



**Life Uncertainties, Personal Identities/Self-worth, and Societal Expectations: A Critical
and Literary Analysis of Frank O'Hara's *Lines for the Fortune Cookies***

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Introduction

In *Lines for the Fortune Cookies*, through a light conversational tone, O'Hara invites the reader into his consciousness and makes himself comfortable and irresistible, prompting readers to write their fortunes. O'Hara's poem is a masterpiece that illustrates the nature of the human condition and life uncertainties (fortunes). It resonates with modern readers and can be interpreted in various ways depending on their perspectives and experiences. O'Hara prompts readers to accept their fortunes and find peace in the uncertainties associated with their life journeys. In addition, O'Hara encourages readers to strive for self-worth and individuality despite the existing life obstacles and societal expectations. Therefore, Frank O'Hara's poem is timeless, transcends fortune-telling, and uses vivid imagery and literary devices to invite and inspire readers to reflect on life uncertainties and personal identities/self-worth despite societal expectations that shape their life paths and destinies.

Body Paragraphs

O'Hara's poem is a critical reminder of the importance of appreciating oneself. O'Hara indicates that we often underestimate our worth and importance by failing to realize our self-worth "I think you're wonderful and so does everyone else" (O'Hara, 2015, line 1). Personally, there are times I fail to recognize my true worth by focusing much on what has happened in my past. This has often downplayed my self-esteem and self-identity, as I sometimes attribute more value to external validation. Although it is common to undervalue oneself, I have learned that affirming my self-identity starts with appreciating my true worth. This means recognizing and accepting my past and present mistakes, successes, choices, behaviors, and strengths and weaknesses. In addition, appreciating self-worth means being

open to knowing myself internally. This does not mean blaming myself or others for the factors that have shaped who I am today, such as my losses, school life experiences, stresses, and relationships, but taking responsibility for fixing myself now and appreciating my self-worth. As O'Hara states, "In the beginning there was YOU-there will always be YOU, I guess" (O'Hara, 2015, line 6), I have learned that there will always be me, and the best thing I can do for myself is find peace within and taking charge of my life as a path towards appreciating my self-worth. Such a realization means that I can let go of the past that impedes recognizing my true worth, which also influences my present feelings and relationships. By recognizing and appreciating my self-worth, I have learned to love and care for myself and others while also enjoying my company. I have also chosen to focus on more positive thoughts, participate in activities that I enjoy, interact with others in a healthy way, and express my feelings without becoming defensive or angry.

O'Hara's poem also highlights the unpredictable nature of fate and life uncertainties. O'Hara states, "Relax a little; one of your most celebrated nervous tics will be your undoing" (O'Hara, 2015, line 10), which indicates the unforeseen consequences attributed to celebrating presents success and failures to relax, refresh, and reflect on ourselves. Such uncertainties mirror my life experiences, where celebrated qualities, habits, and success have unexpectedly led to unexpected outcomes. For instance, during high school, due to my high conscientiousness, I was a reliable hard worker who strived to be highly effective and efficient in my activities. I consistently tried to apply this strength to my schoolwork and social activities. While most of my classmates chose to focus on what made them good in their present situation, I diligently focused on setting goals and working hard to achieve them. This meant being responsible, organized, hardworking, and reliable. It also meant paying attention to the small details to ensure I deliver on the set promises. My rational, dependent, and less spontaneous decision-making style helped me avoid making careless or impulsive

decisions. As expected, such a personality trait was highly appreciated by my classmates as it ensured success. Nevertheless, this celebrated attribute or “nervous tic” soon led to my undoing as I developed anxiety due to my fixation with orderliness, control, and perfection. While personal traits such as orderliness, self-control, and ambition were positive, they led to neglect of self-care as I went to extreme levels to be a perfectionist due to the fear of failure. For instance, sometimes I set unrealistic expectations for myself and others. As such goals were unattainable, I struggled with anxiety, which also affected my performance. Therefore, my most celebrated conscientiousness personality trait soon became my undoing. Nevertheless, I started focusing on relaxing a little, setting realistic goals, allowing room for imperfection and failure, learning to find lessons within failures, recognizing unrealistic goals, and acknowledging limitations. Such a life experience reflects O'Hara's opinion that sometimes we may celebrate attributes that steer our lives to success and fail to take time to reflect and focus on self-care, leading to unforeseen consequences that can shape our lives.

O'Hara's poem highlights the extent to which societal expectations can influence an individual's choices and life paths. Although society is composed of an individual's standards, the set societal expectations and standards often define what is socially acceptable and unacceptable. O'Hara demonstrates this by stating, “You should wear white more often-it becomes you” (O'Hara, 2015, line 20). This line suggests that society defines what others should conform to (expectations) to align themselves with the prevailing societal standards. For instance, college life is run rampantly by positive and negative social expectations, some of which are often stereotypical that students must conform to once they enroll in college, such as developing identities and healthy relationships, performing academically, and securing an internship. In addition, they extend to securing a minimum wage job, apartment, cars, pets, and children. Nevertheless, these are social expectations that few will achieve while in or after recently graduating from college. Although most students will secure

employment after graduation, some graduates struggle to find their dream jobs, leaving them depressed and lonely due to the social expectations that one should secure a job after graduation. In addition, for others who secure employment, society expects them to gain financial independence. In reality, some struggle to gain financial independence as they use most of their income to repay college loans. Such social expectations often stress college students and graduates as they are often unaware of what to do when some of these expectations fail to happen. Some way or somehow, college students are left to figure it out on their own when the time comes. Similarly, I also experienced societal expectations and pressure in selecting a college major and the college to attend to advance my supposed career possibilities. However, I had a clear goal for my career path and the best-suited college that can help me advance to this career path. Although this worked out for my case, the reality is that “wearing something more becomes you” does not apply to everyone, as most college students are influenced by societal expectations, making them make academic choices that are inconsistent with their expectations. This factor often contributes to the current attrition rates and missed opportunities for growth and development among college students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Frank O'Hara's poem is a modern masterpiece that prompts readers to appreciate their self-worth and anticipate life uncertainties while considering the prevailing societal expectations that influence their life journeys. O'Hara suggests that we often downplay self-worth by focusing too much on our past failures, which undermines our self-esteem and identity development. Rather than downplaying our self-worth, O'Hara suggests that we should take charge of our life journeys as paths toward appreciating our true worth. Due to the unpredictable nature of fate and life uncertainties, O'Hara prompts readers to reflect and focus on self-care to steer our lives towards unwavering success. As societal expectations often influence our life experiences, O'Hara encourages readers to set clear life

paths and goals and avoid negative societal influences that may risk their future success. Therefore, as we navigate our life fortunes and existing societal pressures and expectations, O'Hara encourages us to appreciate our self-worth, anticipate unexpected life turns, and increase our resiliency in navigating our life journeys toward unwavering success.



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