Dangerous Giving in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Alexandra Urakova
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Dangerous Giving in Nineteenth-Century American Literature
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In the memory of my father
Gift-giving is the best aspect of the academic life. While writing the acknowledgments, I was surprised how many friends and colleagues I am to thank and how many gifts I am to return with gratitude and love.

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Praise for *Dangerous Giving in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*

“Is the gift a cheery token of disinterested generosity or a Pandora’s box? Inspired by theories of giving from Emerson and Mauss to Derrida and Lacan, Alexandra Urakova offers a fresh approach to 19th-century American writers whose work thematizes giving gifts or was published in the form of the “gift book.” The hair locks and bracelets, bouquets and books that change hands in literature from Lydia Maria Child to Nathaniel Hawthorne and from Harriet Beecher Stowe to O. Henry here reveal their double-edged and deeply problematic dimensions.”

—Werner Sollors, coeditor, with Greil Marcus, of *A New Literary History of America*

“Gifts are not always pleasant, and gift giving is not always disinterested. *Dangerous Giving in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* traces ambivalence about gifts and giving through a startling range of canonical and marginal literatures. Urakova deftly explains how this ambivalence relates to the country’s belief in self-reliance and its vexed race and gender relations. By reading literature through an anthropological lens, Urakova offers fresh interpretations of sentimentality, the rise of commodity culture, and the canon.”

—Stephanie Palmer, Senior Lecturer in English, Nottingham Trent University, UK
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal: “How painful to give a gift to any person of sensibility or of equality! It is next worse to receiving one. The new remembrance of either is a scorpion” (Emerson 1965: 489).¹ Six years later in his essay “Gifts,” Emerson would express his distaste for gifts in a number of aphoristic statements: “It is not an office of a man to receive gifts... We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten” (Emerson 1983: 536).

Emerson’s negativity toward giving and receiving gifts did not prevent him from advising in the same essay what best to give for Christmas and New Year, while his correspondence demonstrates that he could on occasion make masterly use of the gallant language of the gift. “I send you two or three pieces, garnets for your ‘Diadem’—if not too late,” he wrote to his friend William Henry Furness (Concord, May 9, 1845) who edited a gift book called Diadem, marketed as a Christmas gift (Furness 1910: 39). While Emerson’s eccentric attitude may be seen as exceptional rather than representative—after all, most people find giving gifts pleasing!—he was not the only nineteenth-century American author to reflect upon the dangers, either real or perceived, of giving. The gift appears as an ambivalent

¹Leigh Eric Schmidt quotes this in his essay, but unfortunately he errs in abridging it. Cf.: “How painful to give a gift” instead of “How painful to give a gift to any person of sensibility or of equality!” (Schmidt 1997: 74).
and problematic locus in nineteenth-century American literature, whether conceptualized in early theoretical texts, represented at the level of narrative and plot, or suggested by rhetorical tropes.

Dangerous Giving investigates the complex and formative role of gift exchange in nineteenth-century literary texts by American authors, from the mid-1820s to the early 1900s. In contrast to previous research, this book focuses on the dark, unruly, toxic, or self-destructive side of this exchange, and explores the ambiguity of the gift in various social and cultural contexts, including those of race, sex, gender, religion, consumption, and literature.

The book is a contribution to gift theory, which has its origins in the tenets of classical anthropology but has since expanded into various disciplines including sociology, philosophy, history of ideas, theology, and, in the last couple of decades, literary studies. Literature can offer us new insights into the nature of various social phenomena, including the gift, once we follow its own logic and rationale. A literary text is not a “window” into social history but rather an active agent in this history and while its matter may seem elusive and ephemeral, it is precisely due to this elusiveness, ambiguity, and polysemy that it enriches the ongoing dialogue between anthropology, material culture history, and intellectual history.

