

Passage 6

From What Is Happiness? by John Ciardi

The right to pursue happiness is issued to Americans with
 their birth certificates, but no one seems quite sure which
 way it ran. It may be we are issued a hunting license but
 offered no game. Jonathan Swift seemed to think so when
 he attacked the idea of happiness as "the possession of being
 well-deceived," the felicity of being "a fool among knaves." 5
 For Swift saw society as Vanity Fair, the land of false goals.

It is, of course, un-American to think in terms of fools and
 knaves. We do, however, seem to be dedicated to the idea
 of buying our way to happiness. We shall all have made it to
 Heaven when we possess enough. And at the same time the
 forces of American commercialism are hugely dedicated to
 making us deliberately unhappy. Advertising is one of our
 major industries, and advertising exists not to satisfy desires
 but to create them—and to create them faster than any
 man's budget can satisfy them. For that matter, our whole 15
 economy is based on a dedicated insatiability. We are taught
 that to possess is to be happy, and then we are made to
 want. We are even told it is our duty to want. It was only a
 few years ago, to cite a single example, that car dealers across
 the country were flying banners that read "You Auto Buy 20
 Now." They were calling upon Americans, as an act
 approaching patriotism, to buy at once, with money they did
 not have, automobiles they did not really need, and which
 they would be required to grow tired of by the time the next
 year's models were released. 25

Or look at any of the women's magazines. There, as
 Bernard DeVoto once pointed out, advertising begins as
 poetry in the front pages and ends as pharmacopoeia and
 therapy in the back pages. The poetry of the front matter is
 the dream of perfect beauty. This is the baby skin that must 30
 be hers. These, the flawless teeth. This, the perfumed breath

she must exhale. This, the sixteen-year-old figure she must display at forty, at fifty, at sixty, and forever.

Once past the vaguely uplifting fiction and feature articles, the reader finds the other face of the dream in the back matter. This is the harness into which Mother must strap herself in order to display that perfect figure. These, the chin straps she must sleep in. This is the salve that restores all, this is her laxative, these are the tablets that melt away fat, these are the hormones of perpetual youth, these are the stockings that hide varicose veins.

Obviously no half-sane person can be completely persuaded either by such poetry or by such pharmacopoeia and orthopedics. Yet someone is obviously trying to buy the dream as offered and spending billions every year in the attempt. Clearly the happiness market is not running out of customers, but what is it trying to buy?

The idea "happiness," to be sure, will not sit still for easy definition: the best one can do is to try to set some extremes to the idea and then work in toward the middle. To think of happiness as acquisitive and competitive will do to set the materialistic extreme. To think of it as the idea one senses in, say, a holy man of India, will do to see the spiritual extreme. That holy man's idea of happiness is in needing nothing from outside himself. In wanting nothing, he lacks nothing. He sits immobile, rapt in contemplation, free even of his own body. Or nearly free of it. If devout admirers bring him food, he eats it; if not, he starves indifferently. Why be concerned? What is physical is an illusion to him. Contemplation is his joy and he achieves it through a fantastically demanding discipline, the accomplishment of which is itself a joy within him.

Is he a happy man? Perhaps his happiness is only another sort of illusion. But who can take it from him? And who will dare say it is more illusory than happiness on the installment plan?

Happiness is never more than partial. There are no pure states of mankind. Whatever else happiness may be, it is neither in having nor in being, but in becoming. What the Founding Fathers declared for us as an inherent right, we should do well to remember, was not happiness but the pursuit of happiness. What they might have underlined, could they have foreseen the happiness market, is the cardinal fact that happiness is in the pursuit itself, in the meaningful pursuit of what is life-engaging and life-revealing, which is to say, in the idea of becoming. A nation is not measured by what it possesses or wants to possess, but by what it wants to become.

By all means let the happiness market sell us minor satisfactions and even minor follies so long as we keep them in scale and buy them out of spiritual change. I am no customer for either puritanism or asceticism. But drop any real spiritual capital at those bazaars and what you come home to will be your own poorhouse.

Questions

Question 1: The author compares the "right to pursue happiness" to

- A. something we can buy
- B. a hunting license
- C. something we can possess
- D. a false goal

Question 2: The author argues that the advertising industry is dedicated to making us unhappy because

- A. happiness is an illusion
- B. we will act more patriotically
- C. happy people don't make the decision to buy things
- D. that will promote a thriving economy

Question 3: Bernard DeVoto is quoted in the passage when he describes advertising as both “poetry” and “pharmacopeia.” From the context, you can infer that pharmacopeia means:

- A. skin lotions and diet pills
- B. illegal drugs
- C. false optimism
- D. lies and distortion

Question 4: The tone of the passage can best be described as

- A. uplifting
- B. argumentative
- C. sarcastic
- D. ironic

Question 5: The author suggests that happiness will be difficult to define. Perhaps the best we can do is

- A. define two extremes and work to find a middle ground
- B. say what happiness is not
- C. look at how other cultures have defined the term
- D. rely on a good dictionary

Question 6: For Jonathan Swift, the idea of happiness was all of the following except:

- A. the felicity of being
- B. a hunting license
- C. a fool among knaves
- D. the possession of being well-deceived

Question 7: Ciardi suggests that the holy man’s idea of happiness may be

- A. taking on life-engaging difficulties
- B. needing nothing outside oneself
- C. happiness on the installment plan
- D. possession for its own sake

Question 8: One can conclude that Ciardi believes American commercialism is

- A. a creature of both Eastern and Western thought
- B. a heightening of our perceptions about life
- C. about perfect and therefore static happiness
- D. dedicated to making us deliberately unhappy

Question 9: Ciardi suggests that the Founding Fathers viewed happiness in terms of

- A. becoming
- B. learning
- C. possessing
- D. discovering

Question 10: The car dealers who advertised “You Auto Buy Now” were hoping

- A. that customers would believe in planned obsolescence
- B. that customers would believe in rapt contemplation
- C. that customers would believe in careful budgeting
- D. that customers would believe in the duty to want

Answers

1. B 2. C 3. A 4. D 5. A 6. B 7. B 8. D 9. A 10. D

Commentary

Questions 1 and 5 simply call for close reading. In Question 2, answers C and D are very close and you must decide which is best. Answer D refers to a thriving economy and indeed, the "happiness market" may help support the buying and selling of products and therefore will help stimulate the economy. But this passage operates on a more personal level. The paragraph that contains this section includes several "we, our, and you's." The best answer, C, points to the personal import of what advertisers are trying to do. In Question 3, it may help you to try to recognize at least part of "pharmacopoeia." "Pharma," for example, looks like "pharmacy," a place to buy medicines and other health-related products. The author links poetry to the front pages of a magazine and then points out that pharmacopoeia, found in the back pages, is where readers learn about harnesses, chin straps, salves, laxatives, tablets, hormones, and stockings.

Question 4 refers to the passage as a whole. Because the author is clearly critical of the "happiness market," you can eliminate answer A (uplifting). The passage is not completely straightforward (i.e., answer B, argumentative) because even though the author makes claims—"we are told it is our duty to want," we know that he means the opposite. That makes this passage ironic (D). Sarcasm is a snide, somewhat nasty form of irony and there's no evidence of that here.

Question 6 is fairly straightforward because three of the choices are listed by the reference to Swift. Questions 7, 9, and 10 simply require a close reading of the text. Unfortunately, all four choices might be true responses to Question 8. You must eliminate all but choice D because they are not discussed in the passage. Common sense is not always sufficient.