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María Magdalena Flores Quesada

Universidad de Málaga, España

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4156-1352>

Eleanor Oliphant Is not that Fine: Exploring the Transformative Potential of Vulnerability in Gail Honeyman's Debut (2017)

≈ Abstract

This article explores the notion of vulnerability as a condition of potential and openness towards personal transformation and connection with others. The current approach to the notion of vulnerability focuses on challenging and re-orienting its restrictively negative connotation, as the works by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (2017) or Erinn Gilson (2016), among many others, have shown. The notion has also proved useful in connection with political or social action (Butler 2020), as well as in the framework of ethical philosophy (Maillard 2011; Le Blanc 2011). However, analysing vulnerability in contemporary literary works can be problematic, as sometimes the complexity of the notion hinders the representation of the character's journey through good and bad. In this article, my aim is to peruse Gail Honeyman's debut novel, *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017), which has received little critical attention on this area in spite of its popularity following its publication. Addressing the ideal of invulnerability, the connection between vulnerability and social isolation, its movement towards openness to the other and its portrayal through formal choices, I argue that this text is an example of how contemporary literary works of British fiction contribute to portraying the potential that can be found in experiences of vulnerability.

Keywords:

vulnerability; resilience; potential; Gail Honeyman; Eleanor Oliphant

≈ Resumen

Este artículo explora la noción de vulnerabilidad como condición de potencial y de apertura hacia la transformación personal y la conexión con los demás. La aproximación actual a la noción de vulnerabilidad se centra en cuestionar y reorientar su connotación restrictivamente negativa, como han demostrado los trabajos de Jean-Michel Ganteau y Susana Onega (2017) o Erinn Gilson (2016), entre muchos otros. La noción también se ha mostrado útil en relación con la acción política o social (Butler 2020), así como en el marco de la filosofía ética (Maillard 2011; Le Blanc 2011). Sin embargo, analizar la vulnerabilidad en obras literarias contemporáneas puede resultar problemático, ya que en ocasiones la complejidad de la noción dificulta la representación del recorrido del personaje por lo bueno y lo malo. En este artículo, mi objetivo es examinar detenidamente la novela debut de Gail Honeyman *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017), que ha recibido poca atención crítica en este ámbito a pesar de su popularidad tras su publicación. Abordando el ideal de invulnerabilidad, la conexión entre vulnerabilidad y aislamiento social, su movimiento hacia la apertura al otro y su representación a través de elecciones formales, sostengo que este texto es un ejemplo de cómo las obras literarias contemporáneas de ficción británica contribuyen a retratar el potencial que puede encontrarse en las experiencias de vulnerabilidad.

Palabras clave:

vulnerabilidad; resiliencia; potencial; Gail Honeyman; Eleanor Oliphant

Social interaction is essential for the development of one's sense of a fulfilled life. Having significant social relationships provides a feeling of belonging. On the contrary, loneliness has proved to provoke direct negative consequences on the subject's physical and psychological well-being (Fromm Reichmann 1959; Heinrich and Gullone 2006). Eleanor Oliphant, the protagonist of Gail Honeyman's debut novel describes loneliness as a contemporary illness: "These days, loneliness is the new cancer – a shameful, embarrassing thing, brought upon yourself in some obscure way" (Honeyman 2017, 270). Her loneliness is the result of an extended social marginalisation caused by different reasons the novel gradually discloses. As a consequence, Eleanor can be seen as a marginalised member of society. The novel portrays Eleanor's desperate longing for human contact as well as her painstaking attempts to conceal it through a functional and distracting routine, heavy drinking and an avid imagination.

Despite the protagonist's efforts at claiming that, as the title indicates, she is "completely fine", Eleanor's vulnerability is soon evident to the reader. As the novel unfolds, the facade the protagonist has constructed proves no longer useful, and she is forced to recognise her vulnerable position to move on. Behind the protagonist's shield of autonomy lies a desperate need for human connection and healing. Thus, Eleanor can be seen as a vulnerable character that manages to survive and experience personal transformation.