While such a universal and ubiquitous topic as gift-giving may be studied across centuries and nations, a number of factors make nineteenth-century American literature both a representative and a unique case. These factors include interaction with indigenous societies and awareness of pre-capitalist gift economies as part of colonial history; racial controversies and the phenomenon of slavery; the unprecedented expansion of market relations and of a liberal ideology that prompted an increase in domestic giving (Carrier 1990, 1995; Litwicki 2015), best exemplified, perhaps, by the “invention” of modern Christmas with its rituals of reciprocal gift exchange. Of relevance too is the Calvinist heritage that, despite the religious pluralism of the nineteenth century, had a lasting effect on American culture. Since Calvinism would not allow a believer to reciprocate God’s gifts (Hénaff 2003: 313), there emerged a general resentment and suspicious attitude toward secular gifts, as alien to the spirit of self-reliance, independence, and enterprise traditionally attributed to American national self-awareness.

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That Americans were leery of gift-giving—the Puritan attitudes to Christmas were evidence of this—is encountered in, for example, the pages of *Domestic Manners of Americans* by English author and traveler Frances Milton Trollope: “It is not in the temper of [American] people either to give or to receive” (Trollope 1832: 108). Trollope describes how she helped a poor family in Cincinnati: they accepted help only on the condition of this being understood as a borrowing but ultimately never repaid anything. Rather than being simply unthankful, as Trollope insists, one might conclude that this nineteenth-century American family wished to remain on the “safer” territory of contractual relations instead of accepting Trollope’s favors as an act of unrepayable benevolence.

Another crucial factor in prompting nineteenth-century Americans to change their attitude to gifts was the prominent role of sentimental tradition—especially in the antebellum period and reaching its peak in mid-century—which actively promoted gift-giving as a moral act and a true Christian virtue. American sentimentalism was called on to mitigate the rigidity of Calvinist ideology and to “mediate the complex and delicate transitions between premarket and market mentalities” (Fichtelberg 2003: 7). Crucially for the development of modern sensibility, sentimentalism fostered a new culture of sympathy, memory, reciprocity, and attachment via the circulation of souvenirs, mementos, and tokens of affection. Tangible tokens or keepsakes counterpoised to the “increasingly mediated and abstract” market exchange (Stewart 1993: 133) are “incarnated signs,” to use Arjun Appadurai’s term (Appadurai 1986: 38). Semiotic in character and rhetorical in use, the tokens contributed to the development of a language of sentiment that for a long time rendered sentimentality compelling despite its manipulative aspects. The publishing industry in inventing the holiday annual or gift book—a sentimental collection of poetry, prose, and engravings usually sold in the Christmas season—was an important actor in circulating and popularizing new values associated with gift exchange and charity; in this regard, it is especially important to consider the embeddedness of gift-related rhetoric in material and print culture.

It is this ambivalence at the heart of nineteenth-century American culture that my study of dangerous giving seeks to explore. Both terms in the book title require specification. The term “dangerous” suggests a “variety of implications … from ‘bad’ (as opposed to ‘good’ or ‘benign’) and imperfect (as opposed to ‘perfect’) to harmful, threatening, poisonous, misconceived, and onerous” (Sowerby and Urakova 2022, forthcoming).
While the looseness of the term might be considered an obstacle, it also allows me to examine various facets of this complex phenomenon; dangerous giving can be repressive but, as this book will show, can also be challenging and redeeming. Dangerous giving may be understood as dangerous either for the receiver and the giver or, in case of reciprocal exchange, for both parties.

For nineteenth-century Americans, the word “giving” was loaded with symbolic meaning. Writing about antebellum Americans, Penne L. Restad observes that “giving joined two potent elements of the domestic ideal, those of family and religion, together.” Thus, “in the context of religion, a gift symbolized God’s gift of Jesus to Man, and the emphasis rested on giving rather than receiving. In a social context, the custom signified a bond between giver and receiver, and again stressed giving over receiving presents” (Restad 1996: 12). For the most part, I find the term “giving” more inclusive than “gift,” the latter being often, albeit wrongly, confined to a material, tangible object. “Giving” also avoids association with the literary gift, in its meaning of talent or divine endowment and thus reduces the risk of confusion when dealing with gifts in literature. Finally, dangerous giving resonates nicely with the ideology of disinterested giving, a term used by Jonathan Parry that I discuss in more detail below.

