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Implications of The Gift of the Magi for Moral Education of Teenagers From the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chains

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Abstract: Adolescence is a pivotal moment in shaping one's character and holds great implications for one's values and personal growth. *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry portrays how an ordinary young couple in difficult financial circumstances managed to show their love for each other, eulogizing truth, goodness, and beauty in humanity. We conducted a thorough examination of the significance of moral values conveyed in *The Gift of the Magi* for teenager education using the "situation-emotion-symbol" model that is based on Randall Collins' theory of interaction ritual chains in order to establish an interaction ritual chain model for moral education of teenagers. Our study reveals that situated cognition is useful in constructing the focus of attention for the moral education of teenagers; that shared emotion is the driving force for achieving moral education of teenagers; and that symbolic connections help teenagers put the virtues they've learned from *The Gift of the Magi* into action and provides effective measures that can significantly contribute to the cultivation and implementation of moral education among teenagers.

Keywords: interaction ritual chains, *The Gift of the Magi*, moral education of teenagers, situated cognition, shared emotions, symbolic connections

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The *Gift of the Magi* provides a vivid depiction of what love, a simple yet beautiful human emotion is through the daily interactions between a young couple, Jim and Della, while portraying the sad life of the American working class in the early 1900s. The young couple shows their love for each other by selling what they value most to buy each other a Christmas present. Through the story, O. Henry highlights his attention to the mundane but meaningful lives of ordinary individuals and touches the readers. Earlier studies focused on examining the theme, tone, and perspective of the narrative of the story, as well as the consumer culture at the time of the story. One such study investigated the underlying meanings of *The Gift of the Magi* (Lin, 2010) using the concept of metacognition. Another study reinterpreted the work by analyzing the time when the story took place, the symbolic characteristics of the consumer culture of the time, and the psychology of consumption (Li, 2006). Still, another study argued that there was a unique blend of sadness and humor hidden in the tone of the story (Huang, 1998). From a value perspective, one scholar held that the novel embodied a unity of appreciation and irony and that the emotional value provided a full indication that love is more important than practical use. (Sun, 2009). Other scholars examined the use of words, phrases, symbols, and metaphors in *The Gift of the Magi* to better understand O. Henry's use of language through the perspectives of anthropomorphism, irony, tone, and sentiments (Sushma, 2019). Undoubtedly, existing studies have broadened our understanding of *The Gift of the Magi*. However, the story's value for moral education has been overlooked. In fact, the essence of literature lies in its ability to influence and educate readers in a super invisible and nuanced way. *The Gift of the Magi* ended with O. Henry's trademark writing style of "laughter in tears," which is very touching. Although *The Gift of the Magi* portrays the commercial characteristics of the emerging American consumer culture and the harshness and thoughtlessness that was part of the reality at the turn of the century, it highlights the protagonists' commitment to love amid the influence of the consumer culture. The value of moral education behind the story is worth more attention. Examining the moral education value of the story through the perspective of the interaction ritual chains can broaden our understanding of the story and give a better play to its literary value. Additionally, it can guide teenagers in establishing a sound moral framework, ultimately facilitating new developments and breakthroughs in their moral education.

Situated Cognition and Moral Education of Teenagers

The interaction ritual chain, based on situated cognition, provides a key perspective from which to study the moral education of teenagers. It plays a significant role in the creation of group cohesion, self-awareness, and the development of a moral sense within teenagers. "The rapid development of new media technology has fundamentally transformed the way young people communicate and interact with one another. It has transcended the traditional limitations of time and space in social interactions, and the virtual nature of online networks has blurred the boundaries of physical space. Ultimately, this has had a profound effect on the overall mode and state of social communication,

operation, and development” (Liu, 2018, p. 101). Teenagers are challenged by the virtualization of social communication situations during their moral development, with their values impacted in various ways. As such, the cultivation of values centered around truth, goodness, and beauty is incredibly important. A review of the development of moral education through the lens of situated cognition indicates a trend of dis-embedding in current moral education practices. This deviation from the fundamental goals and values of moral education must be clarified and rectified through re-embedding (Si, 2014). It is evident that situated cognition plays a crucial role in the cultivation of moral education of teenagers. It is impressive that Della cried because she did not have enough money to buy her husband a Christmas present, “Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating” (Henry, 1992, p.1). Della and Jim “are a young couple deeply in love but struggling with extreme poverty. They end up sacrificing what they hold dear for the sake of their innocent love” (Feng & Ru, 2002, p. 36). The couple resides in a modest rented flat. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable, man and the butcher. Despite their efforts, the family’s budget comes to only one dollar and eighty-seven cents. Despite their difficult circumstances, Della and Jim remain optimistic and positive about life. They manage to buy a Christmas present for each other to show their love by selling what they hold dear. Even in the face of material scarcity, they lead a rich spiritual life. This heartwarming scenario provides good teaching material for the moral education of teenagers.

