

Manufactured Happiness: The Cultural Construction of Fulfillment in Antebellum America

Abstract

The concept of happiness has long been a subject of philosophical, religious, and cultural exploration, often reflecting broader societal values and individual aspirations. This research examines how happiness was defined and experienced by women in Antebellum America, offering insight into the intersection of religious beliefs, societal expectations, and personal fulfillment. Primary sources from the North American Women’s Letters and Diaries database were analyzed to identify how these women articulated happiness in their own words. A qualitative approach was used to search for references to "happy" and "happiness," documenting significant quotes along with their historical context. The study focuses on sources from 1800 to 1860 to ensure historical specificity.

Findings suggest that women expressed happiness through three main themes: domesticity, religion, and, in some cases, independence. These themes were shaped by a hypercognized belief that happiness could only be found in religious devotion and domestic roles. This narrow understanding of happiness conditioned women to accept these roles as the ultimate fulfillment, limiting their exploration of other forms of happiness, such as independence. The study highlights how these rigid views of happiness influenced women's experiences, shedding light on the complexities of gender, faith, and autonomy in 19th-century America.

Methods

Primary Sources

This study analyzes personal diaries from the North American Women’s Diaries (1800–1863) to examine how women in Antebellum America conceptualized and experienced happiness. Entries where the term “happiness” or its variations appear are identified and analyzed. Significant quotes are selected based on their emotional depth, societal commentary, or personal reflection.

Data Collection

Source Compilation – Diary entries containing references to happiness are carefully reviewed.

Quote Selection – Excerpts that provide meaningful insights into women's perspectives are chosen.

Organization – Selected quotes are recorded in an Excel sheet, categorized by:

- Page number
- Year
- Diary title

Analytical Approach

- Timelines – Developed to track key events, recurring themes, and shifts in how happiness was understood over time.
- Qualitative Analysis – Used to categorize emerging themes, focusing on happiness within the social, religious, and gendered contexts of Antebellum America.



“We pass our lives in searching after happiness, and how many die without having found it!”

- Mary Hassal in a Letter to Aaron Burr, 1802

Preliminary Results

Three Central Spheres of Happiness

- Domesticity, Religion, and Autonomy (Outlier Perspective)

Hypercognitivity of Happiness

- Happiness was intensely culturally conditioned and confined to these prescribed spheres. It was not seen as individual or multifaceted but instead rigidly defined by societal norms.
- Women were conditioned to believe that true happiness was found only in religion, domesticity, or societal expectations of womanhood.

Exclusion of Alternative Happiness

- Intellectual pursuits or other forms of joy outside traditional roles were dismissed or undervalued. Deviation from these norms was perceived as incompatible with true happiness. The rigid definition of happiness reinforced societal roles, discouraging women from questioning or seeking alternatives.

Impact on Autonomy

- Traditional ideals created barriers to alternative understandings of happiness.
- Many women did not pursue independence or suffrage because they were deeply conditioned to equate happiness with their prescribed roles.
- The dominant cultural narrative restricted personal freedom, maintaining a cycle of limited autonomy in defining fulfillment.

Conclusion

This study finds that women in Antebellum America largely defined happiness through domesticity, religion, and, to a lesser extent, independence. The strong association between happiness and these roles reflects how societal and religious norms shaped women's perceptions of fulfillment. By linking happiness to religious devotion and domestic duties, cultural narratives limited alternative paths to self-fulfillment, such as intellectual pursuits or political engagement. While some outliers found happiness in independence or early suffrage ideals, these views remained marginal.

These findings reveal how rigid societal structures shaped women’s aspirations within faith and gender roles. The study deepens understanding of happiness in Mormon women's lived experiences, highlighting the intersection of religion, gender, and societal expectations in 19th-century America. Future research could explore post-Civil War shifts or compare Antebellum women’s experiences across different religious or social groups to examine how historical views of happiness continue to shape gender expectations today.

References

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