Dangerous Giving considers a range of very different gifts, including material objects, slaves as gifts, acts of benevolence, the gift of love or freedom, death as a gift. This combination of material and immaterial gifts is far from whimsical. Rather, it is a feature of the modern (in the broad sense) gift, rooted in the Christian assumption that “everything we have is a gift of God, and what comes in as a gift has some claim to go out as a gift” (Davis 2000: 17). An examination of the usage of the word ‘gift’ in nineteenth-century texts highlights a wide range of literal and metaphorical implications. A word search in volumes of Godey’s Lady’s Book from 1830 to 1845 reveals meanings of gift that vary from a token to the gift of money or estate. Both a child and a beloved are referred to as gifts, as are abstract notions from faith to love, from high birth to nature; there is even the “gift of a broken and a contrite heart” offered by a female character at the altar of God (Davenant 1843: 161). While in each example discussed in this book there is an element of giving or exchange that limits and structures the choice of material, that there is a broad scope and array of meanings is taken into consideration.

One form of giving that this study does not address specifically is charity, even though benevolence and alms are discussed in Chap. 5. First,
the history of nineteenth-century American philanthropy and its influence on literature is well-researched (Ginzberg 1990; Ryan 2003; Bergman and Bernardi, eds., 2005; Sawaya 2014, to mention just a few important studies). Second, I agree with Lee Anne Fennell that gratuitous transfers such as donations to charity present “somewhat different sets of motivations and characteristics” to social or personal gifts (Fennell 2002: 99). The same applies to “transfers of assets upon or in anticipation of death” (99), although here I make an exception in Chap. 8 when discussing *The Wings of the Dove*, considering that the rhetoric of the gift is crucial for the understanding of that particular bequest, especially in the light of Jean-Luc Marion’s concept of pure “givenness” (Marion 2002).

In what follows, I will first situate the gift as a subject of critical inquiry in its relation to modern history, and to the nineteenth century in particular, before briefly reflecting upon the concept of dangerous gifts within gift theory. I then introduce my own interpretation of this theme in the context of the material I examine.

There is a long-standing tradition of beginning any study of the gift with a discussion of Marcel Mauss’s pioneering work *The Gift* (1925). By contrast, I will start with references to recent scholarship, while keeping Mauss within view. This will allow me to outline the current state of arts and to build my argument by challenging three assumptions: (1) the nineteenth century is a blank page in the intellectual history of the gift; (2) the idea of disinterested, pure giving is universal; (3) the gift as an antipode of commodity is essentially benign.

Reconstructing the Western European intellectual history of the gift, Harry Liebersohn observes “a striking poverty of systematic reflection on the gift in the century preceding Mauss’s essay” (Liebersohn 2011: 3). A few thinkers such as Emerson and Simmel “noticed it, but not in a revaluation sustained enough to leave an impact on their contemporaries.” As a result, “no systematic or extended discussion of the gift” (Liebersohn 2011: 3) emerged from the nineteenth century. This argument is accurate only if we confine the discussion to the field of philosophy and political economy and to the writings of major (male) “European thinkers” (Liebersohn 2011: 4). While Liebersohn claims that nineteenth-century philosophical and economic thought failed to find an adequate language to express gift exchange, this study argues that nineteenth-century literature was at the forefront of developing and simultaneously revising this language as well as promoting and contesting a particular ideology of the gift. My premise is that literature, as a form of reflective thinking, had an
important share in the intellectual discussion of the gift and the related issues of reciprocity, generosity, obligation, debt, and gratuity. For example, *Dangerous Giving* will demonstrate how some literary texts were fore-runners of twentieth-century gift theory and will examine a few dazzling attempts at theorizing the gift—those by Emerson, Caroline Kirkland, Mark Twain (Chap. 2), and Frederick Douglass (Chap. 5). Fragmentary, brief, and sporadic, these attempts nevertheless suggest that the question of the gift in the nineteenth century was intellectually vibrant rather than dead or “near-silent” (Liebersohn 2011: 3). According to Liebersohn, it was primarily a reciprocal gift that “disappeared from theoretical thought” in the nineteenth century, being replaced by a conventional notion of the gift as “a voluntary offering that does not anticipate a return” (6). Following Francesca Sawaya, I would say that American nineteenth-century literature demonstrates instead that reciprocal practices of gift-giving were “very much on the minds of intellectuals” (Sawaya 2014: 192). The question of reciprocity comes to the fore precisely in discussions of the voluntary or disinterested gift, predominantly in late nineteenth-century texts (e.g., in Twain and James) though with Emerson as a notable earlier exception.

