

# A Study of Metacognition on O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi"

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## Abstract

The study aimed to bring more possibilities into existence for one of the O. Henry's texts, "The Gift of the Magi", in terms of the application of metacognition concept. The idea of level was rooted in metacognition concept and was used to examine the text. The study found that there were two levels for a same thing in O. Henry's text. One level was an inner-layer story, and the other an external (outer)-layer story. They both constructed a particular twofold spatial for O. Henry's fiction world. It was the very spatial that the opportunities of involving the literary content were created and became possible. Through the investigation, true implication of metacognition was manifested, which was something of knowing beyond knowing and thinking behind thinking.

**Keywords:** Metacognition, Level, Text, Inner, External, Layer

## 1. Research motivation and its importance

Life was a process of learning. People were inevitable learners since they were born. Whether they wanted it or not, they were bound to do so because they needed to survive. It was no doubt that learning how to survive had been an extremely important thing in human history. In the process of one's growth, learning activities never stopped. From the childhood to the old age, learning had always played an important role during people's development of existence. They had different objects to learn, different ways to learn, and different purposes to fulfill.

The proper objects for people to learn might be the protagonists of literary works because, as Hart (1995) ever argued, "the stories are valuable examples of how life was lived at a time."(Note 1) The protagonists might be their ready-made objects to imitate, for imitation had been regarded as a natural thing to educate themselves for most people. Either cognition or observation, the purpose of learning from imitation would be completed. Subiaul et al (2004) combined cognition imitation with observational learning and made sure the copying function of cognitive rules. (Note 2) It was the main purpose why literary works would exist through ages since they had been offering the opportunities of copying for readers. Through the characters of novels, people could learn the living elements to enrich their own life. They could become aware of how to think, how to behave, and even how to breathe in their daily life. Different types of literary forms offered different roles for people to learn. Literary heritage of human beings provided people with abundant objects to learn.

The ways for people to learn by literary works were ample, too. In terms of the novel's plots, people could always keep alert when they saw the characters have some wrongdoings and bear the consequences of evil acts. Some of them knew how to manage their love for others. Others would learn how to figure out their own philosophy of living. Most of all, the ways of their learning stemmed from a willingness by which they chose and read.

The learning purposes of people were to accumulate their own living experiences, which could be used to act as important resources for them to solve problems in the future. Those precious experiences might be prominent factors to make their own dreams come true or make their life become better. If not, those might be necessary catalysts for people to make their life much easier when they were obliged to face the fast-changing world. At least, as one could hope to get it in the literary work like O. Henry's, Littell (2008) put it thus, "O. Henry's stories were written to help people escape from their everyday problems." (Note 3)

It was obviously important for the people in the real world to have an object to learn, and to have good ways to learn, if they would like to have a goal set for their life. Hence, it was also important to know how a fiction world would offer people an optimal environment to learn from protagonists, and to transfer those learned into their own.

## 2. Research purpose

By means of O. Henry's novel and the facilitation of metacognition ideas, it was hoped to break through the boundaries among the author, readers, and researchers, continue to produce text in terms of involving the literary content, and result in an effect of multi-statement and multi-interpretation. The study aimed to create a way of openness for any possible text, not only encouraging readers to read, but also being invited to take part in the text by the author.

## 3. Literature review

In a preliminary explanation, Joe (2006) put it thus, "Metacognition is knowing beyond knowing and thinking behind thinking." (Note 4) And according to Wikipedia (2009), metacognition was knowledge (i.e., awareness) of one's cognitive processes and the efficient use of this awareness to self-regulate these cognitive processes (e.g., Brown, 1987; Niemi, 2002; Shimamura, 2000). It was also called "knowledge of knowledge", "learning of learning." (Note 5)

J. H. Flavell (1976) first used the word "metacognition". (Note 6) He described it in these words: "Metacognition refers to one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes or anything related to them, e.g., the learning-relevant properties of information or data. For example, I am engaging in metacognition if I notice that I am having more trouble learning A and B; it strikes me that I should double check C before accepting it as fact." (Note 7)

Through the form of learning, metacognition was a knowledge which included knowledge of person variables, knowledge of task variables, and knowledge of strategy variables (Flavell, 1976, 1979, 1987). (Note 8) About person variable, it was declarative knowledge that included knowledge about oneself as a learner and about what factors influenced one's performance. For task variables, it was procedural knowledge that included knowledge about the various actions one must perform in cognitive tasks. And for strategy variables, it was conditional knowledge that was an awareness of the conditions that influenced learning when a strategy should be applied and why it was effective.

