that the privileges for which slaveholders claim she should be grateful are
really rights to which she is entitled, not privileges to be given and taken away (this claim
to entitlement is one way that possessive individualism informs her arguments). Despite
her insistence that the Flints have not repaid their debts to her family, Linda strategically
avoids opening herself to the accusation that she is ungrateful for what some might say
the Flints have given her, demonstrating that she and her family have paid off what little
she might arguably owe them.

Repeatedly, Linda challenges slaveholders’ notions of what merits her gratitude,
as when she describes being “thankful for [her] wretched hiding-place” (121-22, also
123). Linda and her family save their gratitude for each other, fellow slaves, and for
whites who help them escape, establishing that freedom is what Jacobs considers most
worthy of true gratitude. It is important to recognize just how often Jacobs describes her
characters as grateful because more than politeness is at stake here: the word “gratitude”
recurs in order to critique the allegation that slaves are guilty of ingratitude. Linda’s
Uncle Ben is “filled with gratitude” when a white former neighbor whom he meets after
running away promises not to report his whereabouts (25). Linda is forever “grateful” to
a man who informs her of Flint’s plans to send her children to join her at his son’s
plantation because this bit of information motivates her to put her escape plan into action
(94). She praises the white woman who hides her when she first runs away: "How my heart overflowed with gratitude!" (100). She is "grateful" to Betty, a fellow slave who helps during her early days of hiding, and when the plan her friends have devised to keep her hidden requires that she spend the night aboard a boat in a snake-filled swamp, Linda says, "I gratefully accepted the best that my poor, persecuted friends could do for me" (112).¹⁶ She is "grateful" to the captain on whose ship she finally escapes to Philadelphia (159) and "deeply grateful" to the "generous" Mrs. Bruce for purchasing her freedom (200, 194).

Gratitude, if not mutual, is not, however, a sufficient foundation for relationships of equality, as Linda (perhaps inadvertently) suggests in justifying her decision to become Sands’ mistress rather than Flint’s, an act that is among her earliest attempts to establish herself as an individual with something to give:

I also felt grateful for his sympathy . . . to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave [. . .]. It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. (54-55, my italics)

Dana Nelson comments that this passage "ironically underscores the fact that her action only redistributes her bondage; she is in fact exploited by both men," and pinpoints the act of resistance nevertheless represented by Linda’s action: "a fellow white slaveholding male—is the one category of humanity whom Flint cannot hope to command" (135, 137). I would add that this passage reveals Linda’s growing sense that the paternalistic claim that masters give to slaves depends on a logic that can be appropriated and turned against those who hide behind it.¹⁷
Linda, arguably, could give herself to Flint in return for the presents with which he bribes her, but she realizes that as Flint’s slave, the ideology of slavery holds that she cannot give back anything other than gratitude because he owns everything else. Flint’s demand for gratitude betrays a weakness to be exploited; by denying feeling any gratitude toward Flint, Linda can challenge his ability to believe that he receives anything from her for any other reason than force. Giving herself to a white man who is not her master means giving herself to one who should be able to acknowledge that her gift is not something he already owns. Perhaps in acknowledging Sands’s “kindness and attachment,” Linda admits to giving herself in return for a white man’s gifts, but nevertheless she initially finds some reciprocity and equality in this exchange, or at least a certain autonomy (“something akin to freedom”).¹⁸ The problem, as Linda gradually realizes, is that Sands is not any more ready than Flint to recognize her gift; whereas she had “felt grateful” for his kindness, he feels nothing comparable in return.

In the end, Sands is not all that different from Flint; Jacobs explicitly engages pro-slavery claims about slaves’ ingratitude by depicting both men making such arguments. Flint, for instance, regularly tries to “reproach” Linda for “ingratitude,” pointing out the favors he has given her (“Did I not take you into the house, and make you the companion of my own children? [. . .] Have I ever treated you like a negro? I have never allowed you to be punished, not even to please your mistress”) and demanding repayment (“And this is the recompense I get, you ungrateful girl!”) (35). Linda, in turn, argues that Flint’s favors have hardly been motivated by generosity and hence are not deserving of gratitude by contextualizing this tirade about her failure to repay him within a commentary on the sexual abuses slaveholders inflict on women such as herself.¹⁹ In much the way that,
according to Greenberg, Southern men tried to turn insults into an opportunity for showing off their superior generosity,20 Flint tries to reconstruct Linda’s rejections as opportunities for further magnanimity; when she asks to marry her black lover, he tells her, “I have been repaid with the basest ingratitude; but though you have proved yourself incapable of appreciating my kindness, I will be lenient towards you” (40).

In other words, to Flint, Linda’s ingratitude proves the selflessness of his actions; his leniency in not punishing her becomes another gift with which he can attempt to demonstrate his superiority. Later, Flint can similarly interpret Linda’s pregnancy only in terms of his own anxiety about making her recognize his generosity: “your ingratitude chafes me beyond endurance. You turn aside all my good intentions towards you. I don’t know what keeps me from killing you” (59). Demonstrating the extent to which paternalistic logic recast the master’s power as the ability to keep others indebted while avoiding similar obligations and, more generally, the interconnectedness of the flow of gifts and power relations, Flint attempts to control Linda by taking control of her decisions about which gifts to receive and which to refuse: “You must hence forth have no communication of any kind with the father of your child. You must not ask any thing from him, or receive any thing from him. I will take care of you and your child. […] This is the last act of mercy I shall show towards you” (59). Linda, on the other hand, largely in response to Flint’s earlier refusal to let her marry and his effort “to make me feel that I had disgraced myself by receiving the honorable addresses of a respectable colored man, in preference to the base proposals of a white man” (40), begins to realize that she might be able to find a form of autonomous selfhood in acts of receiving.

Flint is not the only one Jacobs depicts as accusing slaves of ingratitude in order
to convince himself of his own magnanimity. When Linda’s brother William runs away from Mr. Sands who had bought him along with his and Linda’s children from Flint (who characteristically regards William an “ungrateful rascal” [105]), Sands absurdly accuses William of being ungrateful for not only his paternalistic kindness, but for a gift of freedom not yet given: “I trusted him as if he were my own brother, and treated him as kindly. [...] I intended to give him his freedom in five years. [...] He has shown himself ungrateful” (135-36). As Lauren Berlant comments, “Like so many liberal tyrants, [Sands] . . . believes that his relative personal integrity and good intentions place him above moral culpability” (466). Jacobs underscores the similarity between a liberal tyrant such as Sands and a more malevolent one such as Flint by portraying both as whining about the gratitude they believe they are owed. No matter how good the so-called benevolent master imagines his intentions to be, his gifts are no less disempowering than his crueler counterpart’s since given without acknowledgement of anything the slave gives in return (or, more to the point, without acknowledgement that they are actually themselves a return for what the slave has already given).

Additionally, since the slaveholders’ gifts were generally little more than basic necessities, they were gifts that most slaves found virtually impossible to refuse, and thus they denied their recipients the experience of agency that, as Jacobs discovers, can be achieved through the refusal of gifts. Jacobs’s descriptions of how slaves less fortunate than herself expect gifts on Christmas and on the arrival of a slaveholder’s new bride supports Genovese’s argument that slaves turned gifts and privileges into rights;[21] carefully documenting the various gifts that slaveholders use to control their slaves, she, however, analyzes the limitations of such expectations and suggests a more radical way
to regard the masters’ gifts. When Dr. Flint’s son, Mr. Flint, marries, most of the slaves are “merry” because they are “expecting little presents from the bride, and hoping for better times under her administration.” Linda, however, has “no such hopes,” understanding that the presents some white women give to slaves on their marriage day do not diminish the fact that “the young wives of slaveholders often thought their authority [...] would be best established and maintained by cruelty” (92). Gifts, after all, as Dr. Flint has taught her, can themselves be an implement of cruelty.

Flint’s frequent offers “to give [Linda] a home of [her] own” (53) are not unusual. According to Jacobs, such practices are common: “The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. [...] When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents” (51). Flint himself bribes not only Linda, but “repeatedly trie[s] to coax and bribe” her children with gifts such as “bright little silver pieces and gay handkerchiefs” in exchange for information of her whereabouts (117). Nor do his bribes stop with his slaves; trying, for instance, to get Sands defeated in his run for Congress, Flint “invited large parties of men to dine in the shade of his trees, and supplied them with plenty of rum and brandy” (125). Significantly, Flint’s political bribes, like his bribes of Linda and her family, fail. But this is because, unlike the slaves who anticipate a bride’s presents and unlike the young girls whom Linda pities for exchanging their virtue for presents, Linda and her family (like, evidently, most white male voters) know to refuse the gifts Flint offers.

Linda’s expressions of gratitude toward the Flints are few—I count just two (other than her expressed gratitude for the “indulgences” she received while still a young girl (27)), and both are to Mr. Flint, the doctor’s son. The first instance happens after Mr.
Flint makes Linda’s young daughter play outside unattended while her mother works inside. Ellen falls asleep under the house, and “that night [Mr. Flint] sent Ellen a biscuit and a cup of sweetened milk,” an act of “generosity” that “surprise[s]” Linda until she learns “that in the afternoon he had killed a large snake, which crept from under the house” where Ellen had fallen asleep, an incident that she decides “had prompted his unusual kindness” (87). Such generosity—the giving of a gift that is neither a bribe nor wages merely misnamed—in a slaveholder betrays a failure to believe completely in the rights of slaveholding, a weakness Linda learns to exploit. The second is when Linda asks permission to spend a day in town with her family (unbeknownst to Mr. Flint, she wants to spend the day preparing her escape). Mr. Flint gives his permission, and Linda comments, “for which favor I was thankful. It was the first I had ever asked of him, and I intended it should be the last” (90). Linda maintains control as best she can of what gifts she accepts—by doing so she deprives her masters of what she regards as one of their primary means of ensuring their slaves’ submissiveness.22

Unlike the family of slaves who refuse their mistress’s offer to manumit them shortly before her marriage, only to regret their choice later (50), Linda knows when to accept a gift—and when to refuse. Flint offers things in exchange for her submission countless times, but one such conversation is worth examining at length for its illumination of Linda’s adept refusal of certain gifts:

“Linda, you desire freedom for yourself and your children, and you can obtain it only through me. If you agree to what I am about to propose, you and they shall be free. There must be no communication between you and their father. I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together. Your labor shall be light, such as sewing for my family. Think what is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom! [. . .] You know I exact obedience from my own children, and I consider you as yet a child.”
He paused for an answer, but I remained silent.
"Why don’t you speak?" said he. "What more do you wait for?"
"Nothing, sir."
"Then you accept my offer?"
"No, sir."
[... ] "You have answered without thought. But I must let you know there are two sides to my proposition; if you reject the bright side, you will be obliged to take the dark one. You must either accept my offer, or you and you children shall be sent to your young master's plantation [ ... ]
He was shrewd; but I knew he was not to be trusted. I told him I was ready to give my answer now.
"I will not receive it now," he replied. "You act too much from impulse." (83-84)

While it is wrong to equate simplistically giving with power, and receiving with disempowerment, it is worth noting how faced with Flint’s paternalistic insistence that he regards her as a child, Linda positions herself rhetorically in the supposedly more powerful place of the one initiating a gift exchange even while showing that slavery really does limit her ability to give and accept: she will “give” her refusal; he refuses “to receive it now.”23 But more is going on in this encounter than a simple bickering over who will give and who will receive. Perhaps all offers have at least two sides,24 but Linda realizes that by framing his offer in these terms, Flint enables her to treat her refusal as a choice so that his offer ceases to be something she is truly “obliged to take.”

Distressed that Flint will send Linda to his son’s plantation, Linda’s grandmother unsuccessfully begs him to let her grandchild remain with her family, reminding him “him how long and how faithfully she had served in the family” and offering to “pay them for [Linda’s] time” (85). Appealing to what should be Flint’s sense of personal obligation to her and offering to compensate him financially for the loss of Linda’s labor, the grandmother illustrates the confusion that many slaves likely felt about their masters’ contradictory rationalizations for slavery. Whereas her grandmother feels confident that
Flint "will listen to me" (85), Linda understands that Flint will recognize neither that her grandmother is one to whom he is obliged to give anything in return nor that commodity exchange (paying for Linda's time) has anything to do with sentimental obligations of the sort to which her grandmother appeals. Willfully choosing to go to the plantation rather than consent to the obligations attached to the cottage Flint offers, Linda suggests that she can make Flint acknowledge her participation in the exchange of gifts with which he wishes to control her, even if she can do so only negatively.

To Linda, choosing which side of Flint's offer to accept seems to offer at least a degree of autonomy. From a Maussian point of view, accepting a gift is an agreement to continue a relationship—Linda's rejections of the gifts with which Flint would "make a lady" of her (35) are assertions of independence, a positioning of herself as the one cutting off the relationship by refusing the gift exchange. Her refusals have additional meaning in the context of paternalistic claims that the slaveholder's power came not from force but from his slaves' dependency on gifts they were unable to return. Rejecting what Flint regards as the desirable option in his two-sided offer, Linda challenges his conception of his own generosity and hence the legitimacy of his authority, but she frames her challenge within the very rhetoric Flint uses, that of gift exchange. Later in New York, she accepts the same gift Flint had often offered, the gift of a home ("I accepted the offer of a friend, that we should share expenses and keep house together" [182]), further illustrating that it is not Flint's gift itself that matters but its context and the power relations it represents. Unlike Flint's, her friend's offer represents an expectation of reciprocal, mutual contribution.

Ultimately, the gifts Linda desires to give are gifts of property—she wants
nothing more than "to be able to give [Ellen] and Benjamin a home," just as her brother William dreams of earning "money enough to give" their grandmother one (179, 135). That she articulates her claims to freedom and her family's dreams for the future in the language of the gift while simultaneously affirming that personal property is the true mark of self-reliance is to be expected, given that gifts and commodities are always intertwined in our culture. Jacobs's lesson is that to overcome the disempowerment and objectification of slavery, black Americans would have to establish themselves as able participants in gift and commodity transactions both. The issues she addresses, paternalism and the gratitude it allegedly deserved and gift-giving's relation to autonomy and individualism, remained relevant during Reconstruction and beyond; paternalism might have ended with emancipation, but, as Harper and Du Bois demonstrate, its logic of gift-giving continued to shape arguments about race relations for decades to come.

*Iola Leroy*: A Lesson in Gifted Citizenship

Like many antebellum antislavery novels, Harper's reconstruction-era *Iola Leroy*, or *Shadows Uplifted* claims that slavery's primary wrong was that it subordinated domestic values to those of the market, as Iola's cousin's willingness to sell her, his familial feelings outweighed by her "market value" (102), demonstrates. As Harper represents it, slavery's entanglement with commodity capitalism produced an inability to see African Americans outside their role in the market. At first, this claim might appear at odds with previous arguments about how slaveholders obfuscated the property relationship between themselves and their slaves by treating it as a gift relationship, but
Harper, I argue, depicts the same phenomenon from a different but complementary angle. An ideology that maintains that the economic and the social are fundamentally separate will more likely regard each as a mask for the other than acknowledge their mutual dependency. (*Iola Leroy*’s opening scene in which several slaves disguise news about the Union army’s recent victories as information about the condition of produce at the local market, for instance, illustrates such a masking—the slaves’ personal interest in the war escapes “the cognizance of their masters” [9] who would never think that talk about the market could refer to anything but the market.)

Consequently, and unlike much domestic fiction, *Iola Leroy* argues not that the domestic should be isolated from the market, but that national unity will remain unstable as long as social relations are divorced from economic ones, an argument that counters the racism of a southerner in the novel who insists that whites should “only sustain business relations with the negroes” (238). Harper offers the mutual recognition of gratitude, and more significantly, the recognition of social ties that go beyond business relations, as the only thing that can provide “the cohesion of justice” the nation lacks (24). Appropriating the longstanding discourse about African American gratitude (or lack thereof) for her own purposes thus helps Harper articulate her vision of an interracial national community, but doing so consequently also introduces an element of paternalism into her own argument for racial uplift.

The injustices of slavery were self-perpetuating, Harper indicates, in part because of slavery’s capacity to contain gratitude’s power to generate stronger social ties between blacks and whites. For example, during the war, the slave Daniel describes how when his master was a boy, they loved each other because they realized that each had something to
give the other—Daniel “learned him to hunt” and in turn, the boy “lob’d [Daniel] better
dan any ob his kin, An’ he showed [him] how to read” (25). As another slave points out,
however, Daniel’s master’s failure to free him suggests the limits of his professed love
(25); blinded by the institution of slavery, the master appears to attach less importance
than his slave to the reciprocity of their relationship. Through the tale of Iola’s parents’
membership, Harper suggests that even were one to grant that some whites were capable of
acknowledging their indebtedness to individual slaves, the larger culture of slavery
prevented their doing so from having any effect on the wider community.

