# The Character of a Happy Life

Sir Henry Wotton

How happy is he born and taught

That serveth not another's will;

Whose armour is his honest thought,

And simple truth his utmost skill!

Whose passions not his masters are;

Whose soul is still prepared for death,

United unto the world by care

Of public fame of private breath;

Who envies none that chance doth raise,

Nor vice; who never understood

How deepest wounds are given by praise;

Nor rules of state, but rules of good;

Who hath his life from rumours freed;

Whose conscience is his strong retreat;

Whose state can neither flatterers feed,

Nor ruin make oppressors great;

Who god doth late and early pray

More of His grace than gifts to lend;

And entertains the harmless day

With a religious book or friend;

This man is freed from servile bands

Of hope to rise or fear to fail:

Lord of himself, though not of lamb,

And having nothing, yet hath all

## Words Meanings

Armour - steal covering for the body

Envy - feeling of disappointment at another's success

Humour - having or showing a sense of amusement

Conscience - one's inner sense of right and wrong

Flatterer - one who flatters

Oppressor - cruel person

Servile - slave like

## Summary

The poet “Henry Wotton” expresses his understanding of a man who is happy with his life. He is of the view that such man has born happy and has been taught to be happy in every situation. He faces the problems of life happily and confidently. He serves his own will. In addition, his will is always to serve others. Whatever he wants to do, he does it resolutely. He does not need any armour to fight for truth. His only armour is his honest thoughts. He is skilled in speaking the truth.

In the next stanza, the poet says that a happy man is the master of his desires and passions. He has a control over his desires and longings. He is not afraid of death, so he is always prepared to face it. The poet says that the life of a happy man is free from every tension and anxiety. He lives in the world of reality instead of fantasy. He does not get flattered with anything. Nothing attracts him madly accept good deeds.

The poet is of the view that a happy man does not beg to anyone for the things he needs. He keeps patience upon his desires and needs. He only prays to God for these things. He has a strong faith in God. He does not expect gifts from his God in return for the services he provides to His creature; instead, he just expects His mercy and His favours.

In the last stanza, the poet says that the happy man is not bound of anything or he is not tied with anything. He is free to do whatever he wants to do. He does not work to raise his status or for fear of a decrease in his status. He is free from such things. He is the master of himself. He does not own lands and properties. He only owns himself and even having nothing in his ownership, he has everything with him. He is the richest man on the earth because he is happy.

## Theme

Happy is a person who is born and educated, and does not become a slave of others. His strength is his honest thought and remains truthful in his conduct and behaviour.

## Reference to Context

**Introduction**

The lines given for explanation are an extract from the poem, The Character of a Happy Life written by Sir Henry Wotton. In this moralizing piece of writing, the poet points to the sterling qualities of head and heart needed in a person to lead a life of contentment and bliss. Such a person should enjoy full freedom and should never be dictated by others. He should remain steadfast and firm on the path of honesty. Truthfulness should be his most prominent trait. He should exercise complete control over his passion and should never be swept away by his emotions. He should be brave enough to face all the challenges in life and should have the courage to encounter death any moment. He should believe in simplicity and keep away from the evils of jealousy and flattery. The accumulation of wealth and the acquisition of worldly name and fame should never be his goal in life. He should be pious and God-fearing and pass his time in healthy activities. Such a person may not be playing in riches but he is gifted with all the noble qualities required by a person to lead a contented life.

**Lines**

HOW HAPPY IS HE BORN OR TAUGHT  
THAT SERVETH NOT ANOTHER’S WILL:  
WHOSE ARMOUR IS HIS HONEST THOUGHT  
AND SIMPLE TRUTH HIS UTMOST SKILL!

***Explanation***

In the lines given for elucidation, the poet is referring to three outstanding characteristics of a person willing to pass a happy, contented life. Such a person should be independent in all his actions. He should never be a slave to the will of others. His honest and humble thoughts prove to be his best protective device and truthfulness is his most outstanding and remarkable feature.

**Lines**

WHOSE PASSIONS NOT HIS MASTERS ARE,  
WHOSE SOUL IS STILL PREPARED FOR DEATH,  
UNTIED UTO THE WORLD BY CARE  
OF PUBLIC FAME, OR PRIVATE BREATH;

***Explanation***

The lines given for explanation bring out some prominent qualities of a person who wishes to life a cheerful, satisfied life. He should have full control over his feelings and should never be swayed by his emotions. He should not be afraid of death and should be bold enough to encounter all the difficulties in life. He should follow the path of simplicity and sobriety. He should not care for the individual and collective opinion form about him. He should never run after earthly name and fame.

**Lines**

WHO ENVIES NONE THAT CHANCE DOTH RAISE,  
NOR VICE; WHO NEVER UNDERSTOOD  
HOW DEEPEST WOUNDS ARE GIVEN BY PRAISE;  
NOR RULES OF STATE, BUT RULES OF GOOD;

***Explanation***

In these lines, the poet is referring to the qualities needed in a person desirous of leading a simple, innocent life. Such a person never fall a victim to the green-eyed monster by looking at others who acquire wealth and reputation. He never gets involved in any kind of evil of sight, speech or hearing. He is not interested in politics and government and is simply aware of the golden principles of a life without ostentation. He realizes that flattery is harmful for both who is flattered and the one who is over-praising. Thus, he keeps away from false praise at all cost.

**Lines**

WHO HATH HIS LIFE FROM RUMOURS FREED;  
WHOSE CONSCIENCE IS HIS STRONG RETREAT;  
WHOSE STATE CAN NEITHER FLATTERERS FEED,  
NOR RUIN MAKE OPPRESSORS GREAT;

***Explanation***

In the lines given for explanation, the poet believes that a person who wants to live a simple, contented life keeps his life free from rumours by never trying to become a public figure. Such a person always depends upon his conscience and acts according to it. He is not so affluent that people may flatter him and take undue advantage of his wealthy state. Such flatterers often fill their own coffers but when their benefactors are ruined and deprived of their wealth, they accuse them and find all kinds of faults in them.

**Lines**

WHO GOD DOTH LATE AND EARLY PRAY  
MORE OF HIS GRACE THAN GIFTS TO LEND;  
AND ENTERTAINS THE HARMLESS DAY  
WITH A RELIGIOUS BOOK OR FRIEND

***Explanation***

The lines given for elucidation points to one of the salient features of the character of a person wishing to live a happy life. Such a person is religious-minded, morally sound, pious and God-fearing. He prays to Almighty God whenever it is possible. He asks God for his benevolence and blessings and not for worldly comfort and luxuries. He passes his time in healthy activities by reading good books or being in the company of good, virtuous friends.

**Lines**

THIS MAN IS FREED FROM SERVILE BANDS  
OF HOPE TO RISE, OR FEAR TO FALL:  
LORD OF HIMSELF, THOUGH NOT OF LANDS,  
AND HAVING NOTHING, YET HATH ALL.

***Explanation***

The lines given for explanation present briefly all the advantages of having sterling qualities of head and heart, so necessary to pass a life of joy and satisfaction. A person who is the master of his won will, follows the path of honesty, truthfulness, simplicity, piety and self-confidence, and is courageous enough to face all the challenges, can definitely lead a life of contentment. He is not bound by the chains of slavery, and has neither the hope of achieving loftier goals nor the fear of suffering a fall. He is not a feudal lord, possessing big estates but is lord of himself, having all the noble qualities. Thus, he is able to pass his life in ease, joy and comfort.