

The Quest for Happiness in Nina Leeds from the Play *Strange Interlude* by Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract

This research has explored the quest for happiness in Nina Leeds. The conceptual framework of Soran Frank has been used for this research. It is derived proposition from his work *Migration and Literature* that the quest has four stages. First stage is Quest in which a character feels longing for something. The second stage is Inquest in which a character puts effort to gain that thing. The third stage is Conquest in which a character attains the thing and become happy. The last stage is Consequent in which a character loses the thing and again this whole process continues. This proposition also suggests that the happiness is momentary. It lasts for some time and then it vanishes. The same thing is found in the character of Nina Leeds. Throughout the play, she runs after happiness which she attains momentarily. After attaining the happiness, something erodes that happiness and she begins to run after happiness again. It carries on until she gets utterly disappointed and stops longing for happiness. She undergoes all these four stages throughout the play but she realizes at the end that it is futile quest to long for happiness because it never lasts. So, finally she gets herself out of this quest.

Keywords: Quest, Happiness, *Strange Interlude*, Eugene O'Neill

1. Introduction

According to Oxford Dictionary, Quest is a long or arduous search for something. Nina Leeds associates her all happiness to Gordon, her fiancé whom she loses in World War I. After his death, her quest begins as she wants to become happy again but ends it when she learns that her quest is futile and happiness cannot last. Milan Kundera has opined in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that happiness can be attained if the things are repeated; similarly Nina Leeds wants to relive her past in which she has Gordon who means all the happiness to her. She searches for that happiness throughout the play but it goes fruitless. *Strange Interlude* is produced as an experimental play in 1928 by American playwright, Eugene O'Neill. In this play, he covers the period of twenty-five years of Nina Leeds which shows her prolonged search for happiness.

2. Methodology

This research is qualitative research based on inductive approach. It analyzes the character of Nina Leeds and generalizes that the happiness is a phenomenon which can be attained momentarily and which can never last forever. Moreover, this research is done by the subjective interpretation supported by the primary text of Eugene O'Neill and by the critiques of the critics.

3. Development of Arguments:

Throughout the play *Strange Interlude*, Nina Leeds runs after happiness which she attains temporarily and soon she loses it as another object becomes her happiness. Her quest for happiness begins when her beloved Gordon dies and she gets burdened with the guilt that she could not let Gordon make love with her as "It's what I didn't give! Gordon never possessed me! I'm still Gordon's virgin! And Gordon is mummy ashes! And I have lost my happiness forever" (O'Neill 12). Gordon's death has eroded her happiness and left her guilty and utterly unhappy. Before going to war, Gordon has wanted marriage to take place but Professor Leeds has made him realize that it would be unfair to Nina because if Nina gets pregnant and he dies in the war, she will have to nurse her child and her own life will be ruined forever. So, they decide that the marriage will take place when Gordon comes back from war. Nina considers Professor Leeds responsible for it that if he had not hindered their marriage, she would have made love with him and could have his kid as Professor Leeds tells Marsden that "And she acts toward me exactly as if she thought I had deliberately destroyed her happiness" (14). Nina considers her father to blame for the destruction of her happiness. She confesses to herself that she knew that Gordon wanted to make love with her but she didn't allow as "that happiness was calling me, never to call again if I refused! And yet I did refuse" (17). This guilt makes her mentally sick as her father declares that she has been utterly changed and sick. She always regrets that if she had married or made love with Gordon, she could have attained happiness as "I might have had happiness, Gordon and now Gordon's child" (18). This all suggests that Nina is at the peak of despair and she has lost all the happiness. First, she considers her father responsible who has halted her marriage and then herself because she has not allowed Gordon to have her physically. This guilt makes her unhappy. Her quest for happiness arises when she intends to expiate for this guilt as "I must somehow find a way to give myself to Gordon still" (27). It shows that she is in quest for some way which may atone her guilt and may make her happy. It is the first stage of the quest in which she desires to be happy again. The way she finds to attain happiness is to

abandon home and to go to the hospital to nurse the wounded soldiers. She intends to satisfy the soldiers sexually because she thinks it will let the soul of Gordon rest at peace as Kundera says “A person who longs to leave the place where he lives is an unhappy person” (132). It is the stage of Inquest in which she puts effort to attain happiness as “when I’ve accomplished this I’ll found myself, I’ll know how to start in living my own life again. I owe it to Gordon” (O’Neill 28). It makes clear that she takes her this decision as a way to get happiness so that it is her inquest. At the stage of Conquest, she attains happiness. She nurses the crippled soldiers and satisfies their lust physically. It makes her happy because she thinks that it has expiated the guilt as Marsden tells “The two times I’ve visited the hospital she’s been pleasant enough---pleasantly evasive!—” (42). It suggests that she has attained happiness and it is the stage of conquest. The next stage is Consequent in which a character loses the happiness. So, Nina Leeds also loses the the happiness which she has attained by nursing the soldiers and by satisfying them physically because she begins to think that it is sin which she is committing as she tells Marsden that “I’ve been so homesick. I’ve wanted to run home and fess up, tell how bad I’ve been and be punished! Oh, I’ve got to be punished” (63). It shows that the thing which has been source of happiness for her has now become the cause of agony. When Marsden asks her that if she is unhappy with it, why she has started it, she replies that “perhaps I knew at the time but I’ve forgotten. I was the blindest! I would not see”(70). It is clear here that she has lost happiness and again is burdened with guilt. It is the stage of consequent.