The focus of moral education of teenagers is to develop a system suitable for the moral education of teenagers through situated cognition. The prominent contemporary American sociologist Collins (2017) argues that interactive rituals are fundamental components of our daily social lives. Interactions between groups emerge from specific micro-situations. The interconnection and development of these micro-situations form a chain relationship known as the interaction ritual chain. In social lives, individuals are constantly adapting to the changes around them. People, when interacting in person, are able to swiftly perceive each other’s emotional fluctuations through language, expressions, eye contact, physical movements, and even feedback from physical touch. *The Gift of the Magi* situationally centers around the psychological activities and dialogues between Della and Jim before and after their purchase of gifts. The situations, including Della crying alone before purchasing her gift, engaging in dialogue with Madame Sofronie, a woman dealing hair goods, experiencing ambivalence after buying the gift, and conversing with her husband, Jim, are all common but natural expressions of genuine, virtuous, and beautiful emotions. This story is an inspiration to teenagers, as it demonstrates that while one has no control over their birth circumstances, they have the power to choose their spiritual pursuits and should work relentlessly to achieve their goals, even in situations beyond their control. It also calls for the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty in a materialistic society (Zhang, 2001). The theory of situated cognition holds that “the acquisition and construction of knowledge occurs within specific physical and social situations. The cognitive process involves a conscious interaction between people and their surroundings, rather than solely existing within an individual’s mind” (Schunk, 2003, p. 242). It is evident that cognitive construction is a gradual process

that occurs through social interaction and exchange. Therefore, both self-reflection and interactions under various situations are necessary for teenagers to acquire moral education knowledge. The implications behind the interactions between Della and Jim can be used to guide teenagers not to overly prioritize their family background and material possessions. Instead, they can adopt a positive and optimistic attitude toward life while paying attention to the enrichment and beauty of the spiritual world.

Educators can use embodied cognition to promote the perceptual dimension of moral education of teenagers through the coexistence of fields. The theory of interaction ritual chains is a micro-sociological theory that puts daily social interactions at the center of analysis. “Embodied moral education integrates cognition with the body (and actions), ensuring the externalization of moral values during the learning stage of moral internalization. This approach provides the key to effectively bridging the gap between knowledge and action in moral education” (Yao, 2021. p. 91). Embodied cognition promotes the further development of moral thinking, facilitates the transformation from “knowledge” to “action,” and serves as a bridge for integrating knowledge and action in moral education. Most teenagers are “bystanders” in typical case studies of situated education. To promote a life-based approach to moral education, educators should delve deeper into the lives of teenagers and seek relevant examples to facilitate their understanding and engagement. In their adolescence, individuals gradually develop their worldview and approach to life, while their understanding of the world remains superficial. While they aspire to a happy and carefree life, teenagers are often bewildered by diverse environmental factors and personal conditions. Without proper guidance during this stage, teenagers are vulnerable to going astray. The everyday life situations presented in *The Gift of the Magi* are relatable to the experiences of ordinary teenagers. While they long for love and romance, they must also learn what it means to develop mature relationships and create fulfilling lives. This story helps teenagers understand that considering others’ feelings is just as important as their own. The situational story based on Della and Jim’s simple life can effectively prevent feelings of exclusion and the negative impact it can have on individuals’ self-awareness and social confidence. The construction of situations from a cognitive perspective to create a focus of attention can ultimately facilitate teenagers’ cognitive experience of moral education.

Shared Emotions and Moral Education of Teenagers

Moral cognition facilitates teenagers’ understanding of the specific concepts and values of good and evil, while moral emotions allow teenagers to deepen their theoretical knowledge of truth, goodness, and beauty into intuitive, emotional experiences. Moral education bears significant importance in curriculum design, with an emphasis on moral values, civic awareness, and politics in primary, secondary, and higher education (Doan, 2005). Collins (2017) proposes that the essence of the interaction ritual chains theory is that an individual is attracted by certain types of situations, which Collins refers to as “emotional energy.” The cognitive component of emotional energy operates

