

Pursuit of Happiness: Maryna Hrymych and Unhappy Human in Consumption Society

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Abstract

The question of happiness has always lingered in the minds of humanity. Maryna Hrymych explores what a person needs to become happy in the modern age of money and consumption. Through the journey of the protagonist in his life after death – the second life - Hrymych tries to show the readers that happiness we feel when buying or consuming something is only fleeting. On the other hand, the happiness from sharing and creating is long-lasting and fulfilling. “Second Life” explores the question of what a person has to give up in order to become happy. This article analyzes the spiritual search of the protagonist in a world where personal happiness is identified with the purchase and consumption of material values and unravels his path to finding meaning in life.

Keywords: Hrymych, happiness, consumption, Second Life, modern society.

**У ПОШУКАХ ЩАСТЯ:
ЛЮДИНА І СУСПІЛЬСТВО СПОЖИВАЦТВА
У РОМАНІ МАРИНИ ГРИМИЧ
“SECOND LIFE”**

Олена Щегель

Анотація

Роман Марини Гримич “Second life” висвітлює тему, актуальну для сучасного урбанізованого суспільства – як людині знайти щастя у світі, де панує споживацтво, і чи щастя в такому суспільстві можливе взагалі. Ця стаття аналізує душевні пошуки головного героя у світі, де особисте щастя ототожнюється із купівлею і споживанням матеріальних цінностей і розглядає його шлях до пошуку смислу життя.

Ключові слова: Гримич, Second Life, щастя, споживацтво, сучасне суспільство

The question of happiness has always lingered in the minds of humanity. But even as we advance into the new millennium, the pursuit of happiness continues to be tiring and seemingly unending for many in societies around the world. There are countless books on how to become happy easily found in bookstores everywhere and many go on to become bestsellers¹, according to the World Happiness Report and NEF which is responsible for the Happy Planet Index. Nevertheless, modern humans do not seem to be less prone to depression, anxiety, or discontent, than their predecessors, nor are they happier. A major reason for our unhappiness is the fact that we live in a consuming society.

According to Lee, Heungtak's research of Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*, before the advent of consumption-based society, people used to consume only as much as was needed to sustain their existence, while overconsumption was considered harmful not only for the individual but also for the society as a whole (Lee, 2001:401). Today however, the situation is quite the opposite whereby most of members of society seem to be indulging in overconsumption and those who attempt to refrain are considered exceptions to the rule. For many people in today's modern society, purchases are made in order to obtain a feeling of gratification, which is misinterpreted as happiness.

Maryna Hrymych's *Second Life* explores the question of what it is that makes a person happy and whether it is possible to become happy in a consumption-based society.

Consumerism first arose in the 19th century but gained ground after the WWII, accompanying the intensification of globalization. In a consumer-based society, the actions of the members are influenced by the principles of the market economy and one's real worth is proved not through a person's productivity but through his consuming capacity (Gay, 1996:76). If the core of production culture is creating something for others, consumer culture is focused on the practice of consumption that is egocentric.

In order to understand the correlation between consumerism and happiness,

¹ A search on Amazon.com shows more than 90,000 results for the word 'happiness' while a corresponding search on Google.com provides more than 220 million results.

it is crucial to first define what happiness is. Although the meaning of happiness varies among individuals, there are philosophical definitions that can be said to be representative for each era. Aristotle was the first known Western thinker to attempt to define and explain happiness¹ in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. For him, “the function of man is to live a certain kind of life, and this activity implies a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed it is performed in accord with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, then happiness turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (Aristotle, 2004:1098a13). Aristotle’s happiness is not a pleasurable sensation but an ultimate evaluation of a person’s life.

By the 1700s, utilitarianism became a major philosophical train of thought that replaced Aristotle’s approach to happiness with the idea of minimizing suffering and maximizing pleasure. After Jeremy Bentham and other English philosophers elaborated on this view, the 18th century became the turning point of our understanding of happiness – it was no longer the evaluation of one’s life but a feeling, an emotion, something that makes us smile and brings pleasure. Utilitarians argued that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” was the ultimate good for society and supported free trade as they recognized personal freedom as a necessary means for achieving happiness and thus, creating the first theoretical foundation for globalization.