Nina Leeds has been committing coition with soldiers and this guilt does not let her at peace. She desires to punish herself so that she may get rid of the guilt and attain happiness as she requests Marsden that “Then I saw what a fool I’d been---a guilty fool! So be kind and punish me” (78). It is again her quest for happiness because she thinks that the punishment will wash her guilt away and she will feel light and happy. Marsden advises her to get married with Sam because he thinks if she gets pregnant, it will make her happy and her all frustrations will be ended. Ned Darrell also suggests that Nina should get married and not destroy her life at hospital as he says “she ought to have every chance for a happy life” (81). It also shows that Nina desires happiness for herself and Marsden and Ned Darrell want to help her in this quest. Following Marsden’s advice, Nina gets married with Sam. It is her inquest because she does not love Sam but even then she marries him to attain happiness. She also thinks that being a mother will make her happy as she tells Marsden that “I want children. I must become a mother so I can give myself. I am sick of sickness”(85). She wants happiness, it is quest. She marries Sam in order to attain it, it is inquest. Soon after her marriage, she gets pregnant and attains happiness. It is conquest as she says “well, I do feel happy when I think---and I love Sam now---in a away---it will be his baby too”(91). Her being pregnant kills all the guilt and she forgets all but her child as “I want a baby---beyond everything”(93). Nina marries Sam because she wants to get happiness and she gets pregnant which has made her happy. Even she has begun to love Sam who has given her this happiness. The stage of consequent begins when Sam’s mother tells her about the curse on her family that she cannot give birth to child because they have mental illness in hereditary. Sam’s mother makes Nina realize that it will be more severe crime than murder to give a child such pathetic life. Nina agains falls into darkness of despair as she screams “I’ll have lost my baby! Oh, mother, how can I keep on living” (98). She tells mother that she has wanted children to forget herself. Her purpose of getting married is only to get children. She has placed her all happiness in begetting kids and she has lost happiness again. It is consequent.

Undoubtedly, the happiness has been disappeared from Nina’s life again because she aborts the child as “after her baby---was gone---it was hard even to keep on living” (103). When Nina is at peak of disappointment, Sam’s mother gives her a suggestion which again evokes the quest in her. Sam’s mother advises that if she desires to have a child, she may get it from another man without the knowledge of Sam and Sam will love the child by considering his own. It kindles the light of quest in her again and she again puts herself on the way to attain happiness as she determines that “yes, mother, I want to be happy---it’s my right---and my duty!”(106). Nina accepts this suggestion and promises Mrs. Evans that she will take care of Sam. She considers Ned Darrell to fulfill her plan. It is inquest in which she plans to become happy as she asserts that “I must take my happiness” (107). When Darrell comes, she cleverly gets herself alone with him and presents her problem so convincingly that he agrees to become a father of her child as he says “yes---yes, Nina---yes---for your happiness” (111). He agrees only to solve her problem and to save her married life as he tells himself that Sam and Nina are his friends and he must do something to bring happiness in their life (112). Darrell means nothing to Nina except the means to fulfill her desire as she says that this doctor is nothing to her but a healthy male (114). Darrell makes her pregnant and she reaches the stage of conquest as the text suggests that she has got pregnant and she has triumphant and confident expressions (117). Sam also confesses to himself that Nina is happier now and it seems that she loves him (118). Nina has yearned for the baby and now she is happy at the fulfillment of her desire. Soon the consequent follows and she begins to yearn again as she falls in love with Darrell and now she needs him along with his child to get happiness. She tells Darrell that “this time I’m going to think of my own happiness and that means you---and your child!”(125). She gets so much indulged in love with Darrell that she loathes being with Sam anymore. She determines to get divorced by Sam and to be with Darrell. This is consequent as this love has eroded the happiness which Nina has got by getting pregnant. First she has wanted a

