How to Write Happy Stories: Michel Faber's "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" as a Refutation of Charles Baxter's Happiness Theory

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Abstract

Both writers and scholars frequently emphasize the difficulties of writing successful narratives that are expressive of happiness, but detailed and systematic inquiries into the problem are rare. An exception is Charles Baxter's essay "Regarding Happiness." It gives eloquent and clear answers to the questions of what makes it so hard to write happy stories that mean something, and how one can write such a story anyway. However, the propositions from "Regarding Happiness" can be challenged. Michel Faber's short story "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" can be read as an elaborate refutation of Baxter's theory, as it is an engaging 'happy' story that breaks almost every rule the essay put forward, and contradicts virtually all of its major claims. Showing that—contrary to Baxter—happiness can be communicated in fiction even when the happy character is unable to see or understand it, and that happiness does not need to be highlighted through a successfully completed activity or via contrast with pain, Faber's short story offers important amendments to Baxter's opus and thus makes a valuable contribution to the study of happiness and its relation to literature.

Keywords: Happiness; Fiction; Literature; Narrative; Charles Baxter; Michel Faber

When talking about fiction, writers and critics alike often address the issues of happiness and misfortune. The general consensus seems to be that it is pointless to write happy stories, as it is next to impossible to write happy stories that are meaningful, valuable, 'good.' Paul Watzlawick's (1983) statements on the topic are somewhat typical:

> Disaster, tragedy, catastrophe, crime, sin, madness, danger—that's the stuff of all great literary creations. Dante's *Inferno* is vastly more ingenious than his *Paradiso*; the same goes for Milton's *Paradise Regained*, which, when compared to *Paradise Lost*, is rather insipid; *Faust I* moves us to tears, *Faust II* to yawns.
> Let's not fool ourselves: What or where would we be without our unhappiness? (p. 13)

There are more examples than one can count of experts stating that problems, suffering, and tragedies make for better story material than happiness. Writer Robert McCrum (2013) feels unqualified to recommend recent "books expressive of happiness" (para. 2) to a friend because it's "not . . . a likely theme for the novelist" (McCrum, 2013, para. 4). Leslie Jamison (Jamison & Kirsch, 2014) says it is "more interesting to read about something being wrong than everything being right" (para. 5), and maintains that happiness "collapses characters into people who look just like everyone else, without the sharper contours of pathos to mark their edges and render them distinct" (Jamison & Kirsch, 2014, para. 5). And according to Adam Kirsch (Jamison & Kirsch, 2014), "modern European literature tells us with remarkable consistency [that happiness] is either an impossible dream or a contemptible illusion" (para. 14). Even comedic children's books "ultimately undermine the promise of happiness" and devote themselves to "exploring the unattainability of happiness" (Wayland, 2015, p. 87).

In fact, the 'happy-stories-are-no-good' lesson is already hammered home to students in high school and Literature 101 classes in college, via the plausible dictum that any plot needs a conflict [Jamison (Jamison & Kirsch, 2014) brings this up as well: "Happiness threatens the things that every writing workshop demands: suspense, conflict, desire" (para. 3)]. While the idea is important, reasonable, and ubiquitous, there are not many people that analyze it in detail and examine the relationship between (the nature of) narrative and happiness. In the theory-rich environment of literary studies, systematic happiness theories are hard to find. Arguably the most ambitious and convincing one that exists is by Charles Baxter, in his essay "Regarding Happiness," part of the 1997 collection *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction.* It is an elegant, complex and comprehensive piece which, as a partly personal and meandering essay by a practitioner of fiction, does not fully follow the structural or stylistic conventions of academic scholarship but nevertheless proposes an account that fully answers two crucial questions: why it is so difficult to write happy stories that are any good, and what authors need to do if they still want to write one. Thus, essentially Baxter offers the only testable theory I know of that introduces clear and well-argued-for criteria to determine if a story involving happiness can

work or not. For this reason, his text is a most valuable contribution that deserves scholarly attention.

However, I argue that Baxter's account is flawed, or at the very least needs amendments and modifications. A most peculiar 'happy' short story, Michel Faber's (2007) "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem", manages to be successful while violating many of Baxter's key principles—it almost looks as if Faber had written the story as a reply to the theory. After giving a detailed overview of Baxter's ideas, I will use Faber's story to show how facts that according to Baxter represent reasons for the difficulty of portraying happiness actually helped Faber to make his narrative work. Similarly, I will examine how for each of Baxter's rules for successful stories, Faber does practically the opposite. Thus, overall, an extended and improved picture of how communicating happiness is achievable in literature will emerge.

