

COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION IN THE PRINCE AND THE DRESSMAKER AND STARGAZING BY JEN WANG

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Abstract

This article examines the cognitive dimensions of identity formation, perception, and emotional development in *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018) and *Stargazing* (2019) by Jen Wang. Drawing on cognitive literary theory, the study explores how characters construct their identities, interpret social expectations, and develop empathy through interpersonal relationships. The analysis demonstrates that both graphic novels portray cognition as a dynamic process shaped by internal desires and external pressures. While *The Prince and the Dressmaker* focuses on the integration of conflicting identity schemes, *Stargazing* emphasizes the development of empathy and the role of imagination in cognitive growth.

Cognitive literary criticism offers a valuable framework for understanding how fictional characters think, feel, and interpret the world around them. In the context of graphic novels, cognition is conveyed not only through language but also through visual representation, making the genre particularly effective in depicting internal psychological processes. Jen Wang's works are especially significant in this regard, as they explore complex emotional and cognitive experiences through accessible narratives and expressive imagery.

The Prince and the Dressmaker addresses questions of gender identity, self-expression, and societal expectation, while *Stargazing* explores childhood friendship, imagination, and emotional understanding. Although the themes of the two works differ, both texts depict cognition as a process shaped through interaction with others. This article argues that Wang's narratives illustrate how identity and empathy are not fixed traits but evolving cognitive constructs influenced by social environments and personal experiences.

This analysis is grounded in cognitive literary theory, particularly the concepts of schema theory, Theory of Mind, and embodied cognition. Schema theory explains how individuals rely on mental structures shaped by social norms to interpret experience. Theory of Mind refers to the ability to understand the thoughts and emotions of others, while embodied cognition emphasizes the role of physical expression in shaping mental states.

By applying these concepts, this study examines how characters in both novels negotiate internal conflicts, interpret social expectations, and develop emotional awareness. The graphic novel format further enhances this analysis by visually

representing cognitive processes, allowing readers to observe the interaction between thought, emotion, and expression.

In *The Prince and the Dressmaker*, Prince Sebastian's experience illustrates the complexity of identity construction as a cognitive process. Sebastian inhabits two seemingly incompatible roles: a royal prince bound by social expectations and Lady Crystallia, a fashion icon who embodies his authentic self. These dual identities represent competing cognitive schemas—one imposed by society and the other emerging from personal desire.

Sebastian's struggle can be understood as a form of cognitive dissonance, in which conflicting beliefs and identities create psychological tension. The expectation that he must conform to traditional masculinity clashes with his desire for creative self-expression. This tension is not merely external but deeply internalized, as Sebastian anticipates rejection and suppresses aspects of his identity to maintain social acceptance.

The act of dressing as Lady Crystallia serves as a form of embodied cognition, allowing Sebastian to externalize his inner self through physical appearance. Clothing becomes a symbolic language through which identity is communicated and experienced. As Sebastian gradually reconciles his dual roles, the narrative demonstrates that cognitive harmony is achieved not by choosing one identity over another but by integrating both into a coherent sense of self.

A crucial element in Sebastian's cognitive development is his relationship with Frances, the dressmaker. Frances functions as a supportive figure who validates Sebastian's identity and helps him articulate his internal experiences. Their relationship exemplifies how cognition is often distributed across social interactions rather than confined to the individual mind.

Through Frances's encouragement, Sebastian gains the confidence to confront societal expectations and accept himself more fully. This dynamic highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in shaping cognition, suggesting that identity formation is not an isolated process but one that depends on empathy, communication, and mutual understanding.

While *The Prince and the Dressmaker* focuses on identity integration, *Stargazing* explores cognition through the lens of childhood imagination and emotional growth. The character Moon represents an alternative way of understanding the world, as she interprets her experiences through imaginative and spiritual frameworks. Her belief in celestial visions reflects a cognitive system that blends fantasy with emotional reality.

Moon's imaginative perspective contrasts with Christine's more structured and socially influenced cognition. At the beginning of the narrative, Christine struggles to understand Moon's behavior, demonstrating a limited capacity for perspective-taking. However, as their friendship develops, Christine gradually expands her cognitive

framework, learning to interpret the world from Moon's point of view.

Christine's cognitive development is closely tied to the concept of Theory of Mind. Through her interactions with Moon, she becomes increasingly capable of recognizing and understanding another person's emotions and beliefs. This process is neither immediate nor effortless; it involves moments of misunderstanding, jealousy, and emotional conflict.

The turning point in Christine's development occurs when Moon faces a serious illness. This experience forces Christine to confront the limitations of her previous assumptions and reevaluate her understanding of reality and imagination. As a result, she develops a deeper sense of empathy and emotional awareness, illustrating how cognitive growth often emerges from challenging experiences.

Both novels also highlight the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping cognition. In *The Prince and the Dressmaker*, societal expectations regarding gender and royalty create rigid schemas that constrain Sebastian's identity. Similarly, in *Stargazing*, cultural norms influence Christine's behavior and perceptions, particularly in relation to family expectations and social conformity. These cultural frameworks act as cognitive filters through which characters interpret their experiences. However, Wang's narratives suggest that such schemas are not fixed; they can be questioned, reshaped, and expanded through personal reflection and interpersonal relationships.

A comparison of the two novels reveals both similarities and differences in their cognitive themes. *The Prince and the Dressmaker* centers on the internal conflict between competing identity schemas and the process of integrating them into a unified self. In contrast, *Stargazing* emphasizes the development of empathy and the ability to understand alternative perspectives.

Despite these differences, both narratives demonstrate that cognition is inherently social. Characters achieve growth not in isolation but through their relationships with others. Furthermore, both works highlight the importance of accepting complexity, whether in terms of identity or perception, as a key aspect of cognitive maturity.

Jen Wang's *The Prince and the Dressmaker* and *Stargazing* provide rich examples of how cognitive processes shape identity, perception, and emotional development. Through the use of visual storytelling and character-driven narratives, both works illustrate that cognition is dynamic, relational, and deeply influenced by social context.

The analysis shows that identity is not a fixed attribute but a cognitive construct that evolves through experience and interaction. Similarly, empathy is portrayed as a learned ability that develops over time. By presenting these themes in accessible and visually engaging forms, Wang's graphic novels contribute significantly to the study of cognitive literary theory and children's literature.

References

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