
The Myth of Pursuing Happiness in *The Pursuit of Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine how to pursue happiness constructs Americans in the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006). Pursuing happiness is included in one of the American Dreams which means that everyone in America deserves their happiness. To investigate the analyses, this study uses Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to find out the happiness in Americans. The results show that pursuing happiness is categorized as one of the American myths and the American characteristics. The characteristics of freedom, happiness, and success describe the American character in pursuing happiness as the myth. In addition, pursuing happiness illustrates the similarity of the narrative when compared to the myth. It analyses in social and cultural of Americans' lives.

Keywords: *Americans; American Dreams; happiness; myth; semiotic*

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of happiness has been so deeply embedded in American culture and is in many other cultures around the world since happiness is the primary concern for all mankind in the world. However, the term

happiness commonly refers to the US since it is rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which is named the Pursuit of Happiness (Jefferson, 1973), stating that

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.

This statement plays an important role in portraying the US as a nation that promotes liberty and equality. Besides the famous ideal of liberty, the Pursuit of Happiness appears in American writings as the American Dream, whether it is in American fiction or non-fiction.

The American Dream has a wonderful appeal that draws many people to the country. It has been a powerful belief among many individuals in the US, owing to how many people have been aroused by the promises of a better opportunity and life. The term "American Dream" was first used by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (2001, p. 31),

The term refers to the hope promised by America to thousands of people who demanded liberty and equality in pursuing their dream to have a better life.

Because of this strong belief, the American Dream has become a myth for the American people. Fossum and Roth, in their book *The American Dream*, say that "the American Dream is one and

many, i.e., the success myth and the many myths" (Fossum & Roth, 1981, p. 5). The question is whether or not the Pursuit of Happiness is the American myth. If it is a myth, it must be reflected in American cultural products as it is a bedrock belief underlying the product.

The myths originated from stories and historical records of phenomena that take place in a specific area. The myths can also be believed by people as the phenomena happened in the past, and the myth illustrates the same narratives. Robertson (1980, p. xv) argues that the myths in the United States are "part of the world where we live in". Myths in the US are rationally and logically acceptable. This strong belief is based on realities that they get and see in the US. The description was stated explicitly as the American Dream, that people came to the US to seek a better life and to pursue happiness.

Pursuing happiness is closely tied with the US, both as a purpose for its founding and as a measure of success or failure. Most vividly, it reflects the American Dream more than any other and treats happiness as a concrete and possible goal. The inclusion of the pursuit of happiness as one of the three most fundamental

inalienable rights (Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) in the Constitution by Thomas Jefferson demonstrates the connection between freedom and happiness and how important happiness is for individuals. As Robert Darnton, in his journal, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, says, "Most Americans take it for granted as a natural extension of 'life' and 'liberty.' The pursuit of happiness is an idea that has long been debated and whose meaning is still up for grabs" (Darnton, 1995, p. 42).

Therefore, one of the American films entitled *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006) shows equality in the search for opportunities since it references the myth of the pursuit of happiness. It assumes to wholly depict the same narratives as the myth of pursuing happiness. After that, this film is important to be investigated because of its status as a popular film. It became the most popular film due to its winning famous awards. With nearly the same title as *The Pursuit of Happiness*, it appears and grasps a successful film. According to IMDB (2006), this film won 12 awards from 26 nominations as a result of its popularity from 2006 to 2007. In 2006, the movie won nominations for the Capri Movie

of the Year Award and the Phoenix Film Critics Society Awards. In 2007, there were ten winners from the ASCAP Film and Television Music Awards, Italian National Syndicate of Film Journalists (2007), MovieGuide Awards, MTV Movie + TV Awards, NRJ Ciné Awards, Santa Barbara International Film Festival, and Teen Choice Awards. Therefore, connecting *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006) in the context of the American dream of the pursuit of happiness as intended in this research is important to investigate.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses Roland Barthes' semiotic approach which is reconstructed and focused on giving meaning to sign rather than language. It is mainly used in structural activity based on the process. Barthes proclaimed that "semiology aims to take in any system of signs whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects" (Barthes, 1968, p. 9). The analysis focuses on the signs that are taken from many objects as a result to reveal the meaning. As known, the signs are universal, and they are used in daily life. The signs indicate something and generate meaning. "Sign not only brings but also produces meaning. Meaning is not an

absolute and stable concept that has been packed in the process of delivering a message or in a message in this situation" (Adi, 2016, p. 63).