Eugene Leroy, Iola’s father, frees and marries his slave Marie who had nursed
him during a serious illness because her “devotion in the darkest hour had won his love
and gratitude” (76). He finds that his willingness to recognize a black woman as an
individual whose gifts he is obligated to return (a recognition that has no effect on his
relationship with the other slaves he does not free), as a member of his gift community,
results in his own exclusion from that community. Friends stop visiting him, and white
children insult his children (76, 81). Eugene trusts that his cousin Lorraine will look after
his wife and children after his death and not “do anything dishonorable,” but Marie
knows better, expressing her misgiving in terms suggestive of Greenberg’s account of
Southern honor’s foundation in a narrow sense of community: “He might not with his
equals. But how many men would be bound by a sense of honor where the rights of a
colored woman are in question?” (81). Indeed, when Eugene dies, Lorraine manages to
have Marie’s marriage and manumission invalidated in order to prevent her from
inheriting any of her husband’s property.

As does Jacobs’s Incidents, Iola Leroy treats the common allegation of blacks’
ingratitude as among the primary defenses developed during slavery against an acknowledgement of whites' indebtedness to blacks, a charge that Harper, like Jacobs, answers first by frequently depicting her black characters' capacity for gratitude. Dying from a wound inflicted by Confederate soldiers, the slave Tom looks at his friend Robert (a slave eventually revealed to be Iola's uncle) with "grateful recognition" (53) and at Iola, who has nursed him, with "[g]ratitude and affection" (55). Rev. Carmicle, a black minister, feels, "deeply grateful to the people who have supplied us with teachers" (258). Iola's brother Harry is "grateful" to Dr. Latimer, the black doctor whom Iola marries, for the interest he has taken in him, and he is "grateful, too" for the relative lack of discrimination he experiences in the North (267). Harper's characters also express (a somewhat qualified) gratitude for the actions of white abolitionists. Latimer encourages Iola to write a book that would be beneficial to the race, telling her "Authors belonging to the white race have written good racial books, for which I'm deeply grateful, but it seems to be almost impossible for a white man to put himself completely in our place" (263). The language of gratitude and reciprocal exchange, as in many sentimental novels, also characterizes Harper's depiction of courtship and marriage.

Iola rejects Dr. Gresham's (a white physician whom she meets while working as a nurse during the war) marriage proposal, saying "neither gratitude nor friendship is love, and I have nothing more than those to give" (109), while nevertheless clearly conceiving of love as something to be given and received; to herself she thinks, "she had never for a moment thought of giving or receiving love from one of that race who had been so lately associated in her mind with horror, aversion, and disgust" (111). By comparison, Iola later thanks Latimer, whose proposal she accepts, for a lovely evening: "I am indebted to
you for a great pleasure. I am extremely grateful.” He tells her, “The pleasure has been mutual, I assure you” and quickly proposes (270). As in Alcott’s Little Women (where, as I have describe in my second chapter, Jo’s refusal to marry Laurie “merely out of gratitude” [330] stands in contradistinction to the mutual gratitude and love that characterize the March sisters’ marriages), the juxtaposition of different forms of gratitude in the context of depictions of courtship helps illustrate what constitutes a happy, egalitarian marriage. In Iola Leroy, however, this distinction has added meaning within the context of Harper’s argument about gratitude between the races. Whereas Iola and Latimer feel mutual gratitude for the small pleasures that are naturally and casually exchanged in a relationship of equality, the gratitude Iola feels toward Gresham, as I elaborate below, is closer to the gratitude associated with relationships of dependency; Iola’s marriage proposals thus contribute to Harper’s general argument that while mutual gratitude must eventually be developed between the races, black Americans will at first have to look for such mutuality in their relationships with each other.

After all, Harper argues, the former slaves have as yet had little reason to feel grateful to whites; she, again like Jacobs, further counters allegations of their ingratitude by explicitly denying that slavery gave them anything for which they should be grateful. During the war, Robert and Tom discuss slaves’ capacity for self-sufficiency after emancipation. Tom asks rhetorically, “who plants de cotton and raises all de crops?” and Robert answers, “They eat the meat and give us the bones / Eat the cherries and give us the stones” (17), a verse resembling a song Frederick Douglass includes in My Bondage and My Freedom (1855):
We raise de wheat,
Dey gib us de corn;
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de cruss;
We sif de meal,
Dey gib us de huss;
We peal de meat,
Dey gib us de skin,
And dat’s de way
Dey take us in. (252-53)

Both the verse and song brilliantly caricature the ideology Greenberg describes; the paternalistic claims of slaveholders who mistook the meager comforts and basic necessities they had provided their slaves for gifts are the target of their irony.

Robert later voices the same argument more explicitly when Captain Sybil, the white captain of a black regiment, comments “I have often heard that colored people are ungrateful.” Robert asks, “what had we to be grateful for?” and argues that it is the whites “who have . . . lived off our labor for generations” who “should be grateful” (51). Sybil then shares an anecdote that helps define the sort of actions that the novel depicts as actually meriting gratitude. He tells of an army captain who escaped from a Confederate prison and was helped by an elderly black couple who hid him and “gave” him some of “their humble food” (51). Sybil says he doubts that this captain “will ever cease to feel kindly towards colored people” because of the help this couple gave him (52). In other words, modest gifts given with genuine compassion are what can create good will between the races.

Harper addresses the question of whether slaves owed anything to their former masters most explicitly in depicting the relationship between Robert and his former mistress, a woman whose kindness he acknowledges, particularly her teaching him to
read, despite her having sold his mother away from him (17-18, 176). When Robert returns to visit Miss Nancy after the war, she asks whether or not he is at all grateful for her treatment of him: “I once thought that you would have been the last one to leave me. You know I never ill-treated you, and I gave you everything you needed. People said that I was spoiling you. [. . .] Wasn’t I always good to you?” (151). Robert’s reply, “you were good, but freedom was better,” indicates that his decision to leave his mistress does not reflect an inability or refusal to acknowledge what good she had done for him. In fact, he eventually proves his gratitude (or rather, that his generosity is in fact greater than hers) with gifts of his own; returning South after Lola’s marriage, Robert is “kind and generous” to his former mistress, “often remember[ing] her and send[ing] her timely aid” (280). Another former slave, Aunt Linda, similarly suggests that whatever gratitude Miss Nancy is owed, she is being paid: “Weneber I goes to town I carries her some garden sass, er a little milk an’ butter. [. . .] She neber struck me a lick in her life, an’ I belieb in praising de bridge dat carries me ober” (159).

If Harper finds it necessary that her characters express gratitude to their former masters, even while suggesting that this gratitude is not really deserved, she finds it even more important to depict them as grateful for the “gift” of freedom. Aunt Linda, for instance, seems grateful to “dem Yankees dat gib me my freedom, an’ sent dem nice ladies from de Norf to gib us some sense” (176). To Robert who wonders “Had that army, with freedom emblazoned on its banners, come at last to offer them deliverance if they would accept it?” (35), freedom is a gift, but one that depends as much on the recipient’s acceptance as on the giver’s benevolence. Like Jacobs who describes slaves who, believing the stories their masters tell them about the North, “think it is not worth
while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom” (43), Robert expresses concern for slaves who do not know to accept this gift; he asks, “what’s the use of praying for a thing if, when it comes, you won’t take it?” (19). Iola herself voices the slaveholders’ version of this question—before learning of her black ancestry, she defends slavery to her classmates at her Northern boarding school: “Our slaves [. . .] would not take [their freedom] if we gave it to them” (97-98).

That the characters of both Jacobs and Harper regard freedom as a gift suggests the extent to which their thinking is still shaped by the discourse of paternalism and by slavery’s construction of manumission as a gift.26 There is, however, at least one significant difference between the common understanding of the gift of freedom and Harper’s: she understands that gifts obligate one to reciprocate and that the one-way gifts of slavery were a means of crushing their recipients under this obligation. While retaining the notion of freedom as a gift that someone (presumably Northern whites) has given to blacks, she utilizes this notion to justify her argument that blacks have a responsibility to uplift their race. For Harper, freedom is a gift that can only be repaid by serving the nation by aiding its black citizens.

During the war, when explaining to Gresham her decision not to marry him, Iola reveals that she equates being unable to give reciprocally with being subordinate and under obligation: “Instead of coming into this hospital a self-sacrificing woman, laying her every gift and advantage upon the altar of her country, I came as a rescued slave” (113). She continues, describing to Gresham her childhood: “We had no neighbors who ever visited us; no young white girls with whom I ever played” (113), an isolation the novel elsewhere indicates was really an ostracization by her peers who (unlike herself at
the time) knew of her racial status (e.g., 87). Like Jacobs, Harper connects the feeling of inferiority experienced by one burdened with a sense of indebtedness to exclusion from the community of those with the power to oblige others to themselves. In many respects, then, Harper’s novel is the story of Iola’s growing realization that she does have something to give, a realization that, ironically, corresponds to her growing awareness of her blackness.

Iola’s conviction that one must not “prove unworthy” of one’s advantages (116) is central to Harper’s advocacy of a gift-oriented conception of selfhood and racial identity. It is worth remembering that many of the gifts Iola has to give, such as her education, stem from her prior privileged status as a slaveholder’s daughter. Iola rightly recognizes her privileges as gifts she must return, as debts she must repay, wishing to teach former slaves because “It was [. . .] through their unrequited toil that I was educated, while they were compelled to live in ignorance. I am indebted to them for the power I have to serve them” (235). It is as a gift that Harper treats Iola’s and most of her other major characters’ decision to devote themselves to educating emancipated slaves, and, by depicting their ability to do so as itself a gift received (Iola, is “gifted in intellect;” Latimer possesses “rich gifts of inheritance and acquirements” [214, 239]), Harper frames her vision of racial uplift as a sort of reciprocal gift exchange. Nevertheless, through Gresham’s admiring characterization of Iola as “self-sacrificing” (235), for instance, Harper manages to portray her as one not simply returning an obligation, but giving more than she owes, which is one reason Iola and her friends’ gifts of racial service occasionally seem closer to the one-way gifts of paternalism than to an exchange of gifts.
No longer made a commodity by slavery, Iola is free to characterize her decision to teach the less fortunate of her race as a sort of gift of self: “I intend offering myself as a teacher” (142). She is not, however, above caring about whether her gift is properly valued and enjoys that “she was heartily appreciated by the freedmen” (145-46). Harper’s depiction of the former slaves’ gratitude is condescending and stereotypical: “In their simple childish fashion they would bring her fruits and flowers, and gladden her lonely heart with little tokens of affection” (a passage that can be read to refer not only to the children Iola teaches, but also their “parents” as well as the “old folks” who also attend her school (146). I will further discuss Iola’s need for gratitude, but one way of approaching this passage is to compare it to the paragraph that immediately follows:

One day a gentleman came to the school [...] to talk to them on the achievements of the white race, such as building steamboats and carrying on business. Finally he asked how they did it?
“‘They’ve got money,’” chorused the children.
“‘But how did they get it?’”
“They took it from us,” chimed the youngsters. (146-47)

Immediately juxtaposing the small tokens with which Iola’s students acknowledge her gift to them with their comment about whites’ taking what is not rightfully theirs, Harper frames their gratitude to Iola as proof that her gifts, unlike the benefits that many whites continued to believe outweighed slavery’s harms (a belief some express even today28), are in fact worthy of gratitude and, moreover, that she does recognize what she receives in return, no matter how small it is.

This contrast between what Iola gives and what whites have taken contributes both to the novel’s argument for racial uplift and to its increasingly emphatic critique of capitalistic conduct. Although suggesting the nation needs to work toward enabling
blacks and whites to feel mutually grateful toward each other, Harper’s priority is to show that because of the persisting barriers to a true community between blacks and whites, the obligation of those such as Lola to make a return for their gifts and privileges will have to be fulfilled first by giving to blacks. In fact, Harper implies that a strengthened black community is a prerequisite to the national community she envisions. In a brief note concluding the novel, Harper expresses her hope that members of “[t]he race” will “use every power God has given them to rise in the scale of character and condition, and to add their quota of good citizenship to the best welfare of the nation” (282). After helping themselves “rise” in “character” and “condition,” in other words, blacks will then be able to give back to the nation and thereby improve it, an argument that foreshadows Du Bois’s.

Like Du Bois, Harper claims that following a period of racial uplift accomplished primarily by the race’s elite, African Americans would be able to make a valuable contribution to the nation as a whole, one that would improve the national character. According to Berlant, “in contrast to Jacobs’s narrative, Harper’s Lola Leroy seizes the scene of citizenship from white America and rebuilds it, in the classic sense, imagining a liberal public sphere located within the black community. [. . .] She also imagines that African American nationalism will provide a model of dignity and justice that white citizens will be obliged to follow” (467). One way in which her model of citizenship would surpass that of white America, Harper argues, is that because stemming from a recognition of the importance of gifts and mutual gratitude, it would offer a corrective to capitalistic, mercantile values (a claim that itself anticipates Du Bois’s account of what African Americans can offer the nation).
Not unlike her young students who profess their knowledge that the accomplishments of whites have too often resulted from the economic exploitation of others, Iola suggests "the time will come when the civilization of the negro will assume a better phase than you Anglo-Saxons possess. You will prove unworthy of your high vantage ground if you only use your superior ability to victimize feeble races and minister to a selfish greed of gold and a love of domination" (116). Like the obligation to serve one's race, the obligation to serve one's nation, suggests Harper, stems from the gifts and advantages one has been given. Moreover, Harper argues through Lucille Delaney, the woman who becomes Iola's sister-in-law, that the nation as a whole is under a similar obligation: "America [. . .] is the best field for human development. God has not heaped up our mountains with such grandeur, flooded our rivers with such majesty, crowned our valleys with such fertility, enriched our mines with such wealth, that they should only minister to grasping greed and sensuous enjoyment" (247). Significantly, Lucille suggests this logic of obligation requires a circular, reciprocal exchange between nation and citizen; she fulfills her own sense of obligation by opening a school for black women whom she teaches "to do all in their power to make this country worthy of their deepest devotion and loftiest patriotism" (251). In other words, she teaches her students to show gratitude for their advantages by serving their country, which in turn will make the country even more capable of giving to its citizens (and more obligated to do so), thereby necessitating another return gift of further "devotion" and "patriotism."

In advocating this gift-based model of citizenship, Harper does not reject possessive individualism; Iola Leroy argues, for instance, that the "color of a man's skin has nothing to do with the possession of his rights" (44). Nor does Harper reject other
ideals connected to this ideology, such as self-reliance, as the hostess of the
*conversazione* Lola and her friends attend makes clear when she speaks of the need "to
teach our boys to be manly and self-respecting, and our girls to be useful and self-reliant"
(253). Such comments reveal the novel’s commitment to individualism, despite its
insistence on more communital values; nevertheless, Harper’s endorsement of possessive
individualism and self-reliance revises these concepts so that they are uncontaminated by
the greed and selfishness of the market, a revision accomplished primarily through the
depiction of Lola’s search for employment in the North. After twice losing her job when
other saleswomen discover her race (206-7), Lola is given a sales position by Mr. Cloten,
the father of a girl she had nursed because as he says, he is "grateful for the care Miss
Leroy gave our Daisy" (212), thereby acquiring a job that simultaneously demonstrates
both the self-reliance needed to "earn her own living" (205) and the superiority of those
who conduct business according to the principles of gift exchange.

Cloten repays Lola not only by employing her, but by telling his other employees
that he will not tolerate any racial prejudice against her. Unlike the southerner Dr.
Latrobe who, mistaking Latimer for a white man, advises him "only [to] sustain business
relations with the negroes, and not commit the folly of equalizing yourself with them"
(238), Cloten realizes that market transactions should not—and indeed do not, as the very
refusal of some to work with Lola demonstrates—overlook social ties. He thus
exemplifies an alternative business ethics, as his wife realizes; Mrs. Cloten praises her
husband for taking "a right step in the right direction," one that she hopes "other
merchants [...] rich enough to afford themselves the luxury of a good conscience" will
follow (212).
Conducting business with such a regard for personal relations, approaches gift exchange since people give gifts to those to whom they feel bound by relationships such as kinship or friendship, but generally understand commodity exchange to entail no other relationship than the temporary link constituted during the exchange itself (Carrier 11, 23). Lela Leroy reconciles its call for economic self-reliance and its argument about putting racial service before personal interests by envisioning an America in which all citizens treat each other as members of the same gift community, even when conducting business. For example, when Latrobe praises slavery for civilizing thousands of Africans, Rev. Carmicle answers, “could not a legitimate commerce and the teachings of a pure Christianity have done as much?” (226). Hiring Lola and treating “his employees as if they had hearts as well as hands” (270), Cloten illustrates what Harper believes might constitute a “legitimate commerce.”

The end of slavery, as the racist clerks who would prevent Lola from having a job demonstrate, did not automatically give rise to the Christian commerce to which Carmicle alludes. One of Harper’s characters describes how after the war the freed slaves, to whom southern whites would seldom sell land, found “[d]em Jews” to have “been right helpful to culled people wen dey hab lan’ to sell,” a remark that, like the refusal of some to work alongside a former slave, calls attention to how what is theoretically the anonymous transactions of a free market are in fact, for better or worse, determined by personal and social relationships (155). Even when “all in debt,” a former slaveholder remains unwilling to enter a market transaction with his former slaves, boasting he would rather “let de lan’ grow up in trees ’fore he’d sell it” to them (155, 154). Aunt Linda’s comment that “Some Jews [. . .] gib us a chance to buy” land
suggests the lingering tendency of some former slaves to conceptualize exchanges with whites as gifts (a tendency Harper implies might make them vulnerable to the Jews whom she stereotypically describes, betraying the limits of her own vision of inclusiveness, as not caring with whom they do business “so long as dey gits de money”) (155).