through our memory's ability to associate emotional charges with important symbols. This will produce an expectation that an individual can dominate a specific situation or become a member of a group. Throughout the process of preparing a Christmas present for her husband, Della experiences a complex range of emotions, with her feelings fluctuating constantly, "There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl... She stood by the window and looked out dully... Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass... Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet... When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason" (Henry, 1992, pp. 1-3). The emotional climax occurs when Della finds the gift her husband purchased for her. Initially, she was disappointed about not having enough money to purchase a Christmas present for him and then resolved to sell her hair. However, Della became sad when she feared her husband might no longer find her attractive with short hair. All the twists in the story culminate in their love for each other and appreciation for life. This transformational process illustrates the concrete expression of abstract moral thinking. Moral thinking is fundamentally intertwined with values and emotions, and it is a product of natural self-organization resulting from various factors, such as nature and the social environment. Such self-organization is inherent to all human development, including moral development. The natural expression of sincerity can evoke empathy and enhance moral thinking, thereby providing a driving force for the moral education of teenagers.

To promote the moral development of teenagers and help them put moral values into practice, we can build emotional energy for shared emotions. Collins (2017) argues that emotional energy is produced when people concentrate their attention on the same thing in each situation in which they realize each other's presence. The interaction ritual chain uses the element of "emotion" to transform fleeting sentiments and experiences into long-lasting emotional energy that can develop gradually over time and eventually be elevated to the level of shared emotions. In *The Gift of the Magi*, poverty does not stop Della and Jim from showing their love for each other. On Christmas Eve, they sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their own. Despite losing possessions they hold dear, they gain the most invaluable treasure in the world: love and care from their loved ones. "What Della and Jim sacrificed were not just their personal possessions but also their psychological selves, which they value most. Therefore, their sacrifice is even more laudable" (Zhu, 2001, p. 51). Ritual education, with its unique characteristics and the ability to reshape individuals' behaviors and values through ritual practice, has become an important social tool that can bind individuals and construct value identities. Only with a proper understanding of the internal logic of constructing value identities through ritual education can we accurately identify the issues arising from ritual education and propose practical countermeasures and recommendations accordingly (Xin, 2022). In educational practice, educators should guide teenagers to immerse themselves in the emotional experiences of the story's protagonists. Through an in-depth analysis of the positive energy embodied in the themes of truth, goodness, and beauty, educators can evoke shared emotions among teenagers. Additionally, educators

can teach teenagers how to maintain an optimistic and positive attitude and how to deal with the ups and downs in life.

Emotional resonance can promote the memory dimension of moral education of teenagers, give full play to the cohesion of moral education, and promote shared emotions and interactions among groups. “To the extent that the ingredients successfully combine and build to important levels of mutually focused and emotionally shared attention, participants have the experience of ... feelings of morality: the sense of rightness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols, and defending both against transgressors” (Collins, 2017, p. 80). The feelings of morality developed through the combination of ingredients in interaction ritual chains can be extended to classroom teaching and daily life, fostering a group membership effect among teenagers, and promoting the transmission and development of truth, goodness, and beauty. In conducting moral education during classroom teaching, each discipline should focus on incorporating emotions and creating a curriculum that reinforces individual moral values (Zhu & Wang, 2018). When teenagers read a literary work, immersing themselves in the emotional experiences of the protagonists and the theme the work intends to convey can evoke emotional resonance and even shared emotions. Della said to Jim, “Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered, but nobody could ever count my love for you” (Henry, 1992, p. 4). Jim enfolded Della. Simple and genuine emotions are constantly displayed during the interactions between the two, resulting in emotional resonance among readers. Educators can use this story to encourage teenagers to express gratitude toward their parents, teachers, friends, and other individuals who have supported their growth. Additionally, interactive activities such as hugging can foster emotional sharing and spread good moral values among teenagers, ultimately promoting a sense of cohesion in moral education and personal development.

Symbol Connection and Moral Education of Teenagers

The transmission of the truth, goodness, and beauty symbols is useful to build a good adolescent moral education system and fostering a community of “literary works-symbols-moral education.” Symbols of group membership carrying emotional energy emerge when an individual participates in a living situation and gains emotional energy during the interaction. In this process, the interaction rituals operate continuously, thus promoting the development of social and moral standards. Symbols, as an important ingredient of interaction ritual chains, convey the moral emotions generated across various situations. Symbols allow individuals to cognitively store and restore the emotional energy generated during rituals and sustain their intensity, making them sensitive and directing their attention in future interactions (Goss, 2007). Interactions and communications between teenagers are essential to the cultivation of moral values. Symbols bridge them together, conveying positive energy. The generation of moral symbols is useful for maintaining moral values, establishing practice boundaries, and helping students to review their practice of embodied moral behaviors (Sterchele, 2021). O. Henry wrote in *The Gift of the Magi*, “Eight dollars a week or a million dollars a year—what is the

difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer” (Henry, 1992, p. 4). Money is not merely a measure of wealth but a moral symbol beyond material wealth. It represents the warmth of mutual support between Della and Jim in poverty and conveys positive energy to readers.