I argue in this article that the protagonist's transformative inner process is supported and put to the fore by a series of formal choices that make the novel a "vulnerable text" (Ganteau 2015, 173), that is, a work of fiction that not only portrays vulnerability but also performs it aesthetically through structure, intertextuality and other formal choices. These choices, which often provoke the reader's lack of understanding, confusion, weariness or uneasiness, can put the text at risk of rejection, given that, as Rita Felski contends, "[a]n aesthetic that assaults our psyches and assails our vulnerabilities turns out to be all too vulnerable to the vagaries of audience response" (2008, 131).

This multi-layered expression of vulnerability through both content and form allows us to explore the protagonist's transformative process from different perspectives. Through my analysis, I seek to demonstrate that the goal of invulnerability is fruitless and unattainable. Instead, I argue that the novel rejects the ideal of autonomy and independence to explore how it is necessary to think about human relations in ethical terms through responsibility, interdependence, vulnerability and care. I suggest reading Eleanor's transformative process as an example of an ambivalent vulnerability that moves from closure to openness, as a site of both weakness and development, open to external interaction, to responsibility, care and the other's vulnerability. I will apply Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's conceptualisation of dispossession in the light of the criteria used by Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau in their introduction to *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* as a possible positive openness to the other (2017, 8).

I will explore Eleanor's physical, psychological and social vulnerability relying on Guillaume Le Blanc's conceptualisation of *l'exclu* [the outcast].¹ Eleanor's isolation will be then aligned with social exclusion and invisibility. As a marginalised and forgotten member of society, Eleanor's can be seen as an "ungrievable life"

(Butler 2009, 31), a life whose loss barely counts as human, being lived in isolation.

With this multidisciplinary approach that combines ethics, sociology and textual analysis I want to demonstrate how literary texts like Gail Honeyman's portray the potential that can be found in experiences of vulnerability. I argue that, whereas vulnerability and dispossession underline our inescapable condition as "relational and interdependent beings" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 3), it is precisely the experience of vulnerability that can be used to find personal development and ethical connection. By understanding vulnerability as ambivalent and potential, the subject can turn towards a more positive, future-oriented and interconnected reality.

The Impossibility of Invulnerability

At the beginning of the novel, Eleanor behaves as a fully functional person by avoiding problems that soon come to the fore. Eleanor is a very intelligent woman; she is almost thirty, has a permanent job, a comfortable house and a meticulous routine from Monday to Sunday with which she seems quite satisfied. The text also performs this apparent normalcy by using a chronological narrative in the first person that helps to support the persona Eleanor constructs. However, this very well-organised routine also includes stockpiling painkillers, heavy alcohol consumption and social isolation. She lacks any human interaction outside her workplace: "No one's been in my flat this year apart from service professionals; I've not voluntarily invited another human being across the threshold, except to read the meter" (Honeyman 2017, 5). She spends the weekends completely alone, having no word with any human being until Monday arrives. Her co-workers tend to ignore her or make fun of her, and her interactions with complete strangers in shops or public transport often end up in misunderstandings due to her lack of social skills.

This soon creates a gap between Eleanor's narrative and readers' perception of the truth, which at the same time creates a double effect: first, the narrative often results comical, despite the crudity of some passages. This comic relief comes from Eleanor's overly judgemental attitude, an exaggerated practicality to address most situations and a profound lack of knowledge about basic social conventions and references. For example, when visiting a patient in hospital she decides to give him a packet of cheese slices as a present because "all men like cheese" (Honeyman 2017, 191). This serves to alleviate the emotional charge of some situations while the text also evinces the vulnerability of an isolated character. The second effect is one of narrative unreliability, given that Eleanor constantly reinforces the idea of being independent, autonomous, fully functional and "fine" by constantly reasserting it, typically right after particularly sad or isolating moments, such as: "I sat on my own and no one asked me to dance and I was absolutely fine with that" (Honeyman 2017, 41), or "I had no one, and it was futile to wish it were otherwise [...]. And, really, I was fine, fine, fine" (Honeyman 2017, 160). This provokes an empathic approach towards the character, at the same time that the narrative evinces Eleanor's unresolved issues and how her shield of invulnerability always seems on the brink of collapse.