Such an anecdote suggests for Harper why “the negro problem” (220) will be solved not by the supposedly blind fairness of market economics but by a more community-centered ethics. People often decide to whom they will sell and from whom they will buy, with whom they will work and whom they will hire for reasons that have more to do with their social identity than with economic rationality. “Business relations,” in other words, are always already social; accordingly, Harper argues, market transactions have social and moral implications that must be acknowledged if one wants, as Mrs. Cloten puts it, “a good conscience” (238, 212). America, Harper’s characters insist, needs to become not “a nation building up a great material prosperity [. . .] grasping the commerce of the world,” but one seeking “to create a moral sentiment [. . .] which will consider a wrong done to the weakest of them as a wrong done to the whole community” (219, 229).

That Iola Leroy might thus be said to attempt to replace the self-interest conventionally understood to dominate market culture with the relatively communal awareness of gift exchange does not mean, however, that it constructs the gift as entirely selfless. The novel represents Iola’s “allying [her]self with the colored people” as a gift, but Iola herself admits that her doing so is not “wholly unselfish” (235). She asks, “To whom to-day is the world most indebted—to its millionaires or to its martyrs?” (219), a question that indicates that Iola’s gift, the sacrifices she makes to become a “leader of a
race to higher planes of thought and action” (219), as opposed to the hypothetical “free” gift generally maintained to be a “true” gift, is intended not to transcend social obligations, but to generate them. Iola aims not to give without thought of return, but to become one to whom “the world” is “indebted.” That Iola’s willingness to serve her people is not a “free” gift is further underscored by her acknowledgement that she is motivated not by pure magnanimity but by her consciousness of being herself under obligation.

Iola’s decision to leave her relatively easy life in the north to spend her “future among the colored people of the South,” remember, stems from her own sense that she is “indebted […] for the power to serve” to those whose “unrequited toil” paid for her education and other privileges, that her being given more advantages than others entails a recognition of her social responsibility (234, 235). In fulfilling her obligation to serve others, however, she gives them reason to feel a debt of gratitude to her, a debt that they in turn will be obligated to repay. Indeed, Harper suggests, “not only the freedmen, but the whole country” will be indebted to those such as Iola and Latimer whose work to uplift their race will make possible “the true reconstruction of the country” and whose “precept and example” will “instill into the minds of others sentiments of good citizenship” (235, 236, 279). Gift exchange’s cyclic production of mutual indebtedness is what makes it a compelling metaphor for the sense of communal responsibility Harper hopes can strengthen the bonds between the nation’s citizens. Consequently, Iola Leroy, unlike the many sentimental novels that obfuscate gift exchange’s reciprocity by insisting on their heroines’ utter disinterestedness, calls attention to its characters’ awareness that their gifts will in some way, no matter how intangible, be rewarded. Iola considers it
important that those she teaches are “very grateful for [her] services” (234). Harry and Lucille find their gifts of service similarly rewarded. Harry’s decision to teach former slaves rather than to pass for white might have been a sacrifice, but “he has his reward in the improved condition of his pupils” (280). Lucille “gives her ripening experience to her chosen work” and is “soon crowned with gratifying success” (280, 200).

*Iola Leroy’s* frequent illustrations of the freed slaves’ capacity for gratitude hence function not only as a rejoinder to a particular racist argument but also as an assurance to the black community’s elite that their contributions to uplifting the race will not go unrewarded. Rather than obscuring the question of whether one’s gifts entitle one to expect at least gratitude in return, Harper’s novel explicitly addresses it with Iola’s refutation of Gresham’s contention that “these people [the former slaves] are more thankful than grateful” (“thankful” seeming to denote a general sense of being glad to have what has been given but a failure to recognize an obligation to the one who has given it) (234). Iola indicates that she would still do “all in [her] power to help them” even if she believed they would not properly appreciate her sacrifice, but she also claims that Gresham’s charge is simply wrong (“I do not think so”), a claim substantiated by the novel’s recurring depictions of former slaves’ gratitude (234). Gresham’s distinction and Iola’s insistence that those she helps will feel grateful toward her points to a certain ambiguity in Harper’s model of gift exchange.

On the one hand, Iola’s insistence that former slaves can feel not merely thankful, but truly grateful is a rejection of the paternalistic belief that slaves were incapable of returning gifts, of even repaying them with genuine gratitude, and thus could never be agents in reciprocal exchanges. On the other hand, Iola’s answer to Gresham reveals the
extent to which she herself, even while averring that she is not seeking gratitude, really does expect it. Suggesting that Lola has every reason to feel confident that Gresham is wrong to fear the freedmen “will forget [her] services and remember only [her] failings” instead of showing her the gratitude she is due (234), Harper reassures those whom she most hopes to persuade, the black community’s elite, that should they follow her characters’ example and “put aside their own advantages for their race and country” (265), they too can expect that their sacrifices will be properly appreciated. There is thus perhaps a certain trace of the paternalist’s expressed longing for his slaves’ gratitude in the argument for uplifting the race, particularly when this argument is articulated in the language of the gift. That an inability to avoid echoing the same paternalistic argument it aims to critique might be an inherent shortcoming of applying metaphors of gift exchange to discussions of race and race relations is further suggested by the writings of Du Bois.

“Gifts Worth the Giving”: The Problem of the Gift in Du Bois’s Theorizing of Race

In “Of the Meaning of Progress,” The Souls of Black Folk’s fourth chapter, Du Bois describes the people among whom he lived in rural Tennessee while filling his first teaching position: “The mass of those to whom slavery was a dim recollection of childhood found the world a puzzling thing: it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering” (410). Proving the offerings of the once enslaved race to be offerings worth giving is one of Souls’s fundamental undertakings. A major strategy Du Bois deploys to do so is to treat the contributions of African Americans metaphorically as gifts and to offer the exchange of these gifts as a corrective
to dominant cultural values. The gift appears as an explicit trope countless times throughout Du Bois's works, as the titles of later works such as *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924) and "The Black Man Brings His Gifts" (1925) suggest, and *Souls* is no exception.

Because gift exchange characteristically occurs in small groups and communities, among friends or neighbors, not strangers, it provides a metaphor useful in arguing the necessity of recognizing African Americans as members of the national community. Indeed, given the way in which most slaveholders and, later, many whites unsympathetic to the emancipated slaves, had manipulated a particular concept of gifts and gratitude as a means of excluding African Americans from their community, it was inevitable, and even necessary, that African American writers such as Du Bois would stress that the race has many gifts to offer. But perhaps because the racially oppressed all too often lack the economic resources needed to give gifts that are material in nature, Du Bois, as had Jacobs and Harper, apparently discovers reasons for emphasizing spiritual and cultural gifts—an emphasis that leads easily to essentialist arguments about racial traits. Additionally, because gift exchanges are no less immune to becoming a tool with which to perpetuate a certain relationship of power than is any other form of exchange, defining social interactions in terms of gift exchange, even if in very different terms than had pro-slavery ideologues, is not a foolproof method of rebutting paternalism, especially when in the context of elitist arguments such as Harper's and Du Bois's.

*Souls* begins with the following anecdote about Du Bois's early childhood and first experience of racial discrimination: "In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards [...] and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card [...]. Then it
dawned upon me that I was [...] shut out from their world by a vast veil” (363-64). This card exchange (like all acts of exchange, including gift exchanges) reflects the dynamics by which communities define themselves and by which individuals assert themselves in relation to various communities: he is excluded from his community of classmates when his gift is rejected by the “newcomer” who uses the exchange to publicize her rebuff of Du Bois and presumably to claim her membership in the community of other students with whom she does trade cards.34

The connection between this childhood experience and the gift metaphor that frequently appears in Du Bois’s arguments about race relations has gone unnoted, perhaps because a tendency to imagine gifts as things given with no thought of return means that gifts are not readily associated with acts of exchange. As Mauss and subsequent theorists have demonstrated, because the giving and returning of gifts is often motivated by feelings of obligation and because gifts are usually exchanged with those with whom one wants to maintain a particular relationship, generally speaking, gift exchange strengthens and even produces bonds between individuals. While generally acknowledging the naiveté and inadequacy of definitions that claim an absolute opposition between gift and commodity exchange by equating gifts with “social” relations and commodities with “contractual,” “economic” transactions, most gift theorists continue to differentiate gifts and commodities by stressing what sociologist David Cheal describes as gift exchange’s role in the construction of “certain kinds of voluntary social relationships” (90). This capacity of gifts for reinforcing social relationships, their role in “the ritual construction of small social worlds” (Cheal 92), makes gift exchange a valuable tool in the defining of communities. Gifts’ power as
symbols of personal relationships and of communal feeling must be recognized in order
to understand Du Bois’s gift metaphor’s full significance. Few have considered Du
Bois’s use of this metaphor in terms of gifts’ function as an actual mode of exchange,
despite many having noted that a notion of racial gifts shapes his theorization of race.

The message of the anecdote about the schoolchildren’s card exchange is that
having one’s gift refused makes one feel like an outsider, a message consistent with
Souls’s general argument that the nation must recognize the gifts of black folk. The story
of his refused card provides the backdrop for Du Bois’s formulation of double-
consciousness, which immediately follows. Du Bois points out that such experiences
have a constitutive effect on one’s sense of self and racial identity: “the Negro is a sort of
seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a
world which yields him no true self-consciousness [. . .]. It is a peculiar sensation, this
double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of
others” (364). And while Du Bois argues that this double-consciousness results from
racism, it is worth noting that he simultaneously refers to it as a gift, as something that
African Americans alone are “gifted with.”

But if second sight and double-consciousness are gifts, clearly they are not the
sort of gifts for which one owes gratitude to any person—generally, when talents or
abilities are spoken of as gifts, what is implied is that one need be grateful for them only
to one’s creator or one’s own experiences, a gratitude expressed simply by using these
talents (the same understanding of gifts supporting Lola Leroy’s insistence that one must
show gratitude for one’s advantages by using them to serve others). For Du Bois,
double-consciousness and the experiences of African Americans are gifts that the race
can potentially use to improve the condition of all races: "the longing of black men must have respect: the rich and bitter depth of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life [...] may give the world new points of view" (438, my italics). In other words, African Americans possess, Du Bois insists, unique gifts and therefore have many gifts to offer.

The formulation of double-consciousness lays the foundation for Du Bois's argument that there should be a gift giving between white and black Americans that would be a true exchange, neither Africanization of white America nor unidirectional assimilation. An African American, according to Du Bois, "would not Africanize America, for America has much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world" (365). Thus asserting that blacks and whites have "much to teach" each other, Du Bois pleads for a mutual "striving toward" the day when "on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack" (370).

This call for an interracial gift exchange introduced in Souls' first chapter is reasserted in the concluding paragraphs of its last, "The Sorrow Songs:"

Your country? [...] Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song [...] the gift of sweat and brawn to [...] lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. [...] Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation [...] Are not these gifts worth the giving? (545)

Du Bois's choosing to categorize such contributions as "gifts" is not accidental; he hopes that the conceptualizing of them as such will help forge a sense of obligation as well as a
sense of community between blacks and whites, between the nation and all its citizens. In asserting the value of the gifts of black folk and in asking "Would America have been America without her Negro people?" (545), Du Bois goes so far as to suggest that it is white America who has failed to observe its obligation to return the gifts it has received—a suggestion that reverses the fundamental assumption of paternalism, namely that whites have given more to blacks than blacks could ever return. (In his biography *John Brown* [1909], Du Bois makes this point far more explicitly, asserting that America’s "greatest destiny—unsensed and despised though it be,—is to give back to the first of continents the gifts which Africa of old gave to America’s fathers’ fathers" [cited in Sundquist 506-07]).

Central to this passage listing the "three gifts" of African Americans is its claim that these gifts have not been "merely passive." On the contrary, Du Bois contends, African Americans should be recognized as having already been active participants in an exchange with the nation as a whole, as having already "mingled" their gifts with those of other Americans. This insistence that African American gifts not be thought of as "passive" echoes *Souls's* earlier argument, articulated during its often discussed chapter "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," that the race’s gifts do not have to be a "giving up." There, Du Bois characterizes Washington’s proposals within his own framework of gift exchange, but as an unfair exchange in which blacks can only lose:

Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things,—

First, political power,
Second, insistence on civil rights,
Third, higher education of Negro youth,— (398, my italics)

Stressing that "the way for a people to gain their reasonable rights is not by voluntarily
throwing them away” (401), Du Bois suggests a crucial distinction between giving what
one has to give and giving up what one needs, a distinction he believes blacks must
understand if they are to prevent their offering from being “ridiculed” (410). This giving
up, this mere forfeiting, is, like the slaveholder’s “one-way gift-giving” (Greenberg 65),
not part of a reciprocal exchange and thus an obstacle to equality.

Realizing this, Du Bois asks “what has been the return” for this giving up, and
sees disenfranchisement, legal segregation, and diminishing financial support for the
education of African Americans as the only answer he can offer (399). This problem is
compounded, Du Bois asserts, by the simultaneous failure to insist on what one should
rightfully have: “the prevailing public opinion of the land has been but too willing to
deliver the solution of a wearisome problem into Washington’s hands, and say, ‘If that is
all you and your race ask, take it’” (394). Du Bois thus criticizes Washington for
allowing white America to treat justice as a favor. In other words, each race—the blacks
who give up what they should not and the whites who persist in regarding the rights of
blacks as gifts bestowed by whites—is giving to the other with neither expectation nor
recognition of return. Du Bois offers as a remedy to this situation his own model of
reciprocal gift exchange.36

As an illustration of this cultural gift exchange that he believes is possible, Du
Bois offers in “The Sorrow Songs” the African American spiritual:

Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself
stamped on her bosom [. . .] the Negro folk-song [. . .] stands today not simply as
the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human
experience born this side of the seas. [. . .] it still remains as the singular spiritual
heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (536-7)

Du Bois thus situates the spirituals within a series of exchanges—more than just an
African American gift to the nation, the spirituals are something of beauty that America, in turn, can give to the world. Additionally, what is crucial about the songs, according to Du Bois, is that they themselves represent a mutual, reciprocal exchange of cultures. African American folk songs, Du Bois argues, emerged first out of African, then Afro-American music, eventually developing into “a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land” (540). Du Bois comments, “The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs” (540). As a gift already given, the “sorrow songs” prove that cultural exchange is achievable, and they represent in some sense the possibility of being “both a Negro and an American” (365).

Moreover, “The Sorrow Songs” is just one instance of Du Bois’s efforts to evoke a culture rooted in a recognition of gifts that the races make mutually and reciprocally as members of a single gift community. In his previous argument that “the greater ideals of the American Republic” are best served by doing more to train “gifted minds” and working toward the day when “two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack” (370), he avers:

We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. (370)

In this argument that one of the things African Americans have to offer the nation is a
perspective that might help counteract a tendency to privilege dollars over people, Du Bois hints at the sort of arguments further developed in his later critiques of capitalism.

Like Harper who claims that African Americans could help the nation overcome the injustices caused by Anglo-Saxon "selfish greed of gold and a love of domination" (116), Du Bois thus argues that one of the gifts of black folk is a recognition of the limitations of the dominant culture's economic paradigm, an understanding from which he believes all America can benefit. (Among Du Bois's objections to Washington, consequently, is that "so thoroughly did he learn the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism" that he premises his "programme" not on a recognition of what "history and reason" has shown must be the path to "effective progress in economic lines," but rather on dominant economic values, "a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life" [393, 399, 398].) In this respect, the gift provides Du Bois with an exceptionally apt metaphor, since on a literal level, gift exchanges can be classified as an alternative to the commodity exchanges that constitute a capitalist market. However, in suggesting the gift as an alternative to capitalism's less appealing values, Du Bois apparently overlooks the ways in which the obligations generating and generated by gift exchanges can themselves be oppressive.

Constructing African American contributions to the national culture as gifts reinforces one of Souls's most basic arguments, specifically, the justifying of the demand that blacks be given the assistance needed (i.e., the political power, civil rights, and higher education that Du Bois accuses Washington of failing to pursue) if they are to become capable of devoting their "energies [. . .] toward a cheerful striving and co-
operation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster, and fuller future” (437). In extolling the gifts of black folk, Du Bois causes what some might regard as a call for charity to be felt as the nation’s obligation to return these gifts, to make what gift theorists call a countergift. The gifts of African Americans not only free them from the debt of gratitude which many whites, echoing the paternalistic slaveholder, still claimed they owed, but repositions this debt so that it becomes one owed to them. But despite the future Du Bois envisions, a future in which “two world-races [. . . ] give each to each” in a spirit of neighborly “co-operation” (370, 437), he, like Harper, considers it necessary that for the present, blacks look to themselves for support: “We cannot hope, then, in this generation, or for several generations, that the mass of the whites can be brought to assume that close sympathetic and self-sacrificing leadership of the blacks which their present situation so eloquently demands. Such leadership, such social teaching and example, must come from the blacks themselves” (481).37

In thus advancing service to one’s fellow blacks as both a “responsibility to the struggling masses” and a “responsibility to this nation” (401), Du Bois establishes racial uplift as yet another gift that African Americans have to offer the country. For example, describing the development of schools for blacks throughout the South, Du Bois comments on how of the six million dollars used to found institutions such as Fisk, Atlanta, Howard, and Hampton, there were “seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars of which the freedmen themselves gave of their poverty” (385). This gift that blacks have managed to give despite their poverty illustrates their capacity for contributing to the nation (the freedmen’s donated money is a gift that keeps on giving since those it helped educate presumably can now contribute more to society than they would have been able
to otherwise) and demonstrates that the race need not be completely dependent on the gifts of well-meaning but often paternalistic whites. Constructing racial uplift as a gift the black community can give itself (a line of argument that risks simply shifting culpability for paternalism from whites to upper-class blacks) is a primary end of Du Bois’s gift rhetoric.

