

Through the Looking Glass: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Social Integration and Growth in Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*

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ABSTRACT

Gail Honeyman's debut novel, Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine (2017), challenges simplistic narratives of complex trauma by offering a nuanced exploration of the protagonist's journey toward social connection and emotional healing. Through a psychoanalytical lens, this study argues that the novel critiques societal reliance on linear recovery narratives through Eleanor's seemingly contradictory coping mechanisms. Her rigid routines and intellectualisation, while initially providing a sense of control, ultimately hinder her attempts at forming secure attachments. "Through the Looking Glass" metaphorically represents Eleanor's unconscious mind, a realm where hidden traumas, distortions, and suppressed desires shape her altered perception of reality, intensifying her struggles with social integration and exposing her vulnerability. By re-examining her repeated social faux pas, often stemming from a childhood marked by neglect, this paper brings to the fore how the novel portrays the long-lasting effects of complex trauma on adult social integration and identity formation. Through an analysis of the novel's engagement with contemporary mental health discourse, this study underscores the therapeutic potential of storytelling and emphasises empathy as an essential element in fostering both social inclusion and personal growth.

Keywords: Complex trauma; social integration; Attachment theory; Defence mechanisms; Mental health narrative; Narrative therapy

INTRODUCTION

The psychological novel is typically characterised as a storytelling literature art form that focuses on the interior lives of characters, depicting one's subjective thoughts, emotions, remembrances, and passions (Vrettos, 2010). Gail Honeyman's 2017 novel, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, falls squarely within this genre, employing psychological insights to illuminate the complexities of its central character's psyche. The novel receives high acclaim for its poignant exploration of social isolation and the difficulties of human relationships. Using a psychoanalytic approach, the article explores the central character of the novel, Eleanor Oliphant's mental and emotional healing, as well as her social integration. By moving away from oversimplified characterisations often seen in mainstream media, Honeyman presents a detailed and nuanced view of how traumatic experiences impact an individual's personal and social development.

Gail Honeyman, a Scottish author and recipient of The Costa Book Award, a prestigious literary accolade, renowned for honouring the contributions of British and Irish writers, poignantly captures the experience of mental distress and loneliness in her work, further cementing her reputation within the literary community. The present research aligns with Honeyman's thematic concerns, demonstrating that a lack of social connection, i.e., loneliness, functions as a form of

social pain. This experience acts as an aversive signal that activates neural mechanisms similar to those involved in physical pain, thereby motivating individuals to restore vital social bonds (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

The novel's central character, Eleanor, reflects on her circumstances and begins to wonder how such loneliness could arise. In a rare moment of self-pity, she expresses thus;

These days, loneliness is the new cancer – a shameful, embarrassing thing, brought upon yourself in some obscure way. A fearful, incurable thing, so horrifying that you dare not mention it; other people don't want to hear the word spoken aloud for fear that they might too be afflicted.

(Honeyman, 2017, p. 270)

The article argues that the novel subtly critiques the societal preference for linear recovery narratives. Eleanor's carefully planned routines and overthinking/intellectualisation, though seeming to offer some control, actually hinder her ability to build strong connections with people. The title of the paper alludes to Lewis Carroll's classic fairytale *Through the Looking Glass* (1998), highlighting Eleanor's distorted perception of reality, shaped by her neglectful childhood. Alice, the central character of Carroll's classic, finds the world strange, confusing, and messed up in her adventures in Wonderland, which is quite similar to the central character, Eleanor, in the novel *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (Honeyman, 2017), who navigates a world that seems nonsensical to her, while appearing perfectly normal to those around her. This article examines how the narrative portrays the impact of complex trauma on adult social integration and self-identity through the protagonist's social awkwardness, who does not conform to societal norms and expectations. Moreover, this exploration adds to the ongoing discourse on mental health in contemporary literature, demonstrating the therapeutic impact of storytelling. The central character of the narrative emphasises the transformative power of human relationships and the value of nurturing empathy. The article argues that empathy plays a significant role in promoting social inclusion and personal growth, questioning the notion that recovery is uniquely a personal journey.