A study in literature rather than in intellectual history, *Dangerous Giving* contributes to what Rebecca Colesworthy neatly calls “a literary counter-genealogy of writing about gift” (Colesworthy 2018: 7). Colesworthy examines this counter-genealogy within the tradition of Anglo-American modernism, placing an emphasis on female modernist authors. Paying tribute to the earlier, pre-modernist period, she claims that “in literature, as in the social sciences, the question of the gift did not suddenly emerge ex nihilo following World War I” (15). At the same time, her own study gives the impression that pre-modernist “writing about gift” consists of a handful of male authors only (15) and that the relevant female tradition cannot be traced prior to modernism. By contrast, *Dangerous Giving* will demonstrate that nineteenth-century female writers, including such renowned authors as Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline Kirkland, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, offered original insights into the nature and the function of the gift even when using what were by modernist standards conventional narrative and rhetorical patterns.

In attempting to fill a significant gap in nineteenth-century studies of the gift, my book is not the first to address this subject in the context of American literature. Two important works by Mary Louise Kete (2000)
and Leon Jackson (2008: 89–141) explore certain aspects and forms of gift-giving in nineteenth-century American literature, related to the culture of mourning (Kete) and authorial economies (Jackson), respectively. Hildegard Hoeller’s (2012) is the only book-length study devoted exclusively to the gift in nineteenth-century American fiction and has the great merit of bringing our attention to female and Black narratives of the gift and covering a vast body of literature from Hannah Foster to Frank Norris—a “blind spot” in previous scholarship (Hoeller 2012: 12). However, Hoeller’s study, largely “a Derridean inflected application of gift theory to American literature” (Sawaya 2014: 193), has serious limitations in its approach and method that I will address in various contexts below.

“The reality of the gift—the net of obligations it creates—has always coexisted with the wish for it to be pure and disinterested—outside of any economy. In that sense, the gift has remained desirable, confounding, and (im)possible to reckon with” (Hoeller 2012: 12; italics mine.—A.U.). The word “always” in this otherwise nicely written passage from Hoeller’s abovementioned study is misleading. To make one rather obvious counter-argument, it is highly unlikely that this “wish” existed in “archaic” or indigenous societies, driven, as Mauss famously put it, by three obligations “to give, to receive, to reciprocate” (Mauss 2002: 50). As Jonathan Parry highlights in his seminal 1988 essay on gifts, Mauss considered indigenous gifts to be “the combination of interest and disinterest, of freedom and constraint” (Parry 1986: 456). The “ideology of disinterested giving” or “disinterested gift” (Parry 1986)—a term that will be used repeatedly in this study—is hardly universal.

Advocating for a distinction between the indigenous and the modern gift, Parry argues that the concept of disinterestedness is “most likely to arise in highly differentiated societies with an advanced division of labour” (467) and that the “ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange” (458). In fact, economic self-interest and the disinterested gift are two sides of the same coin: both are “our invention” (458). Parry points out two important features of “disinterested giving,” one of which is its imperative or prescriptive modality; Mauss, rather than “telling us how in fact the gift is never free,” tells us instead “how we have acquired a theory that it should be” (458). The other is a universalistic character stemming from Christianity, “with its notion that all men are fashioned equally in the image of God” (468). This universalistic character of the concept may in fact be responsible for the universal fallacy described above.
While Parry himself does not outline a specific genealogy of this ideology, studies in the modern history of gift-giving tend to associate it primarily with the emergence of modern, market-oriented societies (see, e.g., Carrier 1995: 154–176). As Jackson puts it, while never ceasing being “economic—in the broad sense of the word,” gift exchanges in the modern history cease to be “perceived as economic.” And also: “[t]he ideology of the free gift legitimized the ruthless and disembedded world of commercial economics, that is to say, by holding out the promise that there remained one sphere of exchange that was wholly free of calculation or obligation, even though … business and gift exchange had traditionally been mutually constitutive” (Jackson 2008: 141).³