The declarative knowledge, the conditional knowledge, and the procedural knowledge were all involved in strategic knowledge. It was the one part in metacognition. The other part of it was executive management, which involved the processes of planning, monitoring, evaluating and revising one's own thinking processes and products. Both executive management and strategic knowledge metacognition were needed to self-regulate one's own thinking and learning (Hartman, 2001). (Note 9)

In the literary field, the theory that metacognition had a critical role to play in successful learning meant it was important that it be demonstrated by both readers and the author. In a sense, the author seemed to act as instructor through the roles of characters in a novel; the readers act as learners from the characters. It was the domain that metacognition could be used though different fields defined metacognition very differently. Dunlosky, Serra, and Baker (2007) covered this distinction in a recent review of metamemory research that focused on how findings from this domain could be applied to other areas of applied research. (Note 10) O. Henry's novel was the right alternative area of research which could offer a different finding.

As an ordinary citizen in New York, O. Henry came to know many kinds of different people living locally. As a writer, he faithfully put those people in his stories and continued to pay his concerns. The process from knowing them to knowing their humbleness was exactly that of metacognition concept. At the height of his popularity, according to Littell (2008), "O. Henry could dine in the fanciest restaurants and buy tickets for the most popular shows. Yet he never lost sight of the fact that there were thousands of working-class New Yorkers who lived very differently." (Note 11) Even when his life was very successful, he kept an eye on the "common folk" and wrote about the "four million" New Yorkers that other writers tended to ignore. (Note 12) The situation of knowing beyond knowing was precisely one of the essential parts of metacognition.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research object

The research object was O. Henry's novel, "The Gift of the Magi", which was considered as O. Henry's best known story as Dark (2002) depicted it, "was written for the *World* in 1905 and has become an American treasure." (Note 13) It was about a young couple who were short of money but desperately wanted to buy each other Christmas gifts. Unbeknownst to Jim, Della sold her most valuable possession, her beautiful hair, in order to buy a platinum fob chain for Jim's watch; while unbeknownst to Della, Jim sold his own most valuable possession, his watch, to buy jeweled combs for Della's hair. The essential premise of this story had been copied, re-worked, parodied, and otherwise re-told countless times in the century since it was written.

#### 4.2 Research tool

The tool adopted by the study was metacognition concept, through which the ideas of levels were used to collect the qualitative data from the text of O. Henry.

#### 4.3 Research method

By means of metacognition concept, the text of O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" was investigated in terms of levels.

### 5. Discussion

According to Tsai (1998), metacognition was something of "higher level." (Note 14) For example, life as a concept of one level, but thinking about the relationship (e.g., religion) between life and its significance was another level, which was exactly what metacognition would mean. The kind of knowing one's knowing, and even controlling one's own knowing was the sense of metacognition. The senses of levels from metacognition were perceived in O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi."

The senses of levels, first of all, should be examined like this: it was one level when O. Henry wrote "The Gift of the Magi", and it was the other level when the readers were touched in their mind and would feel the same way as a personal favor. As a reader, Musick asked, "Do you recall the lump in your throat when the hero, Jim, sold his only valuable possession, his watch, to buy a set of jeweled combs to decorate Della's long beautiful hair? And the tears that rolled down your cheeks when you read that she sold the one luxurious thing she had, her magnificent hair, to buy a chain for his watch. How wonderful to love so deeply; how glorious to be loved so much." (2008) (Note 15) The so-deep love and so-much love filled with O. Henry's fictional framework – two levels, along with twist endings.

Before Christmas came, the simple level of "penny" meant the other level of "saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher." (Note 16) Only the poor family could understand that it was hard not to haggle over what they needed to pay, especially when they were bargaining to save some money for some purpose.

When Della, the protagonist, felt depressed and howled, she had her moral introspection. She thought that her life was composed of crying, depending, and a little smiling. Among them, the most obvious was the one "with sniffles predominating." (GM, p.1) That was one of the main parts in O. Henry's stories. Like an early autobiographical interview by *New York Times* (1909, 2008), one could readily see that O. Henry was the natural father of "the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating," (Note 17) which moral reflection was the thread upon which most of his stories were strung. Life was an idea of one level, but its another level meaning full of "sniffles."

To describe the embarrassing financial situation of Della and her husband Jim, O. Henry used the level of "a letter-box" to denote another level of "no letter would go." (GM, p.1) Also, O. Henry used "a furnished flat" as one level, which turned out to be another level, "word on the look-out." (GM, p.1) For Della and Jim's home, little would function well even if an electric button which actually meant in another level "no mortal finger could coax a ring." (GM, p.1) In one simple level, the common things such as penny, life, a furnished flat, a letter-box, and even an electric button would stand for some meanings of another level. The process from on to another level was exactly a degree of cognition which O. Henry intended to invite his readers to sense the possibility of some existence.