In addition to psychoanalytic and trauma research, recent studies highlight how storytelling operates across various cultures as a way to navigate trauma and a sense of belonging. Norbasudi and Rosman (2025), for instance, explore how Palestinian speculative fiction uses alternate and virtual realities as cultural tools to process displacement and rehearse returning home. Similarly, Roselind et al. (2012) show how Muslim women's self-narratives trace a journey from alienation to awareness and connection. Despite their different backgrounds, both emphasise that healing is not only personal but also relational and communal. These findings deepen the current analysis of Eleanor, whose story reflects the struggle between solitude and connection, emphasising storytelling as a means of healing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma narratives are becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary writings, with scholars like Carruthers (2016) highlighting limitations in simplistic portrayals of recovery, further discussing the "recoveryism" (4) attitude, viewing one type of recovery as the only legitimate form that fails to recognise the diversity and complexity of individual recovery journeys. In her non-fiction self-help and therapeutic book *Aftershocks: Healing the Curse of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, Susan Brunson reaffirms the blend of clinical expertise and compassionate spirituality that offers a comprehensive toolkit to reshape the recovery journey for survivors of acute traumatic

experiences, focusing on effectiveness, empathy, and personalised healing (Brunson, 2011). These narratives often depict a clear trajectory from trauma to complete healing, failing to capture the multifaceted and non-linear nature of the process (Brunson, 2011).

When analysing Eleanor's journey, it is evident that understanding her development and the obstacles she faces is crucial, especially in considering the challenges linked to navigating the aftermath of complex trauma. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Van Der Kolk, 2014), emphasises the importance of addressing deep-rooted trauma in breaking harmful patterns and fostering healthier connections. Eleanor's story clearly illustrates how trauma can profoundly influence individuals and their relationships. Complementing these psychoanalytic perspectives, recent scholarship has shown how trauma narratives also operate on cultural and collective levels. Norbasudi and Rosman (2025) highlight how Palestinian speculative fiction transforms displacement into shared meaning through imagined spaces of belonging, while Roselind et al. (2012) demonstrate how self-narratives shift from alienation to relationality within relational and faith-based frameworks. These insights reinforce that recovery is seldom a solitary endeavour, and they offer a comparative framework that deepens the focus of this study on Eleanor's non-linear journey.

Van Der Kolk (2014) demonstrates how trauma alters the brain's architecture and functionality, particularly impacting the amygdala (which detects threats), the hippocampus (involved in memory), and the processes controlling emotional regulation, resulting in heightened alertness and difficulties in emotion management. He suggests that genuine recovery necessitates confronting the underlying cause. Conventional therapy methods may have limitations, so he recommends integrating body-focused techniques such as EMDR (Eye movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing), yoga, and mindfulness, thereby overcoming negative patterns and developing healthier, more fulfilling relationships.

Conversely, psychoanalysis provides valuable frameworks for comprehending Eleanor's actions and the influence of her history. Her strict schedules and tendency to overthink can be viewed as defence mechanisms, a concept calibrated and fine-tuned by Anna Freud (1936). These unconscious strategies yield temporary relief but could potentially impede the growth of healthy coping mechanisms and hinder the formation of secure attachments (Bowlby, 1982).

Several scholars examining Honeyman's fictional narrative have explored the profound impact of Eleanor's childhood trauma on her adult life. Tiansyah and Suharyati (2021) employ Freudian psychoanalysis to examine how past experiences shape Eleanor's present behaviour. Azizah (2022) expands on this approach by analysing Eleanor's anxieties and defence mechanisms through a Freudian lens, highlighting the reciprocal causation between her inner world and outward actions. However, the exploration extends beyond Freudian theory. Macmillan (2015) draws upon the concept of the psychic crypt, introduced by Abraham and Torok, to explore Eleanor's unhealed traumas. This theory, rooted in psychoanalysis, examines how the deceased (metaphorically representing a past trauma) can become entombed within the psyche, impacting present experiences. Through this framework, Macmillan suggests that unaddressed childhood abuse might underlie Eleanor's struggles with isolation, potential autistic traits, and suicidal ideation. Additionally, Pratiwi (2023) examines how Eleanor confronts and overcomes trauma resulting from betrayal, integrating insights from both psychology and literary trauma studies.