While many have connected Du Bois’s notion of racial gifts to essentialist concepts of race, it has gone unnoted that his troping of the gift is something he shares with earlier African American writers and, more importantly, that his gift rhetoric is connected to issues other than the attempt to define racial difference. Eric Sundquist says of Souls’s “racial essentialism” that “wanting to avoid the imputation of biological racialism, and yet uncomfortable with the environmentalist reduction of race to ‘culture,’ Du Bois had placed his emphasis on the quasi-mystical notion of ‘strivings’” (486), a concept closely connected to, and at times seemingly synonymous with, his sense of racial gifts. Sundquist adds, “Du Bois lived with the paradox that racialism—the claim for an essentially black ‘soul’ ‘genius,’ or ‘gift’—was inevitably one foundation of political racism” (560). But that Du Bois found reasons for accepting the risks of racist arguments does not explain his choice of the “gift” as a metaphor for voicing them. Du Bois, it would seem, chooses this metaphor because it works with multiple arguments, such as his critique of new forms of paternalism and his exploration of possible means of establishing a true community between the nation’s races.40

The question of whether Du Bois ever satisfactorily escaped essentialist theories of race has, of course, been a crucial issue in Du Bois scholarship. Many scholars have persuasively defended Du Bois against the charge that his racial theory is rendered
inadequate by its alleged essentialism, and yet we might very well ask why, despite a near consensus that Du Bois resolutely countered biologicist definitions of race with sociohistorical ones, such a defense continues to seem necessary. I would suggest that although Du Bois’s arguments are not in actuality necessarily essentialist, they sound like they might be. Du Bois’s gift rhetoric is a significant reason why one hears traces of essentialistic thinking in prose that does not otherwise defend essentialism.

That thinking of the social and cultural contributions of members of a race as “gifts” teeters dangerously on the edge of racist stereotyping should be obvious, and it is not difficult to find examples of racial gift rhetoric used to such effect. For example, in 1998, in a speech before the Wisconsin legislature, Reggie White, an African American ordained minister and professional football player, described the “gifts” of various races—he claimed that blacks are gifted in “celebration and worship,” whites “know how to tap into money,” Hispanics have a talent for family relationships and “can put 20, 30 people in one home,” and Asians “can turn a television into a watch” (“Sour Sermon” 76). Du Bois’s prose might not be as off-putting as White’s, but certainly within the context of his argument about the need to enable races to give to each other, his passing comments about blacks’ “innate love of harmony and beauty” (366) and “light-hearted but determined Negro humility” and “loving jovial good-humor” (370) suggest the limitations of arguments for social equality (White himself claims his speech was intended to “get people to come together”) that are rooted in notions of racial gifts. Du Bois’s gift rhetoric strengthens his argument that white America needs to allow blacks to contribute to the national community and culture; in fact, a consideration of the gift seems virtually necessary to this argument, not only because of a need to repudiate a
discourse that constructed gifts as a justification for oppression, but also because the very question of what constitutes and sustains a community is the question of the gift. Nevertheless, because there is a slippage between the metaphor linking gifts and cultural contributions and the occasional rhetoric that draws on (perhaps strategically) or implicitly accepts stereotypes of racial traits, Du Bois’s “gift” becomes ambiguous.

Du Bois’s gift motif similarly underscores the elitist elements in his writings, an aspect of his work that, in turn, likewise destabilizes his own model of the gift. Pointing out Du Bois’s evident elitism, particularly his belief in the “Talented Tenth,” is nothing new, but more could be said about the ways in which his arguments about race and his elitism inform each other. Because his gift rhetoric is so persuasive in the context of arguments about African American contributions to the national culture, it, on the one hand, simultaneously renders more convincing his account of the role of the black upper class by incorporating it within a general attestation of African American gifts. On closer examination, on the other hand, Du Bois’s description of the upper class’s social responsibility creates tensions within his attempt to characterize African Americans as the givers, rather than the mere recipients, of gifts. Du Bois, after all, does not expect those who depend on the gifts of the Talented Tenth to reciprocate.

The problematic relationship between Du Bois’s gift metaphor and his elitism becomes more apparent with an understanding of gift exchange’s crucial function in the paternalistic ideology that helped support slavery and that evolved after slavery into the new forms of paternalism that Du Bois condemns. As Arnold Rampersad writes, “central to [Du Bois’s] argument is his belief in the persistence of the power of slavery beyond emancipation” (112), or what Rampersad calls “neo-slavery” (113). For instance,
describing the difficulties the Freedmen’s Bureau faced during Reconstruction, Du Bois argues that Southern governments attempted “to make [blacks] the slaves of the State, if not of individual owners,” and the Bureau, despite some successes, failed “to guard its work wholly from paternalistic methods which discouraged self-reliance” (386, 387). Du Bois’s gift rhetoric can be understood as a borrowing from the longstanding discourse of paternalism that he uses to address new forms of paternalism, of which he offers the system of sharecropping as just one example.

“In the country districts of the South,” he complains, “a system of white patronage exists over large areas” (468). As Du Bois points out, emancipation did not prevent many people from having to work for whatever a master chose to mete out:

What did such a mockery of freedom mean? Not a cent of money, not an inch of land, not a mouthful of victuals,—not even ownership of the rags on his back. Free! On Saturday, once or twice a month, the old master, before the war, used to dole out bacon and meal to his Negroes. And after the first flush of freedom wore off, and his true helplessness dawned on the freedman, he came back and picked up his hoe, and old master still doled out his bacon and meal. (463)

Sharecropping is, Du Bois concludes, “theoretically far different” from slavery, but the slave who “became a metayer” remained “a laborer with indeterminate wages in fact” (463, 464) because as during slavery, what the master can pretend is his own generosity substitutes for the wages he should pay. These uncertain compensations doled out by the sharecropper’s landlord resemble the “gifts” that, according to slavery’s apologists, the paternalistic slaveholder had bestowed upon his slaves. Like Jacobs before him, Du Bois understands that to combat paternalism’s false gifts, merely gaining ownership of one’s person is not sufficient—one must also prove oneself able to offer and return gifts as an active participant in their exchange.
Recognizing the role historically played by gift exchange in the defining of the community of free men suggests what is at stake in Du Bois’s insistence on a reciprocal gift exchange between the races and in his contention that African American gifts must not be a “giving up” or “merely passive.” The slaveholders had believed that although they gave presents to their slaves, they did not actually exchange gifts with them. When Du Bois lists the gifts that African Americans have already given to the nation, he, like Jacobs and Harper before him, is reminding white America of the absurdity of thinking that the nations’ black citizens are in a state of indebtedness. These similarities between Du Bois and previous writers suggest that some of the problematic aspects of Du Bois’s argument are perhaps inherent to metaphorizing issues of race in terms of gifts. Harper, I have argued, similarly employs the language of the gift to repudiate the claims of white paternalism and to assert racial uplift as a duty of the black community’s elite and ends up echoing, no less than Du Bois, the paternalistic slaveholder’s longing for his slaves’ gratitude (e.g., 146, 234). It must be recognized, however, that conceptualizing social relations in terms of gift exchange does not intrinsically result in paternalistic arguments; many theories of the gift, such as that offered by Emerson, are egalitarian to the point of being overly idealistic. If the model of gift exchange that Du Bois offers as a corrective to the paternalistic gifts of slavery seems undermined by those aspects of his own argument that suggest another form of paternalism, then what this points to is not a pitfall intrinsic to the concept of the gift itself, but rather to the fact that gift exchanges tend to be only as egalitarian as are the relationships already existing between the people conducting them. In other words, if Harper and Du Bois inherit a terrain contaminated by U.S. slavery and characterized by an obfuscating rhetoric of gifts, their writings
suggest the difficulty of converting such rhetoric to non-elitist, non-racist ends.

Spotting instances where Du Bois’s gift rhetoric contributes to his arguments’ paternalistic, elitist undertones is not difficult. In the midst of discussing higher education for blacks, Du Bois interjects that from the spot on Atlanta University where he writes, he can see a monument which alumni have erected “in grateful memory” of the university’s founder, Edmund Asa Ware (432). While this acknowledgement of gratitude inscribed on the monument might seem cliché, it is not trivial within the context of Du Bois’s general commentary on gifts; it calls attention to the fact that Du Bois, like Jacobs and Harper, is interested in defining which types of gifts merit gratitude. Having quoted in full the monument’s inscription, Du Bois immediately comments on the gift that some whites gave African Americans in establishing schools for them:

This was the gift of New England to the freed Negro: not alms, but a friend; not cash, but character. It was not and is not money these seething millions want, but love and sympathy [. . .] a gift which to-day only their own kindred and race can bring to the masses, but which once saintly souls brought to their favored children in the crusade of the sixties [. . .]. The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out [. . .] of the places where slavery had wallowed them. The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the sons of the freedmen came in close and sympathetic touch with the best traditions of New England. They lived and ate together, studied and worked [. . .] [T]heir curriculum was doubtless old-fashioned, but in educational power it was supreme; for it was the contact of living souls. (432)

Du Bois is explicit—the gifts he advocates are not the alms, the one-way gifts that sustain neo-slavery, but the kind of gifts whose circulation define a community of equals. However, Du Bois’s vision of such an egalitarian community between the races is qualified by his elitism. Even in this passage extolling the power of love and community, Du Bois insists that the African American “masses” need “their own kindred and race” to give the gifts that white New Englanders once gave by educating their “favored
children."

Elsewhere, Du Bois describes how the forms of contact that connect people within races seldom occur between races, but since his focus is the potential development of relationships in which the contributions of all are "mutual" (e.g., 476), what he most emphasizes in this analysis is, not surprisingly, the rarity of contact between the privileged classes of different races:

the increasing civilization of the Negro since [the war] has naturally meant the development of higher classes. [...] Between them, however, and the best element of the whites, there is little or no intellectual commerce. [...] [T]he very representatives of the two races, who for mutual benefit and the welfare of the land ought to be in complete understanding and sympathy, are so far strangers that one side thinks all whites are narrow and prejudiced, and the other thinks educated Negroes dangerous [...]. [M]any a scheme of friendliness and philanthropy, of broad-minded sympathy and generous fellowship between the two has dropped still-born because some busybody has forced the color-question to the front [...]. (489)

Du Bois thus makes clear that when he laments this lack of "philanthropy," he is not asking that the whites give charity to the "higher classes" of blacks.

Instead, as he explains, he is referring to the need for the "higher classes" of each race to work together to help those less fortunate and thereby society as a whole:

in matters of simple almsgiving, where there can be no question of social contact, and in the succor of the aged and sick, the South, as if stirred by a feeling of its unfortunate limitations, is generous to a fault. [...] And yet this does not touch the kernel of the problem. Human advancement is not a mere question of almsgiving, but rather of sympathy and cooperation among classes who would scorn charity. And here is a land where, in the higher walks of life, in all the higher striving for the good and noble and true, the color-line comes to separate natural friends and co-workers; while at the bottom of the social group, in the saloon, the gambling-hell, and the brothel, that same line wavers and disappears. (490)

Du Bois’s position is not that he opposes all gifts of simple almsgiving but that he opposes such gifts being given to—and, moreover, not being given by—what he regards
as the “higher classes” of blacks who “would scorn charity” as much as whites of the same class.\textsuperscript{42} Among people who should be “natural friends,” acts of charity—as opposed to the reciprocity of gift exchange—can only be an obstacle to understanding and friendship. As does Jacobs and Harper, Du Bois criticizes charity as it commonly practiced, but whereas they emphasize the hypocrisy of those who give it,\textsuperscript{43} Du Bois’s argument against almmsgiving is more plainly Emersonian.

Du Bois’s wariness about charity, like that of Emerson, stems from a fear that it hinders self-reliance. He seeks, he claims, a “higher individualism” that stems from “a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul” (437). Du Bois criticizes “paternalistic methods which discourag[e] self-reliance” (387) because he believes that one of the lingering consequences of slavery is that it has left many “handicapped by a training the very opposite to that of the modern self-reliant democratic laborer” (478). Du Bois resolves the tension between his desire to affirm individualism and his recognition that the American tradition of possessive individualism has left many dispossessed by turning to a notion of gift exchange which recalls Emerson’s formulation of the “true gift,” rather than to the charity which he, like Emerson, believes burdens its recipients. According to Emerson, “the gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto to him. When the waters are at level, then my goods pass to him, and his to me” (“Gifts” 537). In this formulation, equality is a prerequisite for non-oppressive gift exchange, as it is in Du Bois’s advocacy of a gift exchange which he consistently portrays as reciprocal and egalitarian. (I point out this similarity in Du Bois’s and Emerson’s thinking not to suggest that Emerson directly influenced Du Bois’s understanding of gift exchange, but to offer an example of how Du Bois’s sense of the
gift is rooted in a shared cultural concept of the gift, one that intersects with notions of individualism and social responsibility.\textsuperscript{44}

However, comments such as "human advancement is not a mere question of almsgiving, but rather of sympathy and cooperation among classes who would scorn charity" indicate that to some extent Du Bois imagines this reciprocal, egalitarian exchange as the prerogative of certain classes. Despite his locating in African American folk culture, in its spirituals, the "greatest gift" blacks have yet given to the nation, there is also the implication that he believes that blacks’ continuing ability to exchange their racial gifts will depend on the gifts and support of the race’s most privileged. As Cornel West has noted, Du Bois’s elitism is itself a type of paternalism (143, 144).\textsuperscript{45} Du Bois attempts to reject paternalism’s despotic, unidirectional gifts by arguing that gifts are really gifts only when given in a system of reciprocal exchange, and if his own arguments can be said to reflect a kind of paternalism, it is, of course, a very different paternalism than that practiced by antebellum slaveholders.

The slaveholders’ paternalism had worked to hinder the development of communal feeling between the races; the type of paternalism Du Bois suggests would occur primarily within the African American community, in the relations between the race’s elite and its “masses.” In other words, Du Bois substitutes a class-based paternalism for one that had been both classist and racist. Du Bois’s answer to white paternalism is twofold: (1) that African Americans have already given gifts to the nation; and (2) that their participation in the national gift exchange can continue to grow as the race’s privileged take over the responsibility of giving to the underclasses. Because Du Bois’s priority is interracial equality, he is more concerned with the race than with class
differences between African Americans; his racial essentialism enables him to overlook the ways in which his notion of racial uplift might reproduce white paternalism's structure. That Du Bois fails to critique racial uplift in the same terms as he does white paternalism is understandable; such a critique would do nothing to further his argument that African Americans are entitled to the educational opportunities and rights enjoyed by white citizens. Nevertheless, it is worth recognizing that one reason that Du Bois occasionally seems to echo the paternalistic thinking that he otherwise effectively refutes is because his troping of the gift has its roots in a discourse that developed in response to a particular mode of gift exchange practiced during slavery. In other words, if Du Bois's metaphor of the gift seems to accentuate the paternalistic undercurrents in his argument, it is in part because of connotations that slavery gave to the concept.

Using a rhetoric of gift-giving, of course, in advocating civil rights is unique neither to Du Bois nor to African Americans, but its use in this context highlights how slavery's paternalistic logic long outlived that peculiar institution and continued to shape assertions of equality and understandings of racial identity and race relations long after slavery. Jacobs, Harper, and Du Bois attempt to reject the despotic one-way gifts of paternalism with the argument that gifts are only gifts when they are given in a system of reciprocal exchange. Because a defining feature of gift exchange is that it occurs within small groups, among friends or neighbors, all three authors are able to use this rhetoric of the gift as part of an argument about the necessity of recognizing African Americans as members of the national community and thereby illustrate how the systematic interdependence of gifts and commodities in U.S. culture inform instances of resistance to that culture. Once it is recognized the extent to which our popular imagination
mystifies gifts as the polar opposites of commodities, the looking toward gift exchange as a basis for empowerment begins to seem virtually inevitable. But because gift exchanges can themselves confirm, rather than disrupt, existing social hierarchies, defining selfhood and social interactions in terms of gift exchange as a means of correcting the dominant ideology easily raises new problems of its own.