Despite all this, on the outside Eleanor manages to give the image of self-sufficiency and even superiority on behalf of loneliness disguised as independence:

Some people, weak people, fear solitude. What they fail to understand is that there's something very liberating about it; once you realize that you don't need anyone, you can take care of yourself. That's the thing: it's *best* just to take care of yourself. You can't protect other people, however hard you try. (Honeyman 2017, 159; emphasis in the original)

As this quote shows, the protagonist identifies vulnerability and solitude with weakness and equates freedom and independence with self-autonomy and lack of responsibility for the other. It can be said that Eleanor strives to resist fragility and isolation through denial of her real needs and limitations. In this attempt to reject her vulnerable side, in this part of the novel Eleanor aims at a constant state of invulnerability, understood as “closure to those modes of being affected that bring us into contact with our own vulnerability most vividly” (Gilson 2014, 76). As Erinn Gilson explains, the pursuit of invulnerability involves a negative understanding of vulnerability in the first place: “binding vulnerability to ideas of weakness, incapacity, passivity, and powerlessness is both reductive and facilitates denials of vulnerability and rejections of responsibility” (2014, 37). Understood as such, the attempt to construct an invulnerable living state involves a deliberate ignorance of vulnerability.

As Gilson and Nancy Tuana have demonstrated, there are different types of ignorance as well as different types of invulnerability. It is then important to clarify that Eleanor's intentional ignorance of vulnerability does not align with Tuana's conceptualisation of “willful ignorance” (2006, 11), which is exercised by someone in a position of privilege to maintain this status at the expense of the oppression of others. On the contrary, Eleanor's ignorance of her vulnerability and her closure towards others' needs has to do with a desperate attempt to protect herself from external exploitation, which, it is later discovered, comes from a traumatic past. Her ignorance is then “a rejection that functions to resist rather than collude in oppression” (Gilson 2006, 88).

By embracing this attitude, the protagonist echoes a model that has been present in the fields of ethics and political thinking since the Kantian theories of justice: that of the rational and self-autonomous subject. After Carol Gilligan's pioneering revision of the traditional theories of psychological development and moral behaviour, and her subsequent distinction between the theories of justice and the ethics of care (1982, 73), many authors have established characteristics to define and distinguish both models. Among them, Grace Clement has outlined three main differences that characterise the subject in the two models: first, the subject in the ethics of justice approaches moral problems abstractly, drawing from universal principles, whereas, in the ethics of care, the subject takes the specific context into account. Secondly, the theories of justice take social relationships and the ties of responsibility they establish as something voluntary, whereas the ethics of care understands that the subject does not always choose personal engagements with others (like family), which creates certain imposed responsibilities that must be recognised. Thirdly, the model of justice takes equality as its main value, understanding that all subjects are autonomous and independent, while the ethics of care fosters attention to the needs of the other (1996, 11–21).

Nathalie Maillard, in her study of vulnerability as a potential new moral category, also examines the ethics of care in contrast with the theories of justice. Apart from the distinctions that Clement makes regarding the subject, for Maillard it is the relationship towards the other that distinguishes the two models. After reconsidering Emmanuel Levinas's and Paul Ricoeur's theories of alterity, she concludes that how the subject addresses the other in both models is significantly different: in the theories of justice, the relationship with the other is a relationship between equals where the self must respect the other's autonomy and rights; in the ethics of care, the relationship with the other is asymmetrical, as the other is always vulnerable and dependent (2011, 180). She concludes that endorsing one approach by fully rejecting the other can be problematic. The main reason is that there is a multi-layered vulnerability that emanates from human life that cannot be avoided, not even by the rational autonomous subject:

... puisque c'est parce que nous sommes des êtres naturels et relationnels que nous avons des besoins; [...] si nous étions de purs esprits menant des existences hors du temps, délivrés des contingences naturelles et sans besoins d'aucune sorte; si nous étions par ailleurs des êtres 'ontologiquement autonomes', nous serions alors des êtres invulnérables. (Maillard 2011, 199)

[... it is because we are natural and relational beings that we have needs; [...] if we were pure spirits leading timeless existences, free from natural contingencies and without needs of any kind; if we were otherwise 'ontologically autonomous' beings, we would be invulnerable beings.]