Dangerous Giving will follow the intellectual tradition of historicizing the ideology of disinterested giving and will demonstrate that sentimentalism, whose own history coincided with the emergence of modernity, was one of its most important outposts. In sentimental tradition, disinterestedness is a guarantee of the moral goodness of the gift. James Carrier’s observations on the modern Western present may well apply to how sentimental authors conceived of the good and the bad gift: “The good present is one that reflects or expresses the giver, and if it is good in that sense, the present is also morally good. Conversely, the present that is constrained and interested is repulsive, because constraint and interest conflict with the source of goodness, which is spontaneous expression” (Carrier 1995: 162). The “morally bad” gift is, after all, no gift at all since it betrays the very nature of disinterested giving in being too similar to the object of an interested exchange, a commodity; no surprise, then, that sentimental discourse of the gift endeavored to separate the wheat from the chaff. An essentialist attitude to the gift typical of sentimental discourse is guilty of another fallacy—the implied goodness of the gift.

The idea of gift-giving as something inherently, essentially good in contrast to mercenary transactions is so contagious that the risk of an idealistic or utopian attitude to the gift developing not only in popular culture but also in criticism is quite high. The most famous example is perhaps Lewis Hyde’s study (Hyde 1983) that counterpoises free circulation of the gift, which best manifests itself in art and poetry, to consumerism and, at the same time and in the neoliberal spirit (Konstantinou 2016), allows for the

³Speaking more broadly and within a different intellectual tradition, scholars relate “the origins of humanitarianism” to the rise of capitalism, associating it with a change of modern sensibility (Haskell 1985, I: 342).
possibility of the free or pure gift under the conditions of capitalism. As Jackson observes, “for Hyde, there is no such thing as a bad gift, only gifts given or received badly” (Jackson 2008: 92).

Indebted to the theories of both Derrida and Hyde, notwithstanding the differences between these two theorists, Hoeller’s abovementioned study on the gift in nineteenth-century American literature tacitly suggests that the gift, as opposed to a commodity, is inevitably good. Exploring nineteenth-century narratives of the gift, the book itself generates a meta-narrative, as suggested by the title: From Gift to Commodity. Ending with a discussion of Frank Norris’s late nineteenth-century anti-capitalist novel *McTeague*, Hoeller interprets the novel’s “warning” in apocalyptic terms: “the end of the gift...might as well be the end of the world” (Hoeller 2012: 22).

While I agree that the gift provided late-nineteenth-century authors with a language that allowed them to “launch their critique of capitalism” (Hoeller 2012: 21), I find it hard to accept this metanarrative and its apocalyptic implications. Can we indeed describe the nineteenth century as a passage from presumably benign gifts to presumably evil commodities? Many turn-of-the-century texts—including such famous example as O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi”—far from lamenting the impossibility and the loss of the perfect gift affirm its presence in the commodified world. The gap between domestic and market economies predictably widens toward the end of the century as the country enters the “Gilded Age” but this hardly signals the victory of “commodities” over “gifts,” either in literature or in popular imagination.

The subtitle of Hoeller’s study—Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth Century American Fiction—clearly indicates that it is concerned only with one specific type of the gift: sacrifice or rather self-sacrifice as opposed to self-interest. While self-sacrifice as a form of altruistic giving undoubtedly formed an important part of the ideology of disinterested giving, the gift was a broader and more inclusive category in nineteenth-century American literature, as this study hopes to demonstrate.