The symbols generated by the interaction ritual chains give teenagers a sense of belonging, promote their recognition of common values, and enhance group cohesion. “The world we inhabit is one in which symbols serve as the very foundation of human culture. Within this symbolic structure, value symbols play a crucial role in disseminating abstract values and spiritual qualities such as lofty ideals, ambitious pursuits, and noble characters. These symbols associate these elevated ideas with specific objects” (Fei & Wang, 2021, p. 61). The power of actor has inspired teenagers to put the values of truth, goodness, and beauty they have learned into action. In *The Gift of the Magi*, the aesthetic appeal of moral education lies in the contradictory yet unified expressions of the characters’ psychological activities, words, and behaviors. This interplay is a natural expression of the values of truth, goodness, and beauty. The story addresses the question of whether there is anything more valuable in life than money in a society of money worshipers. It suggests that moral values such as friendship, true love, and justice are fundamental to human progress and the advancement of society. The gifts Della and Jim prepared for each other in the story serve as symbolic representations of their love for each other. The gifts go beyond physical articles and embody the values of truth, goodness, and beauty. In specific scenarios, interaction rituals serve to link abstract emotional energy with tangible group symbols, imbuing these symbols with value and meaning. These rituals form the foundation of moral norms, ideological culture, and societal values through continuous repetitions (Zhang et al., 2021). Currently, the shaping of symbols in the development of teenage values is not fully refined and requires improvement to prevent falling into the pit of disenchantment. As such, the generation of positive energy symbols by drawing on the humanistic emotions portrayed in *The Gift of the Magi* and extracting the core values of truth, goodness, and beauty can facilitate the transformation of moral education of teenagers from theory to implementation.

At the behavior level, symbolic connections can enrich the content of moral education of teenagers, facilitate the spreading of moral behaviors between teenagers, and establish an interaction ritual chain model driven by a “cognition-emotion-behavior” framework. Rituals serve as an interactive medium that links individuals with broader social and cultural structures (Clarke & Waring, 2018). “Rituals create symbols of group membership and supply individuals with emotional energy” (Collins, 2017, p. 74). A ritual is a form of social interaction with a set of relatively consistent symbols. Symbols can promote and reinforce symbolic meanings and social norms, the cultivation of common identities, and a heightened sense of belonging. In the end, O. Henry commented on the story in a philosophical language: “And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi” (Henry, 1992, p. 5). At this moment, “the hair and the watch” which Della

and Jim hold dear are nothing more than two items that they could use to exchange presents with each other. They are mere symbols of monetary value. Instead, the true treasures in their eyes are the gifts they give to each other; these gifts serve as precious emotional symbols that embody wisdom, truth, goodness, and beauty. Through sublimation, educators can guide teenagers to prioritize their spiritual lives and enrich their emotional worlds. This, in turn, can improve the quality and effectiveness of moral education.

Conclusion

We applied the interaction ritual chains theory to examine the moral value of *The Gift of the Magi* in the context of situations, emotions, and symbols. The main objective is to promote the virtues of truth, goodness, and beauty among teenagers and enhance their physical and mental development in a coordinated manner. By constructing the interaction ritual chain model for the moral education of teenagers, we believe that efforts can be made from the following perspectives to strengthen the moral education of teenagers: (a) coexistence of fields, which focuses on guiding teenagers to understand the underlying meanings of classic literary works so that embedded cognition can be used to promote the cognition dimension of moral education of teenagers; (b) emotional resonance, focusing on discovering the convergence between classic literary works and teenagers' emotions so that shared emotions can be used to promote the memory dimension of moral education of teenagers; (c) symbol sharing, fostering an environment that encourages teenagers to actively discuss and spread the moral values of classic literary works so that shared feelings can be used to enrich the content dimension of moral education of teenagers. In the process of advancing the moral education of teenagers, all parties should work together to build an interaction ritual chain based on situations, emotions, and symbols with the help of diversified interactive situations, to form points of interest for teenagers. At the same time, efforts should be continuously expended to expand emotion-related factors and strengthen emotional and social influences, thus driving the sublimation of emotional experiences under different situations. Lastly, efforts to extract symbols that can represent the values of truth, goodness, and beauty from literary works should be expanded and focused on spreading hidden positive energy to advance the transformation of moral education of teenagers.

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