Because we are physically, socially and anthropologically vulnerable, she suggests instead an understanding of the subject and the other as both autonomous and vulnerable at the same time (2011, 364).

Following the previous distinction, it can be observed that at this point of the novel, the protagonist is more identified with the autonomous subject of the theories of justice. She remains distant from relationships of dependence, and she rejects others' vulnerability as well as her own. Far from recognising her own needs or weaknesses, Eleanor lives in a constant attempt to conceal her real emotions. This will gradually transform through openness towards the other and recognition of her own limitations. Thus, the novel seems to suggest that the model of the autonomous and independent subject cannot last.

Forced Isolation: Eleanor as an Outcast

Eleanor's main hindrance to openness and transformation resides in her lack of abilities at socialisation. She struggles with social conventions and behaves in an overly eccentric and often socially inappropriate manner. Although details in Eleanor's characterisation may align with someone on the autism spectrum, Honeyman has clearly stated otherwise: “Eleanor isn't anywhere on the spectrum ... She is the product of nurture, not nature” (Woods 2018). Thus, the novel seems to point in the direction that she is, simply, a marginalised character that is used to her position as a misfit.

In this sense, Eleanor could fit into the category of what Guillaume Le Blanc describes as *l'exclu* [the outcast], “un humain pas tout à fait comme les autres” [a human being not quite like the others] (2011, 19). According to Le Blanc, being excluded is being left outside of social normalcy (2011, 25). In the novel, it is constantly reminded that although Eleanor is a woman, she does not feel fully human to the point of feeling annoyed by “human smells” at a hospital (Honeyman 2017, 70–1) or “human mating rituals” (Honeyman 2017, 73) when she sees people flirting, to name just some examples, as if human life was completely alien to her. In fact, she ultimately aims at “successful camouflage as a human woman” (Honeyman 2017, 30), suggesting that she stands out as something different. Social normalcy, which establishes which lives are considered either ordinary or precarious (Le Blanc 2007, 22–3), constitutes the quality of one’s life, exposing the subject in different degrees to potential exploitation, exclusion or social invisibility. Eleanor’s extreme lack of personal connection evinces her position as a marginalised character. This becomes quite obvious in the novel when Eleanor’s solitude gets her to question her own existence:

I do exist, don't I? It often feels as if I'm not here, that I'm a figment of my own imagination. There are days when I feel so lightly connected to the earth that the threads that tether me to the planet are gossamer thin, spun sugar. (Honeyman 2017, 5)

Although the formal representation of vulnerability will be later explored in depth, it is worth observing that, as seen in this quote, the novel is written in the first person, often using a confessional tone. This, according to Ganteau following Thomas Couser, is a predominant narrative form for representing vulnerability (Ganteau 2015, 23). This seems to suggest that the novel will ultimately give voice to vulnerability, evincing the protagonist’s social isolation, despite Eleanor’s effort to conceal it.

In their recent study of contemporary anglophone fiction, Ganteau and Onega put Le Blanc’s philosophy in dialogue with Judith Butler’s famous notion of “ungrievability” (2023, 6), a connection that is relevant for this purpose. Butler has redefined the concept in her latest book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, to reaffirm that there is a “radically unequal distribution of ungrievability” (2020, 75). According to Butler, “the ungrievable are those whose loss would leave no trace, or perhaps barely a trace” (2020, 75) and, therefore, their lives are considered less valuable, or more “lose-able” (Butler 2009, 31). As Ganteau and Onega contend, ungrievability is always “enmeshed in the social” (2023, 3) and, therefore, dependent on the subject’s relationality. Considering Eleanor’s state of social exclusion, especially at the beginning of the novel, as an outcast that questions her own existence, Honeyman’s protagonist can clearly be seen as an ungrievable character. Eleanor even reflects explicitly on this question in the novel at some point seeing herself as an ungrievable life: “When I ceased to exist, it would make no material difference to anyone. Most people’s absence from the world would be felt on a personal level by at least a handful of people. I, however, had no one” (Honeyman 2017, 268).