Barthes expands on Saussure's ideas by emphasizing the significance of the interaction between sign users and signs in producing meaning, a phenomenon known as signification (Fiske, 2004, p. 114). Barthes (1968, p. 95) developed semiology with a secondary meaning, stating "the aim of semiological research is to reconstitute the functioning of the systems of significations other than language with accordance with the process typical of any structuralist activity". Here is Barthes' semiological system as follows.

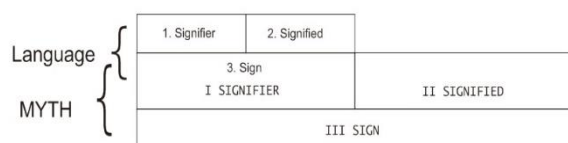


Figure 1. Semiological System
 (Barthes, 1968, p. 133)

Barthes' semiological system operates in two stages. In the first stage (language), it is directly talking about the object's description (denotative stage), which consists of the signifier, signified, and sign. The second stage combines the whole sign system of the first stage

(connotative stage) and creates the second-order semiology as the result of myth.

Therefore, this research is conducted under qualitative method, which provides a broader understanding and explanation. Moreover, the theory of semiotics from Roland Barthes might provide the Information to fully investigate how the myth is being represented through the film. As Barthes said myth is a peculiar system, it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second order-semiological system (Barthes, 1991, p. 114.)

DISCUSSION

In portraying the myth of the pursuit of happiness in the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006), this film shows its appearance to depict capability in presenting the reality of American myth. The myth has the narration referring to the search for freedom and happiness. Yingli asserts that, more specifically, the myth applies to Americans relying on their effort to achieve their overall life goals (Yingli, Rui, & Xuewei, 2017, p. 477). The myth of the pursuit of happiness is constructed for the people in the United States who place a significant goal on obtaining achievement,

searching for freedom, and getting equality with the determination of their happiness being completely within their control. In the process of achieving happiness, the myth of the pursuit of happiness depends on Americans' capabilities who are struggling to pursue happiness.

The Symbols of Happiness

Struggle

The struggle in pursuing happiness is meaningful in that they begin on a new phase in the US, which is symbolized by a life-changing path. This goal is supported by equal opportunities, which also serve as the focus for several discussions concerning the concept of happiness. It has been accepted that a successful life is always followed by various struggles.



Image 2. Trying to fix the machine to be sold (01:44:30)

The struggle is illustrated through the symbol of a man finishing a job. He performed to show his ability to complete the job successfully. This struggle might be seen as a

means of attaining success. He hopes to improve their quality of life to achieve happiness. From the struggle, most people, including Chris Gardner as main character, have a dream to pursue happiness in their lives. Their happiness is determined by his ability to struggle with himself. The basic idea of an individual's personality is in their pursuit and desire to achieve advantages in life because Friedman & Schustack (2008, p. 137) suggested that the level of success achieved by individuals could differ from common expectations in the meaning of happiness. Indeed, the situation may be difficult and may be easy. Both could be solved because challenges always appear in life, like in the scenes shown above, and the struggle is the solution to achieving the goal.

Family

Family has a significant place in American society; it is often regarded as people's dream of happiness. Pursuing happiness with family is one of the pathways to the ambitious goal for many individuals in American society. Certain individuals in the US spend their time with family to achieve personal happiness. It is part of American characteristics that they will

be strong if the family can also feel happy (Griggs, 2020).

The portrayal of family is shown in the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006). The story told that the role of a father is to bring happiness to his son. He is willing to work hard for the happiness of his son. The portrayal of family contains one of the characteristics of American people to achieve happiness in life.



