

The Dystopian Madness in Defining Happiness

Defining happiness has long been at the heart of both philosophical and literary debates, and yet the meaning of being “happy” remains deeply contested. For example, on May 3, 1989, Margaret Thatcher commented on her tenth anniversary as the United Kingdom’s first female prime minister: “If you just set out to be liked, you would be prepared to compromise on anything at any time and you would achieve nothing.” Prime Minister Thatcher’s sentiment is just one example of how many individuals equate happiness with seeking personal satisfaction, accomplishment, and public attention. However, dystopian literature challenges this popular sentiment by creating oppressive societies in which the search for happiness is always prevented, controlled, or constantly redefined. The societies in George Orwell’s *1984* and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, for example, explore the corrosive effects of a watchful state that restricts the pursuit of happiness. Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Paine, however, argued that happiness is inseparable from liberty, reason, and the ability to challenge authority, and it is clear that Paine’s work, especially *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution*, inspired, whether intentionally or not, Orwell and Bradbury when they wrote their respective novels. By examining how these works define happiness and comparing them to foundational philosophical ideas (like Paine’s work), it becomes clear that happiness can be distorted when it is separated from individual decision-making and personalized freedom. Happiness is not only pleasure or comfort, but it is also rooted in individual autonomy and intellectual freedom. Without these core tenets, what is called “happiness” becomes something that is state-imposed rather than profoundly experienced individually.

In *1984*, George Orwell presents a dystopian society in which happiness is defined as absolute obedience to the state, revealing how easily happiness can be distorted when individuals

lose the power to think independently and pursue happiness. The Party in Oceania maintains control not only through physical surveillance, but also through psychological manipulation and cruel torture, ensuring that its citizens are forced to accept its version of reality. In a later part of his novel, Orwell wrote this in describing the realities of Winston Smith's oppressive world:

“That the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great bulk of mankind, happiness was better. That the party was the eternal guardian of the weak, a dedicated sect doing evil that good might come, sacrificing its own happiness to that of others. The terrible thing, thought Winston, the terrible thing was that when O'Brien said this he would believe it.”

This quote offers readers a false set of choices, suggesting that individuals must choose between liberty and happiness. However, we all know that happiness and freedom are not at all mutually exclusive. Newspeak and Doublethink, for example, are specifically designed to eliminate the possibility of dissent. As a result, individuals in the story are no longer capable of articulating dissent, let alone pursuing an alternative vision of happiness.

Furthermore, Winston Smith's initial dissatisfaction reflects a lingering human desire for the truth and personal autonomy, as he secretly writes in his diary and questions Big Brother's authority. However, this desire is violently crushed through torture, culminating in his acceptance of Oceania's oppressive ideology. At the end of the story, Orwell describes Smith's newfound acceptance of Big Brother: “He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.” By the end of the novel, Winston's declaration of love, admiration, and loyalty for Big Brother demonstrates the regime's

ultimate success. It has not only controlled his actions, but has fundamentally reshaped his understanding of happiness. In this way, *1984* illustrates that when the state monopolizes the truth and suppresses independent thought, “happiness” equates to submission.

While *1984* defines “happiness” as obedience through fear and coercion, *Fahrenheit 451* offers a different attack on the pursuit of happiness by depicting a society in which “happiness” is maintained through blind distraction and wilful ignorance. Rather than ruling primarily through fear and torture, this society encourages ignorance by book burning, for example. Captain John Beatty strikingly notes throughout the novel his world’s view that, in order to be happy, people need to accept conformity: “We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon.” Beatty’s suggestion reveals the underlying premise of the story that is presented in *Fahrenheit 451*, which is that “happiness” is achieved not through fulfillment, but through being the same as ignorant folks. In this world, books are banned because they encourage people to think, introduce conflicting ideas, and in some cases, challenge oppressive societies.

Characters like Mildred Montag are significant examples of ignorant consumers of false happiness, as she immerses herself and is absorbed in interactive television and avoids meaningful human connection, which are arguably the core tenets of when it comes to defining happiness. Bradbury thus suggests that true happiness cannot exist without engaging with others and their thought-provoking literature, for example, as well as the freedom to question one’s surroundings. By presenting a society that willingly sacrifices intelligence for wilful ignorance, *Fahrenheit 451* demonstrates how “happiness” can be defined as mere distraction when

individuals abandon their capacity and agency for individual thinking, which is ultimately at the heart of the often life-long endeavor of pursuing happiness.

Alternatively, throughout the novel, Clarisse McClellan serves as a powerful symbol of someone pursuing true happiness. When asking questions and observing the world around her, McClellan challenges the norms of her oppressive society and inspires Montag, who arguably intellectually fell head over heels for her in contrast to being a fireman that causes fires on the behalf of his society, to reconsider his own beliefs. Bradbury vividly describes their first encounter: “He saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if her eyes were two miraculous bits of violet amber that might capture and hold him intact. Her face, turned to him now, was fragile milk crystal with a soft and constant light in it. It was not the hysterical light of electricity but-what? But the strangely comfortable and rare and gently flattering light of the candle. One time, when he was a child, in a power-failure, his mother had found and lit a last candle and there had been a brief hour of rediscovery, of such illumination that space lost its vast dimensions and drew comfortably around them, and they, mother and son, alone, transformed, hoping that the power might not come on again too soon...”. Through Clarisse, Bradbury suggests that happiness is closely tied to awareness, curiosity, and human connection, and it is unfortunately clear that these aspiring qualities cannot exist in a society that suppresses independent thought and the overall pursuit of happiness. This moment marks Guy Montag’s transformation and serves as hope throughout the novel. As he begins to read and engage with forbidden ideas, Guy becomes increasingly aware of his society’s goal of imposing happiness defined by willful ignorance.

Taken together, the definitions of happiness presented in both *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*

reveal that happiness can be distorted in fundamentally different ways when people lose their power in taking part in the ongoing and never-ending philosophical and literary debate in question in this paper. In *1984*, “happiness” is obedience, and in *Fahrenheit 451*, “happiness” is state-enforced willful ignorance. Both dystopian definitions rely on limiting the individual’s pursuit of happiness. The two dystopian novels clearly reflect Thomas Paine’s vital work, especially in his *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution*. In his revolutionary text, Paine expressed his belief that society arises from our wants and promotes happiness, while government arises from our wickedness to restrain vice. For Paine, the ability to challenge authority freely is not just a political right, but also a necessary aspect of living a “happy” life. It is also no surprise that Paine heavily inspired then-America’s future president Thomas Jefferson when he wrote the United States Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.” Orwell’s Oceania and Bradbury’s reimagined American town illustrate the consequences of removing happiness-driven human agency, demonstrating that when individuals are denied intellectual freedom, what remains is not genuine happiness, but a facade of it.

Ultimately, dystopian literature serves as a powerful exploration of how happiness can be manipulated when separated from individual decision-making. The oppressive societies in *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451* restrict people from pursuing happiness, mainly through propaganda, torture, and fear. Noteworthy English philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood once said that “the only clue to what man can do is what man has done.” Through dystopian literature, we are able to confront the consequences of losing control over defining happiness, and in doing so, makes readers realize and recognize the importance of having and maintaining the power to freely

think, choose one's destiny, and live a life full of meaning and, well, happiness. As Ally Condie once said: "The beauty of dystopia is that it lets us vicariously experience future worlds – but we still have the power to change our own." It is evident that we have the power to define happiness, and dystopian novels help make us recognize the importance of Paine's influence in defining happiness.