The eighteenth century signaled the beginning of the era of the pursuit of happiness with highlights being Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Theories of social contract* and the United States’ *The Declaration of Independence*. The former argued that the most important function of the government and social rules is to make all citizens happy. The latter stated that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. Such perspectives of the Enlightenment have continued to influence our perception of happiness to this day. Before the Enlightenment, people often sought the meaning of life in beauty, honor, or virtue. Today, finding happiness is

¹ Approximately at the same time in the Orient, Mencius drew similar conclusions of happiness as cultivation of virtues though Confucianism’s emphasis on social virtues more than individual ones, contrary to Aristotle.

generally the goal of one's life. McMahon argues that the reason humanity has become obsessed with the pursuit of happiness is due to a decline in religious beliefs and economic prosperity. He claims that a person can only worry about how happy he or she is only when all other needs are satisfied. Therefore, happiness is referred to as a kind of luxury (McMahon, 2006).

The pursuit of happiness has become a Hedonic treadmill of consumer-based society - when a person's economic expectations and desires rise in accordance with an increase in income but the feelings of gratification or happiness do not follow. In other words, despite living more prosperously now than in any other period of human history, happiness (or contentment) is not lasting for today's populace who try to obtain it through the buying of more goods but soon find themselves on a never-ending Hedonic treadmill. Artem – the protagonist of Maryna Hrymych's novel *Second Life* – is a typical product of consumer-based society. Born in Ukraine and raised in a poor family, he later gets a chance to study in the U.S. but his life is far from glamorous – he lives in a dirty room in Chinatown and works odd jobs to pay for his lodgings and food. The goal of his life is to pull out of poverty in any way possible.

The person who helps Artem get a room in Chinatown is Li, a Vietnamese girl whom he met at the university library when they were both freshmen. After helping Li with her assignment, the two start living together until it is time for Artem to go to London for his master's degree. Despite living together for four years, Artem's relationship with Li has nothing to do with love. Not once does he refer to her as his girlfriend as he sees her as nothing more than a 'commodity'. Li cooks, washes and irons his clothes, cleans his room while not asking any questions, and thus is a comfortable 'utility' that helps him concentrate on his work and studies. She also helps him feel less lonely in a foreign country, and gives him a feeling of warm affection which he accepts but never reciprocates. He never considers Li's feelings until he dies and finds himself in a 'second life', finally acknowledging her as a human being and not a mere object needed for the moment.

With the role of money becoming increasingly important, relations between people in society have steadily become more fragmented. In a society ruled by money, relations between people last only as long as there is a deal to seal.

Then, when the deal is no longer profitable to either of the parties, the relationship is broken, which makes it hard for people to find genuinely deep affection (Lee, 2001:22). Artem is a person not capable of real affection which is evident from his relationship with both poor Vietnamese student Li and wealthy English aristocrat Elizabeth.

By the time he enters graduate school at Oxford, Artem has already become more affluent than most of his peers by virtue of his talent in trading stocks. Despite being no longer poor, he is still not happy as begins to crave social status and recognition in society. For accomplish this, he joins the astronomical society which he has no sincere interest in but where the cream of English society are members, with whom he tries to befriend. At the same time, he becomes friends with Elizabeth – a student from one of his classes – but is not attracted to, even referring to her as ‘Ugly Betty’. That changes after Elizabeth invites him for a Christmas dinner at her home. Artem discovers that Elizabeth’s father is a lord and she is an heiress to an enormous fortune and a title. In his eyes, she is no longer and Ugly Betty but ‘Queen Elizabeth’.

Artem despises himself for his change in attitude towards Elizabeth as he knows too well what brought it about, but still cannot help but desire her – not as a person but a mean, a utility for getting something he wants. For him, there is no radical difference between Li and Elizabeth. They are both profitable deals but as soon as the deal loses profitability, he is ready to end it and move on to the next one to fulfill his superficial desires. He treats people coldly, as if they were things that can be disposed of when they are no longer necessary and replaced with new ones, more suitable for his needs. Hrymch shows Artem as a collective image of modern people for whom calculative and quantitative aspects replace qualitative aspects of relationships.

We first see Artem as a person captivated by money and consumption but he soon loses his ability to feel satisfied and happy with his achievements. He later realizes that with his money, there is virtually nothing he cannot buy and at that moment, all ‘merchandise’ loses its attraction for him. But as Artem knows no other means for achieving what he believes is happiness, he starts to slide into depression which becomes severe after the suicide of Elizabeth’s father, Sir Charles, with whom Artem had grown very close. Seeing himself in Artem, Sir Charles writes a letter to him before committing suicide. In it, Sir

Charles confesses that the reason for his choice is an illness - a growing darkness, an emptiness within his chest. Artem understands all too well that Sir Charles is not talking about physical illness.