In one of modern gift theory’s seminal texts, Marshall Sahlins offers a different view of “one-way” gifts than the one I have suggested in this chapter. Defining the “generalized reciprocity” that characterizes “everyday kinship, friendship, and neighborly relations,” Sahlins observes that while even gifts to “loved ones” generate counter-obligations, “the expectation of reciprocity is indefinite” and “an open stipulation of return would be unthinkable” (“Sociology” 29, 31). “A good pragmatic indication of generalized reciprocity,” he remarks, “is a sustained one-way flow” (“Sociology” 31).47 The gifts exchanged by those who willingly recognize themselves as members of a community, in other words, go unmarked and misrecognized. Clearly, there is much truth in Sahlins’s contention that the obligatoriness of reciprocity is more openly acknowledged as “social distance” increases (“Sociology” 29). (We give gifts to those we love, for example, because we want to, regardless of whether they are able to reciprocate; when love is absent, we might find ourselves thinking, “I have to buy her a present because she bought me one.”) The one-way gifts slaves received, however, were clearly not the sort of unmarked gifts Sahlins describes not only because those who gave them explicitly insisted that they were gifts necessitating returns of gratitude but because, as the writers discussed in this chapter make clear, one-way gifts indicate exclusion, not inclusion, when they expressly negate their recipients’ desire to reciprocate.
When the conversation about gifts takes the form of who owes whom what, of whose gift has been undervalued or ignored, the gift community has already broken down or was never there to begin with. Recognizing this makes it all the more troubling that the U.S. still finds itself debating Du Bois’s question, “Are not these gifts worth the giving?” (545): that The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks, Randall Robinson’s recent book outlining the case for slavery reparations, is a controversial best-seller and that Horowitz’s call for blacks to show their gratitude was national news only months ago demonstrates that “the gift” remains a key question in the nation’s dialogue about race. If the exchanges that most strongly bind a gift community are those that are unmarked, then calling attention to the gifts one has given, as do Jacobs, Harper, and Du Bois (and as do the performances Melville depicts in The Confidence-Man), unavoidably impedes the very sense of community it is intended to produce.

The gift rhetoric used by Jacobs, Harper, and Du Bois is problematic not only because it necessarily makes explicit what would ideally go misrecognized. Their writings show the importance of determining what kinds of gift relations would characterize equality but also the difficulties of doing so—Jacobs’s repudiation of the slaveholder’s professed benevolence develops into the elitist and seemingly essentialistic undercurrents of Du Bois’s own argument against paternalism, a development that the metaphorical possibilities of the word “gift” facilitate. The inescapably paradoxical gift is thus perhaps an extremely risky concept around which to develop a theory of race or nation; it appears, nevertheless, to be a concept that must necessarily be addressed. If the sense of mutual obligation and social responsibility felt by a community’s members is generated by transactions that take the form of gifts (as I have argued throughout this
dissertation), then a person has no alternative but to try to make her gifts be recognized if she wants to be acknowledged as a member of a community from which she is currently excluded.
NOTES

Introduction

1 Disagreeing, on the basis that all gifts contain elements of self-interest, with Bronislaw Malinowski's earlier argument that "motives of self-interest" were the reason for the continuum between pure barter and pure gift, Marcel Mauss nevertheless agreed that economic acts should be regarded as a continuum of practices, with the "purely self-interested economy" of modern society at one extreme (Mauss 73, 76). Marshall Sahlins offers another influential formulation of this argument, one that makes "social distance" the key question in the classification of exchange's "continuum of forms" ("Sociology" 29). See also Nicolas Thomas and James Carrier's respective arguments for regarding this continuum as an analytical tool, rather than as a description of concrete phenomena (Thomas 15, Carrier 190).

2 I specify Western capitalism rather than capitalism in general because studies of gift giving in Japan indicate attitudes and practices unlike gift activities in Western capitalist societies. See Maurice Godelier 157 and Carrier 180.

3 For descriptions of how mainstream, neoclassical economics either ignores gift exchanges or interprets it as market exchange, see Christopher Gregory 102; Diana Strassmann 61-62; Julie Nelson 33.

4 See Gregory 12. For an exceptionally clear illustration of this fact, see Lewis Hyde's history of usury laws 109-40, also 61. See too Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé 208.
These issues are discussed in most of the works I cite in this introduction and are the topics of several of the essays in the collection edited by Alan Schrift.

Generally, I use “the gift” to refer to what I describe below as the Western ideology of the gift, a widely held, abstract concept of what gift-giving entails and represents, and “gift exchange” and “gift-giving” to refer to concrete, empirical transactions involving gifts.

Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen make a similar observation (29). See also Aafke Komter “Netherlands” 107.

E.g., see John Frow 217.

Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) also contributed to modern interest in gift-based economies.

E.g., “To refuse to give, [. . .] just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (Mauss 13).

On Mauss’s sense of social democracy, see Mary Douglas (xv); also Godbout and Caillé (59-60, 149). Annette Weiner criticizes Mauss’s (and others’) unquestioning acceptance of the norm of reciprocity (e.g., 2, 28-32, 43, 149-50). See also Frow (130). Claude Lévi-Strauss makes the most familiar objection to Mauss’s apparent mysticism, or “indigenous” explanation (“Selections” 55). See also Sahlin (“Spirit” 74-83); Maurice Godelier (45). Jacques Derrida examines Mauss’s “Rousseauist schema” (66); see also Sahlin (“Spirit” 85) and Rodolphe Gasché (111-12). Another important analysis of Mauss worth noting is Gasché’s observation that Mauss gives insufficient attention to the first of the three obligations he discusses, the obligation to give, and consequently fails to
recognize that there is no “originary gift” since what obligates a gift to be given are exchange relations that have always already been established (111, 115).

12 A similar warning against labeling certain societies as “gift” economies and description of how “the older anthropological construct of the gift depended more upon an inversion of the category of the commodity than upon anything” else had previously been offered by Thomas (203, also 4). I give more attention to Carrier’s version of this argument because whereas Thomas ultimately examines the ways in which “indigenous people” have “created customs of reciprocity and an idea of the gift” to differentiate their own culture from “the ‘money life’ of white foreigners” (203), Carrier’s focus, like mine, is on how the tendency to treat gift and commodity exchange as a bipolar opposition has contributed to Western capitalism’s own gift-giving customs. For a general discussion of “the various essentialisms and reductionisms” of gift theory, see Jack Amariglio and David Ruccio, 388-91.

13 See also 65, 71.

14 But not to capitalism only. “Mauss’s discourse [. . .] oppose[s] a liberal socialism to the inhuman coldness of economism, of those two economisms that would be capitalist mercantilism and Marxist communism” (Derrida 44). (All citations referring to Derrida in this introduction refer to Given Time.) See also Godelier 208; Douglas xvi.

15 For a discussion that situates Mauss’s work within liberalism’s conventional strategy of creating of “the illusion that we acknowledge ourselves to be historically determined, while in fact denying it,” see Alexandra Oroussoff (285, 296n11). Mauss’s inattention to the question of what produces the obligation to give in the first place
likewise represents his desire to preserve a sense in which the gift can represent freedom in exchange. See Gasché 113; also see footnote 11 above. For a reading that, like Parry’s, regards Mauss’s effort to construct a gift that combines freedom and obligation in a positive light, see Godbout and Caillé 178, 196-97, also 50.

16 See Frow 103-04; Woodmansee and Osteen 29.

17 Hyde’s idealism is most evident in his acknowledgement that he does not “take up the negative side of gift exchange—gifts that leave an oppressive sense of obligation, gifts that manipulate or humiliate, gifts that establish and maintain hierarchies, and so forth” (xvi), as if such gifts are mere exceptions that can justifiably be overlooked. In fairness to Hyde, it should be noted that by his book’s end, he has modified his argument about the absoluteness about the distinction between gift and commodity (273).

18 Godbout and Caillé most closely resemble Mauss in their specific sense of the gift’s utopian possibilities (e.g., see 50, 215-22), but for the most part, theirs is a balanced and theoretically nuanced treatment of the gift.

19 See Weiner 41; Frow 117.

20 But as Frow points out, there is a certain contradiction in this aspect of Bataille’s argument. On the one hand, his “concept of dépense, non-productive expenditure” seems to disrupt “the system of generalized reciprocity that, in one reading of Mauss and certainly in his structuralist succession, models the systemic equilibrium of exchange,” but on the other hand, it seems “that dépense is the release of energy that allows the system to continue functioning,” in other words, that it works to maintain, rather than disrupt the system’s equilibrium (118).
21 See Christopher Bracken; also Godelier 77, 155-56; Weiner 40-43; Hyde 30.

22 See Frow 118; Woodmansee and Osteen 30; Barbara Hernstein Smith 135-49.

23 For insightful, balanced discussions of this similarity between postmodern economic theory (but not Bataille specifically) and neoclassical economics, see Regenia Gagnier and John Dupré 402-05; Amariglio and Ruccio 392-94.

24 For a critique of the “economism” of structuralist accounts such as Lévi-Strauss’s, see Pierre Bourdieu, e.g., Logic 112-13, 96, 98. For a critique of Lévi-Strauss’s emphasis on reciprocity, see Weiner e.g., 14, 27.

25 Such an approach is associated with sociologists such as Richard Emerson and Peter Blau. For critiques of this approach see Cheal; also Carrier 157-58. More generally, it should be noted that a similarly problematic approach is practiced by some neoclassical economists, such as Gary Becker. See Amy Koritz and Douglas Koritz 409-13; Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson 6; Paula England 41-44; Strassmann 61.

26 For descriptions of how Derrida obscures meaningful distinctions between gift and commodity exchange, see, for instance, Godelier 247-8n13; Bourdieu, “Marginalia” 234. Bourdieu’s own theory of gift exchange, however, has itself been criticized in these terms. See, for example, Godbout and Caillé 121.

27 That Derrida qualifies his critique of Mauss by noting “in Mauss’s favor” that his “happy medium” is “impossible” and “untenable” (65, see above) likewise suggests that what he finds compelling about “the gift” is precisely its ability to suggest itself as an ever-unreachable ideal. The gift for Derrida is that which “we require simultaneously [. . . ] that it appear and that it not appear in its essence [. . . ] That it obligate and not
obligate;” he thus formulates “the structure of this impossible gift” in terms that ultimately do not challenge that the gift’s “essence” is the opposite of exchange and that leave intact Mauss’s sense that the ideal gift (the impossible gift) would express both freedom and obligation (27).

28 For a discussion of how Derrida thus might be said to posit “an omnipresent global capitalism that consumes everything in its wake” in his very act of criticizing it, see Amariglio and Ruccio, 391.

29 Derrida himself points out that the logic of the gift he deconstructs is culturally specific through such statements as “wherever time as circle [. . .] is predominant, the gift is impossible” (9; italics altered). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in this passage it is the construct of time, not “the gift,” that is the variable. Similarly, Derrida points out the problem of “identifying from one culture to another what [Mauss] understands by gift” as a crucial question raised by Mauss’s essay, one that problematizes “the very existence of something like the gift,” but this problematizing of “the gift” leads not to a deconstruction of the gift/exchange binary on which his own definition of “the gift” rests, but to further evidence of this gift’s impossibility, of the constitutive “aporia” that is for him the significance of “the gift” (25-27).

Frow similarly observes that Derrida’s argument depends on his acceptance of a particular notion of the gift “as entirely as the purely gratuitous, non-reciprocal, and atemporal act of the ‘first gift’” (108). For a different account of how Derrida’s (and Levinas’s) argument about the gift leaves “intact the West’s tendency to declare its universality by devaluing, excluding, appropriating, or assimilating its other,” see Robert
Bernasconi (270).

I realize that my use of the word "reciprocity" is problematic since different scholars have used it to mean entirely different things. For example, Sahlins's continuum of reciprocity includes every type of possible transaction, with sharing or the so-called "pure gift" at one pole (that of "generalized reciprocity") and the "attempt to get something for nothing" through such acts as "gambling," "chicanery," and "theft" at the other ("negative reciprocity"). Between them is "balanced reciprocity," which includes both gift exchanges and various "more economic" forms of trade ("Sociology" 31-32). In opposition, Alfred Gell, in a passage that illustrates just how uncertain and even controversial the term is, argues: "Gift exchange—in which accounts are kept, and recompense must be forthcoming—is defined in contrast to what goes on inside households [. . .]. 'Generalised' and 'balanced' are not two alternative forms of reciprocity; balanced reciprocity is reciprocity, because 'balance' [. . .] is built into the notion of reciprocity as such: 'generalised' reciprocity is the absence of reciprocity, i.e. non-reciprocity" (152). Karl Polanyi uses "reciprocity" to distinguish certain forms of economic behavior, including household relations and some forms of gift exchange, from the forms of economic behavior that predominate in market societies (47-51). It would not be difficult to list more such examples. I have decided, however, not to use "reciprocity" in any technical sense; in common usage, "reciprocity" broadly refers to any mutual exchange, and the common usage is most relevant to my own argument, which is primarily concerned with identifying popular, widely held understandings of the differences between gifts and commodities. Additionally, my preference for using
“reciprocity” to refer to both gift and commodity exchanges stems from the connections I see between Weiner’s critique of the norm of reciprocity and my own concerns about how conventional economic approaches obscure the role gift exchanges play in modern societies.

31 E.g., see Gregory 18-20. While Gregory does describe alienation as “the transference of private property,” that “Marx noted, ‘has no existence in a primitive society based on property in common’” (12), he does not treat inalienability as the simple opposite of this aspect of alienation. Gifts are inalienable not because they cannot be transferred, but because they express a relationship between the people who exchange them. In this respect, Cheal (“Moral Economy” 87-88) and, to a lesser degree, Frow (127) and Gell (145) oversimplify Gregory’s argument.

32 It might be objected that this is not always the case, that we are often given things that hold no special meaning for us. Such gifts, I would argue, prove only the difficulty of giving a successful gift, not that gifts, generally speaking, are inalienable in a way that commodities are not. Moreover, such meaningless gifts are likely to be exchanged within the context of relationships that are not particularly close; in this respect such gifts confirm the common observation that gift exchange becomes more difficult as social distance increases.

33 For an argument similar in this respect to Gregory’s, see Godelier 12-13.

34 Arjun Appadurai, for instance, criticizes Gregory’ for overstating the differences between gift and commodity (11). Cheal is remarkably critical of Gregory’s failure to consider gift exchanges within modern western societies (“Moral Economy”
87-88), despite the practical implications of his own argument having much in common with Gregory's. For especially helpful discussions of both the limitations and advantages of Gregory's theory, see Thomas 14-18, 30 and Gell 144-46. For another useful critique of Gregory, see Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 7-8.

Then again, "reciprocity" is also used to designate explicitly non-market forms of exchange. See, for example, Polanyi 47, John Wikse 51 or Stephanie Coontz 35, 104, 119. While this specific usage of the word has the advantage of distinguishing between types of transactions, it tends to obscure the importance reciprocal gift exchanges have within market societies.

In the case of Mauss, whose primary focus is the obligation to return gifts received, the gift appears as utopian alternative for reasons, of course, other than a failure to recognize gift exchange's reciprocity; Mauss's limitation is his conventional sense of the norm of reciprocity. See Weiner (see footnote 11, above). For a more positive reading of Mauss's articulation of the norm of reciprocity, see Sahlins ("Spirit") 86-95. For conventional formulations of the norm of reciprocity as a principle of social stability, see both Alvin Gouldner and Lawrence Becker.

See too Godelier 42. Carrier also points out in this passage that gift transactions resemble commodity transactions in that "the counter-transfer can take place at the same time as the transfer or it can be delayed" (20). Godelier similarly notes that immediate reciprocation of a gift highlights its value as an inalienable object (44). Such observations suggest an important qualification to theories of gift exchange (e.g., Bourdieu's and Derrida's) that emphasize the time between gift and countergift as the
defining feature of gift exchange.

38 I say “relative” because in defining gifts strictly in terms of this notion of inalienability, I am intentionally oversimplifying in order to avoid theoretical issues too complex to address adequately here. For perhaps the fullest consideration of inalienability, see Godelier, who, following Weiner’s influential formulation of inalienability in terms of “a universal paradox—how to keep-while-giving” (Weiner 5), suggests that gifts and valuables be defined more precisely as “caught [...] between two principles: between the inalienability of sacred objects and the alienability of commercial objects” (Godelier 94). Godelier thus distinguishes between types of inalienability: “sacred objects are inalienable and must be kept and not given, whereas precious objects are given while being kept” (100). While both Weiner and Godelier occasionally suggest ways that their observations might be relevant to analyses of exchange in capitalist societies, they primarily discuss their own fieldwork in so-called archaic societies. I would suggest that in capitalist societies, where less importance is generally given to sacred objects, the inalienability of gift objects, relative to commodities, appears even stronger than Godelier suggests.

39 Similarly, Godelier describes a gift’s value (specifically in the case of non-agonistic exchange) in terms of “binding” and “reciprocal dependence” and how gifts “must contain something more, something which seems to all members of society to be indispensable to their existence and which must circulate among them in order that each and all may go on living” (44, 72). Also, see Hyde’s distinction between a commodity’s “value” and a gift’s “worth” (60).
40 This expression is A.J. Strathern’s (qtd. in Gregory 53). Godbout similarly refers to the gift’s “alternating inequality” (33). For a negative account of the gift’s “disequilibrium,” see Komter who describes it in terms of “a disintegration of social relations” (“Netherlands” 108).