Figure 3. A father buying a bar of chocolate for his son (00:57:23)

The illustration portrays the father's great love for his son. It can be seen from the scene that the father spends his time trying to bring happiness to his son. The sign appears when he dedicates his time to the purpose of his son's happiness. This portrayal is deeply connected with the American myth of the name of happiness, and it proposes that people own their desires to achieve happiness. It shows family happiness because it portrays happiness in other ways, and it reflects American characteristics.

This symbol refers to the myth of the pursuit of happiness as a characteristic of Americans. Various ways are portrayed as a means to achieve happiness, and happiness appears as a form of struggle to achieve success. Struggle and family are included in one of the American characters, showing that they are not easy to give up, and are ambitious people who pursue happiness.

The Symbol of Freedom

The US is known as the land of freedom. People came to America in search of a better life, to change their fate, and to find happiness. It has become the land of freedom because "from the beginning, people came to America to seek the opportunity to lead their lives following their conscience" (Assiddiqi, 2011, p. 1). They came from various countries and regions to get freedom because they did not get what they needed where they lived before. Then, Remini (2014) says that the people who first came to America needed a new life. They were motivated by freedom in the land of opportunity, the US. They were also looking for food as a means of survival there. Then, each of them formed a group and culture that was created from various countries and regions (pp. 1-2). It is important to note that their goal is to gain

freedom in life and to find happiness in America.

Every American has the freedom to take a part in his life. He is free to decide what to do now and in the future. As stated in the Declaration of Independence, the American government or constitution guarantees each individual without interference as a natural right. He is free to speak, to get material wealth, and to profess religion. As Kearney et al. (1984) state, by freedom, Americans mean this concept as the desire and the ability of all individuals to control their destinies. The desire to be free of control was a basic value of the new nation in 1776, and it has continued to attract immigrants to this country (pp. 20-21).

To see how American people define freedom, some scenes in the movie show various meanings of freedom characterized as American characteristics. Some of the characters have their way of gaining freedom in the US.

Equality

In defining freedom, equality is one of the discussions to gain freedom in life. It is important to understand that Americans believe in equality as an opportunity. Each of them

should have an equal chance, which means equality for everyone to get freedom as Americans. Equality of opportunity may be thought of as an ethical rule to get freedom in the US (Kearney et al., p. 22).

Demanding equality in America is one of the American characteristics that is rooted in the spirit of the earlier settlers who first came to the US. Jackson (1986) states, "it became an appropriate symbol of the American frontier spirit, one which focused on the future" (p. 16). Their spirit can also be characterized as the future for individuals, a future in which equality should be applied in the US. Thus, according to Spiller (1956), the US represents a new world. The idea of having a mindset of equality undoubtedly came from the immigrants who had the concept of material realities and freedom of life during the beginning of the US (p. 17). Therefore, freedom of thought is one of the elements of Americans' search for freedom. They come to the US for equal opportunity and freedom to live their lives. To see further the meaning of equality, the following scenes are proof that equality happens in the US.



Figure 4. Workers coming from different backgrounds walking on the side of the street (00:10:23)

The scene illustrates the occurrence of equality in the US. The concept of the pursuit of happiness is universally embraced by every individual in America. Regardless of their origin, they have a common objective of pursuing happiness. According to Frey (2020), In 1980, American people consist white people comprised almost 80% of the national population, with Black residents accounting for 11.5%, Latino or Hispanic residents at 6.5%, and Asian Americans at 1.8%. It is proven that American people have origins in different countries. They immigrated to the US intending to improve the quality of life.

Improving the quality of life has been formed in the minds of Americans through American myths. Their characteristics serve as a representation and define, as Ausband (1983) said, a product of the Enlightenment in the sense that no other country is terrible. Its progenitors were

rational men who believed that equality in the US could solve all problems (p. 51). Therefore, Kearney et al. (1984) claim that Americans believe in creating their freedom through their characteristics. It requires a commitment from each other that they are united. It means that they have an important role in achieving happiness in American society and gaining influence and respect, and the individuals must be viewed as having the spirit to achieve their wishes (p. 21).