baby but not Darrell along with his baby. Ned also loves Nina but he feels too guilty to break Sam's marriage. He flees to Europe by abandoning pregnant Nina behind. Nina adjusts herself with Sam but she is not happy. She gives birth to a boy and they name him as Gordon. Sam loves the child and does not know that he is not the real father of him. After a year, when Marsden tells Nina that he has met Darrell because he is back in town, Nina begins to burn again in the fire of his love. She again longs for happiness which she has not got in the past as she assures herself that "he loves me!--he's mine---now more than ever!--he'll never dare leave me again" (152). When Darrell comes to meet her, she tempts him and tries to entice him toward her. It is inquest. Her efforts get rewarded because Darrell also intends to be with her as her lover as he says that "I love her---I can help to make her happy"(161). So, Darrell comes back to Nina and Nina attains happiness which is conquest. Here the stage of consequent comes when Nina loses interest in Darrell. She begins to get fed up by Darrell's presence as she says "why does she stay long?---I can't stand having him around me that long anymore" (178). As Russell has pointed out in *The Conquest of Happiness* that it is evident that happiness partly depends "upon external circumstances" while partly upon internal (241). It indicates that Darrell is no more able to give her happiness and Nina gets deprived of the happiness which she has had with Darrell.

Nina no longer feels happiness with Darrell because now Gordon, her son has become the object of her happiness. The thing which arouses the new quest in her is that Gordon is more attached with Sam than Nina and Nina thinks that Sam has snatched her son from her as she asks herself that "does he [Gordon] love Sam more than he does me?---oh, no, he can't!---"(O'Neill 192). She does not want to share Gordon even with his fiancée, Medaline. Her all attention is at Gordon now and she wants to see Gordon all her own. At the stage of inquest, she plans to tell the truth to Sam that he is not the father of Gordon but she knows well that Sam will believe it only when Darrell also confesses it to him. She tries to convince Darrell that they should tell Sam the truth about their son but Darrell does not listen to her this time. She wails as "I've lost my son, Ned! Sam has made him all his" (205). She does not lose heart when Darrell refuses to do as she wants as she asserts that this time she will not lose Gordon at any cost. She decides to tell all the matter to Medaline to make her refuse for marriage but Darrell interferes and does not let her succeed in her plan. Here Nina does not fulfill her quest as she quits her quest when Sam dies. She feels too guilty to carry on this quest after Sam's death as she addresses to Sam "I will give you my happiness again! I will give you Gordon to give to Medaline"(221). She does not become hurdle in Gordon's marriage and makes Gordon free. Now she becomes incapable of having quest for happiness as she says to Marsden "Peace!---yes---that is all I desire---I can no longer imagine happiness" (232). She has been sick of this quest because she always has had it temporarily. Now she willingly abandons her son for Medaline as she confesses to Marsden that "my having a son was a failure. Was'nt it?---he could never give me happiness"(233). At last, Nina stops longing for happiness and marries Marsden because she can discuss the old days with him when she has been happy before falling in love with Gordon Shaw when this quest for happiness has not begun. Finally, she gets out of this quest because she has realized that the happiness can never last.

4. Conclusion

The quest for happiness is found in the character of Nina Leeds. Her quest begins when Gordon, her beloved fiancé dies in the war. Before going to the war, they intend to marry each other but professor Leeds hinders their marriage. Gordon also has wanted to make love with Nina which she does not allow. When Gordon dies, Nina loses her all happiness and she is burdened with the guilt that she has not allowed Gordon to have her physically. In order to wash her guilt and to attain happiness, she nurses the wounded soldiers and satisfies them sexually. She becomes happy for sometime but later on realizes that it is sin and this realization makes her unhappy. Marsden asks her to get married because he thinks if she becomes a mother; it will soothe her soul and bring her happiness. Nina gets married with Sam only to get pregnant. She gets pregnant and it makes her happy so much that she starts to love Sam. She loses this happiness when Sam's mother tells her about the hereditary disease. She aborts the child and becomes unhappy again. Sam's mother asks her to get child from some healthy man and also forbids her to tell it to Sam. In order to get a baby, she flirts with Darrell and convinces him to give her a baby so that it may bring happiness to her. He agrees and makes her pregnant but Nina begins to love Darrell and now she wants Darrell too with his child. She wants to abandon Sam and marry Darrell but Darrell's conscience does not allow him to commit this treachery to Sam who trusts him as a friend. He goes to Europe to keep Nina and Sam together. Nina begets a son but still yearns for Darrell. Darrell comes to Nina after a year and accepts to be with her as her lover. Nina becomes happy for some time but when Gordon, her son grows up and loves Sam more than her, it makes her unhappy because now she does not want Darrell anymore but her son, Gordon. She thinks that Sam has deprived her of her son and now he wants to give him to his fiancée, Medaline. She makes a lot of effort to get hold of Gordon but fails. When Sam dies, she feels guilty and quits this plan. At the end, she marries Marsden instead of Darrell because she has known that it is futile to run after happiness which can never last. She gets sick of this quest and quits it as she confesses it to Marsden "Peace---yes---that is all I desire---I can no longer imagine happiness"(232).

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