Le Blanc talks about this form of exclusion as a double or “vulnérabilité excessive” [excessive vulnerability] (2011, 10), an exclusion that comes from both internal and external sources and

that makes the subject both socially and psychologically vulnerable. But also, and more importantly in the reading of the novel, is the idea that being this vulnerable as an outcast means standing at the point where living and surviving become indistinguishable (Le Blanc 2011, 49). It is then significant that Eleanor constantly describes herself as a survivor: “I’m a sole survivor – I’m Eleanor Oliphant” (Honeyman 2017, 8), “I was happy being alone. Eleanor Oliphant, sole survivor – that’s me” (Honeyman 2017, 169).

This idea of life as survival makes more sense considering how, as Ganteau demonstrates, characters’ quest for survival is a common trope in works of British fiction that perform textual vulnerability (2015, 168). As the novel unfolds, the first-person narrator gives away vague details about a traumatic past that seems to be responsible for her social awkwardness and unemotional behaviour. Eleanor makes references to a fire, a childhood in foster care and an abusive relationship with a man in her youth. All this situates Eleanor in the position of a survivor.

These traumatic experiences have left both physical and psychological wounds. She refers to a voice damaged by smoke inhalation (Honeyman 2017, 85) together with a face that is “a scarred palimpsest of fire” (Honeyman 2017, 30). Her psychological vulnerability also stands out: “There are scars on my heart, just as thick, as disfiguring as those on my face. I know they’re there” (Honeyman 2017, 85). These psychological wounds are more paralyzing for her. As Azizah has explored, Eleanor makes use of different coping mechanisms such as denial, repression or displacement, among others (2021, 35–45).

However, even if Eleanor tries to conceal her traumatic memories, the past keeps returning to her as a ghostly disruptor in her routine that she cannot quite avoid. When she seems to disentangle some of her concealed memories in a vague flashback, she quickly punishes herself for having emotions: “Ridiculous, Eleanor. It was disappointing that I had allowed myself, even for a moment, to indulge in sentimentality” (Honeyman 2017, 27). This is why the past marks Eleanor’s routine. As an outcast, Eleanor finds herself “sans avenir” [without a future] (Le Blanc 2011, 51), unable to imagine an alternative better life. She also lives in the constant loop of trauma, which, according to Marianne Hirsch, creates “a sense of inexorable repetition of the past in the present and future in which injury cannot be healed or repaired but lives on, shattering worlds in its take” (2016, 80).

Evident proof of this is her dysfunctional relationship with her abusive mother. Only at the end is it revealed that she has been long dead. However, according to Eleanor, her mother contacts her once a week from some mysterious institution and, even if these conversations are abusive and provoke psychological and physical pain in her, she seems to be unable to avoid them: “However much I might wish it were otherwise, she always managed to get through to me in the end” (Honeyman 2017, 33). Not only that but her mother’s words and behaviour resonate in every decision Eleanor makes or every opinion she has; “Mummy always said” is a sentence she constantly repeats in the novel. The past, then, lives rampant in Eleanor’s apparent “fine” life.

As an attempt to make Mummy “thrilled” (Honeyman 2017, 8), Eleanor develops an obsessive and platonic love for Johnnie Lomond, a musician she has never met in real life. She makes efforts to fit into the traditional standards of attractive

femininity by changing her hair, clothes, and makeup. This desperate quest for love, “a crush which seems more appropriate for a girl of thirteen than a woman of thirty” (Macmillan 2021, 48), seems odd and infantile, compared to the intelligence Eleanor exhibits at other points of the narrative. However, this platonic love functions as another coping mechanism through which she tries to project what an ideal escape from her past-oriented self would look like. As Marcela Santos Brigida puts it, Lomond becomes “the personification of her brighter future” (2018, 2) and “a way to fight her own inertia” (2018, 3).

