

Happily Ever After: A Novella Exploring the Choice between Marriage and Personal Freedom

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ABSTRACT

In this creative thesis, I would like to explore the tension between the human needs for love/belonging and the need for personal freedom. Employing William Glasser's Choice Theory (1998), this creative thesis portrays how societal pressures and personal histories constrain protagonists Lana and Owen, leading them to resolve their internal conflicts through conscious-intentional choices. The narrative specifically addresses why the protagonist's struggle to choose between marriage and personal freedom rooted in societal expectations and past trauma, how their views of freedom are influenced by marriage as threat to independence and a cage of responsibility, and how they navigate their choices through self-reflection, trust-building, and redefining marriage as a partnership balancing love and autonomy. Ultimately, the story demonstrates that happiness emerges from aligning personal values with relationships through open communication and deliberate decision-making. The thesis emphasizes self-awareness and intentionality in resolving internal conflicts.

Keywords: conscious-intentional choices, marriage, personal freedom, romance, self awareness

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in today's world is often seen by young adults as something that restricts their personal freedom. Research shows that the journey to becoming an adult has changed significantly for young people today. Social and economic shifts mean the old ideal of falling in love, getting married, and having children right away is now often out of reach or simply less appealing (Furstenberg et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2011). Because of the demands of today's economy, reaching adulthood takes longer than it used to. This process is also less predictable and more personal, varying greatly from one individual to another (Furstenberg et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2011). While most young Americans still plan to get married and have children someday (Settersten, 2011), they typically do these things at older ages. Importantly, these milestones often come only after experiencing other serious relationships, which may begin and end (Arnett, 2015; Cherlin, 2010; Furstenberg, 2010). In fact, the number of relationships young adults have, the kinds of relationships they form, when they form them, and the order in which key events happen have all become much more varied and less fixed by social rules, mirroring the overall less predictable path of modern life (Arnett, 2015; Cherlin, 2010; Furstenberg, 2010; George, 1993; Rindfuss, 1991).

This conflict between what marriage expects and what individuals want for themselves is the main focus of my creative thesis. While views on marriage differ across cultures, research confirms that young adults in fast-changing societies hold especially diverse opinions about it (Härkönen, et al., 2023). For example, while eighty five percent of young Americans plan to marry someday, nearly sixty percent doubt whether marriage can truly lead to lasting happiness (Taylor, 2010). This mixed feeling comes from marriage's complicated role that offers connection but can also feel like it holds people back (Cherlin, 2010).

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Deciding whether to marry is a major life choice where personal desires often clash with outside pressures, like family or society (Glasser, 1998). Society often treats marriage as a necessary life step, but this idea fights against modern values of self-direction and independence (Amato & Booth, 1991). As Stephanie Coontz (2013) explains, marriage has changed. It used to be mainly a practical partnership, but now people expect it to meet deep emotional needs. This change creates a built-in problem between wanting closeness(commitment) and wanting independence(freedom). Psychologist William Glasser's Choice Theory (1998) helps explain this conflict. He identified five basic human needs: safety, love and belonging, personal power, freedom, and enjoyment. Marriage usually meets the need for love and belonging but can threaten the equally strong need for personal freedom (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This inner conflict is especially tough for people feeling pushed to marry. When forced to choose between these competing needs, people often feel anxious, guilty, or doubtful, which can harm relationships (Orth & Wieland, 2006). My thesis shows how facing these conflicts helps people make conscious choices that match their values, leading to healthier relationships (Glasser, 1998).

Furthermore, while the tension between marriage and freedom affects many, this work focuses specifically on young adults for three key reasons backed by research. First, high divorce rates (even if slowly declining) mean most young adults have seen marriages fail in their families or social circles (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Second, women and men often see things differently: women consistently hold more progressive views, with seventy three percent seeing single parenting as just as effective as married parenting (Parker & Stepler, 2021). Third, men express greater skepticism about marriage, frequently worrying that it will cost them personal freedom (Medved, 2011). These patterns reflect bigger shifts in family life documented by sociologists (Cherlin, 2010; Coontz, 2013).

To explore these psychological themes, I chose the novella form. A novella is a story between 20,000 and 50,000 words that focuses deeply on characters and emotions rather than complicated side stories (Alupoaicei, 2023). This shorter length works well for examining personal struggles, as this is easier for readers to engage with while still having strong emotional impact (Green & Jenkins, 2020). Being longer than a short story but shorter than a novel, the novella is very readable and gives enough space to explore complex, morally grey situations (Lundén, 2005). As Lunden notes, novellas create a "lingering emotional resonance through concentrated character studies" (p. 28) "making this form perfect for a psychologically rich story that stays with readers".

The romance genre is the best fit for this exploration. Known for its emotional depth, character growth, and hopeful endings (Wainger, 2004), romance naturally connects with themes of love, identity, and personal development. Its focus on how relationships are built and how conflicts are resolved allows for a genuine look at how people balance competing needs like love and freedom (Romance Writers of America, 2017). The genre's emotional honesty lets readers safely explore love's complexities while offering hopeful insights about human connection (Nicholls & Keyes, 2025).