Although Baxter (1997/2008) affirms that he is dealing with the "unimaginably vast" problem of "what is the matter with happiness," he in fact turns it into two fairly concrete questions: The first he tackles, after some personal anecdotes of Baxter refusing to write happy poems and his students unsuccessfully looking for happy stories, is "why is it nearly impossible to portray happiness in extended dramatic narratives?" (p. 199). Two distinct reasons can be distilled from the following elaborations and musings. One grows out of the observation, important enough for Baxter to italicize it, that "*Happiness*, we might say, *usually has no consciousness of itself*" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 199). In other words, happy people do not know that they are happy, and certainly do not reflect on their happiness while they are in its thrall. If happiness, then, is an "emotion complete in its own magical circle" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 199), it follows that any attempt to genuinely capture it from the outside and after the fact, in writing or otherwise, must fail.

Baxter's (1997/2008) second reason is far more complex and gets much more space. At first, it seems to be merely about the fairly predictable and common insight that "reading about the happiness of others is often boring" (p. 199)—the same point the Watzlawick quote makes. It seems that Baxter thinks this is to some degree an aspect or consequence of the first reason, the magical circle: He implies happiness is boring because others watching happy people fail to see anything remarkable, and the happy people themselves don't feel the need to address their condition either (Baxter, 1997/2008, pp. 199-200). (As said above, Baxter doesn't divide his thoughts into distinct parts or points but presents one free-flowing meditation that often jumps and returns to previous ideas.) Baxter shows how, if everything is perfect, as it was for Adam in paradise, there are "no stories to tell" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 200); to be interesting, fiction needs conflict (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 201).

Yet, for Baxter (1997/2008), such happiness does not merely bore the readers, it *offends* them, or at least it should. This is because, as he points out, a

happy person must "forget, or not see, the misfortunes of others" (p. 201). Such ignorance of suffering becomes even more troubling if we consider that happiness, as Baxter suggests, does not only occur while others are unhappy but actually "*depends* on the unhappiness of others" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 201). He gives the example of a rich man getting rich at the expense of others and quotes Frank Bidart: "All life exists/at the expense of other life" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 202). The real world is a dark place, no happiness is innocent, and those who are happy are somewhat blind. The essayist's argument here serves partly as criticism of people clamoring for happy stories, those who criticize realistic narratives for being "depressing" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 202): "To complain about a tragic work of art is to be afraid or resentful of the pain of others" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 203). This means, in turn, that writing a happy story puts the storyteller in the position of the one who turns—willfully or naively ignorant—a blind eye to suffering (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 203). It is very hard to write a happy story that does not offend the just.

Having presented his reasons why composing upbeat narratives is difficult, Baxter (1997/2008) seamlessly moves to his other question: the one asking what rules writers must stick to in order to manage to compose an upbeat narrative anyway. For one thing, "happiness, within a dramatic medium, requires an activity as its vehicle" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 204). Baxter arrives at this conclusion via a poem by Czeslaw Milosz (1971/2006). It consists of a happy speaker working in the garden, who points out that all the markers of unhappiness (such as greed, envy, shame, or pain) are absent from his day. Baxter (1997/2008) provides more literary examples that confirm his idea that "happiness deals with an activity successfully completed" (p. 205): Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway,* Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus,* and Malcolm Lowry's "The Forest Path to the Spring." His claim that "happiness is . . . a state of being discovered in the midst of an activity" is also reminiscent of the earlier moment in the "magical circle" and thus implicitly relates the activity to the idea of happiness not being conscious of itself—especially since the "condition seems momentary and evanescent" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 204).

Within the same train of thought, the essayist revisits the issue of the suffering that surrounds the happy person. When it is "mindful," i.e. not naïve or cynical as described above, happiness depicted in literature "knows, and acknowledges, everything from which it has been excluded or freed. It often has a frame of suffering around it" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 204). This rule again owes a lot to the Milosz poem "Gift;" inspired by the fact that the speaker is working in a garden, Baxter links successful portrayals of happiness to pastoralism—metaphorically, the activity that the happy character carries out has to take place in a garden, but one "bordered by a darkening city" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 206). In other words, the bliss has to be contrasted with the misfortune and pain that

can't be denied is near. (Baxter is silent at this point about the earlier contention that the bliss is *based* on said misfortune and pain.)