Finally, there is always a risk of taking declarations of nineteenth-century rhetoricians and advertisers at face value and, as result, of re-sentimentalizing the gift. In the introduction to his seminal collection, Mark Osteen calls for “sharper and more refined theory that steers clear of both the Scylla of sentimentality and the Charybdis of economism” (Osteen 2002a: 31). Without claiming that my study has achieved the desired balance, I do attempt to avoid these two dangers by (a) focusing on the
language/languages of the gift and (b) tracing ideological patterns that mediated gift-giving and its representations. Following in the steps of scholars like David Cheal, who demonstrated that the gift versus commodity binary stemming from classical anthropology fails to explain the specificity of the modern gift (Cheal 1988: 9–12), Dangerous Giving relegates this binary to the field of language and ideology where it belongs and refuses to apply it as the sole explanatory model to describe the complex dynamics of the modern gift. The focus on the dangerous gift as the third, fluid, and contingent agent, in addition to the duo of gift/commodity—gift-giving may go well but may also go awry—allows us to avoid the aforementioned dualistic determinism.

My interest in dangerous giving has its roots in a tradition prominent in gift theory, including in classical anthropology. Mauss challenges the concept of the disinterested and morally good gift—the nineteenth-century intellectual heritage—not only by emphasizing that there is no such thing as a “free gift” but also by stressing how the gift’s ambiguity is revealed in some European languages, the word “gift” meaning both “gift” and “poison” (Germanic languages but also Latin—dosis) (Mauss 2002: 81, 187).

Another Maussian challenge is his theory of potlatch, a North American ritual where two clans compete for social status and prestige by exchanging gifts, which potentially ruins the prosperity of each party. In his classification of different types of reciprocity, Marshall Sahlins identifies a so-called negative reciprocity, a gift exchange that borders on theft or barter in which one of the parties tries to get something for nothing—the direct opposite of altruistic giving (Sahlins 1997). Jonathan Parry describes how a particularly dangerous gift to an Indian priest could “poison” him with the sins and defilement of the giver (Parry 1986).

Philosophers such as Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida were fascinated with the potentially redeeming character of dangerous giving; for Bataille (1988), it is the excess and “the suicidal impetus” in potlatch that “frees one from the dictatorship of property and ownership” (Sowerby and Urakova 2022, forthcoming). Derrida’s gift of death, or to be more accurate, the giving of death (“donner la mort”) imperils the feeling of stability and security induced by the Maussian gift economy (Derrida 1995). Pernicious transactions are of interest in sociology (for Pierre Bourdieu, rejection and lack of reciprocity are two risks associated with gift-giving; Bourdieu 1992: 98) and psychology (Barry Schwartz, from a psychological standpoint, analyzes the risks of the power relationship in
gift-giving; Schwartz 1996). Gender theorists discuss the dangers associated with power relations that gift exchange inevitably entails, from women as objects of exchange—an indigenous practice that Claude Lévi-Strauss makes central to his own gift theory (Lévi-Strauss 1969)—to their subordinate position in courtship rituals and romantic or sexual relationships (Joy 2013; see also Belk 2022, forthcoming). Historians and literary scholars trace the specific dangers of gifts in national mythology, systems of beliefs, and the literary imagination of particular historical periods (Groebner 2002; Lyons 2012) or across times and cultures (Urakova, Sowerby, and Sala 2022, forthcoming).

Dangerous Giving is a study that attempts to be both history-oriented and theoretically informed in its approach: it follows the narrative logic and the language of the texts it examines while employing elements of social analysis as well as specific terminology developed within gift theory. Reading gift theory into nineteenth-century fiction undoubtedly risks re-labeling and may be both far-fetched and misleading. As Osteen observes about literary studies of the gift, “too many critics are content to simply ‘apply’ mechanically the paradigms of Hyde, Derrida, Mauss or Bataille without acknowledging the limitations and blind spots in each…” (Osteen 2002a: 30). In his late work, Mark Twain repeatedly calls death a gift. Does this mean that Derrida’s donner la mort is an explanatory model fit to describe Twain’s ideas by default? No, though we can say that Twain’s vision may have presaged certain twentieth-century tendencies in intellectual thought, including those represented by Derrida or Nancy, since Twain views death in its liminality and denies the religious idea of the gift of death as a gift of an afterlife.