In his thesis, *"Defence Mechanism Against Childhood Trauma of the Main Character in Gail Honeyman's Novel Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine"* (2023), America employs Freudian theory to analyse Eleanor's defence mechanisms, uncovering the role of repression, denial, projection, and fantasy as a shield against her traumatic childhood. On the other hand, Rahmadanty

and Subianto (2021) apply Holiday's transitivity system from a linguistic perspective to explore how specific lexicons depict the complex nature of Eleanor's personality traits. This linguistic approach aligns with the psychoanalytical approach of Ameria (2023), providing a comprehensive understanding of Eleanor through her narrative actions and interactions. Further expanding the scope of analysis, Andersen (2017) analyses Eleanor's social isolation and path to self-awareness and healing, emphasising the character's resilience and the transformative power of human connection, primarily from an intertextual perspective, focusing on its relationship with "Jane Eyre" and its adaptation for contemporary audiences.

Collectively, while existing analyses of *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017) have emphasised a range of theories, from Freudian psychoanalysis and psychic crypt to corpus linguistics and intertextual adaptation, this study employs a contemporary psychoanalytic lens to examine defence mechanisms, skewed perceptions, and their long-term effects on social integration and identity formation. As the plot unfolds, the novel tackles mental health and the healing process. Shattering simplistic notions of recovery, the novel urges readers to consider the complexities of trauma. Honeyman's storytelling skilfully reveals the protagonist's journey, eliciting empathy for those dealing with the lasting effects of trauma. This approach aligns well with narrative therapy, emphasising the power of shared stories and empathy in healing (White & Epston, 1990). Ultimately, Eleanor's development highlights the importance of resilience and community support, enabling trauma survivors to heal and gain control of their lives.

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach using literary analysis and close reading as its primary methodological approach, focusing on *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017) to identify recurring themes, patterns, and representations of trauma, social integration, and identity reconstruction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, attachment theory, and trauma studies, this theoretical framework offers a nuanced approach to analysing Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017). The interdisciplinary framework focuses on the psychological and social ramifications of trauma, particularly how it shapes the protagonist's behaviour, impedes social integration, and hinders emotional development. By integrating these theories, the study emphasises the importance of defence mechanisms, disrupted attachment, identity formation, and the complex, non-linear path to recovery, all of which are central to Eleanor's journey.

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freudian concepts of defence mechanisms, provides a foundation for understanding Eleanor's coping strategies. Freud's work on the unconscious serves as a lens through which Eleanor's intellectualisation, avoidance, and rigid routines can be examined. Eleanor's "invisible father" becomes a metaphorical absence, representing the gap in her identity formation. In psychoanalytic terms, the father figure often represents authority, structure, and identity in a child's life. Eleanor's lack of a father figure exacerbates her struggle with self-concept and contributes to her internal turmoil.

Eleanor's intellectualisation, distancing herself from emotional experiences, can also be seen in her reluctance to forge connections. By sabotaging potential relationships, she avoids emotional compromise, remaining isolated to protect herself from further emotional harm. Her inability to move toward compromise suggests deep-seated trust issues, which begin to subside only after meeting Raymond (a healing figure in the narrative). His consistent presence fosters

trust, leading to the gradual erosion of her defences. As such, Eleanor's gradual willingness to trust Raymond and lower her defences aligns with John Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, which emphasises that secure attachments are crucial for emotional healing.

Eleanor's reliance on alcohol, a behaviour stemming from her unresolved trauma, adds complexity to her character. Her past is marked by profound neglect and emotional abuse, and despite the toxic coping mechanism of alcohol use, she consciously chooses isolation over becoming an "iconoclast." This choice hints at a moral compass shaped by her suffering, indicating a preference for emotional numbness rather than overt self-destruction. The question of whether Eleanor is healing from her addiction to alcohol or from the wounds of her past suggests that the two are intertwined. Her reliance on alcohol is a manifestation of her deeper emotional scars, and as her emotional wounds heal, so too does her need for the numbing effects of alcohol.