For most rich family, one dollar and eighty seven cents might not be an important sum of money. Nevertheless, \$ 1.87 would mean a lot to Della because it was "something fine and rare and sterling." (GM, p.2) She planned to use the little money she owned and bought her husband a Christmas present. \$ 1.87 was one ordinary level, but its another level meant something valuable to Della.

Likewise, one thing could not be always viewed from only one side. It was quite conspicuous that the other side of the thing would be worth noticing. Noticing that even a poor family was able to have a dream was sometimes something significant. With regard to the aspect, Hart (1995) once proved it and wrote, "O. Henry had a genuine sympathy for the downtrodden and oppressed which was unusual in writers of his era." (Note 18) For Della and Jim, even though they were truly poor, there were two things of them in their family, which could be two mighty prides; Della's hair and Jim's gold watch. For Della, her hair was one visible level, but the other level was invisible and something "just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts." (GM, p.2) And to Jim, his gold watch inherited from his father and grandfather was only a visible level, however, the other invisible level of his watch would let King Solomon "pluck his beard from envy." (GM, p.2)

O. Henry made good use of the things about his protagonists to denote the meaning in one level, but to connote that in another level. Della's beautiful hair was implied to be "a cascade of brown water." (GM, p.2) When Della had her hair cut and sold it for collecting money to buy Jim a Christmas gift, she told her husband, "Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered, ...but nobody could ever count my love for you." (GM, p.4) After she sold her hair and got money, Della ransacked immediately the stores for Jim's gift. When she found a platinum fob chain, she thought it was simple and chaste in design and "It was like him [Jim]. Quietness and value." (GM, p.3)

The moment Della opened the gift Jim bought for her, she saw a set of combs and uttered her scream of joy. The set of combs was, in one level, some ornament for hair, but its true meaning, in another level, was something "craved and yearned." (GM, p.5) The couple apparently gave up something important to buy presents for the other half. On the surface, they seemed to be "two foolish children" who did not do the right thing for the moment, but O. Henry put it this way, "all who give gifts these two were the wisest." (GM, p.5) It was noticeable that O. Henry denoted someone to do something foolish, but actually connoted the role's wise behavior.

Clearly, O. Henry endeavored to lead his readers to sense the existence of another level which was pitifully not perceived, for things would be frequently seen from only one level, much simpler and easier side. The process between denotation and connotation might be one of O. Henry's favorite writing styles. As he told the reporter of *New York Times* (1909, 2008), "I've always had a desire for style. ...I'm going to give particular attention to style, also to character and plot. These really are the essential things in a novel. Tell the world that this novel will be worth a dollar and a half of any man's money." (Note 19) With regard to O. Henry's metacognition concept through his text of "The Gift of the Magi", a table at the end of the article would provide a clear view.

### Insert Table Here

## 6. Conclusion and suggestion

In the beloved story of O. Henry, a man and woman each longed to bring home just the right gift for the other. But with so little money, how could there be hope? The poignant twists and heartwarming conclusion of this perfect plum of a story helped explain the lasting appeal of this most American of authors. Writing under the famous pseudonym, O. Henry, William Sydney Porter breathed life into characters, creating moments that touched readers with their sensitivity and humanity. He portrayed lovelorn people with the same authentic touch, using sympathy, irony, and the wit for which he is justly famous.

Through O. Henry's text, "The Gift of the Magi," the elements of both sensitivity and humanity breathed life into his characters and used by him to convey different concepts of levels were quite simple and ordinary. Nothing too theoretic or abstract was found in those elements. Those elements were extremely daily common things in one's life. Though they were small stuffs, they were entrusted with the different implication. By O. Henry's depiction, they became significant.

In the text of "The Gift of the Magi," it was rather clear that O. Henry tried to express his points of viewing the same thing from two different levels. One of the two levels might be an inner layer, and the other an external layer. In the inner-layer story, O. Henry described the financial embarrassment of Della and Jim by pointing out their saving money one and two pennies at a time. The other outer-layer story was who Della and Jim might truly be in O. Henry's real life. Did O. Henry intend to describe their own situation when he and his wife were down and out? Did O. Henry desirably let Della and Jim counterfeit themselves for their real life? Or did O. Henry imply even if the most ordinary couple would do the same thing to each other? It was exactly the purpose of the outer-layer story which echoed the ideas of multi-statements or multi-interpretations. All metacognition concepts needed the idea of knowing beyond knowing, as well as thinking behind thinking.