At the same time, and as Jackson observes, sometimes we can gain a better understanding of nineteenth-century texts or textual objects “by viewing them through the lens of modern gift theory than through their own self-representations” (Jackson 2016). While it is tempting to agree with Groebner that a gift is “simply whatever contemporaries call a gift” (Groebner 2002: 1), this is not always the case. First, the rhetoric of the gift in the texts examined here may be deceptive or self-deceptive and blind to its own controversies. Shall we indeed take at face value the claim of the editors of gift books that those volumes were tokens of pure affection rather than commercial projects?

Second, there was no operative language to describe certain social and cultural phenomena. For example, its own controversial history notwithstanding, the anthropological term “potlatch” “does reveal something
common to all gift exchanges” (Greenberg 1996: 154). Writing about
dangerous gifts in Ancient Greek mythology and literature, Deborah Lyons
claims that “although this kind of competition is not explicit in our sources,
it is possible to read the unequal exchange of armor between Glaukos and
Diomedes or the gifts offered by Agamemnon to Achilles in *Iliad* 9 in these
terms” (Lyons 2012: 13). My own study will employ the term potlatch in
the context of the frontier novel on the one hand and, after Lévi-Strauss, to
describe the excesses of Christmas on the other: in both cases, this is a ret-
rospective approach. The same is true for other terminology employed in
the book, be it “givenness” (Marion 2002) or “munus” and “donum”
(Esposito 2009) that, in my view, accurately capture certain literary and
cultural phenomena that I explore. Finally, in the case of texts that have
already been discussed within gift theory, such as Emerson’s “Gifts” or
O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” literary analysis can tease out
disciplinary boundaries and engage itself in interdisciplinary dialogue.

With the exception of Chap. 2, which establishes a conceptual frame-
work by analyzing the nineteenth-century ideology of disinterested giving
in three theoretical texts by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Caroline Kirkland, and
Mark Twain, the chapters are in chronological order, moving from the
1820s to the early 1900s (the latter considered as belonging culturally and
ideologically to the nineteenth century as the upper bound of the so-called
long nineteenth century). Chaps. 3, 4, 5, and 6 focus exclusively on the
antebellum period seen as formative for the modern language and ideology
of the gift. Chapter 3 demonstrates the ambivalence of the extreme form
of disinterested giving—altruism and self-sacrifice on behalf of the “selfless
savage”—in the context of colonial history, interracial relations, and nation
building in Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok*. Chapter 4 examines the gender
aspects of the sentimental gift as epitomized by antebellum gift books,
paying particular attention to the ways in which the mainstream hetero-
normative exchange of sweet tokens was contested and challenged in gift
book stories by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and
Edgar Allan Poe. Chapter 5 continues the discussion of gift books in the
context of the anti-slavery movement, focusing on the concept of “the gift
of freedom” and its racist implications in *The Liberty Bell* on the one
hand and on alternative attitudes to the gift, slavery, and race—including
an attempt at building and maintaining a Black community via album
writing (Cassey’s album)—on the other.

Chapter 6 presses the question of the “race of the gift” still further by
analyzing how the motif of a slave as a gift undermines the sentimental
rhetoric of giving in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, with a special focus on the metaphorical language of poison that is associated with Black race and with the unwelcome human gift in the novel. Chapter 7 expands on the gender implications of the pure versus poisonous binary that was fundamental for nineteenth-century ethics of giving while also demonstrating its ambivalence in modern revisions of archetypal plots about poisoned gifts and poisonous bodies. By moving from Hawthorne to Oliver Wendell Holmes to the obscure late-nineteenth-century author Caroline Wilder Paradise, this chapter also serves as a link to the two last chapters, which deal predominantly with turn-of-the-century texts.