Trauma theorists like Judith Herman (1992) and Bessel Van Der Kolk (2014) suggest that trauma often manifests in behaviours like emotional detachment and avoidance, both of which are central to Eleanor's existence. If Eleanor had chosen to stay permanently isolated, continuing her reliance on alcohol and emotional disconnection, her psychological trajectory might have led to more profound mental health issues. Knowledgeable individuals, as research suggests, are sometimes prone to mental health disorders due to their heightened awareness of societal pressures and internal conflicts. Eleanor's intelligence, coupled with her traumatic past, makes her vulnerable to this risk. Her eventual destination, had she not engaged in meaningful social connections, might have been a life of further alienation and psychological decay.

Societal expectations of normalcy further complicate Eleanor's healing journey. Society often equates normalcy with relationships, social connections, or affection, while Eleanor's sense of what is "normal" (rather called 'fine') diverges significantly. Her definition of both normalcy and abnormalcy is shaped by her traumatic upbringing, causing her to perceive traditional relationship dynamics as foreign and undesirable. For Eleanor, normalcy is solitude, routine, and self-sufficiency, starkly contrasting with societal ideals of love and companionship.

Eleanor's journey toward redefining normalcy in her terms can be seen through the lens of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). As she begins to re-author her life story, she reinterprets her narrative from one of isolation to one that allows for potential human connection. Her interactions with Raymond and her gradual therapeutic process are key to this redefinition. The novel suggests that healing does not necessarily involve conforming to societal norms but instead finding a sense of self that is authentic to one's experiences.

Empathy remains central to Eleanor's recovery. Raymond's kindness allows her to slowly dismantle the emotional walls she has built, illustrating how empathy can foster both social inclusion and personal healing. Through this lens, the novel positions empathy as a transformative force capable of breaking down the psychological barriers erected by trauma, enabling Eleanor to navigate the complexities of her identity and emotional world.

BEYOND ROUTINE: ELEANOR OLIPHANT'S DEFENSIVE TACTICS

The novel presents the labyrinthine world of the titular protagonist, Eleanor Oliphant, who demonstrates remarkable resilience despite the heavy burden of a traumatic past. The protagonist embodies the quintessence of routine and solitude. To get through a world she perceives as inhospitable and incomprehensible, Eleanor employs defence mechanisms like rigid routines, intellectualisation, emotional detachment, and avoidance. While these provide a sense of control,

they ultimately hinder her attempts to form secure attachments (Bowlby, 1982). In the same vein, this state of living parallels addiction stigma (Horvath, 2016).

By day, Eleanor functions with impeccable efficiency in a nondescript office job; by night and on weekends, her life is a cycle of predictable solitude, punctuated only by the numbing comfort of alcohol and frozen meals, a ritual that provides a sense of comfort and predictability. She adheres to strict “routines” in her daily life and maintains a composed exterior, giving the impression that everything is fine, as she goes over her weekly routine, which calls for her to appear at work at 8:30 a.m. Each day, she dedicates an hour to a refreshing midday break by reading newspapers and solving puzzles in the staffroom’s predictable and controlled environment. After a long day of work, a bus ride home is a comforting ritual for her. She prefers a healthy dinner, opting for salad and plain pasta with pesto. After dinner, she either watches TV or reads. On Friday nights, she picks up a frozen pizza, a bottle of wine, and vodka from the Tesco Metro near her office, which she consumes throughout the weekend.

I have always taken great pride in managing my life alone. I’m a sole survivor- I’m Eleanor Oliphant. I don’t need anyone else, there is no big hole in my life, no missing part of my own [...]. I am a self-contained entity. That’s what I have always told myself, at any rate. I sit in the staffroom with my sandwich and I read the newspaper from cover to cover, and then I do the crosswords [...] I don’t talk to anyone [...]. When I get home, I eat the pizza and drink the wine. I have some vodka afterwards [...] I drank the rest of the vodka over the weekend and spread it throughout both days so that I’m neither drunk nor sober.

(Honeyman, 2017, pp. 4-8)

This facade of functional autonomy belies a deeper narrative of unresolved childhood trauma, manifesting in acute social maladjustment and emotional seclusion. However, the narrator’s rigid schedule implies a substitute for genuine human interaction with routine and underscores her apprehension towards uncertainty and the accompanying emotional upheaval. Eleanor relies on the regimented routine for peace of mind, which she lacks in her solitary life.