41 E.g., in her study of gift-giving in the Netherlands, Komter found that men are more likely than women to feel that they are giving more than they receive and poorer people are more likely than wealthier people to feel similarly discontent (“Women” 122; “Netherlands” 115, 118). Komter finds that generally, most people believe that they have received less than they have given (“Netherlands” 111).

42 See Thomas 22; Godelier 12-13.

43 E.g., see Hyde 15, 74-75. In some respects, Bataille similarly posits the debt resulting from the gift as what keeps a gift economy functioning. See footnote 20 above.

44 My understanding of this fact comes largely from Weiner’s demonstration that when “inalienable possessions” are exchanged, reciprocity expresses, rather than neutralizes, the play of social power (e.g., 40, 42), but even more so from Godelier’s mapping of the differences between non-agonistic and agonistic forms of gift exchange (e.g., 48, 56), which he offers explicitly as a means expanding and refining Weiner’s argument. As Godelier makes clear, the first question when “analyzing a gift, whatever it may be,” must always be what is “the relationship that existed between the giver and the receiver before the former made a gift to the latter” (13).

45 The reciprocation of gifts may also be indirect in that it can be conditional on what and when particular recipients can afford to give in return. See Sahlins,
"Sociology" 31-32.

46 On wrapping, see Cheal, "Showing Them" 101; Godbout and Caillé 47-8.

47 Hyde is specifically describing empirical examples of indirect, or "circular,"
gift exchanges, such as the kula; my point is that even direct exchanges can be performed
in such a way as to produce, to a degree, a similar effect.

48 Such is Humphrey and Hugh-Jones's interpretation of Gregory's argument,
which they critique as an oversimplification (7). While I think that theirs is a reasonable
gloss of portions of Gregory's argument (e.g., 41), I also think Gregory's argument is
more nuanced that it might first appear, given his explanation of how all forms of
"reproduction" address "the conditions necessary for the self-replacement of both things
and people" (29, my italics).

49 More precisely, Cheal studies the exchange of presents, which is but one
specific form of the more general phenomenon of gift exchange.

50 Frow perhaps more clearly defines a "moral economy" as "a patterning of
mores, customary ways of behaving and being" (124).

51 For a detailed discussion of the gift to strangers as "a distinctly modern
phenomenon," see Godbout and Caillé (e.g., 62-63, 76-77, 96, 142). As they point out,
the modern gift to strangers demonstrates the limitations of Sahlins's typology of
reciprocity (76-77). For a more general discussion of humanitarianism as a phenomenon
associated with capitalism, see Thomas Haskell; also Coontz 236. Conversely, for a
discussion of how in a "gift-exchange culture" (as opposed to a market culture) an
individual's gift-giving obligations "ended at the border that separated him from
strangers,” see Kenneth Greenberg (85).

52 Polanyi’s notion that social relations are “embedded” in the economic transactions also seems more precise than Cheal’s claim that “in the contemporary world system, moral economies exist alongside political economies” (“Moral Economy” 91, my italics).

53 Stephen Holmes 268. For an exceptional history of the concept, see Albert Hirschman. For an account of how the historical construction of the opposition between passions and interests that Hirschman describes contributed both to the development of economics as a separate field of study and to the modern ideology of the impossible gift, see Bourdieu, “Marginalia” 234, 236, 241n6).

54 Here I am following Komter’s discussion of these interconnections between gift and commodity transactions (“Introduction” 10). The idea that particular objects are both commodities and gifts at different times is a key element of both Thomas’s and Godelier’s arguments.

55 Similarly, I find Michel de Certeau’s description of gift exchange a weakness of his theory of practice. Like Bataille, de Certeau emphasizes the potlatch and defines the gift in terms of a “transgression” of the “modern market economy;” in doing so, he overemphasizes gift exchange’s capacity to “subvert” (27-28).

56 Which is why Derrida should not be so surprised that Mauss does not discuss this aspect of the gift: there is no need to “untie” the gift in the precapitalist societies Mauss discusses.

57 Carrier elaborates: “One factor that may account in part for the ideological
assertion of the freedom of the giver is that the constraints people bear in gift relations appear insignificant compared to what they experience in the world of work. [. . . ] Moreover, because people enter a job abruptly, the constraints it imposes are likely to be more noticeable than those that people experience in the social realm. People develop social relationships and identities slowly, often over the course of years, and these identities emerge through implicit negotiation and adjustment among those involved. Perhaps because of this, people tend to think of the obligations that these relations entail as chosen freely, rather than imposed externally" (159).

58 This is Bourdieu’s term.

59 Here is where I disagree with Cheal, who regards the “social relationships” constructed by gifts as “voluntary” in fact; a perspective that allows him to make the obviously problematic argument that “interpersonal gift giving [. . . ] is not strongly determined, either by social roles or by the class system (“Moral Economy” 90).

60 For a similar argument, see Wikse 51.

61 Attention to the gift helps explain, I think, some of the incongruities Stanley notes in particular formulations of the contract metaphor. For example she describes how Harriet Jacobs and Frances Harper (two of the authors my third chapter discusses) deployed the rhetoric of possessive individualism and of free contract (30-31), but comments: “Yet their vision differed from other images of propertied individualism, for the self-owning freedwoman would not be fenced off from the interdependencies of social relations but rather would be included in a community of rights-bearing individuals” (34). It is precisely their use of the alternative rhetoric of the gift that, I will
argue, explains this difference. Similarly, she shows that both sides of the slavery debate argued “that market values were not commensurate with domestic affection and that social order required a realm of reciprocity not measured by buying and selling” and that feminists, later in the century, used “language denoting neither market reciprocity nor dominion and dependence. The relation was supposed to be sentimental but not paternalistic; the image was of contract but not a contract evocative of the marketplace” (240, 186). Again, I regard this evocation of an alternative form of reciprocity as an instance of the gift being used to resist or redefine the conventional model of contract.

62 As Cheal and others have documented, in modern capitalist societies, “women are more active in all forms of gift giving than are men” ("Moral Economy" 85).

Chapter 1

1 For a critique of Gilmore’s reading of this anecdote about the preacher, see Richard Teichgraeber 26-8. David Jacobson offers another suggestive reading; commenting on Emerson’s summary of the preacher’s message (“we expect our revenge to-morrow” [286]); Jacobson argues that like Nietzsche, Emerson builds his “theory of value in opposition to the spirit of revenge” (111). Thus, although Jacobson does not address the gift, his essay suggests that Emerson’s and Nietzsche’s sense of the gift might be explored further in terms of gift theory’s potential relevance to questions about justice and revenge.

2 Even Maussian theorists acknowledge that the claim that giving is obligatory is a generalization; the first gift given in the early stages of a new relationship is given
comparatively freely (Carrier 22). However, as Rodolphe Gasché explains, such a first gift is always already caught up in the cycle of obligations (e.g., 111, 115).

3 Such is Gary Shapiro's translation of what appears in most English translations of the text as the "bestowing" virtue (e.g., Shapiro 17).

4 See my introduction 10, 257n21.

5 Grusin takes for granted that "primitive gift exchange" is a system of "expenditure and loss" (36). In fairness to Grusin, I would point out that the most significant critiques of such a definition of gift exchange have been written subsequent to his essay.

6 Teichgraeber, for instance, rebuts "the familiar but misleading claim that an early, antimarket Emerson ultimately gave way to a later, supposed apologist for capitalism" (20). For examples of this claim, see Gilmore 67, 81; Carolyn Porter 112-13; Howard Horwitz 100. Such accounts of Emerson's alleged shift from an ambivalent opposition to the market to advocacy of it replicates in significant ways the larger shift in Emerson's career from a celebration of individual freedom to a less idealistic fatalism described in Stephen Whicher's influential Freedom and Fate—a shift that a growing consensus, including David Van Leer, David Robinson, Michael Lopez, Christopher Newfield, and James Albrecht, has more recently questioned or even denied. As Lopez argues, "Whicher's evolutionary paradigm [...] though intended to rescue Emerson from an even shallower, hagiographic image [...] made it possible to continue speaking of Emerson in simplistic either-or terms: Emerson as either optimistic or pessimistic [...] nonconformist or conservative, and so forth" (48). The impulse to label Emerson as
either "anti-" or "pro-" market is yet another manifestation of this approach.

7 See also Teichgraeber x.

8 In other words, the market poses for Emerson another site for the kind of struggle that he, as Lopez has argued, regards as necessary to the formation of individual identity (e.g., 4).

9 On this passage as an allusion to slavery, see Anita Patterson 93.

10 See my introduction 17-19. Unlike Grusin, who notes this particular sentence’s similarity to etiquette book prose primarily in order to justify discussing essays other than “Gifts” (35), I do not think then that this sentence can be dismissed as unimportant to Emerson’s general argument about gifts.

11 Emerson’s observation is consistent with much modern gift theory, as my introduction’s discussion of inalienability indicates. Barry Schwartz claims, for instance, “The gift imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the receiver” (70).

Commenting on this particular passage in Emerson’s essay, James Carrier rightly notes that Emerson “mystify[es] the work that people do” to evoke a gift “valued not because of its material nature” (148), but mistakes, however, this passage (which I read as an elaboration of the forms of “common gifts”) for Emerson’s attempt to identify a second, superior mode of gift-giving. In contrast, I argue that the second type of gift defined by Emerson is the “true gift” which he in fact distinguishes from these “tokens of compliment and love” which he characterizes as “for the most part barbarous” (536). Therefore, although I agree that this essay illustrates the Western ideology of the gift at work, I think Carrier himself comes to this conclusion a bit too hastily and thus perceives
Emerson's model of gift exchange as merely naive. For a reading of this passage that is based on Carrier's interpretation of it, see Mary Louise Kete 53.

12 To Carrier, Emerson thus indicates that "even the common gift is free because we would be so indebted to our friends were we to need their help that any present we may give to them is insignificant in comparison" (149). Again, I find that Carrier's account of why this essay illustrates the ideology of the true gift—a claim with which I ultimately agree wholeheartedly—skips crucial nuances in Emerson's argument.

13 I am paraphrasing Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé 196-97.

14 That Winsome is a portrait of Emerson has been acknowledged in virtually all studies of The Confidence-Man; Egbert has occasionally been identified with Thoreau, but has more commonly been regarded as a parody of a particular aspect of Emersonianism. For overviews of the earliest arguments about these identifications, see Watson Branch et al. 332; Hershel Parker 333n.1; John Bryant "Problem Novel" 330. Like Gary Lindberg (and many others whom I cite, such as Bernhard Radloff), I treat Winsome and Egbert as "two phases of the same 'character'" (33).

15 Approaching these exchanges as illustrations of various economic principles and viewpoints sometimes leads me to suggest arguments quite different from some others have offered. In many cases, these differences reflect not disagreement but simply that this complex novel yields varied interpretations when read in different contexts. Critics who have contributed to my appreciation of this novel's complexity by approaching it from perspectives different than mine include Helen Trimpi, who elucidates its political satire by correlating its characters with public figures of the 1850s,
and Radloff, who locates Melville's critique of humanism within multiple philosophical traditions.

My reading resembles that which Wai-Chee Dimock offers in *Empire for Liberty* in its emphasis on the economic thinking this novel reflects, but our conclusions differ because her argument does not, I think, adequately differentiate between Melville's representation of the opposing positions voiced by different characters. Moreover, her reading does not distinguish between types of exchange and thus too readily detects evidence of commodification and of complicity with capitalistic ideology.

16 Most critics seem to think so, despite quibbles about particular characters, such as the deaf-mute. For a typical explanation of why the various con-men should be read as a single character and a brief overview of scholarship on the subject, see Tom Quirk 49-57. I treat the novel's various con-men as a single character as a matter of convenience (it matters little to my overall argument, one way or the other), although I am inclined to agree with Bryant that the novel in fact leaves this question unanswered so that readers will themselves have to struggle with the problem of confidence as they attempt to characterize its various characters (e.g., 235-37; "Problem Novel" 316). All references to Bryant in this chapter are to *Melville and Repose*, unless otherwise noted.

17 This question generally arises as a version of the first, with the observation that Goodman's differences from Melville's protagonist's previous guises suggest that he for one might not be conning anyone (e.g., Franklin 164, Bryant 238). Again, I agree with Bryant that Goodman's questionable status as con man is the point: "as we attempt to make out just exactly who or what Goodman is," we are made "to feel the conflicting
passions of cosmopolitanism" (250, 245).

18 The extremeness of the con-man's moral ambiguity is reflected in the fact that he has been interpreted as both Satan and Christ. For a synopsis of such readings, see Branch, et al. 333-34, 336, 342-43 (excerpts of several of the most influential formulations of these arguments can be found in the Norton edition of the novel edited by Parker). Lindberg and Bryant both convincingly demonstrate that such readings oversimplify by treating the novel as allegory, a mode of interpretation the novel itself critiques (e.g., Lindberg 27, Bryant 232-33). (Dimock's commitment to an allegorical reading of Melville [e.g., Empire 21-25] thus seems to me to be another shortcoming of her argument.)

19 Bryant's analysis of the differences between the novel's halves is particularly thorough (236-38).

20 Announcing this after a completed sale, the boy, unlike the confidence man, fails to use this technique to initiate a transaction; however, his statement does seem an attempt to win the trust of the other prospective customers present.

21 See for instance, Bryant's, Lindberg's, and Quirk's analyses of multiple elements of the novel, such as the interpolated tales of Goneril (Lindberg 30-31) and of the Indian hater (Lindberg 27; Bryant 251-58), the misanthropy of the bachelor Pitch (Bryant 245-49), and the limitations of characters such as Egbert (Lindberg 34-38, Quirk 44) and Charlie Noble (Lindberg 42-43, Bryant 250-62, Quirk 132). Bryant's argument that Melville's cosmopolitan "fuses the mutually exclusive sensibilities of idealism and skepticism" (112) is particularly useful because it locates Melville's novel within a
cultural history of the cosmopolitan ideal. Lindberg finds a similar fusion between “outward” skepticism about “social appearances” and “inward faith” in Melville’s confidence man, although not in any one of his guises in isolation (45, 43, 42).

22 Throughout this conversation, Egbert goes by the name, “Charlie” (after Charlie Noble, the fellow confidence man previously encountered by Goodman), as part of the role-playing that Goodman requires him to undertake. For clarity’s sake, I call Egbert “Egbert,” even when discussing places in the text where he appears as “Charlie.”

23 Hyde is suggesting a possible distinction between gift and commodity cultures; as he documents in his history of usury laws (109-40), in pre-capitalist societies, gift exchanges affirm the bonds between a community’s members while interest on loans appears when such a community begins to exchange with strangers. But if the meanings of “gift” and “commodity” shift and even reverse depending on cultural context (as Hyde suggests in observing that because of anxiety about “charity,” in commodity culture “the giving of gifts starts to look suspiciously like the old way of dealing with strangers” [137]), then that only points to further difficulties in defining the differences between these two terms.

24 The novel’s play with related words highlights the double meaning of “oblige” here. For example, when the P.I.O. man offers to “accommodate” him with a boy or man (115), the bachelor retorts, “Obliging word accommodate: there’s accommodation notes now, where one accommodates another with a loan, and if he don’t pay it pretty quickly, accommodates him with a chain to his foot” (116), a comment recalled by Goodman’s rejecting Egbert’s calling loans “an unfriendly accommodation” as an oxymoron (203).
25 Bourdieu continues, “Conversely, as the relationship becomes more impersonal [. . . ] it can, and increasingly does, become more purely ‘economic’, i.e. closer to its economic truth, and the interested calculation which is never absent from the most generous exchange” (Logic 115).

26 Contracts that last indefinitely rather than concluding at a certain date or with the completion of specified actions (such as a lease that remains in effect until tenants give notice that they will be moving elsewhere) may never provide such a guarantee. In some such cases, confidence might be established after the signing parties have mutually demonstrated a record of compliance, but such confidence is more accurately said to stem from a personal relationship of trust that can develop from a long-term contract, rather than from a contract itself.

27 On the importance of “style” in gift-giving, see also Godbout and Caillé 179. For another account of gift exchange as a performance that masks economic truths, see Karl Polanyi 47, 59.

28 See also W. B. Worrhen’s discussion of the different conceptions of performance operating in “performance studies” and “dramatic studies” (1094).

29 Emerson, incidentally, makes this comparison to illustrate a premise that he himself articulates in the rhetoric of gift exchange, perhaps thus betraying his own culture’s investment in an “archaic” practice: “For every thing that is given, something is taken” (“Self-Reliance”279).

30 “[I]t is a short step from the proposition that everything is ritual to the practical reality that nothing is ritual” (Bell 73).
31 Thus, Melville’s position might be aligned to a degree with Kenneth Burke’s “comic ethics,” which Albrecht contrasts with Emerson’s “individualist ethics.” Albrecht argues that while the “social component” of Emerson’s ethics must not be underestimated, Emerson nevertheless differs from Burke in claiming that “individual acts—despite their social indebtedness—can attain an autonomous or independent moral integrity.” Burke’s “comic ethics,” according to Albrecht, suggests that “the ethics of an activity cannot be measured solely by an individual’s intentions or competence” and “encourages ‘charitability’ toward the motives of others—indeed, the alternative is an assumption of universal cunning and hypocrisy that would make social cooperation impossible. However Burke also insists that charitability must not be ‘gullibility’: we must denounce overt deception and oppression” (52, 53).