These last chapters demonstrate the persistence of the patterns of dangerous giving throughout the long nineteenth century but also reflect on cultural phenomena that become particularly marked toward the end of the era, including the secularization of intellectual and literary thought and the unprecedented commercialization of Christmas. Chapter 8 discusses how Mark Twain and Henry James revisited and modernized the sentimental ideology of disinterested giving by exploring an intimate connection between the perfect gift and death. Chapter 9 explores the melancholy side of Christmas giving and the anxieties associated with it in three Christmas stories by William Dean Howells, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and O. Henry, all written around the 1900s. The conclusion summarizes the patterns of dangerous gifts explored in this study and ends with an example of Native American writing of the gift in Zitkála-Ša’s short story “The Coffee-Making,” which I see as both consonant with and removed from that of most of the other texts discussed in this book.

While drawing from theoretical research in the field, *Dangerous Giving* is neither Derridean, nor Bataillesque, nor Maussian in its approach since it does not rely on any specific concept of the dangerous gift. Rather, it builds on the premise that “danger enters into the gift-giving process at multiple points. There is no one typology of dangerous gift or perilous exchange, and perhaps any straightforward typology would lead to unprofitable oversimplifications and conflations” (Sowerby and Urakova 2022, forthcoming). In what follows, I will highlight specific “areas where dangers could inhere” (Sowerby and Urakova 2022, forthcoming); these are gender, race, consumption, the religious or transcendental sphere, and literature.

There are several types of dangerous giving associated with gender in this study. The first is the transgression of gender norms and conventions, for example, those of a heterosexual romance which was often initiated in an exchange of tokens and signs of attention. The counter-practice often
expresses itself through irony, humor, subversive critique, or meta-literary play. Where conventions and norms function as repressive cultural mechanisms, a dangerous gift may have a redeeming or liberating effect, as demonstrated in the example of antebellum gift books and three gift book stories in Chap. 3: Sedgwick’s “Cacoethes Scribendi” (1829), Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1832), and Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844). A different type of danger relates to the perception of the giver’s body, female or male, as polluted or contaminated (Chap. 7). Gifts in Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844), Holmes’s Elsie Venner (1861), and in a late-nineteenth-century story “Father Dunstan and Crabs” (1898) by Wilder Paradise threaten or are perceived as threatening the bodily integrity of the receiver—for example, via contagion (poisonous touch) or digestion (crabs “poisoned” with the sins of the givers). Finally, there are risks associated with the feminization of gift-giving observed in modern Western societies (Cheal 1988; Godbout, Caillé 1998). Chapter 9 shows how Christmas shopping in O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” (1906) exposes a woman, the new type of female consumer, to the hazards of the big city. In extreme cases, the female burden of Christmas-time chores and the fatigue they induce may lead to the death of the giver (Twain believed, as briefly discussed in Chap. 8, that this happened to his daughter Jean).

Interracial gift exchanges are especially hazardous, being fraught with dominance and power. Using the example of Child’s Hobomok (1824), Chap. 3 demonstrates how a bilateral interracial exchange of generosity and gentility may ruin one party and cause discontent to the other; the gift exchange of the story, placed at the origin of American nation, is suicidal, burdensome, and ultimately murderous. The gift relation appears to be even more problematic in the context of race and slavery. Chapter 5 explores different types of potentially dangerous interracial gift exchanges. Abolitionist writing in the pages of The Liberty Bell, an anti-slavery gift book, risks symbolically “enchaining” liberated slaves with the bonds of gratitude under the guise of the gift of liberty while, as Frederick Douglass argues in “The Bible for Slaves” (1848), the gift bestowed on an enslaved person is itself fundamentally wrong and impossible. In the short story “Dinah Rollins” by Edmund Quincy (1841), the subversion of this model when an independent Black woman becomes a donor to a white person bestows the former with a new identity but also puts her in subordinate position to the white recipient of her favors. Finally, the so-called Cassey’s album (a friendship album owned by Amy Matilda Cassey)