A third rule posits that a "prolonged innocence, and the happiness that arises from it, is nearly always comic" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 206). This is fairly self-explanatory because a character who again and again stumbles through the world both happily and entirely oblivious to the, as shown, very obvious darkness of this world, must appear buffoonish or clownesque. (Baxter does not comment on why such a character cannot strike us as offensive; a clarification would have been useful given that he stressed before how obscene it is to be happy without caring about the suffering of others.)

Although "Regarding Happiness" has no explicit fourth rule, it stresses the need for an "unhappy onlooker" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 208) so forcefully that it basically can be called rule number four. An anecdote of young Baxter enviously watching a happy couple, plus several literary examples including of Satan observing Adam and Eve, or Iago observing Othello and Desdemona, serve to show that such an unhappy onlooker is where the "story resides" (Baxter, 1997/2008, p. 208).

Michel Faber, a Dutch-born author of seven novels of vastly different genres (historical, gothic, sci-fi, young adult) as well as some short fiction and poetry who grew up in Australia and resides in England, is arguably going against all of the above. In my reading, Faber's (2007) short story "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" breaks most of Baxter's four rules and refutes his two claims about the difficulty of writing happy stories. Since the narrative puts happiness front and center and arguably succeeds in its portrayal of a happy person, a close look at what exactly Faber is doing will illuminate the original question "What's the matter with happiness" some more, and show that "Regarding Happiness" is just a good starting point for a discussion, but not the last word.

"Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" begins with the introduction of the protagonist and all the crucial characters, and a peculiarly explicit announcement of the focal point of the story: "Don, son of people no longer living, husband of Alice, father of Drew and Aleesha, is very close to experiencing the happiest moment of his life" (Faber, 2007, p. 239). The rest of the text gives us the build-up to and, to a lesser extent, the aftermath of this moment; mixed in are some other relevant anecdotes and facts from Drew's family's lives. Don, a forty-something American on a holiday with wife and children, is on a train in Scotland when the narrator commences the count-down to his happiest moment. The reader finds out that Don has just had a minor argument with 15-year-old Drew "but they've made up since then, and Don is two minutes away from the big moment" (Faber, 2007, p. 240), which will top the previous happiest moment from decades ago, when he "saw Alice waiting for him outside what was then still called Kentucky Fried Chicken, and she smiled at him, and they

both knew they were going to . . . make love to each other for the first time" (Faber, 2007, p. 240). The "moment," when finally recounted in minute detail over more than a page ["time slows right down," (Faber, 2007, p. 243)], comes after discussion of how Drew's bleached, close-cropped Eminem haircut came about. It consists of 13-year-old Aleesha "carefully, oh so slowly, [running] the teeth of her comb through her brother's hair" (Faber, 2007, p. 243); the cut, though Don opposed it vehemently, becomes "the best haircut in all of Scotland north of Inverness, maybe the best haircut in the world" (Faber, 2007, p. 244). The account ends, unsurprisingly, with a comment on what this means: Aleesha grooms Drew, who is snoozing, "pointlessly, for he's as combed as combed can be, except that there is a point because this is the happiest moment of Don's life" (Faber, 2007, p. 244). Then, the story fast-forwards via will-future—30 seconds, 50 seconds, two years, five years, and so on. We learn among other things that Aleesha will change her name, that Drew will be living in South America, that Alice will die at age 59, and that Don will marry again. The story ends, as it began, with references to the happiness frame: Don will be

> happy, happier than he ever expected to be in his old age . . . happier than he's ever been in fact, except for maybe a couple of isolated moments, . . . like the hand of his daughter floating above the head of his son, on this morning in a Scottish train, the haircut making everything worthwhile . . . (Faber, 2007, p. 246)

As far as Charles Baxter's (2008) first pronouncement is concerned—happiness has no consciousness of itself—Faber's story seems to say, it's true but that doesn't mean happiness can't be depicted. Baxter suggests the brief "magical" moment is hard to grasp and communicate, and besides, there is not much to say anyway about an event that must be experienced, not reflected on. Obviously, Faber (2007) would very much disagree, as roughly one quarter of the story is capturing and communicating Don's happiest moment, while the rest says something about it. The moment is as central to the text as the murder is in a crime novel: There is foreshadowing ["Don is two minutes away," (Faber, 2007, p. 240)], a slow build-up with flashbacks and background information ["The haircut they argued over endlessly," (Faber, 2007, p. 242)], a detailed account of the event and a discussion of its aftermath.

