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Literary Analysis: *The Happy Man*

Imagine in a world so full of fear, stress, and anger that happiness feels like a disease. *The Happy Man* by Naguib Mahfouz describes a man that has been suddenly afflicted with happiness. The author uses a subject that everyone can relate to, happiness. Many have to struggle with the stress of earning a living, and feel sad about things in their life. The ideal human condition would be for people to be happy most of the time, with temporary moments of sadness, anger, and loneliness. Mahfouz uses direct and indirect characterization to advance the theme of the pursuit of happiness.

Direct characterization is found in the main character’s internal monologue. When then man woke up in the morning, he was feeling happy. He ponders what he is feeling, and compares it to his usual state of strain and contemplation. He would normally talk himself into facing the inconveniences and difficulties of the day. He describes his symptoms as, “feeling boundless power, imperishable energy, ability to achieve anything with confidence, precision and, obvious success” (Mahfouz 407-8). Isn’t this something people hope to achieve? However, the Happy Man already seemed to have reached the goal most people dream of, as “His heart was overflowing with love for people, animals, and things and with an all engulfing sense of optimism and joy. It was as if he were no longer troubled or bothered by fear, anxiety, sickness, death, argument, or the question of earning a living” (Mahfouz 408). His happiness seemed unreasonably, indescribably perfect. What was left to pursue in life?

The internal monologue continued as he stopped working and realized his state of happiness would affect his relationships. At first, he was afraid that his happy mood would be fleeting, so he chose to enjoy it. As the day progressed, he began to view his happiness as more problematic. Then he realized, “It was almost time for him to go to the club, but he did not feel like meeting any friends. What was the point of exchanging views on public affairs and private worries? What would they think if they found him laughing at every major problem? What would they say?” (Mahfouz 413). At this point in the story, the readers notice that the character’s thoughts and actions are those of someone who has an illness, rather than someone who is genuinely happy.

Direct characterization appears in the dialogue, showing a disconnect between the Happy Man’s feelings and his actual life. The servant states, “You get angry a lot…and have fierce arguments with your neighbors” (Mahfouz 409). The rival declares, “I always picture you as someone with a fierce and violent temperament which causes him a good deal of trouble and leads him to trouble other people” (Mahfouz 411). The internal medicine doctor states, “You’re a picture of health,” (Mahfouz 414). The nerve doctor declares the Happy Man’s nerves as “in enviable condition!” (Mahfouz 414). The gland specialist also congratulates him (Mahfouz 414). I like the way that Mahfouz reverses the role of happiness and unhappiness, and makes the reader wonder why there is a sudden difference in the character. What is he aiming for in life?

At the end of the story, the Happy Man resorts to seeing a psychiatrist. He is amazed that the doctor knows what he is feeling and describes his agony perfectly, as “An overwhelming, incredible, debilitating happiness” (Mahfouz 415). The irony is that the psychiatrist analyzes the character, acknowledges his happiness and insists on seeing him for sessions twice a week, and the man agrees.

The author Naghib Mahfouz once was stabbed in the neck for creating characters based on Mohammed and Moses in *Children of the Alley* (“Naghib Mahfouz”). His characters really have an impact! His novels (he wrote 45!) “were among the first to gain widespread acceptance in the Arabic-speaking world, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, and “In 1996 the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature was established to honour Arabic writers” (“Naghib Mahfouz”). Clearly, he is an author to study.

*The Happy Man* is creatively written and full of satire. It reflects how people get so caught up in day to day life, and focus on the negatives in life so much that happiness begins to feel abnormal. I wonder if people have a crisis like this when they finally reach what they have been pursuing.

Works Cited

Mahfouz, Naghib. “The Happy Man.” *Reading the World*, edited by Carol Francis and Julie A. Schumacher, 2nd ed., Perfection Learning, 2012.

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