My creative work centers on Lana, a lawyer pressured to put marriage before her career, and Owen, a freelance artist scarred by his parents' failed marriage. Their journey shows how making thoughtful, intentional choices can balance the need for love and belonging with the need for personal freedom, demonstrating that fulfillment comes not from avoiding commitment, but from shaping it to fit your own life.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The novella focuses on how making choices, particularly the conscious-intentional choices, can navigate the struggle between marriage and personal freedom. Through this lens, the story will provide an illustration of how choices can impact psychological state and way of life. Through the story, awareness will be spread about the importance of making conscious-intentional choices to prevent the negative impacts of unresolved internal conflict about love/belonging and freedom among adults.

Plot

The story follows Lana, a headstrong and ambitious lawyer, and Owen, a freelance artist who values his carefree and spontaneous lifestyle, as their paths cross at The Ever-After Project, a luxury community for those who choose independence over traditional relationships. Lana, raised in a family that values marriage and stability, struggles to reconcile societal expectations with her desire for personal and professional freedom. Owen, on the other hand, faces a different kind of dilemma: while he longs for emotional connection, the idea of marriage brings with it the weight of financial stability, fixed jobs, and a loss of spontaneity. Their initial connection begins with lighthearted banter but deepens as they discover shared dreams and vulnerabilities, setting the stage for a complex and evolving relationship.

For the rising action, as their feelings for each other grow, both Lana and Owen face choices that threaten their budding relationship. Lana is torn between her skepticism about love's role in her independent life and the undeniable pull of her emotions for Owen. Her struggle reflects the tension between her need for freedom (personal and professional independence) and her desire for love/belonging (a meaningful romantic connection). Similarly, Owen wrestles with his fear of commitment, fearing that settling down will compromise the carefree lifestyle he cherishes. His conflict arises from the competing needs for freedom (artistic independence) and love/belonging (a deep, committed relationship). These internal struggles are central to the narrative, highlighting the challenges of balancing personal aspirations with emotional vulnerability.

The climax reaches its peak when Lana and Owen must choose between continuing with The Ever-After Project's vision of independence or taking a leap of faith toward building a life together. Lana expresses her struggle to reconcile her ambition with her feelings for Owen, while he admits that his fear of commitment stems from a desire to protect his creative spirit. During this moment, they must decide whether to continue pursuing The Ever-After Project's vision of independence or confront their fears and acknowledge that love and ambition can coexist. By choosing to embrace both love and independence, they demonstrate that fulfillment comes from making conscious, fulfilling choices that align with their values and aspirations.

Following their heartfelt conversation, in the falling action Lana and Owen begin to navigate their relationship with a new perspective and understanding. They discover and understand the idea that fulfillment comes from making conscious, intentional choices that align with their values and aspirations. These turning points allow them to explore the balance between love and freedom, leading to a deeper connection.

The story concludes with Lana and Owen embracing a balanced future, where they commit to each other without sacrificing their dreams. This resolution reflects the novella's central theme: happiness is not about choosing between love and freedom but about making

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intentional choices that honor both. Through Lana and Owen's journey, the narrative offers a hopeful perspective on the transformative power of conscious decision-making, illustrating how understanding and addressing one's needs can lead to emotional well-being and harmonious relationships.

Characters

Main Characters

- **Lana Christy Tan**
Age: 27
Nationality: Indonesian

Lana is an only child with long dark-black hair, now working as a head lawyer with a perfect winning record since her debut in her career. Lana's assertive and strategic nature drives her ambition, but this often clashes with her emotional side, particularly regarding her skepticism about marriage and her desire for authenticity in love. Her internal conflict arises from the tension between her need for freedom (professional independence) and her desire for love/belonging (a meaningful romantic connection), Lana's personal freedom is further complicated by societal expectations, as she feels pressured to conform to traditional norms of marriage while yearning to maintain her independence and career success. This tension drives her journey as she dives deeper to the complexities of love and personal freedom, ultimately learning to make conscious, intentional choices that align with her values and aspirations. Through her evolving relationship with Owen, Lana discovers that fulfillment comes not from choosing between love and independence but from finding a way to embrace both.

- **Michael Owen Sunarkho**
Age: 25
Nationality: Indonesian

Owen is the third-born in a large family, characterized by his warm and charismatic presence that draws people in. In romantic relationships, Owen is curious and playful, valuing engaging conversations and intellectual stimulation. However, his internal conflict stems from his fear of the responsibilities that come with commitment. While he longs for emotional connection, the idea of marriage brings with it the weight of financial stability, fixed jobs, and a loss of spontaneity—elements that threaten the carefree lifestyle he cherishes. This creates a struggle between his need for freedom (artistic independence and spontaneity) and his desire for love/belonging (a deep, committed relationship). This tension drives his personal growth and shapes his evolving relationship with Lana, as he learns to navigate the balance between love and independence through conscious, intentional choices.