The narrator’s act of consuming three bottles of alcohol over a weekend introduces the potential impact on health and well-being. However, in her admission that “*smoking kills*” (Honeyman, 2017, p. 318), there is a lack of explicit acknowledgement of the potential problem by the narrator, who suggests a possible denial or minimisation, a tendency that aligns with a pattern of suppressing difficult or uncomfortable truth, both internally and externally. The silent query she poses to herself sheds light on the whole situation.

How could one human being see another so obviously in pain, a pain she had deliberately drawn out and worried away at, and then push her out into the street and leave her to cope with it alone?

(Honeyman, 2017, p. 295)

Her adherence to a structured lifestyle, marked by predictable routines and minimal social interaction, is not merely a preference but a coping mechanism. According to psychological studies on trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2014), such behaviours can be interpreted as efforts to maintain control and ensure emotional stability, counteracting the unpredictability inherent in unresolved psychological distress. This rigid structure provides her with a sense of control and stability, countering the chaos of her unresolved emotional trauma. Her life, devoid of spontaneous social engagements, reflects her subconscious effort to avoid triggers that could puzzle her carefully maintained emotional equilibrium.

The accuracy and regularity of the narrator’s schedule, attributed to the character’s perfectionism and high intelligence, highlight a deeper psychological dependence on predictability as a source of comfort rather than social ties, as well as her substitution of routine for human

interaction. More often, this regimented way of living, as detailed by Honeyman, is emblematic of a coping mechanism developed in reaction to the absence of social interaction, offering a semblance of stability amidst extreme isolation.

As Block and Kremen (1996) precisely reemphasise, highly intelligent individuals are socially awkward and may have underlying mental health issues. Factors like genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and individual experiences play a crucial role. However, to possess an understanding of Eleanor's trait is quite complex, though trivial in this context. The connection between her ability to solve certain puzzles and her regimented life may not always be associated with her past trauma; it could be her lack of ego resiliency. Her intelligence suggests that she is capable of critical thinking and problem-solving, which can be seen as a strength despite her ego resiliency, as past experience does not necessarily hinder intellectual development. She never became suspicious of her mental state, even after overhearing peculiar conversations with her coworkers; "I do exist, don't I? It often feels as if I'm not here, that I'm a figment of my imagination" (Honeyman, 2017, pp. 5-6). According to Tony Nixon (2018), she is identified as "blunt, judgmental, and formal in her dealings with other people," while also noting her "idiosyncratic ideas about what constitutes proper behaviour."

However, her consumption of three bottles of alcohol throughout the week hints at a form of self-medication that is common, as antipsychotic medications are primarily used to treat psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, characterised by symptoms like hallucinations or delusions (Lally & MacCabe, 2015), but a hazardous approach to managing psychological distress. Subsequently, the 'self-medication theory' posits that individuals with mental health disorders use substances like alcohol or drugs to alleviate their symptoms temporarily (Khantzian, 1997). This behaviour, while offering short-term relief, often complicates or exacerbates the underlying condition.

Eleanor's use of alcohol can be seen as an attempt at self-medicating to numb emotional pain or social discomfort. In this way, her preoccupation has disrupted relationships and prevented her from living a fulfilling life. Consequently, in an attempt to avoid these situations, individuals may adhere to a highly structured lifestyle and avoid socialising. Moreover, this adherence to structure and avoidance of socialisation can be seen as a form of ritualistic behaviour, where individuals engage in repetitive and rigid actions to alleviate their fears and anxieties about illness and death (Furer & Walker, 2008).

Propelled by a deep-seated emotional need for connection, Eleanor engages in a weekly ritual of conversation with her deceased mother every Wednesday. This behaviour, however, reflects the "splitting" evident in her character. Following a week-long absence, she craves her mother's attention, readily sharing work details – a sign of seeking approval from the idealised "good mother" she has constructed. This idealised figure stands in stark contrast to the "monster" Eleanor perceives in her memories. However, the mother's response, emphasising their blood relation and portraying an unbreakable bond, seems more a product of Eleanor's projection than reality. The cautiousness in Eleanor's reply hints at a more complex dynamic, one where lingering fear of judgment from the "bad mother" disrupts the idealised connection. The raw emotionality of the encounter, with its accompanying physical reactions, further underscores the internal struggle between these extremes. The following dialogues from the narrative (Honeyman, 2017, p. 34) serve as evidence;

Eleanor: "It's only been a week, I know, but it feels like an age since we last spoke, Mummy. I've been so busy with work."