His illness was not that of a body. Sir Charles's body was healthier than that of anyone else Artem knew. Sir Charles's illness was that only rich intellectuals suffer from. Neither just rich people, nor just intellectuals. That was a rare disease striking only rich intellectuals... There was a scientific name for this disease but Artem knew it was a 'disease of the void soul'. The abyss within you. Nothing you cannot have. Everything you have you achieved by yourself. You have built a fortress of wealth. And you know that you could not live without this money, live like an average person. But you also know all too well that it is this money that is holding you back from unfolding your potential. You were not given life to climb to the top of the social ladder and spend your days in narcissistic self-admiration. You were gifted with exceptional intelligence not to achieve success without breaking a sweat just for yourself, you were gifted with it to make the world a better place! ... The abyss inside your soul grows until it becomes incompatible with life... (Hrymch, 2010:131)

Trying to escape the fate of Sir Charles, Artem realizes that the only way to do this is to escape from the city which is the center of consumption and calculative deals. In the city, there is nothing a person can do but consume and it is a space where genuine affection cannot exist anymore. His intuition compels him to run as far away from the city as possible until he finally finds himself in the middle of a prairie, living in an old trailer with Dave, who thinks of himself as the scum of society.

Dave lives in the prairie because he tries to escape from the city and its consumerism but his reasons for running away differs from Artem's. Living all his life in a small town in the prairies and working at a gas station, Dave is quite content with his life until one day he goes to the city to see his daughter and her newborn child. Finding himself in the world of consumption, he realizes that his humble way of life was something to be ashamed of. But he

also knows that he would never be able to fit into this cruel world of money. After returning to his small town, Dave can no longer be content with his life as he feels he is “the scum of society” and is now convinced that working at a gas station for his humble salary is humiliating. Thus, he quits his job and moves into an old trailer on a bankrupt farm which belonged to his grandfather. For him, it is his only choice as he cannot fit into consumer-based society nor is this society capable of accepting him. As Simmel writes, in a society of consumption, the distinction between oneself and others is only possible through the amount of money we spend. Those spending the least money are doomed to become the outcasts (Simmel, 2004). Dave is a caricature of the typical outcast of a consumption-oriented society.

Living on the farm in the middle of nowhere, Dave and Artem are surrounded by nature but have no connection with it. For them, it is merely background. Their failure to establish a connection with the wilderness is why instead of feeling better after escaping from the city, their depression only worsens. Humans come from nature, return to it, and cannot survive without it. But consumer-based society considers nature as to be property, an object of consumption. Rejecting obsessions for possessions is the only way to reconnect with nature and obtain its vital power. Although Artem gives up all his possessions, leaving them in the city, as a person who spent his all life in a megapolis, he cannot find a way to reconnect with nature by himself. He needs something he knows and understands, a familiar medium to help him. He finds such medium in an old tractor. The moment he turns on the engine, he feels the vibration beneath him, from machine in contact with nature itself. These vibrations become the impetus that gives him the strength to live and awakes him from his depression. He realizes that as a human, he is not the owner of the nature around him and by letting go of this perceived possession, he frees himself from the grip of consumption society, and now realizes that he can only achieve happiness by sharing his life and his affections with others. At that moment Artem finally seems to find meaning in his life, he suddenly dies from a heart attack and finds himself in a so-called ‘second life’ – life after death. The reader might be perplexed by such turn of events but it is necessary as Artem has not yet given up his attachment to his one final possession – his life. Thus, death is the only way he can be free. When he

first finds himself in his second life, he is full of complaints about why he had to die at the young age of thirty-three. This shows that he still cannot let go of this last possession. He first believes that his death the deliberate work of God as it is God who creates and controls everything. But through his journey in his second life, he soon realizes that he is wrong. He receives the shocking revelation that 'the Creator' is not God, and that anyone can become a Creator. He now understands what Sir Charles meant in his suicide note when he wrote that we are born to make the world a better place – that it is the humans' job, not God's.

Hrymych leaves unanswered in her novel, the question of whether God really exists. She also appears to not own anything. In *Second Life*, she emphasizes that goods and possessions should not be used to satisfy one person's pleasures and desires, but be viewed as mere tools to achieving happiness through the sharing of them with others, without being obsessed with possessing them. She encourages readers to pursue sustainable happiness and continue making efforts to "make this world a better place".

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