

‘The Happy Man’

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ | winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature.

The following is excerpted from the short story, "The Happy Man," by Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature. When he woke up, he found himself happy. That was most strange compared with his habitual state of mind in the early morning. For he usually got up with a terrible headache from working late hours in his office at the newspaper, or with a hangover from too much eating and drinking at some wild party. The worries of the day before and the problems of the present day usually assailed him then, so that he dragged himself out of bed with great difficulty, trying to muster all his energy and face the troubles of life. But today he was unquestionably happy, overflowing with happiness. The feeling was so clear and intense that it imposed itself on his mind and senses. Yes, he was happy. If this was not happiness, what was it then? He felt all his organs were functioning in perfect harmony with each other and with the whole world around him. Inside him there was infinite energy and a tremendous capacity to achieve anything with great skill and confidence. And his heart was brimming with love for people, animals and things, with an overwhelming feeling of optimism, as if he had finally defeated fear, anxiety, sickness and death. Above all, there was that incomprehensible sensation which penetrated his body and soul, playing a delightful tune of joy, contentment and peace.

Intoxicated with this ecstasy, he savored it slowly and with a deep sense of wonder about its mysterious source. There was nothing in his past to explain it or in his future to justify it. How did it come? How long would it last? Oh no, this must be just a fleeting mood which could never be permanent. For if it lasted forever, man would become an angel and reach the world beyond. Let him enjoy it now, live with it, treasure it, before it became a vague memory in the distant horizon.

He ate his breakfast with great appetite, looking from time to time with a bright, smiling face at Am Beshir who was serving the food. The old man became increasingly surprised and anxious, because his master did not normally look in his direction except to give orders or ask questions. Then he said to him:

"Tell me, Am Beshir, am I a happy man?"

The man was embarrassed, since the master was for the first time addressing him as a companion or friend. After moments of uneasy silence, he replied:

"My master is happy with God's gifts and blessings."

"Do you mean that I must be happy with my excellent position, beautiful apartment and good health? Is this what you mean? But do you really think I am a happy man?"

"My master exerts himself beyond human endurance and often gets angry in heated discussions with other people."

He interrupted him with a loud laugh and asked:

"What about you? Don't you have any worries?"

"Of course. Nobody lives without worries."

"Do you mean that perfect happiness is impossible?"

"Well, this is the nature of life." How could Beshir, or anybody else, imagine his wonderful state of happiness? It was something strange and unique, as if it were his own private secret of all people on Earth.

In the conference room at the newspaper, he saw his greatest rival in this world turning the pages of a magazine. The man heard his footsteps but did not raise his eyes. No doubt he somehow glanced quickly but tried to ignore him for his own peace of mind. In regular meetings they often disagreed violently and exchanged the harshest words until they were on the verge of fighting. And only last week he was shamefully defeated by his rival in the union elections, which was a terrible blow to his pride that filled him with bitterness and darkened his vision. But here he was now approaching his enemy with a pure and carefree heart, intoxicated with that wonderful happiness, overflowing with tolerance and forgiveness, as if he were another man who conveyed the promise of a new friendship. And without feeling awkward, he smilingly greeted him. Taken by surprise, the man raised his eyes in wonder and for moments remained silent until he could collect himself and answer the greeting briefly, as if he did not believe his eyes and ears. He sat close to him, saying:

"The weather is gorgeous today."

"Oh yes."

"It's the kind of weather that fills the heart with deep happiness." The man looked at him cautiously and intently, then mumbled:

"I am glad that you're happy."

He said laughingly:

"It's happiness beyond comprehension."

The other replied hesitantly:

"I hope that I will not spoil your mood at the meeting of the editorial board today."

"Oh, never. My opinion is well known to everybody. But I don't mind if the members accept your view."

"You have changed considerably overnight."

"In fact, I am happy beyond comprehension."

"I bet your son has changed his mind about staying in Canada for good."

He chuckled and said:

"No, my friend, he has not changed his decision."

"But that was your greatest source of grief."

Oh, yes. I have pleaded with him again and again to come back in order to relieve my loneliness and serve his country. But he told me that he intended to start an engineering business with a Canadian partner, and even invited me to join him there. Let him live where he likes. But here I am--as you see--happy, unbelievably happy."

"This is unique courage on your part."

"I don't know what it is, but I am happy in the full sense of the word."

Yes, this was happiness, rich and touchable, firm like absolute power, free as the air, violent as a flame, fascinating as the scent of flowers. Yet this unnatural feeling could not last forever.

The other man, attracted by his friendliness, said amicably:

"In fact, I always regarded you as a man with a violent nature that caused you a good deal of suffering."

"Really?"

"You don't know the meaning of compromise. You live intensely with your nerves, with your whole being, fighting fiercely as if any problem were a matter of life or death."

He accepted this criticism tolerantly, as though it were a little wave in his infinite ocean of happiness, and with a bright smile on his face, asked:

"Then, you believe that there should be some balance in my approach to events?"

"Certainly. Take, for example, our discussion yesterday about racism. We share the same opinion, and the issue is worthy of enthusiasm to the point of anger. But what kind of anger? It should, in a sense, be intellectual, abstract anger. Not the anger that would fray the nerves, cause indigestion and raise blood pressure. Right?"

"That is very clear to me now."