How does the author manage to show what cannot be shown? First, he makes use of a fact that Baxter (1997/2008) already inadvertently gives away in his essay: "Happiness isn't something you experience; it's something you remember" (p. 199). Don might not be conscious of any happy moment when it happens, but he clearly *remembers* it, in minute detail, such as here about his second-happiest time:

> [He] saw Alice waiting for him . . . her smile when he approached her—that smile of welcome and anticipation and conviction that she was doing the right thing—that was a more memorable thrill than anything they did afterwards. Standing in that doorway under an icon of Colonel Sanders, she was wearing a little black dress with a tan raincoat loosely buckled over it: very French, or so he thought then, never having been to France but having seen movies set there. (Faber, 2007, pp. 240-241)

Not only is the event "memorable," Don is also keenly aware of its value, "more" than being "in bed with Alice" (Faber, 2007, p. 240). In fact, he is conscious enough of his happiness to carry out complex analyses and comparisons: Remarried in old age, he's "happier than he's ever been," except "for maybe a couple of isolated moments, like the smile of a young women waiting to be his lover, her face glowing in the light of a fast-food franchise" (Faber, 2007, p. 246). The scenes fulfill important roles; implicitly, we get a theory of happiness where brief instances of pure bliss trump contentment, but contentment is valuable too.

An even more powerful tool to portray happiness successfully and solve Baxter's (1997/2008) first difficulty is the narrator. Don might not be conscious of his happiness when it occurs, but the narrator, our mediator, clearly is. This narrator is a peculiar creation. He or she is omniscient in the truest sense of the word, mindful of moments and eternity, of tiny things and the whole: Already in the opening sentence, he or she combines an almost biblical, epic tone of timelessness ("Don, son of people no longer living, husband of Alice, father of Drew and Aleesha") with the 'in-the-moment-ness' and breathtaking play-by-play reporting of a sports commentator: ". . . is very, very close to experiencing the happiest moment of his life" (Faber, 2007, p. 239); the present tense used in the story is no accident.

Like an anthropologist studying a strange people, the narrator, fascinated by the subjects but never judging, notes and reports on every single event or behavior: "Aleesha, still a child at thirteen despite her budding breasts and chopped white nail polish, has snoozed off in the middle of reading *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*" (Faber, 2007, p. 240). What is more, the narrator knows the family's thoughts and emotions: "Alice is forty, and hates being forty. Every month, three days before her period, she starts complaining about her body, and its worsening imperfections, and Don has to tell her whatever she wants to hear, which takes some guessing" (Faber, 2007, p. 240). Thus, a better analogy than the anthropologist would be a powerful alien studying humans. The narrator can, and does, freely move in time, accessing past and future events at will, like an observer rewinding ["The Haircut. The haircut they argued over endlessly," (Faber, 2007, p. 242)] and forwarding ["In 50 seconds from now, a refreshment trolley will come down the aisle . . . and Don's happiness will ebb a

little," (Faber, 2007, pp. 244-245)] a family tape that contains a whole life, from the cradle to the not-yet-existing grave. He or she is primarily interested in recounting Don's magic moment, in the present tense, and this moment is the actual 'now' the narrator is situated in, but this vantage point is chosen to define, by stressing the force and persistence of the moment, Don's life as a whole. Don's general happiness is complemented and enriched, not hurt or diminished, by the much more powerful present moment of Drew's haircut "shining so bright, it leaves a pattern on your retina when you close your eyes, vanilla bright like Eminem" (Faber, 2007, p. 246). The single moment gets much more space than the rest of Don's life, yet it is brought up so that we get a better sense of who Don is as a whole—Don's momentary vanilla-bright happiness is Don in a nutshell: An everyman, a loving father, a human being appreciating the little things, a man who knows that children will not be there forever, etc. Thus, employing a time-traveling omniscient narrator-analyst allows Faber, in complete opposition to Baxter's dictum, not only to communicate Don's happiness itself, but even to give it meaning that goes beyond the moment.

