

# Money and happiness: a philosophical view through works of literature



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People do love money. Wealth, in the eyes of the great majority, is the most direct and understandable measure of success. As success in life appears to most, it is closely related to one's feeling of happiness; the common tendency is to measure happiness in terms of financial success. But is it justified? Does money really bring happiness? Although everyone may have their own point of view, this essay will make an attempt to look at this subject as it is developed in the works of literature. While it may not give a clear answer, artistic interpretation provides a great opportunity for investigation and conclusions on the subject. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace* both approach the subject from a different angle. Another angle can be seen in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Some people love money because they do not have it. In Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace*, Mathilde " had no dresses, no jewels, nothing. And she loved nothing but that, " she felt made for that" (de Maupassant 130). The craving for money, or at least for the appearance of its possession, led Mathilde to borrow an expensive necklace from a wealthy friend to show it at the ball given by the Minister of Public Instruction. She was a great success and became the lady of the evening in her fancy dress and necklace, but there was a price she had to pay. Because Mathilde had lost the necklace, she had to replace it, at the cost that brought her family's budget to ruin. It took years of hard work for Mathilde and her husband to finally be able to repay the debts: " She came to know what heavy housework meant and the odious cares of the kitchen. She washed the dishes, using her rosy nails on the greasy pots and pans. She washed the dirty linen, the shirts, and the dishcloths, which she dried upon line; she carried the slops down the street every morning, and carried up the water,

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stopping for breath at every landing. And, dressed like the woman of the people, she went to the fruiter, the grocer, the butcher, her basket on her arm, bargained, insulted, defending her miserable money sou by sou. Each month they had to meet some notes, renew others, obtain more time" (de Maupassant 134). However, just as the debts were repaid, she met Mme Forestier who lent her the necklace and found out that it was actually nothing but paste, worth significantly less than the one purchased as a replacement. Readers are left wondering how does Mathilde feel about the money now? Is she happy? Mathilde had paid the price. Her life had changed forever when, at the moment of weakness and driven by vanity, she borrowed something more valuable (or at least something she thought to be more valuable) than what her own budget could ever allow. Mathilde was willing to take the risk, and when the worst happened, she was honorable enough to face the consequences. But was it really necessary? What good could it possibly do to her and to her family to make a show of herself for once in front of people she would most likely never see again in her life? Struggling to appear more than she really was, Mathilde had tried to gain recognition she felt she deserved, but did not have. Yet the illusion of wealth is not the wealth itself, and hardly worth sacrifices. For Mathilde, ten years of hard work and the loss of her youth was the price for a moment of enjoyment in front of a crowd of strangers. Perhaps her true happiness could have been found much closer - in her family, or her daily life. Readers can only hope she was able to find it in the end. Money played a very different role for Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Perceived by many, including her own husband, as a "spendthrift", Nora, the main character of the play, needed money to pay the debt she made to save her husband's life. She did

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not seem to need money to be happy, but she needed it to reestablish herself in her own eyes, to gain confidence in life. And that, of course, would be happiness for her. She was hoping to let her husband know of her sacrifice one day, as Nora confesses to her former friend, Kristine: "... some day, perhaps... in many years time, when I'm no longer as pretty as I am now... Then it might be a good thing to have something in reserve" (Ibsen 821). But the situation takes a different turn- when blackmailed by the person who loaned Nora money leads to a painful resolution, Nora was deeply hurt by her husband's reaction; she feels she has no other choice but to leave, telling him: " What I mean is: I passed out of Daddy's hands into yours. You arranged everything to your tastes, and I acquired the same tastes. Or I pretended to... I don't really know... I think it was a bit of both, sometimes one thing and sometimes the other. When I look back, it seems to me I have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by doing tricks for you, Torvald. But that's the way you wanted it. You and Daddy did me a great wrong. It's your fault that I've never made anything of my life" (Ibsen 858). Though it was a revolutionary solution for its time, it may in the end bring Nora true happiness, happiness of liberation from the lies and deceit, and happiness away from pretense and masquerade of a long-dead marriage. Even her husband's new job with it promising a wealthy and careless life, is no substitute for freedom. Nora makes her choice without hesitation, for her money cannot buy happiness. The play ends with the heavy sound of her slamming the door. But the lure of money is a very powerful one. Sometimes, it can lead to dreadful deeds, as it is the case in Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous novel, Crime and Punishment. The hero of the novel, Raskolnikov, decides to break out of poverty and desperation in one <https://assignbuster.com/money-and-happiness-a-philosophical-view-through-works-of-literature/>

stroke, by killing an old pawnbroker woman. He executes his idea, but the crime does not pay - not literally, as he is only able to find a meager amount of money, and in the words of Dostoevsky himself as quoted by Joseph Frank in his introduction to A Bantam Classic edition of the novel, " the insoluble problems confront the murderer, unsuspected and unexpected feelings torment his heart" (ix). Brought to the brink of insanity and unable to leave with the crime, Raskolnikov confesses to the murder, first to Sonya, his lady friend, then to the authorities. He is imprisoned in Siberia; being spared a death sentence for his confession. For a short while Raskolnikov remains just as proud and as alienated from humanity, but eventually he realizes that he truly loves Sonya and becomes remorseful of his crime. It seems that in the end it was love that made him happy, not money. Realization of happiness came to both Raskolnikov and Sonya suddenly; here is how it was revealed in the final scene of the book: " How it happened he did not know. But all at once something seemed to seize him and fling him at her feet. He wept and threw his arms round her knees. For the first instant she was terribly frightened and she turned pale. She jumped up and looked at him trembling. But at the same moment she understood, and a light of infinite happiness came into her eyes. She knew and had no doubt that he loved her beyond everything and that at last the moment had come" (Dostoevsky 504).

Neither in de Maupassant's *The Necklace*, nor in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, did money bring happiness to people. Even less can it be said about Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Yet is it fair to say that its presence in human life completely destructive? Of course it would not be true. However, it is not money itself that make people happy or sad; it is people's attitude towards it, and their attitude towards life itself. It wasn't the lack of money

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that troubled Mathilde, Nora, or Raskolnikov, it is the lack of recognition and the lack of substance in their lives. True happiness is not in financial wealth, it is inside a human heart. Everyone can find it; people just have to know how to look.