32 By the end of the China Aster story, however, Egbert is arguing the opposite: “the best man, as the worst, is subject to all mortal contingencies”—an argument that as Goodman points out is an extreme instance of “inconsistency” (222). Lindberg’s analysis hinges on showing how “Egbert’s own ‘fixed convictions’ are damaged by the telling” of the story and how this illustration of “‘character’ [...] succumb[ing] to circumstances” itself critiques this cultural split between beliefs and practices” (37-38).

33 See Kenneth Marc Harris for a related argument offered from the perspective, not of performativity theory, but of self-deception theory. Harris’s essay is suggestive (even if the examples with which he illustrates self-deception are somewhat sexist, or at least odd). A consideration of the intersections between self-deception theory, performativity theories, and Bourdieu’s sense of misrecognition (and of the role self-
deception plays in *The Confidence-Man* could be fruitful, but is beyond my present argument’s scope.

34 This passage’s next sentence contains another aspect of Emerson’s gift rhetoric: “Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another [. . .]” (“Self-Reliance” 278). This is not the only instance of Emerson’s using the gift as a metaphor for an individual’s talents and other inalienable characteristics (e.g., “Self-Reliance” 263), but a consideration of this metaphor is beyond this chapter’s scope. On such rhetoric in general, see Hyde 190-91.

35 In another guise, he discusses another theme of “Compensation:” “as for the apparent license temporarily permitted sometimes, to the bad over the good [. . .] it might be injudicious there to lay too much polemic stress upon the doctrine of future retribution as the vindication of present impunity” (66).

36 On Emerson’s internalization of principles of exchange, see Wikse 129-32; Dimock “Scarcity” 92.

37 Describing the confidence-man as the “ultimate game-player” in the “confidence game” that is “American social activity,” a game whose “pattern” most other characters are unable to follow (26), Lindberg also positions the confidence-man as a sort of exemplar of practical conduct (27, 45, 26).

Chapter 2

1 Two recent studies of nineteenth-century sentimentalism, however, have noted that gift exchanges contributed to “a distinct economic ethos” associated with domesticity
(Merish 146). Mary Louise Kete describes a process of “sentimental collaboration” that “works essentially as a gift economy, establishing symbolic ties among separate persons [. . . ] by producing a network of obligations that link together separate people and groups of people” (52). Lori Merish observes that “gifts are a critical category of antebellum material life, exemplifying the Protestant emphasis on the role of possessions in imparting and conveying personal feelings and sentimental commitments;” gift exchange, she argues, works to ensure that commodities are “domesticated” and is thus among those practices that make “capitalism ‘habitable’” (133, 71, 117). My own argument, which details the underlying assumptions of nineteenth-century gift-giving practices, is generally consistent with Kete’s and Merish’s observations about gifts, but also refines them in two key ways. First, whereas both Kete and Merish describe how gift exchanges helped produce the proprietary subjectivity associated with liberal individualism and market culture (e.g., Kete 53, Merish 117), I argue that one way that the domestic gift economy distinguishes itself from the market is that it asserts a specifically non-individualistic model of possession (which is not to say that it does in fact successfully subvert market individualism). Merish’s compelling account of “how the ‘treatment’ of domestic possessions” has a “performative function” in that it “renders habitual the (repeated) performance of the proprietary emotions that define subjectivity itself” (118) can therefore be expanded, I think, to describe not only the performative construction of individual subjectivity, but also (as my previous chapter describes) the production of interpersonal relationships and emotions (such as trust) that are economically necessary, but not strictly proprietary. Second, whereas both Kete and Merish define gifts in the
terms established by the nineteenth century’s ideology of the ideal gift, such as that offered by Emerson (see Kete 53) and particular women writers, I also examine nineteenth-century critiques of this ideology, such as those offered by Melville, Fern, and Howells, critiques that emphasize gift exchanges outside the domestic sphere and thus call attention to how such exchanges not only reinforce the market economy (e.g., see Kete 237n10, Merish 134), but also transform that economy into something other than what is conventionally assumed in theoretical accounts of “the market.”

2 Gift books themselves represent an effort to transform a particular commodity (books) into gifts. See Stephen Nissenbaum 141-50.

3 The bibles the March girls receive on this particular Christmas are “an effective gesture of emotional intimacy” because as Nissenbaum notes, their different colors reflect Marmee’s understanding of her daughters’ “individual tastes” (154) and, I would add, because these colors symbolize each girl’s personality and because the bibles remind the girls of their mother’s moral lessons. The gifts that each girl gives her mother similarly reflect both an understanding of the recipient (each gives something she knows her mother either needs or likes) and something personal about the giver (e.g., the gloves Meg gives reflects her pride in “her own pretty hands” [5]).

4 Zelizer illustrates that “values and social relations” do indeed “reciprocally transmute money by investing it with meaning and social patterns” (18), in part through an insightful discussion of gifts of money (71-118). Zelizer focuses on money specifically, but suggests that her argument should be extended to the theorizing of elements of market exchange other than money itself (e.g., 214).
See my introduction 18-19.

Like *The Senator’s Son*, Warner’s novel thus criticizes merchants who transact business in a manner that further alienates their customers from the objects they buy. As discussed in my previous chapter, in economic systems closer to gift exchange, shopkeepers and their customers understand themselves to be bound by a personal relationship.

On “redundancy” as a defining characteristic of gifts, see David Cheal, “Moral Economy” 90-91.

Nissenbaum discusses handmade gifts specifically (175, 193-94). See also William Waits 18-22.

Nissenbaum 172-75; Godbout 42-3; Waits, 25.

The gift similarly appears in *The Lamplighter* as a means of mitigating an anxiety about strangers (e.g., 141), an anxiety that Cummins, like Melville, frequently connects to a lack of “confidence” (e.g., 79, 84). This message, however, is undercut in *The Lamplighter* by the revelation that the novel’s most recognizable stranger is in fact, not a stranger, but family. Philip Amory, who is repeatedly called “the stranger,” even after his name is known (e.g., 262-63, 266, 267, 268, 277) and even after he has given gifts (e.g., 270), turns out to be Gertrude’s father and Mr. Graham’s stepson.

Elsie has $20 saved from her monthly $10 allowance (245), $50 her father gives her because his “little girl might perhaps be glad of a little extra pocket money for buying Christmas gifts” (247), and an additional $20 he gives her after she has “already spent so much” on gifts for family members that she has almost nothing left to buy gifts
for the house slaves (277, 276). Nineteenth-century women writers are rarely so specific about money matters, but eight-year-old Elsie’s shopping fund should probably be regarded as little more than fantasy,  

12 Her sister Amy has similar reasons for relishing the wealth she acquires through marriage, as she tells her husband Laurie: “How delightful it is to be able to help others, isn’t it? That was always one of my dreams, to have the power of giving freely; and, thanks to you, the dream has come true” (459).

13 Zelizer is quoting Robert Bellah when referring to “the tyranny of the market.”

14 Here, I am responding to Karl Polanyi’s claim that in a market culture, “social relations are embedded in the economic system” (52). This may be so, but it is important, I believe, to recognize that the individuals who live in market cultures have practices through which they are able to misrecognize this fact.

15 Bourdieu further explains that a gift “implies uncertainty and therefore a temporal opening: one can always choose not to reply to the interpellation, invitation, or challenge, or not to reply immediately, to defer and to leave the other party in expectation. But non-response is still a response” (“Marginalia” 238). The gift, in other words, is necessarily returned, but that is not to say that the giver of a gift necessarily expects compensation.

16 Elsie Dinsmore similarly supplements its message about God’s gift with allusions to scriptures that symbolize salvation in terms of money: Elsie’s father’s command that she give him “a strict account” every time she “spend[s]” or “give[s] away any money” evokes the parable of the talents (121, Matthew 25).
On the impossible reciprocity of divine gifts, see Maurice Godelier 193-98.

All references to Derrida in this chapter are to Given Time.

This strategy can often be detected in sentimental texts’ frequently ambivalent treatment of the issue of charity. The Lamplighter, for instance, acknowledges the potentially oppressive obligations that charity can engender: Mr. Graham’s accusations of “ingratitude” cause Philip Amory to resent his “utter dependence on his bounty” and similarly give Gertrude her first taste “of the evils that spring from dependence upon the bounty of strangers” (315, 371, 141). But an awareness of charity’s negative aspects does not lead Cummins’s novel, as it has modern gift theorists, to question the construct of a free gift: The Lamplighter persists in praising “disinterested” acts that might very well be regarded as charity, such as Emily’s generosity toward Gertrude, without addressing whether they might likewise produce oppressive obligations. In Little Women, Jo makes an Emersonian proclamation of her disdain for charity (a proclamation her wealthy relatives punish by taking Amy rather than Jo to Europe): “I don’t like favors; they oppress and make me feel like a slave; I’d rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent” (297). The novel as a whole, however, treats the March family members’ frequent acts of charity as an unquestionable sign of their virtue.

If in modern gift theory, charity’s sometimes negative connotations point to the gift’s undoing, in sentimental fiction, they merely underscore the logic that understands the gift to transcend unwanted obligations. In Little Women, for example, the March family members are at first made “shy of accepting favors they could not return” by “the fact that they were poor and Laurie rich,” but they soon discover “that he considered
them the benefactors, and could not do enough to show how grateful he was for [...] the comfort he took in that humble home of theirs; so they soon forgot their pride, and interchanged kindnesses without stopping to think which was the greater" (58). Additionally, like the gifts the senator’s son, dressed in a Santa suit, distributes to poor children, the March sisters’ charitable acts, such as their giving their own breakfast “as a Christmas present” to a poor family (14), suggest that ritualized gift-giving helps ensure that charity will not appear as mere charity. Conversely, charity that represents one’s sense of “privileges and authority” rather than “kindness” and “affection,” as does the “bounty” of The Lamplighter’s Mr. Graham (371), can be criticized because it does not even register as a gift as the Western ideology of the gift defines it.

20 Isabel is rescued not only by Amory’s selflessness, but also by Gertrude’s: Gertrude tricks Amory into saving Isabel rather than herself, an action Amory refers to as a “sacrifice” (329-330, 342).

21 Folbre discusses these issues more specifically in terms of nineteenth-century domestic ideology in her essay “The Unproductive Housewife.” Further implications of the tendency in mainstream economics to assume self-interest in market transactions but altruism within the domestic sphere are discussed by many of the contributors to Marianne Ferber’s and Julie Nelson’s anthology; see particularly the essays by England and Diana Strassman.

22 See Godbout and Caillé 28-33.

23 Framing marriage as a wife’s gift of self is certainly consistent with The Wide. Wide World’s insistence on feminine submission, but it should also be recognized that
inevitable reciprocation of one’s gifts—which the novel depicts elsewhere—somewhat mitigates the one-sidedness suggested here.

24 For the most influential formulation of this argument, see Gillian Brown.

25 The mention of pin-money itself might be regarded as a critique of the domestic gift economy; receiving money only as her husband’s gift, rather than as either wages for her labor or a share of the household income to which she was entitled, contributed to the nineteenth-century housewife’s sense of subordination (Zelizer 42).

26 For a now classic critique of rational choice theory, see Amartya Sen (reprinted by both Aafke Komter and Jane Mansbridge). For a helpful explanation of how the assumption of independent utilities leads to this narrow understanding of self-interest, see England 45.

27 Brown is exactly right that “Ruth Hall makes clear that the distrust of [...] the feminine in the commercial [...] rationalizes a masculinist monopoly of literary value” (142). A central argument of this dissertation is that the binary oppositions of the related ideologies of separate spheres and of the gift ultimately work to excuse capitalism’s negative aspects. Brown’s own argument, however, does not avoid replicating such oppositions. For instance, in locating Ruth Hall’s “unabashed commitment to market individualism” in the novel’s “[reformation and relocation]” of “familial relations [...] in the market” (140), Brown keeps intact the common supposition that close personal relationships are normally located within the family but not within the market and does not adequately explain Fern’s depiction of unscrupulous businessmen, such as Lescom and Develin.
28 See note 19 above.

29 Although the correction of the sentimental that is a conventional staple of the male realist tradition is perhaps itself an attempt to obscure this fact. If “domestic” and “sentimental” have often been regarded as near synonyms, it is largely a consequence, I would argue, of the ideology of the gift that denies that sentiment informs transactions outside the home.

30 I generally agree with Dimock that Sewell’s economy of pain, in trying “to minimize not only suffering but also the obligations that suffering entails,” suggests reasons for revising Thomas Haskell’s argument that capitalism fosters humanitarianism so that capitalism be conceptualized “not only as an enabling influence on humanitarianism but also as a limiting condition” (“Economy” 71, 72). Nevertheless, I find her argument shortsighted in its characteristic assumption that “resource allocation” and “moral adjudication” are separate activities that have somehow been problematized by capitalism (“Economy” 68). The inextricability of such activities in precapitalist societies, after all, is precisely what Mauss, describing gift exchange as a “‘total’ social phenomenon[on]” expressive of “religious, juridical, [. . .] moral” and “economic” institutions, argued differentiates them from capitalist culture (3). Dimock notes her disagreement with some gift theorists (89n32), but as in her essay on Emerson (“Scarcity” 93n24), her remarks apply only to a particular theory of the gift, that of Bataille.

31 The novel’s subplot centering around Zerrilla Dewey, the daughter of Jim Millon who was killed during the war saving Silas from a bullet, offers a similar critique
of the ideal gift. Silas repays Jim's heroism by providing for his wife and daughter only to be threatened by Zerrilla's mother when he can no longer afford to support her drinking habit. Demonstrating the resentment the gift's recipient often has toward the benefactor, Mrs. Millon accuses, "You talk as if we was beholden to you [. . .] if it hadn't been for Jim, you wouldn't been here crowin' over us" (307).

32 According to Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, one way in which bartering has been distinguished from gift exchange is that the "compulsion of the gift [. . .] lies in forcing others into debt. [. . .] But in barter the difference is that items held by others already are objects of desire" (18). Nevertheless, bartering, like gift exchange, "creates social relations" (8).

33 On this diminishing trust, see Bourdieu Logic 115.

34 Kasson refers to Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption in describing how wealthy families used etiquette to "consolidate their social positions" (Kasson 201-02), a theory Veblen himself defines by comparing customs such as "the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts" to "the potlatch" (75). Howells' novels clearly anticipate many of Veblen's ideas, so it is no surprise that Howells wrote two very favorable reviews of Theory of the Leisure Class (1899). See "'An Opportunity for American Fiction' [Thorstein Veblen]."

35 Dimock does note that Howells also "makes morality a vital issue in business dealings" (79). My argument is that in doing so, Howells's novel calls into question the very meaning of the word "economic" as Dimock uses it. Dimock, for instance, explicitly defines "economy" as an exchange of "equivalences" and argues that "positing
equivalences [. . .] is the central task of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*” (80-81). Howells’s emphasis on the moral elements of business transactions, I argue, underscores the incalculability that undermines economic models that recognize only the exchange of equivalences.

36 Donald Pizer explains this apparent contradiction by saying that Silas’s decision is in fact consistent with the economy of pain that governs the romance plot since he bases his decision on “the common good rather than [. . .] individual need” (323). For a contrary view of Silas’s moral heroism as the very sort of sentimentalism that the novel’s Mr. Sewell attacks, see Daniel O’Hara. Crowley attributes such apparent contradictions in the novel to Howells’s conflicting feelings about capitalism. My own sense is that this tension between the novel’s plots becomes less problematic when the romance and business plots are regarded as complements (one highlighting the economic aspects of social conduct, the other the social aspects of economic conduct); viewed this way, it no longer seems that both plots should be solved by the same “economic” logic.

Chapter 3

1 See also Jacobs’s commentary on the ambiguity and danger of the word “gives” on the two occasions that Linda receives news that Sands has “given” their daughter to a relative (142, 166, italicized once in original).

2 See Orlando Patterson’s account of the logical impossibility of purchasing freedom and his subsequent analysis of manumission in terms of gift exchange, 210-18, an analysis with which Greenberg concurs, 66. I would stress that what matters is not
whether the purchasing of freedom and manumission exemplifies commodity or gift exchange, but that slavery required that these acts be imagined as gifts.

