
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The One Million Dollar Dream in *The Standard of Living* from the Functional Fixedness

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ABSTRACT

Dorothy Parker is well-known for her wit in her writing, and in her *The Standards of Living*, she satirizes the two young girls for their empty desire for wealth and the role of money and luxury in life. This paper aims to apply functional fixedness to explain why the two girls have such daydreams which is contrasted with the fact. The paper finds out that the class they live in limit their power to imagine and their superficial understanding of wealth.

KEYWORDS

Dream; wealth; functional fixedness

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1. Introduction

Dorothy Parker was an American poet, writer, critic, and satirist. Her poetry acerbically critiques the flaws of contemporary American life. Her short stories, on the other hand, exhibit satirical undertones with a distinct sense of empathy and a problem-solving approach. Parker also worked as a Hollywood screenwriter for several years and later became involved in drama writing and critique. Dorothy Parker is recognized for her remarkable and clever oratory skills. Her initial poetry compilation, *Enough Rope* (1926), was an instant hit, and *Portable Dorothy Parker*, a compilation of her works, has been in circulation since its initial release in 1944.

The Standards of Living is a brief narrative centering on two females called Annabel and Midge, who are best friends due to their shared standard of living. The girls enjoy colorful living and indulging their desires through playing games developed by Annabel. In the game, they consider how they would spend a hypothetical one million inheritances from a deceased elderly person. While out one weekend, they spot a string of pearls displayed in a shop on Fifth Avenue and decide to enter the store to inquire about the price. After discovering that the cost of pearls was a quarter of one million, Annabel and Midge were immediately taken aback. After regaining composure, they decided to up the stakes to ten million and start the game again.

2. Literature Review

There has been limited discussion of this brief narrative in China, with some acknowledging the author's humor and the satire foregrounded in the work. Zhang Linlin (2020) argues that in *The Standard of Living*, Dorothy Parker developed several humorous and passive female characters to critique the gender restrictions imposed by a patriarchal society and the consequent agony experienced by women. Similarly, Wang Yeting (2017) analyses Parker's witty writing style and believes that Parker was highly skilled in combining irony and insightful epigrams, thus creating a substantial and valuable literary legacy for future humorists. I believe the writer expresses her compassion towards the two girls through her satirical and humorous words, understanding their absurd behavior to be a result of the cognitive narrow-mindedness caused by their social class. From the viewpoint of functional fixedness, I will examine the transition from one million to ten million in their daydream.

3. Findings

Functional fixedness is the phenomenon of an individual's cognitive rigidity and lack of flexibility due to cognitive limitations and emotional influences. This results in habitual thinking and a state of functional solidification. The emergence of functional fixedness is attributed to individual cognitive limitations, which lead to psychological stereotyping and limit one's understanding to a certain range, making it difficult to continue exploring.

In this short story, the author extensively describes the food of two girls.

"They had lunched, as was their wont, on sugar, starches, oils, and butter-fats. Usually, they ate sandwiches of spongy new white bread greased with butter and mayonnaise; they ate thick wedges of cake lying wet beneath ice cream and whipped cream and melted chocolate gritty with nuts. As alternates, they ate patties, sweating beads of inferior oil, containing bits of bland meat bogged in pale, stiffening sauce; they ate pastries, limber under rigid icing, filled with an indeterminate yellow sweet stuff, not still solid, not yet liquid, like salve that has been left in the sun. They chose no other sort of food, nor did they consider it" (Milton, 1952).

The two girls assume that the food they are eating is indicative of wealth due to its apparent abundance. However, the author utilizes the adjectives "inferior, pale, stiffening, rigid" and a metaphor to convey to readers that the girls are actually consuming food of poor quality. Later, the author describes the physical appearance of the girls, stating that their skin resembled the petals of wood anemones, and their bellies and flanks were flat and lean like those of young Indian braves. The metaphor implies a negative connotation regarding their physique. The two girls apparently concentrated solely on their physical appearance, disregarding the importance of character. It was subsequently highlighted that they had an inclination to consistently alter their romantic partners. The author employed scathing language to ridicule their superficial and materialistic conduct directly, which they aspired to replicate but were deemed ill-perceived by their affluent peers.

The above stacks serve to heighten the novel's climax - the cost of pearls. Two girls glimpsed an exquisite pearl necklace displayed in the window of Fifth Avenue. Though they could intuit its costly nature, they were unprepared for the hefty price tag, totaling a quarter of a million yuan. Astonishingly, a million yuan, once an unreachable aspiration, could only purchase four such necklaces. As a result, they were immediately disheartened and stupefied.

They walked on. Slowly, the disdain went, slowly and completely, as if drained from them, and with it went the regal carriage and tread. Their shoulders dropped, and they dragged their feet; they bumped against each other, without notice or apology, and caromed away again. They were silent, and their eyes were cloudy (Milton, 1952).

They used to proudly walk on Fifth Avenue, but they soon realized their past beliefs were not grounded in reality. They had assumed that having a million pounds made someone wealthy, but this was not the case.

The two girls seemed to only focus on superficial aspects, such as luxurious food, slim figures, and casual relationships. They dream of buying a silver fox coat instead of pearls and imagine having millions rather than billions. The study of social cognition from a social class perspective reveals that high- and low-class individuals differ in their cognitive tendencies, which are attributed to their environment. The cognitive and imaginative capabilities of individuals may be limited by their social class. The study of social cognition from a social class perspective reveals that high- and low-class individuals differ in their cognitive tendencies, which are attributed to their environment. The study of social cognition from a social class perspective reveals that high- and low-class individuals differ in their cognitive tendencies, which are attributed to their environment (Li Xiaoxin et al., 2019). Individuals from lower social classes, who possess limited social resources and perceive a lower social status, have restricted behavior and fewer opportunities to pursue goals. They envisioned the cuisine consumed by affluent individuals, their socializing habits, and their purchasing patterns, but without marking them as subjective judgments. These perceptions were influenced by their own available resources, indicating a cognitive bias.

In contrast, enduring material destitution may cause psychological impoverishment that is distinct from external conditions. The theory of social cognitive hierarchy posits that individuals living in poverty experience a prolonged shortage of resources, leading them to recognize the impact of external factors on their behavior and goal attainment (Li Xiaoxin et al., 2019). This realization contributes to the development of a contextualist social cognitive inclination. Individuals tend to focus on external attribution, assuming that wealth is primarily determined by factors outside of their control, such as luck and background. As a result, they believe that their personal efforts have little impact on their achievements, ultimately leading to a decrease in their level of ambition. This belief leads them to imagine a scenario where an unknown and incredibly wealthy individual decides to leave them

ten million pounds after passing away, akin to simply going to sleep. This daydream of becoming instantly wealthy rather than achieving wealth through personal endeavors embodies contextual cognitive tendencies.

4. Conclusion

In the story, the two girls feign a luxurious lifestyle despite earning a modest salary and living with their family. They assert their superiority over others without being cognizant of the reality of wealth. Although they frequently walk on Fifth Avenue, supposedly a marker of affluent living, they have never entered a store in the area. The author critiques their shallow understanding of society. However, the last paragraph evokes a sense of sympathy as the two girls' aspirations are shattered by the harsh reality. Their perception of affluence stems from limited knowledge and imagination, shaped by their social class and life experiences. This frustration is relatable to all individuals who are restricted by their respective fields and social backgrounds.

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