Incidentally, Faber's (2007) curious narrator also refutes Baxter's (1997/2008) fourth rule, that happiness stories depend on and are really anchored in an unhappy onlooker. Certainly the onlooker—the narrator—is central to "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem," but there is absolutely no indication that he or she is unhappy, and the narrator's feelings have no bearing on the story anyway. Reading Faber reveals a possible bias towards a Hobbesian worldview on Baxter's part—the envy required for an unhappy witness of happiness, the "darkening city" that surrounds the happy garden are reminiscent of Hobbes' (1651/1981) "nasty, brutish and short" life where man is wolf to another man. Faber's narrator shows that in fiction, envy is not the only possible reaction to observing the happiness of others.

Speaking of the garden and the darkening city, Baxter's perhaps most distinctive rule, the one stating that happiness in fiction needs to have a frame of suffering around it, gets refuted as well. "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" does not offer a pastoral that is then put in sharp contrast to the misery and tragedy around it. Indeed, it can be argued that Faber's text offers a philosophical critique of the premises behind Baxter's statement. The narrative attacks the very idea that happiness is something exalted, sublime, something radically removed from or opposed to ordinary life and the 'real' world. In the short story, there is no metaphorical dark city, but there is no heavenly garden either. Everything, the happiness and the rest, is framed as decidedly *normal*. Don's happiest moment is a small, random event, his daughter combing his son's hair. The breathtaking language used to report parts of it—"It's a good haircut after all, damn it . . . maybe the best haircut in the world" (Faber, 2007, p. 244)—does not transport it out of the realm of daily life. It situates it even more firmly in it, because of the comical effect of anointing a previously mocked bleached short

caesar as "the best haircut on this train" (Faber, 2007, p. 244). Don's second happiest moment, the smile young Alice gave him, is objectively not as big a deal as the love-making that followed; otherwise, there would be no need to stress twice that subjectively, for Don, the smile was "a more memorable thrill than anything they did afterwards" (Faber, 2007, pp. 240-241). The personal magic of the moment is not denied, but it is not set against its real-world surroundings but integrated into them. Things around the blissful moments are as mundane as they can be. As for the setting, Don is "traveling down through the Scottish highlands to Inverness, tired and ever so slightly anxious in case he falls asleep between now and when the train reaches the station" (Faber, 2007, p. 239). It is hard to feel awe or see drama here.

Painstaking detail is used to clarify the characters are regular folks: Drew, who thinks "Eminem is cool" (Faber, 2007, p. 242), has been "cursing a lot lately" (Faber, 2007, p. 243) and will go on to do aid work in South America. Aleesha with her "bracelets of chewed multicolored cotton hooped around her knobbly wrist" (Faber, 2007, p. 240), Don who "still wants [Alice]" and is "looking forward to the next time they're alone together in bed . . . anywhere where he can run his palms over her warm skin and stroke her hair off her face" (Faber, 2007, p. 244). They are regular people in regular situations that have regular relationships with each other. "Alice and Aleesha are across the aisle, slumped opposite each other, their sports bags propped in the window seats, too bulky for the overhead baggage rack" (Faber, 2007, p. 240)—this is neither tragic misfortune to set the bliss apart, nor an idyll that is already part of the bliss. Even the Eminem-related arguments are not dramatic. "Who did Drew think he was fooling, pledging fellowship with ghetto youth and the hip-hop scene, chanting along with lyrics about smacking bitches and fuckin' wid de wrong niggaz when he was a white kid living with his folks in the suburbs of West Springfield" (Faber, 2007, p. 242), does not sound like the tragedy of a family broken beyond repair, but more like a cliché, the hapless middle-class dad who is a bit out of touch. Thus, it is comical again because we recognize it; it is gently poking fun at the mainstream, the commonplace.

Now, readers might wonder if all this doesn't mean that the short story ignores suffering. Doesn't it confirm Baxter's warning that it's hard to portray happiness mindfully because the writer of happy stories will come across as blind or cynical? Is "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" offensive?

Faber can get out of this dilemma, since he does not actually ignore suffering or tragedy at all. It's true that he does not *juxtapose* his happiness with tragedy, as Baxter recommends to make the happiness stand out. But tragedy of the most existential kind is clearly there: Aleesha's abortion, and especially Alice's death at 59. Nevertheless, Faber *intertwines* the good with the bad, instead of separating them. Here is the relevant passage about Aleesha, who will change her name to Ellen:

> And in five years, despite her parents' confident predictions, Ellen won't have grown out of being Ellen, she'll still be Ellen and she'll have had an abortion and her smile will be different, lopsided and a little discolored by smoking, but she'll be engaged to a man who adores her, and pregnant with a baby she intends to keep (Faber, 2007, p. 245).