3 Again relevant is O. Patterson’s argument that slavery’s defining characteristic cannot be its treatment of persons as property (2)—if it were, then overcoming commodification would be a sufficient means of liberation. Jacobs’ portrayal of the dynamics of her and Flint’s relationship (such as her observation that his unwillingness to sell her children stems from his caring “even more for revenge than [. . .] money” (101)) illustrates her awareness that there is more to slavery than the slave’s commodification. Nevertheless, readings of Jacobs’s narrative often focus on her resistance to commodification. For instance, see Mauri Skinfield; Karen Sánchez-Eppler; and Houston Baker. For the purposes of my argument, the most useful accounts of Jacobs’s resistance to commodification are those which connect it to possessive individualism. However, such accounts generally explore Jacobs’s efforts to become a possessive individual, but not her attempts to also establish an alternative foundation for selfhood. See, for example, Carla Kaplan; Carla Peterson; and Thomas Lovell. Jacobs’s commitment to possessive individualism and free market principles is not as straightforward as Lovell suggests. For instance, he defines Linda’s eventual “self possession” as “the freedom that Linda has reluctantly purchased from her owners” (10), not acknowledging that Linda does not purchase her freedom but receives it as a gift that she ambivalently suggests resembles the one-way gifts of slaveholders. For a reading of Incidents as a critique, rather than endorsement, of possessive individualism, see Samira Kawash 283-88.
4 For an account of plantation Christmas festivities as an example of the slaveholders’ ability to treat the provision of basic necessities to their slaves as gifts, see Eugene Genovese 90, 557, 573-81. On this and other aspects of particular plantation Christmas customs, including “John Canoe,” see Stephen Nissenbaum 258-300.

5 I think, therefore, that Anne Bradford Warner’s sense that because Jonkonnu was a chance for “the enslaved [to] claim their rights to gifts,” it critiqued “southern white rituals of hospitality” is wrong (27). Southern society did not deny slaves the right to receive gifts, only to give them—a practice Jonkonnu reinforced. While I disagree for similar reasons with Geneviève Fabre’s argument about Jonkonnu’s subversiveness, I think she also makes valuable observations about it, such as that “slaves overacted their roles as servants by asking for patronage” (59).

6 “The slaves’ view of reciprocity required that acts of kindness by their masters and especially by their mistresses be repaid. [. . .] Thus, common field hands felt an obligation to present Missus with a few eggs or a chicken or some other small gift when she visited the quarters. These gifts would be freely given, but if they did not repay some previous kindness, the slaves could expect to be and normally would be recompensed in some way” (Genovese 136). Neither masters nor slaves wanted to be indebted to the other, and despite the masters’ claims to the contrary, slaves could and did manage to return gifts.

7 Lawrence Becker writes that “The norm of reciprocity [which he identifies as a general principle governing gift exchange and other various practices] is not equivalent to the Golden Rule [. . .]. That rule concerns more than exchanges, for one thing. It
proposes a criterion for initiatives one might take: Do to others only what you would have them do to you” (81). I would argue that Jacobs’s mentioning of the Golden Rule is relevant to her interest in gift exchanges in that she connects it to recognizing others as one’s neighbor, as a fellow member of a community participating in reciprocal gift exchanges. Harper likewise offers the Golden Rule as the “remedy” by which “our nation can recover from [...] slavery” (216-17).

8 See Sanchez-Eppler’s argument concerning the importance of this word, 90.

9 That Jacobs’s text resists such oppositions can be formulated in ways other than in terms of gifts and commodities. For instance, Debra Humphreys has demonstrated the ways in which Jacobs rejects nineteenth-century domestic ideology’s separation of public and private and reverses its privileging of private over public as the safer realm.

10 As Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé observe, “a one-way relationship” should be regarded as the very antithesis of the gift (7).

11 See also 65, 86.

12 As do the most engaging parts of Greenberg’s argument. See for instance his discussion of how Southern men of honor excluded strangers as well as slaves from their gift community, 81.

13 See also O. Patterson, 338-39; Genovese, 70-86, 89-91, 141-49, 344. 49, 344.

14 See, for example, 82, 90, 97-112, 303, 144, 555, 600-01.

15 Horowitz’s article received much attention in March, 2001, from various news media when several college newspapers refused to print it as a paid advertisement.

16 One such friend who helps her more than once is Peter, whom Linda thanks for
his “disinterested kindness” (129). But it is worth noting that his kindness is not exactly disinterested; he himself replies to Linda’s thanks by saying “I don’t forget that your father was my best friend, and I will be a friend to his children so long as God lets me live” (129). Like gifts, favors are given in a network of relationships, and seen as part of an ongoing exchange.

17 As Lori Merish observes, Linda generally “construes feminine consent as what Michel de Certeau calls a ‘tactic,’ a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’” (205).

18 Much of Baker’s argument about Linda’s self-commodification hinges on his reading of her decision to give herself to Sands. As I argue, this decision can be also be interpreted as Linda’s attempt to establish herself as an agent in a gift economy, an attempt which might be regarded as very different than self-commodification.) Lovell claims that Linda’s justification of her affair with Sands demonstrates that she regards the affair as “a kind of contract” giving her “a kind of agency” facilitated by “activity within a free market” (5). My own understanding of Linda’s explanation of her affair is that by saying she decided to “give” herself to Sands she tries to establish herself as a participant in a gift economy, the principles of which she frequently, although not always, opposes to the buying and selling of market transactions.

19 According to Berlant, Jacobs describes how “because sexuality is the only exchange value the slaves pseudo-possess” some slaves “become actively complicit in the local scene of sexual savagery” by allowing slaveholders access to their wives and daughters (472). Jacobs portrays such sexual liaisons not only as slaves’ attempt to gain control of what commodity exchange understands as exchange value, but also as the
slaveholder’s manipulation of a gift economy’s values — slaves submit to sexual pressure because they feel obligated to return a master’s bribes.

20 Greenberg’s excellent interpretation of the duel between Henry Clay and John Randolph as a series of gift exchanges (53-67, 74-75) convincingly illustrates the importance of gift exchange among men of the master class and adds to an understanding of gift exchanges as a means of defining community.

21 See Genovese 49, 91, 146-48; for his examples of this phenomenon, see 141, 538, 557, 569, 575.

22 Jacobs thus offers an example of what Barry Schwartz describes as, “outright rejections of gifts with a conscious view to affirming the selfhood whose status such an acceptance would threaten” (71). Another example of Linda’s ability to preserve her autonomy by refusing gifts and her recognition of the traps of the gifts of slaveholders can be found in her response to her mistress’s (Flint’s daughter) letter which both offers her the chance to purchase herself and asks her to return home as a slave. Linda remarks, “of course I did not write to return thanks for this cordial invitation. I felt insulted to be thought stupid enough to be caught by such professions” (187).

23 Kaplan’s observation that since Linda’s letters “cannot be answered by Flint, they are also an outlet into play, one-way communications that parody the letter-writing exchange they imitate” (287) suggests another way that Linda perhaps tries to force Flint into the position of the slave who is not allowed to return gifts.

24 Linda’s claim soon after this conversation with Flint that “Give me liberty, or give me death” became her “motto” (99), demonstrates her belief that autonomy can be
achieved through regarding all gifts and offers as two-sided—both the accepting and rejecting of a gift reflects an active choosing that even a slave can make.

25 Jacobs’s stressing of community, as opposed to unconstrained individualism, has frequently been discussed as a central component of her effort to resist slavery and/or her own commodification. See for instance, Peterson 571-72; Carolyn Soriso 6; Maggie Sale 710. (Hazel Carby makes a similar argument about Harper’s novel; Iola, she argues, becomes “a transformed individual committed to a definition of self in relation to community” [75].) Lovell suggests that communitarian values shape Jacobs’s commitment to possessive individualism, claiming that she argues for the need to give “commercial transactions the feel of a familial, sentimental bond” (3). I would suggest that this is one way Jacobs’s sense of the economic includes economic principles more properly associated with gift exchange than with free market exchanges, which I think Lovell too readily interprets Jacobs as affirming. At the same time, however, one should resist positing an over-simplified opposition between possessive individualism and community since possessive individualism is part of the same Lockean system of thought that theorizes concepts of social contract. See Anita Haya Patterson 3.

25 Greenberg writes, “Because one of the distinguishing characteristics of a master was the ability to give gifts, and one of the distinguishing characteristics of a slave was the inability to give gifts, an emancipation that assumed the form of a gift paradoxically reconfirmed the master-slave relationship. [...] It also explains why images of Abraham Lincoln and Northern soldiers as great emancipators—as bringers of the gift of freedom to the downtrodden—actually worked both to liberate and to degrade newly freed slaves.
The same insight clarifies the important issue at stake when, in the middle of the twentieth century, the historian W.E.B. Du Bois rejected the notion that emancipation was a gift and argued that American slaves liberated themselves" (66-67).

27 John Ernest argues that while Harper’s treatment of black folk characters as more spiritual and emotional than other characters does employ a stereotype often used to support “paternalist arguments,” her novel suggests the race “has these qualities because it has not been corrupted by the dominant culture’s mode of education” and “not because African Americans have any inherent racial claim to spiritual insight.” But Ernest’s argument that Harper offers a model of education that is “not just the socialization of one culture according to the terms of another” (511) does not adequately consider that the distance between Iola and Harper’s folk characters (who, more so than Iola their teacher, represent the qualities African Americans stereotypically can offer) suggests Harper’s own version of paternalism.

28 See for instance Horowitz’s argument that “If slave labor created wealth for Americans, then obviously it has created wealth for black Americans as well, including the descendants of slaves.”

29 Carby regards *Iola Leroy* as “symptomatic of Harper’s wider pleas that the black community look toward itself for its future” (93).

30 Harper’s highlighting of the contributions of black men and women to the war effort, as described by Elizabeth Young, might be regarded as part of her illustration of blacks’ capacity to give back to the nation.

31 Carby describes how the “concept of a black intelligentsia as represented in
__Iola Leroy__ prefigured [Du Bois's] 'The Talented Tenth'" (84, also 92).

32 Kenneth Warren insightfully compares __Iola Leroy__ and __The Souls of Black Folk__, (and Henry James's __The American Scene__) as critiques of Gilded Age values.

33 If this common understanding of commodity exchange does not always reflect lived experience, that is partly because in reality commodity relations rarely exist pure of other social relations, such as those supported by gift exchanges.

34 Shamoon Zamir argues that this anecdote illustrates Du Bois's idealization of his childhood and of the New England values which inform at least his earlier writing: "by making the origin of disruption a 'newcomer' Du Bois effectively puts the source of racism outside this culture and so manages to safeguard, at least in part, its values and his own allegiance to them" (138). Du Bois's use of this incident to thus position himself in relation to particular social values is, I argue, typical of his more general effort to conceptualize social relations as acts of exchange.

35 Ernest Allen's argument that "the sole, positive attribute associated with African-American duality was to be culled from the 'gift of second sight'" apparently assumes that "gifts" necessarily have a "positive connotation" (273). It is crucial to remember that gifts, because of the obligations they entail, are not always beneficial to their recipients.

36 Ronald Judy reads the tale of the schoolchildren's card exchange for what it says about Du Bois's understanding of himself as different, not as a particular incident of exchange, but he nevertheless suggests one way in which it expresses Du Bois's concern with reciprocity: "Du Bois suffers the contempt of his classmates, and reciprocates—if
they think they are better than me, then I think I am better than them” (259).

37 Adolph L. Reed convincingly shows that the belief “that black advancement would be enhanced by a period that combined insulation of the community from aspects of the society as a whole with institutionalization of a regime of prepatory tutelage, organized and administered by the race’s aristocracy [. . .] remained constant through Du Bois’s life” (38-39).

38 Explicitly commenting on Du Bois’s notion of racial “gifts” in these terms: Cynthia Schrager 568-9; Sundquist 564; Cornell West 143. Commenting more generally on his concept of race: Anthony Appiah; Kenneth Mostern; A. Patterson 160-62, 168-72; Reed e.g., 121, 229; Warren 118.

39 For other attempts to account for Du Bois’s willingness to make such arguments, see Dickson Bruce (“Dilemma”) 340; Appiah e.g., 25; A. Patterson, e.g., 162.

40 As Robert Paynter rightly suggests, Du Bois’s gift rhetoric works toward engendering feelings of obligation and gratitude toward African Americans, feelings necessary for the development of the sort of interracial community Du Bois envisions. I quote Paynter at length because although his is the only extensive attempt to explain Du Bois’s rhetoric in terms of gift theory that I have encountered, he nevertheless illustrates how easy it is to overlook the elitist undercurrents of Du Bois’s metaphor:

For Du Bois, all these African-American objects are gifts given to world culture. The choice of words is interesting, for the objects, actions and ideas Du Bois documents are not presented in his titles as ‘achievements’ or ‘contributions.’ ‘Achievements implies a standard that African-American creations are measured against. [. . .] ‘Contributions’ suggest relations of redistribution, of tithing or taxing or giving—prestations at some world feast, again run by and for the benefit of the chiefly power centers of Euro-American
culture.

But ‘gifts,’ as anthropology knows, are magical (Sahlins 1972; Mauss 1967). ‘Gifts’ simultaneously acknowledge and create social relations—and can be used to forge relations of equality. And ‘gifts’ speak volumes, demanding a recognition of the giver and requiring a return from the receiver. ‘Gifts’ are the media of politics among equals.

By writing a history of The Gift of Black Folk Du Bois is defining the terms of a cultural politics [. . .] [that] starts by recognizing African-Americans as creators and givers of social relations, ideas and material conditions. Euro-American culture should recognize its history’s dependency upon these gifts. And with recognition it should be moved—in the spirit of the gift—and be generously forthcoming with returns. (285-86)

While this analysis is generally accurate in its Maussian definition of gifts as requiring a return gift from the recipient and in its sense of Du Bois’s use of the gift as a motif, it also reflects some simplistic assumptions about gift exchange.

First, Paynter’s distinction between “contributions” and “gifts” is unclear, particularly since he uses “prestation,” Mauss’s word for a system of gift exchange as a synonym for “contribution.” His assumption that “gifts” do not suggest “relations of distribution” is problematic—understood as a form of economic exchange, gift exchange is by definition a means of distributing goods. But to acknowledge this means acknowledging the fact that gifts are not inherently egalitarian, which Paynter clearly does not do. As Carrier and others have argued—and as the institutionalized paternalism of the antebellum slaveholder demonstrated—gift exchange is not necessarily a more generous or less oppressive category of exchange than commodity exchange, despite Western capitalist societies’ tendency to idealize gifts as altruistic or “magical” objects. While I do not disagree with Paynter that Du Bois relies on a notion of gifts in the hope of “forg[ing] relations of equality,” I also feel that this rhetoric bolsters his elitist and
seemingly essentialist arguments as well.

41 For particularly insightful explications of Du Bois’s sociohistorical defining of race, see Thomas Holt, Tommy Lott, A. Patterson, and Mostern. Such an argument is often accompanied by what seems to have become an almost obligatory rebuttal to Appiah (e.g., Holt 321n3; Lott 174; A. Patterson 162; Mostern 234n33, 237n71).

42 Du Bois’s opposition to white philanthropic support is by no means absolute. See Reed, e.g., 59-60.

43 E.g., Jacobs 124; Harper 66, 208-09, 233. Jacobs additionally opposes the receiving of charity to true independence (89).

44 Many have discussed other similarities between Emerson and Du Bois, particularly their use of the term “double-consciousness.” For example, see West; Bruce (“Double Consciousness”). Mostern also focus on similarities between the two authors, at least when describing the “concept of racial identity” Du Bois articulates during his “liberal period” during which he wrote Souls (61); Brian A. Bremen and A. Patterson each interpret Du Bois’s formulation of double consciousness as a critique of Emerson’s understanding of race and nation; Zamir and Reed both reject the notion that Emerson and William James were sources for Du Bois’s psychology of double-consciousness (Zamir 116, 163; Reed 99-105).

45 Reed similarly sees “a healthy dose of paternalism” in Du Bois’s advocacy in The Philadelphia Negro of improved treatment of domestic servants (199).

46 Anzia Yezierska, for instance, in numerous of her works, repeatedly writes of being motivated by a “desire to give [. . .] not only, that which I might be if I only had the
chance. I want to give to America not the immigrant you see before you, starved, stunted, resentful, on the verge of hysteria from repression. I want to give a new kind of immigrant, full grown in mind and body—loving, serving, upholding America” (142; passage italicized in original).

47 Sahlins’s sense of this “one-way” flow is not as unlike mine as this suggests; in addition to “sharing” and exchanges among “loved ones” he also includes “less sociable” transactions such as “chiefly dues” and “noblesse oblige” (31). Sahlins’s would thus classify the slaveholders’ one-way gifts as this type of reciprocal transaction, but this is not to say that he would regard its one-way flow as unoppressive.

48 For a similar observation, made in the context of a discussion of divorce, see Godbout and Caillé 30-31.
WORKS CITED


---. “‘Showing Them You Love Them’: Gift Giving and the Dialectic of Intimacy.”


Eby, Clare Virginia. “Compromise and Complicity in The Rise of Silas Lapham.”


---. “Friendship.” Porte 341-54.


---. “Self-Reliance.” Porte 259-82.

Ferber and Nelson 37-53.


Fabre, Geneviève. “Festive Moments in Antebellum African American Culture.” The
Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture.


Gender.” Ferber and Nelson 1-22.

Rutgers UP, 1986.


economic theory.” The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric. Ed. Arjo Klamer,
184-203.

Franklin, H. Bruce, ed. The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade. By Herman Melville.


Gell, Alfred. “Inter-tribal commodity barter and reproductive gift-exchange in old Melanesia.” Humphrey and Hugh Jones 142-68.


---. *The Minister’s Charge or The Apprenticeship of Lemuel Barker.* Cook 1-312.


---. "Introduction." Komter 3-12.

---. "The social and psychological significance of gift giving in the Netherlands." Komter 107-18.


1982.


