

Narrative possibilities of happiness,  
unhappiness, and joy.

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## Narrative Possibilities of Happiness, Unhappiness, and Joy

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Social Research: An International Quarterly

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 77, Number 2, Summer 2010

pp. 523-544

ARTICLE

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### Abstract

This essay has three parts, corresponding to the three concepts announced in my title: happiness, joy, and unhappiness. "Happiness" does not refer only to a feeling or subjective state, but designates as well an evaluation of a life or the narrative of a life. Accordingly, in representing the lives of fictional characters, novelists invite their readers to assess both what happy or flourishing lives might be, and the narrative routes, variously composed of circumstances and choices, by which such lives might be attained. Joy, as distinct from happiness, is an episodic or dispositional element in an individual's emotional life, and as such not subject to public evaluation in quite the same way as happiness is. And yet joy, which is arguably with desire and sorrow one of the three fundamental emotions of narrative, can nonetheless be subjected to ethical discipline: the novelist can, and often does, prompt her reader to feel joy and grief at the right things. Finally, this article's third section concerns the narrative importance of unhappiness in the novel, especially the Continental novel.

# Adam Potkay

## Narrative Possibilities of Happiness, Unhappiness, and Joy

MY ESSAY HAS THREE PARTS, CORRESPONDING TO THE THREE concepts announced in my title: happiness, joy, and unhappiness. To summarize the argument of each part: first, the word "happiness" does not refer only to a feeling or subjective state, but designates as well an *evaluation* of a life or the narrative of a life. Accordingly, in representing the lives of fictional characters, novelists invite their readers to assess both what happy or flourishing lives might be, and the narrative routes, variously composed of circumstances and choices, by which such lives might be attained.

My second claim concerns joy as something distinct from happiness. Joy is an episodic or dispositional element in an individual's emotional life, and as such not subject to public evaluation in quite the same way as happiness is. That is to say, while it is possible or even common to know someone who thinks he's happy but to claim to know better—one needs only the proper intonation to render ironic the phrase "Mr. Blifil *thinks* he's happy"—the person who experiences joy does so, by contrast, regardless of your assessment or approval. And yet joy, which is arguably with desire and sorrow one of the three fundamental emotions of narrative, can nonetheless be subjected to ethical discipline: the novelist can, and often does, prompt her reader to feel joy and grief at the right things.

Finally, my third section offers a brief mediation on the narrative importance of unhappiness in the novel, especially the Continental



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