Mummy: "I know what you mean, darling, (she said. She spoke quickly). Look, I can't talk for long. Tell me about your week. What have you been doing?"

Mummy: "You can always talk to me, you know. About anything. Or anyone. You wouldn't understand, of course, but the bond between a mother and child. The two of us are like linked forever, you see-same blood in my veins that's running through yours. [...] It isn't possible to destroy a bond that strong."

Eleanor: "That may or may not be true, Mummy."

"The blood was pounding through my body, and my hands quivered."

(Honeyman, 2017, pp. 33-36)

On carefully considering the aspects of the narrative, there are potential symbolic elements of her actions, while otherwise, the thematic exploration of the novel remains the same. Nevertheless, the aspect of Eleanor engaging in conversations with her deceased mother indeed adds a complex layer to her character analysis, inviting discussions that might intersect with mental health considerations of a psychotic disorder, supposedly an early sign of schizophrenia that cannot be ignored. However, conversations/interactions with lost loved ones are not intended to diagnose Eleanor clinically. Instead, they serve as a symbolic representation of the grieving process, her ongoing struggle with past abuse, unresolved grief, and the impact of her upbringing on her current state of mind.

As Eleanor dismantles her defence mechanisms with each barrier, she overcomes the possibility of emotional vulnerability, and authentic connection blossoms. This burgeoning capacity for intimacy suggests a future with less isolation and a greater sense of purpose.

ECHOES OF TRAUMA: UNVEILING ELEANOR OLIPHANT'S SOCIAL FAUX PAS

The narrative presents the complexities of human interaction through Eleanor, a socially isolated woman. Despite her claims of normalcy, her social blunders reveal a deeper truth: her profound childhood neglect and emotional deprivation. As Herman states, children raised in environments lacking nurturing care often struggle to acquire essential relational skills necessary for forming and sustaining meaningful connections (1992). Honeyman argues that Eleanor's identity and worldview are not simply eccentricities, but the direct result of an unconventional upbringing marked by isolation and her mother's unique (and potentially damaging) wisdom. The narrative quotes, "Mummy said that we were empresses, sultanas, and maharanis in our own home and that it was our duty to live a life of sybaritic pleasure and indulgence" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 34).

This profound isolation, evident in her lack of familiarity with everyday experiences, extends beyond the physical. The ridicule she faces, "they all laughed and called me Beanz Meanz Weird (*Beanzy*)" (66), deepens a fragmented sense of self, suggesting unresolved childhood trauma that shapes her present behaviour (Freud, 1936). Though not fully conscious, these experiences influence her perceptions.

Her childhood "tea" invitation, the only one extended to her classmates, reinforces this isolation. The term itself confuses her, revealing a lack of exposure to typical 'social gatherings.' The foreignness of the food - fish fingers, baked beans, and oven chips - further emphasises this. These seemingly ordinary items are entirely new to her, hinting at a restricted diet at home compared to her peers. Having to ask fundamental questions underscores her discomfort and lack of experience, foreshadowing the social challenges she will face. This vulnerability, evident in her

need for clarification, could be exploited later. The mocking laughter is a cruel reminder of potential future judgments and exclusion. These early social faux pas, while exposing her vulnerabilities, gradually become formative experiences that prepare the ground for her eventual social integration.

Eleanor's defiance towards popular culture and reverence for her mother's food choices hint at defence mechanisms. These preferences create a sense of superiority, potentially shielding her from social alienation and ridicule. Similarly, her response to Danielle's mother seems like a subconscious attempt to protect her self-esteem. By presenting a unique diet, she avoids potential misunderstanding or mockery.