The narrator, in the future mode again, mixes in deadly serious setbacks with minor details (like discolored teeth) and success stories, all in the same breath and the same descriptive tone. There is no judgment, they are all just equally part of the 'life tape' that the narrator watches and browses through:

> And Alice will go and make coffee, walking stiffly because of her tennis shoulder which isn't tennis shoulder at all but the first signs of the illness that will kill her when she's fifty-nine, and after that Don will tell everyone he'll never be able to love another woman, but three years later he'll marry one of the people he said this to, and she'll be warm and funny and a great cook and not as good in bed as Alice but he'll never tell her that . . . (Faber, 2007, pp. 245-246)

What Faber's story says is not that life is free of suffering, but that suffering is a normal part of life, and so is happiness; and while we can (or must) give them categories like good or bad, for fate or disinterested observers, they are interchangeable phenomena. Faber seems to suggest that the blissful garden bordered by the dark city is not a good metaphor for life. A much more fitting one would be the okay-but-not-great suburb (which does have its share of bliss and suffering)—or the train to Scotland. With the dichotomy gone, it is also obvious that for Faber, happiness is not a term that lends itself well to discussions of social justice and guilt. To call enjoyment of bliss 'offensive' does not make sense if bliss will be followed and preceded by pain and boredom, an endless cycle that knows nothing outside it. Faber's look at happiness is psychological and personal, not social; he does not look past the microcosm of Don's family and doesn't feel any obligation to do so.[1]

One maxim of Baxter that "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" might agree with is that a prolonged happiness is almost always comic. It is impossible to tell, simply because there is no prolonged happiness in the story. However, Faber's text emphatically goes against Baxter's idea that in fiction, happiness needs a successfully completed activity as its vehicle. Both of Don's magic moments have him as a passive observer who does absolutely nothing. The description of the second happiest moment explicitly uses the verb of passive perception, 'see,' instead of the active 'watch': ". . . when he saw Alice waiting for him outside what was then still called Kentucky Fried Chicken" (Faber, 2007, p. 240). As if to emphasize Don's passivity, the narrator contrasts the

inactivity at the moment of happiness with the activity that follows: "her smile . . . was a more memorable thrill than anything they *did* [emphasis added] afterwards" (Faber, 2007, p. 245).

His happiest moment, the tender combing, is similar. Don is practically transfixed and immobilized—Aleesha is "aware of the spell she's casting over him" (Faber, 2007, p. 244). Don's happiest moment, starting with "Aleesha leans sideways into the aisle, stretching her arm across the empty space towards her brother" (Faber, 2007, p. 243), contains 21 action verbs, but none of the actions involve Don. Happiness through something that is done for you rather than something you do, this anti-Baxter concept again aligns well with the previous thought that it can be pointless to scrutinize happiness with moral categories, to blame a happy person for their happiness or attach questions of guilt or responsibility to it. After all, the happiness is out of their control here, literally not in their power.

All in all, Michel Faber's short story "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" offers a new perspective on the issue of portraying happiness in literature. Needless to say, it does not invalidate Baxter's points completely, but it shows that they are not as universally valid as he thinks. Distilling the essence of Faber's work, one could come up with maxims that, depending on one's view, refute or enrich Baxter's:

1. The happy person in a story might not be aware of his or her bliss at the time it occurs, but the happiness can be depicted very well as a memory.

2. Creative usage of an omniscient narrator can solve the problem of a character's inability to communicate their own happiness and what it means.

3. Happiness in fiction does not always need a 'frame of suffering' around it, and refusing to contrast the happiness with the drama it excludes is not necessarily blind or offensive. Happiness and pain can be shown as interlinked, equivalent, and inseparable parts of life without denying their significance.

4. Happiness is not always the result of an activity successfully completed. In fiction, it is possible for the writer to let happy moments just happen to the happy character (and therefore, judging such fictional moments with moral categories does not always make sense).

It's true that "Vanilla Bright Like Eminem" is, as said at the very beginning, a most peculiar story, and thus so far outside the mainstream that one could argue that Baxter's theory generally works. Yet, what matters is that what Michel Faber does is *possible*. Given that he manages to write a highly accomplished and moving story about happiness, the points above should not be ignored in future discussions of the depiction of happiness in fiction.

Note

1. Of course, some might actually see this as a shortcoming of Faber's happiness theory as compared to Baxter's.

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