Individualism

The US ideally leads to "respect for the individuality of other selves" (Traber, 2007, p. 6). Individualism lies at the very core of American culture (Bellah et al. 1985, p. 55). People have their individuality to mean success in life. The individual concept of getting happiness is one of the characteristics of the American people. As Hudgins (2010) says, it is a natural character and calm feeling. It is sourced from themselves to identify who they are. As it is known that Americans have individual thoughts, they came to the US to seek freedom. Every man and woman freely have the same opportunity to express their way to pursue happiness as individual thought.



Figure 5. A father and a son laughing together while walking (00:17:21)

Individual happiness is depicted in the scene above, where each person has their way of pursuing happiness. Laughing above presents as the symbol of happiness in different ways. This happiness shows that Americans have their way of achieving happiness. According to Kearney et al. (1984, p. 21), American people believe that everyone must learn to rely on themselves for happiness. It means that achieving happiness both in the way of family and material wealth is possible to be reached because it is the freedom to choose what happiness they want. They believed that they should take care of themselves, solve their problems, and stand on their own two feet for their happiness. Kearney et al. (1984, p. 21) claim that "Americans believe they must believe in individual happiness in order to keep their freedom. It means to respect American life in the name of individualism".

The Symbol of Success

The symbol of success has been embedded in American people's minds as their dream. They want to achieve their dreams by working hard. They believe that success can be achieved if people are willing to work hard. Hard work is one of the components of a successful life. It reflects the reality of American life.

Hard work

The belief in hard work in the pursuit of material gain and other goals is often referred to as the characteristics of Americans (Kearney et al., 1984, p. 43). Every individual in the US is allowed to have the same rights in the opportunity and support to develop their wealth. It also means accepting the value of hard work and contributing happiness to others or embracing social responsibilities (Adhitya & Hapsari, 2023, p. 130). As Marx (1964) suggests, in defining the meaning of happiness in the US, it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination of dreams (p. 3). They have imaginations to think and to be able to ensure their life through fighting for the success of everyone.



Figure 6. The man is facing an examination for acceptance as an employee (01:02:27)

Starting with the entrance test to the company is one of the elements of hard work. It may take the form of competition between individuals in the group or the competitive effort of social groups to gain their objectives. Through competitive effort, they may be expended to achieve success and survive in life, like competition in doing the examination or test to be an employee for working. Kearney et al. (1984) argued,

If much of life is seen as a race, then a person must run the race in order to succeed; a person must compete with others. If everyone has an equal chance to succeed in the United States, then it is every person's duty to try. Americans match their energy and intelligence against that of their neighbors in a competitive contest for success. People who like to compete and are more successful than others are honored by being called "winners." On the other hand, those who do not like

to compete and are not successful when they try are dishonored by being called "losers." This is especially true for American men (p. 23).

Understanding American views on the concept of hard work holds significant importance in gaining opportunity. The purpose points out that every individual should be afforded an equal chance of achieving achievement. Many Americans regard life as a competitive struggle to pursue happiness and achieve success. This portrayal provides every individual with an opportunity to compete in a competition and become the winner. In various ways, this idea can be regarded as a moral principle that every individual is free to achieve a better life to pursue happiness (Kearney et al., 1984, p. 22).

His ways illustrate the process of pursuing happiness in his life. The phenomena gave the same narratives as the myth portrayed in the United States. Therefore, the status of the myth of the pursuit of happiness describes the similarity to reflect the American culture through the scenes film above which has been portrayed. The phenomena occurred because they wanted to improve their social status and reach happiness in many opportunities than what their

countries could provide (Pamungkas, 2013). Those who lived in the US began to create a new life to pursue their happiness.

CONCLUSION

A myth can be defined as a story that does not necessarily follow truth or untruth. However, Robertson's statement argues that American myths exclusively have the potential to reflect actuality. The portrayal of this myth draws on historical events of the past, giving an illustration for Americans to believe in the various phenomena present in the US. The pursuit of happiness serves the portrayal of seeking a better life, ideal jobs, and freedom in society. Therefore, this term has grown into the ideology of the American people, and its status has become a myth in American society. It is characterized by an underlying story that is repeatedly conveyed to individuals.

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