"There's no routine," I said. "But what kind of things do you eat, generally?" she asked, genuinely puzzled. I listed some of them. Asparagus velouté with a poached duck egg and hazelnut oil. Bouillabaisse with homemade rouille. Honey-glazed poussin with celeriac fondants. Fresh truffles when in season, shaved over cèpes, and buttered linguine.

She stared at me. "That all sounds quite . . . fancy," she said. "Oh no, sometimes it's just something really simple," I said, "like sourdough toast with Manchego cheese and quince paste." "Right," she said, exchanging a glance with little Danielle, who was gawping at me, revealing a mouthful of partially masticated beans.

(Honeyman, 2017, p. 67)

However, the acknowledgement of her new "culinary family" signifies the beginnings of an identity reconstruction. This recognition marks a vital step in her healing journey, as she starts to integrate her past experiences with her present reality. As Jung (1980, p. 275) famously stated, 'individuation is the process of becoming a unified self'.

Furthermore, Eleanor's emotional response to her coworker Bill's public outburst and rejection at the workplace, "She's a mental" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 9), triggers intense feelings of "a slap, a punch to the gut, a burning." (11). Nevertheless, she utilises intellectualisation as a shield—a defence mechanism. She emphasises the rational justification behind her invitation to a concert, considering his age and musical taste, thereby distancing herself from any emotional motives for connection. This intellectualisation acts as a barrier, deflecting from potential emotional exposure and the possibility of romantic feelings. Moreover, her self-deprecating humour regarding the pub and the wine implies a distancing from the emotional impact of the situation;

I knew nothing about the concert; I hadn't heard of any of the bands. I was going out of a sense of duty [...] I had been drinking sour white wine, warm and tainted by the plastic glasses the pub made us drink from. What savages they must think of us! Billy had insisted on buying it to thank me for inviting him. There was no question of being a date. The very notion was ridiculous.

(Honeyman, 2017, p. 11)

However, in response to psychological maladjustment with an emphasis on high ego-resilience and low IQ (Block & Kremen, 1996), the character's intellectualisation serves primarily as a way to distance herself from emotional vulnerability. It thus reveals that while Eleanor might be intelligent or possibly have a high IQ, her low ego resilience hinders her ability to form a genuine connection. Such blunders, though painful, function as stepping stones that slowly push Eleanor toward social growth and integration, as her awkward attempts at connection ultimately open the door to authentic relationships.

FROM TRAUMA TO TOUCH: A NARRATIVE THERAPY JOURNEY

Eleanor's gradual openness to change, prompted by new relationships and self-reflection, parallels the comprehensive guide designed to assist individuals, i.e., advocacy for a self-empowering approach to recovery (Horvath, 2016). Both emphasise that healing and change must originate from within the individual, supported but not coerced by external influences. Embarking on a transformative path, where the scars of neglect and abuse are confronted and healed, resonates with the power of storytelling in narrative therapy. White and Epston (1990) propose the approach of externalising problems and reframing one's personal story. Eleanor unconsciously begins to distance herself from her traumatic past and envisions a future of healing and self-compassion. An instance where she felt the hand of her boyfriend Raymond on her shoulder, "it felt a warm imprint," (Honeyman, 2017, p. 196) captures a tactile moment that vividly portrays closeness. This contrasts sharply with her experience with Declan, her ex-boyfriend from university, who physically abused her and broke her arm, profoundly shaping her perspective on love and trust and revealing a profound disconnect and a sense of disassociation, lacking warmth, consent, and most importantly, empathy. As she re-narrates her past, she reflects, "He made me touch him, told me how and when and where, and I did so. I had no choice in the matter, but I remember feeling like another person at those times, like it wasn't my hand, like it wasn't my body" (196).

This clear depiction offers an immediate juxtaposition to the soothing symbolism depicted in Robert Frost's *Dust of Snow*, where the gentle act of snowflakes from a hemlock tree represents a moment of unforeseen change, a power to shift the narrator's day from pessimistic to optimistic. Hence, through the narratives of Eleanor, the spectrum of human touch, from manipulative to restorative, emphasises the potential for physical interactions to either alienate or heal. As she continues to narrate the form of touch, she discovers a touch that brings healing and helps her to feel seen and valued as a person. The contemplation of Raymond's touch creates a powerful backdrop for her journey, symbolising genuine care, meaningful human connection, and the healing power of compassion; "I felt the heat where his hand had been; it was only a moment, but it left a warm imprint, almost as though it might be visible. A human hand was exactly the right weight, exactly the right temperature for touching another person, I realised" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 196).

