

HONEYMAN, Gail. *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*. London: HarperCollins, 2018.

OH, LOOK AT ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE: *ELEANOR OLIPHANT IS COMPLETELY FINE* BY GAIL HONEYMAN REVIEW

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Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* had already been the cause of a considerable stir in the literary world before it was first published in May 2017. The Scottish writer's manuscript engendered a bidding war between major publishers that saw HarperCollins as the final winner. Earning rave reviews from newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*, the Scottish author's debut novel appears to have touched upon themes readers had been eager to see portrayed in fiction for some time. We soon learn that the protagonist – Eleanor Oliphant – is more than a bit odd. She is a textbook outcast as some might say. From the outset, the endearing unreliable narrator hints at a dark past and a traumatic event that redefined the path her life would take. A complicated and affection-deprived childhood helped mould Miss Oliphant's character. Eleanor's past and its horrors begin to take shape and become clearer as the plot progresses. The title character's troubles and anxiety towards conceiving what would be appreciated as appropriate behaviour in social interactions as well as the dimension of her loneliness might strike a chord with some of the readers' own routines. Honeyman sheds a light upon the fact that in our day and age it is pointless to pretend loneliness is something reserved exclusively for elderly people in nursing homes. Eleanor is perfectly candid while stating that her free time and weekends would go by without any sort of human interaction besides the brief exchanges with bus drivers or shop clerks. While Oliphant did not even own a computer at the beginning of the novel (she only becomes interested in browsing the internet after developing a crush on a singer from a band),

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Honeyman inevitably leads one to think of the unfulfilled promises of living online. That is, while we are all somewhat connected, in some ways we could not be further apart. The question of Eleanor being completely fine in her isolation or not brings the character nearer to her companion on the other side of the page – the reader. While we might guarantee in witty Twitter posts that all is well, we are a confused society. Judging by the number of young people suffering from anxiety disorders and depression, it is not absurd to suggest that millennials, a generation sandwiched between a mostly analogic era and the explosion of the internet, are not fine at all.

Eleanor Oliphant deems herself a “self-contained entity”. She does not interact with her co-workers more than it is strictly necessary and lives alone. At the beginning of the novel, she shares the fact that no one had been in her flat that year apart from service professionals. Eleanor begins telling her story after everything changes unexpectedly. She had just found love the night before the day our story begins in the form of Johnny Lomond, the singer of a local band. There is something oddly comical in the fact that, on the verge of turning thirty, the usually highly critical and overly formal Eleanor develops a teenage crush on a man from a band. At first, Eleanor explains her infatuation with Johnny as an attempt to please her mother whom she refers to and addresses as *Mummy*. This is a character she only contacts via 15 minutes-long phone calls every Wednesday night. They talk, and mummy dearest will invariably put her daughter down. She is in a bad place for bad people, Eleanor declares somewhat cryptically. However, the actual whereabouts and circumstances of Eleanor’s mother later prove to be a crucial element of the plot that should probably not be discussed in a critical review as it would give away too much of the novel’s intricacies. From the point Eleanor decides Lomond is the personification of her happier future, she begins making changes in her appearance and behaviour in a preparation to become more suitable for an attractive male she does not actually know. Most of what Oliphant assumes about Lomond comes from daydreams and romantic scenarios she plays out in her head. The closest thing to an interaction between them is her reading of his self-indulgent tweets whilst pining over his Instagram pictures. Concomitantly, a parallel subplot begins to develop. The human bonds she forges throughout it burst Miss Oliphant’s fantasy of self-sufficiency and help her strengthen the “threads that tether her to the planet”, as she puts it. Raymond Gibbons, the

office's new IT technician, takes a liking to Eleanor and unlike her other co-workers makes a considerable effort to become – and stay – her friend. At first annoyed at Mr. Gibbons attentions as she likes to keep to herself and is mostly absorbed by the Lomond transformation saga, Eleanor slowly begins to appreciate having a friend. The two become closer after they help an elderly pedestrian who becomes ill and falls whilst crossing the street. After he recovers, this gentleman called Sam also becomes a friend of Eleanor's. She slowly becomes weaving a life of her own away from the gruesome, painful memories that the large scar on her face usually brings back to her. In her odd ways, Eleanor seems to be on an unplanned quest to find a place for herself where she can stop feeling as a permanent outsider. Eleanor's traumatic experiences are her own. However, the sensation of living on the outskirts of society's standards and the choice of alienation and numbness over the possibility of rejection and emotional distress are in tune with our times' own brand of loneliness. Oliphant's entire world structure relies on small tokens of safety granted by her routine: pasta with pesto and salad for dinner and *The Archers* on Radio 4 on weekdays. A margherita pizza purchased at Tesco every Friday night plus two bottles of Glen's vodka spread throughout Saturday and Sunday so that she is never drunk nor sober. Yet, Eleanor wants a significant change in her life. With that in mind, it appears that the Johnny Lomond obsession was about more than just trying to please her mother. It was also a way to fight her own inertia.

Besides her contemporary approach to loneliness, another of Honeyman's accomplishments on *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* is the way in which the author establishes a dialogue with the literary tradition and pop culture. At first glance, Eleanor's name evokes The Beatles' classic song on loneliness, "Eleanor Rigby", while also opening the door to intertextuality with Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) after the protagonist declares the novel is "one of her favourites" at the beginning of Chapter 13. She comments on the scarcity of heroines called Eleanor in any of the variant spellings of the name and states that she loves the story of Elinor and Marianne. As the plot progresses, the reader realises that the name Marianne is also meaningful in the context of Miss Oliphant's life story. In that sense, her considerations about Austen's literary prowess also work as a sort of foreshadowing. *Jane Eyre* (1847) is also referenced as Eleanor perceives similarities between her childhood and personality and those of Charlotte Brontë's heroine. Finally, there is a

remarkable reference to Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!", described by Eleanor as a beautiful poem that combines two elements of which she is fond: punctuation and "the theme of finding, at long last, a soul mate". By openly referencing three authors who played a significant role in establishing a tradition for women writers in the Western canon, Gail Honeyman does more than to hint at their influence on her as writer. She also allows the reader to acknowledge Eleanor as a strong female character of the same order of the Dashwood sisters or Jane Eyre, one who sees herself reflected within the lines of Dickinson's *sui generis* poetic oeuvre.

Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine is as a successful literary effort from Gail Honeyman, one that manages to address the undeniably contemporary theme of widespread loneliness and isolation with wit and sagacity. Although the subplot of Eleanor's relationship with her mother has a *denouement* that might come out to some as a slightly inferior demonstration of the author's fiction-making ability when compared to the rest of the novel, it remains an astonishing work of fiction that deserves all the compliments it has been gathering since it was first published as well as the Costa First Novel Award it earned last year. *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* is a hymn to the beauty of being different, an outcast or a dissonant voice. In times like ours, odes to tolerance and self-acceptance such as this are direly needed. One can only hope Honeyman's pen presents and surprises us with more of her fine writing in years to come.