Supporting Characters:

- **Alexander Dharmawan**
Age: 28
Nationality: Indonesian

Alex is a dedicated plastic surgeon with meticulous attention to detail and a deep sense of responsibility. Alex is one of Lana's most reliable acquaintances and the person who first introduced her to the Ever After Project, recognizing how it could provide her with a new perspective on marriage and commitment. His role in Lana's journey is not just that of a friend but also a catalyst—his subtle guidance nudges her toward introspection and growth, making

him an integral part of her evolving perspective on relationships.

- **Yemima**

Nationality: Indonesian

Age: 24

Mima is a vibrant and charismatic fashion and beauty content creator known for her eclectic style and magnetic personality. She has been an influential and constant presence in Owen's life, not just as his closest confidante but also as the one who has always pushed him toward his artistic potential. Mima played a pivotal role in shaping Owen's career path, introducing him to the world of beauty and freelance artistry. She was the first to see his potential, encouraging his creativity and giving him the confidence to pursue his passion.

- **Henny Wijaya**

Age: 38

Nationality: Indonesian

Henny is the dynamic founder of The Ever-After Project, a luxurious initiative designed for those who wish to embrace single hood. Fiercely against marriage, she believes it restricts women's freedom and independence. Henny has a critical eye and is not afraid to voice her opinions; she often critiques those around her, especially when she sees someone falling in love. Her tendency to judge stems from a deep-seated belief that love can distract from personal goals and ambitions. While she may come off as harsh or unyielding, Henny's motivations are rooted in her desire to empower others to embrace their individuality. However, her strong-willed nature is complicated by her narcissistic personality traits, which sometimes make it difficult for her to empathize with those who have different perspectives on love and relationships.

- **Ragus Suntoro**

Age: 57

Nationality: Indonesian

Ragus is the owner of "Sugar," a cozy café that serves as a sanctuary for both Owen and Lana, offering them comfort, guidance, and a sense of belonging. As Owen's uncle, Ragus has played a pivotal fatherly role in his life, stepping in as a mentor when Owen needed stability and direction. To both Lana and Owen, Ragus is more than just family or a friend—he is their safe space, their voice of reason, and the quiet strength that keeps them grounded in moments of doubt. His empathy and unwavering support make him an irreplaceable presence in their lives.

Conflicts

There are two primary conflicts in my creative work: man-against-self and man-against-man. The man-against-self conflict is the most prominent, as it showcases the internal struggles of the main characters, Lana and Owen. According to Overall & McNulty (2017), "Some protagonists are mostly dealing with internal struggles; the character may be dealing with fear, a traumatic history, an addiction, or a propensity to keep picking the wrong partners; it can add significant complexity to a story." This type of conflict is central to my narrative, as it highlights the psychological and emotional challenges faced by Lana and Owen as they navigate their evolving relationship and the choices they must make. The man-against-man conflict also plays a crucial role, extending beyond their interpersonal tensions to include significant clashes with their parents. As Overall & McNulty (2017) explains, "When two people or more are at odds with each other, there may not be a clear right or wrong, or both sides may think they are right." (p. 2). Lana's conflict manifests in recurring confrontations with her traditional parents, who pressure her to prioritize marriage over her career, viewing her

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independence as a rejection of family values. Similarly, Owen clashes with his parents over their failed marriage and his rejection of conventional paths, symbolizing his fear of inherited relational failure. While Lana and Owen struggle because they want different things from love and freedom. Their arguments with family turn these struggles into bigger problems. These arguments make their personal struggle stronger and clearer. By facing their parents' expectations and society's pressures, Lana and Owen have to deal with their own fears and doubts. This process ultimately shapes their journey towards making thoughtful decisions about commitment and personal freedom.

CONCLUSION

This creative thesis explores the tension between marriage and personal freedom. Using William Glasser's Choice Theory as a framework, the novella examines how this choice creates challenges for adults. It shows how societal views of marriage can make people feel trapped by long-term commitments and expectations. Many adults see marriage as giving up freedom for shared responsibilities and stability, leading to hesitation or rejection. Some fear losing control over their life, career, or choices, while others view marriage as offering emotional security alongside partnership.

I learned that research-supported creative writing is powerful yet demanding, and balancing realism with imagination was highly rewarding. I want to explore the themes of marriage and personal freedom even more deeply, making the conflicts more vivid and the choices more meaningful. My goal is to add impactful events and insights that can really resonate with adult readers who might be facing similar struggles in their own lives. When the story is fully polished, I plan to publish it on an online reading platform like Wattpad.

I strongly suggest that researchers exploring complex personal themes like marriage and freedom embrace challenging topics meaningfully. I recommend moving beyond strong personal views by conducting thorough research that examines diverse perspectives; this builds stronger arguments and deeper understanding. I also suggest actively seeking structured feedback from peers, mentors, or writing communities, as this reveals blind spots and significantly enriches the narrative. I recommend grounding creative analysis in varied sources, including academic literature, documentaries, personal narratives, and discussions on diverse digital platforms. Finally, I recommend approaching creative research as a collaborative process. Engaging in dialogue with others and being open to questioning can greatly enhance the relevance and impact of work on sensitive contemporary issues.

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