Eleanor's realisation that physical intimacy does not equal emotional connection and her battle with alcohol stand in stark contrast with previous occurrences in the narrative. Her externalising of these problems reflects narrative therapy's approach of viewing problems as separate from the individual, allowing Eleanor to reconceptualise her experiences and regain control over her life, a significant shift from feeling disconnected to finding a connection.

The aforementioned process resonates with contemporary mental health issues, particularly trauma and recovery, and this discourse, highlighted by Van Der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), reinforces trauma's complexity and the often unpredictable journey towards healing. While the studies indicate that narrative techniques, including storytelling and re-authoring one's experiences, can be instrumental in trauma recovery by providing individuals with a means to process and make sense of their unique journeys (Van Der Kolk, 2014), the novel highlights the importance of empathy and social connection. This aligns with research justifying the therapeutic power of empathy, defined as the "visceral or emotional experience of another person's feelings. It is, in a sense, an automatic mirroring of another's emotion, like tearing up at a friend's sadness" (Seppala, 2013). Raymond's words to Eleanor, "You do realise, Eleanor, that those are not your only options, don't you? Not all men are like Declan, you know," (Honeyman, 2017, p. 197)

beautifully captures the power of empathy, going beyond mere understanding and instead actively immersing oneself in Eleanor's emotional journey, prompting her to reevaluate her outlook shaped by past experiences as she states "In my mind's eye, I saw the musician bringing me freesias, kissing the nape of my neck" (197).

Eleanor's journey further reflects the growing discourse on mental health awareness and the destigmatisation of seeking help. Her hesitation and eventual openness to discussing her experiences of being with her younger sister, Marianne and her mother before death and after death over the telephone with Dr Maria reflect societal shifts towards recognising the importance of mental health and the value of therapy (Corrigan, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The novel, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017), dismantling simplistic narratives of recovery from complex trauma, presents Eleanor's struggles and triumphs with a multifaceted and non-linear portrait of healing. This aligns with Herman's (1992) recognition that recovery is not linear but requires multiple stages of safety, remembrance, and reconnection. Eleanor's warped vision of the world, mirrored in the nonsensical world of *Through the Looking Glass*, emphasises the need for fostering supportive communities and genuine connections. Carroll's text functions as an allegory of dissociation and fractured perception, illustrating the destabilising impact of trauma on symbolic order. These connections, like a guiding hand through the looking glass, can assist individuals with complex trauma in finding their path to real-life recovery. While Eleanor's subconscious defences and coping mechanisms initially isolate her from establishing meaningful relationships, as the novel progresses, Raymond's unwavering kindness, empathy, and support, and Dr Maria's guidance, put Eleanor back on her journey towards social integration and personal growth. Raymond embodies the 'good-enough other' (Winnicott, 1965), whose reliability gradually dismantles Eleanor's isolation. This further highlights the sustaining presence of relational networks in recovery. Furthermore, the novel opens the door to exploring the therapeutic potential inherent in storytelling, promoting consideration of the ethical implications of fictionalising mental health experiences. Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) suggests that re-authoring trauma through story provides agency and coherence to survivors otherwise entrapped in silence.

The analysis is underpinned by the study's theoretical framework that draws on psychoanalytic theory, attachment theory, and trauma studies, offering insights into Eleanor's coping strategies, relational struggles, and non-linear path to recovery. It encourages a review of how mental health narratives have evolved in modern literature, highlighting the delicate balance between representation and sensitivity in portraying mental health. Ultimately, the novel emphasises the importance of authentic narratives that foster understanding and empathy.

In this way, Honeyman's work contributes to contemporary trauma literature's ethical project: transforming private suffering into a shared ground of recognition, thereby highlighting the transformative role of literature in negotiating trauma and identity, while affirming that social integration and growth remain central to Eleanor's journey and to the broader discourse on recovery.

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