Consequently, the sense of levels constructed the particular twofold spatial of O. Henry, inner layer and outer layer. The other examples were easily found in his text. Like gold watch and hair, it was the inner-layer story (Level 1) that Jim and Della sold what they cherished; it was the outer-layer story (Level 2) that Jim and Della spontaneously bought Christmas gifts for each other. And the inner-layer story again occurred when Della sold her hair which naturally tailed off, but the outer-layer story followed when Della told Jim that nobody could ever count her love for him. The two levels built a spatial in which O. Henry conveyed a viewpoint that the numbers of one's hair did not stand for one's love for others, and that love apparently exceeded what hair could have an influence.

Just as the above mentioned, the study aimed to keep producing text in terms of involving the literary content, and accomplish an effect of multi-statements and multi-interpretations. As a result, the text of O. Henry still remained a lot to explore. Especially when it is examined by the other ideas of metacognition, such as knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition, readers will be given more opportunities to really participate

in O. Henry's world, through which they can learn to prepare for their genuine life. Consequently, the concept of metacognition, its knowledge or strategy will be suggestively for the further study.

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### Notes

- Note 1. Dennis Hart, O Henry: 100 Selected Stories, *Wordsworth Classics* (England: Cumberland House, 1995) 1.
- Note 2. Cantlon F. Subiaul, R.L. Holloway, & H.S. Terrace, "Cognitive Imitation in Rhesus Macaques." *Science*, 305(2004): 407-410.
- Note 3. M. Littell, *The Tales of O. Henry*. [Online] Available: <http://www.nexttext.com/index>, 2008.
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- Note 6. J.H. Flavell, "Metacognitive aspects of problem solving." In L. B. Resnick (Ed.), *The Nature of Intelligence*, (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1976) 231-236.
- Note 7. Ibid., pp.231-236.
- Note 8. Ibid., pp.231-236.

Note 9. H.J. Hartman, *Metacognition in Learning and Instruction: Theory, Research and Practice* ( Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001) 61.

Note 10. J.Dunlosky, M.J.Serra, & J.M.C.Baker, “Metamemory Applied.” In F. Durso (Ed.) *Handbook of Applied Cognition. 2nd Edition.* (Chichester, West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2007)137-161.

Note 11. M. Littell, *The Tales of O. Henry.* [Online] Available: <http://www.nexttext.com/index>, 2008.

Note 12. Ibid.

Note 13. L. Dark, Publisher’s Note. *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2002* (New York: A Division Random House, Inc., 2002) v.

Note 14. C.H. Tsai, “On metacognition from the viewpoint of a layman.” [Online] Available: [http://writings.chtsai.org/1998/06/21/menwaihan\\_tan\\_houshe/](http://writings.chtsai.org/1998/06/21/menwaihan_tan_houshe/), 1998.

Note 15. M. P. Musick, “O. Henry and the gift of the Magi.” *Literary Traveler.* [Online] Available: <http://www.literarytraveler.com/default.aspx>., 2008.

Note 16. O. Henry, “The gift of the Magi, All quotations from the text will be hereafter abbreviated as GM and are to the text (England: Cumberland House, 1995)1.

Note 17. Anonymous “O. Henry’ on himself, life, and other things,” *New York Times.* [Online] Available: <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Library/ohenry/>, p.SM9, Apr.4, 1909.

Note 18. Dennis Hart, O Henry: 100 Selected Stories, *Wordsworth Classics* (England: Cumberland House, 1995)1.

Note 19. Anonymous “O. Henry’ on himself, life, and other things,” *New York Times.* [Online] Available: <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Library/ohenry/>, p.SM9, Apr.4, 1909.

### Table . O. Henry’s metacognition concept

Table 1. Relationship among Common idea, Level 1, and Level 2

level common idea	Level 1 (Inner-layer)	Level 2 (Outer-layer)
money	penny	saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher
life	life	sniffles
house	a furnished flat	word on the look-out
contacting with outside	a letter-box	no letter would go
contacting with outside	an electric button	no mortal finger could coax a ring
money	only \$ 1.87	something fine and rare and sterling
possessions	gold watch	a mighty pride
possessions	Della’s hair	the other mighty pride
possessions	beautiful hair	a cascade of brown water
possessions	a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design	It was like him. Quietness and value.
sentiment	(numbered) hair	love (nobody could ever count)
possessions	the set of combs	craved and yearned
intelligence	foolish	wisest