His heart would not release a single drop of its joys. Racism, Vietnam, Angola, Palestine . . . no problem could invade the fortress of happiness which surrounded his heart. Whenever he remembered a problem, his heart chuckled joyfully. It was, so to speak, a gigantic happiness, indifferent to any misery, always smiling in the face of suffering. He wished to laugh, to dance, to sing, spreading his infinite mirth over problems of the world.

Suddenly he felt that the office was too small for him; he had no desire to work. The mere thought of his daily work was treated with absolute indifference and contempt, and he failed completely to bring his mind down from the heaven of bliss. How could he write about the trolley bus which sank in the Nile, when he was intoxicated with all this terrifying happiness? Yes, it was terrifying, coming as it did from nowhere, violent to the point of exhaustion and paralyzing his will. Besides, it was now midday and the feeling still possessed him

without any sign of diminishing at all. He left his papers blank on the desk and started pacing his room, laughing and snapping his fingers.

He had a moment of anxiety which did not sink deeply inside him, but floated as an abstract thought on the surface of the mind. It occurred to him to recall deliberately the tragedies of his life in order to test their effect on his present mood, hoping they might help him regain some equanimity or at least reassure him that this happiness might eventually fade away. He recreated in his memory, for example, the death of his wife with all its tragic circumstances. But the event seemed to him as a series of movements without meaning or effect, as if it happened to another woman, the wife of another man, in a remote age of ancient history. The recollection even had a pleasant effect on him so that he smiled and could not help laughing. The same thing happened when he remembered the first letter he received from his son, declaring his intention to emigrate to Canada. And when he started to review mentally the bloody tragedies of the world, his chuckles became so loud they might have been heard in the other offices or even in the street. Nothing could touch his happiness. The memories of grief floated softly like gentle waves touching the sands of the shore. Then he left his office and the whole building, without a note of apology for not attending the editorial meeting. After lunch, he went to bed for the usual nap, but felt that sleep was impossible. There was no sign of its approach in this bright, boisterous world of joy that kept him wide awake. He must have some rest and tranquility, some inertia, some numbness in his senses. But how? Finally he left his bed and started humming a tune while pacing his apartment back and forth. And he said to himself that if this state of mind and feeling lasted longer, he would become totally incapable of sleep or work or grief. It was time to go to the club, but he did not feel like meeting any of his friends. There was no sense in these endless talks about public affairs or private worries. And what would his friends think of him if they found him laughing at the most serious matters? No, he did not need anybody; he had no desire for conversation. It was essential for him to sit by himself or walk for miles to release some of this tremendous energy. He must think deeply of what happened to him. How did this fabulous happiness assault him? For how long could he carry this intolerable burden? Will this feeling deprive him forever of his work and friends, of his sleep and peace of mind? Should he yield to it and drift with the current? Or should he seek an outlet, through mental effort, strenuous work or professional advice?

He felt very lonely in the company of this overwhelming happiness, without a friend or guide to help him. Suddenly he remembered there was the office of a psychiatrist across the street. But he did not trust psychiatrists. Besides, he knew quite well that their treatment extended over long periods of time, so that they became almost constant companions of their patients. And he laughed when he remembered their method of free association to reveal the neuroses buried in the subconscious mind. While his feet were leading him to the doctor's office, he was still laughing, especially as he visualized the man listening to his strange complaint of happiness, when he usually listened to people complaining of hysteria, depression, anxiety or schizophrenia.

"To tell you the truth, doctor, I came to you because I am happy beyond comprehension."

And he looked at his face to see the effect of his words, but the doctor kept his calm. Hardly had he started to tell his story when the man stopped him with a gesture of his hand, and asked quietly:

"It is an overwhelming, strange, exhausting sort of happiness?"

He looked at him in amazement and was about to say something when the doctor resumed:

"It's happiness that would make you incapable of work, tired of friends and unable to sleep. And whenever you face any suffering you burst out laughing."

"You must be a mind-reader."

"Oh no, nothing of this sort, but I see similar cases at least once a week."

"Is it an epidemic?"

"I didn't say that. I don't even claim that I have been able, so far, to trace a single case to its original cause."

"But it's a disease?"

"All the cases are still under treatment."

"But you are convinced they are all abnormal?"

"Well, in our field this is a necessary hypothesis."

"Did you observe a sign of insanity or emotional disturbance in any of them?" he asked anxiously. And he pointed to his head in fear, but the doctor said with certainty:

"No. I assure you they are all sane in the proper sense of the word. But you will need two sessions every week. You shouldn't worry or grieve. . . ."

Worry, grief? He smiled and the smile widened on his face until he burst out laughing. Then his resistance collapsed completely and he could not control his tears.

"The Happy Man," by Naguib Mahfouz, from "Modern Egyptian Short Stories," translated by Saad el-Gabalawy, York Press 1977.

“The Happy Man”

Naguib Mahfouz

Instructions: Read the story and answer the following questions.

The first two are short answers (approximately one paragraph).

The final question is an essay question (approximately 500 words). This is a persuasive essay and should follow the “Five Paragraph” format (outline your argument in the introduction, provide three examples which support your argument, and then write a conclusion).

Short Answer Questions

1. How is the main character affected by his newly found happiness?

2. Why is it ironic that the man seeks medical treatment for his happiness?