This fantasy eventually also fails her, demonstrating once more that repressing one’s vulnerability cannot succeed. This gives way to the second part of the novel, which is entitled “Bad Days”. This section opens with a clear image of vulnerability: Eleanor is lying on the floor of her house, naked and curled up in a foetal position, which is a recurrent form to portray vulnerability in narrative (Ganteau 2015, 140). She has drunk several bottles of vodka with painkillers in a failed attempt at suicide. It is at this point that Eleanor’s past comes back with more force and the traumatic flashbacks are tinged with a sense of guilt that she cannot fully locate. Her state corresponds here to a model of vulnerability that Barbara Misztal, following Hannah Arendt, calls the irreversibility of the traumatic past:

The predicament of irreversibility endows an ordinary life with past pains and suffering [...]. This form of vulnerability stems from painful experiences that diminish the emotional capacities of individuals, lower the possibilities for realizing our individuality and reduce the chances of collaborative relationships with others who are seen either as responsible for our traumas and emotional vulnerability or as wounded or damaged by us. (2011, 95)

Eleanor’s traumas are only fully revealed once she undergoes professional therapy and starts embracing her emotions and opens towards the other.

From Closure to Openness

It was discussed above how invulnerability is conceived as closure (Gilson 2014, 76), and how it portrays a model that the subject cannot embrace for long. In the novel, a movement from closure to openness can be observed. This turn makes the subject be affected by others’ needs and vulnerability as well as by one’s limitations. In that sense, vulnerability is portrayed in the novel as potential, ambivalent and transformative, neither constrained by the narrowing view that Gilson rejects (2014, 37), nor necessarily empowering.

At the beginning of the novel, Eleanor claims: “I don’t need anyone else – there’s no big hole in my life, no missing part of my own particular puzzle. I am a self-contained entity” (Honeyman 2017, 8), showing the emotional barrier she has constructed around herself. However, as the novel progresses, Eleanor can no longer ignore “the missing part” that makes her completely vulnerable: personal connections with others. This lack is soon filled when Eleanor and a new co-worker, Raymond, accidentally witness how an old man named Sammy collapses in the street. They save his life and become involved with him until he passes away. Eleanor finds herself, for the first time since childhood, providing care for another living creature other than her plant, Potty. She starts having

new emotions and recognises vulnerability in the other for the first time: “Surprisingly, I felt an emotion that I recognized as anxiety or connection in relation to this elderly stranger” (Honeyman 2017, 46). Her new friendship with Raymond and Sammy entangles her in functional care dynamics, which deeply contrasts with her own family experience: “How different Raymond’s life had been from mine – a proper family, a mother and a father and a sister, nestled among other proper families. How different it was still; every Sunday, here, this” (Honeyman 2017, 111–2).

This openness aligns with Butler and Athanasiou’s notion of “dispossession” understood as “a form of responsiveness that gives rise to action” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, xi). Following Onega and Ganteau, dispossession can be understood as a capacity to be affected by an encounter with the other (2017, 8), in particular, with the other’s vulnerability. In doing so, in contrast to the “self-contained entity” (Honeyman 2017, 8) that Eleanor claimed to be at the beginning, dispossession creates a new sense of interdependence that makes her attentive to others’ vulnerability at the same time she is more aware of her need for personal interactions.

The encounter with Sammy’s vulnerability and with Raymond’s kindness makes her a recipient and agent of care and responsibility, which at the same time, makes her newly vulnerable: “I felt like a newly laid egg, all swishy and gloopy inside, and so fragile that the slightest pressure could break me” (Honeyman 2017, 224). However, it can be observed here that rather than being a paralysing condition, it is precisely the recognition of vulnerability that enables Eleanor to be more attentive to herself and others.

Through this new sense of vulnerability as openness, Eleanor finally becomes fully conscious of the construct of invulnerability she had previously endorsed, and for the first time allows herself to embrace human vulnerability:

I was gradually getting used to feeling the range of available human emotions, their intensity, the rapidity with which they could change. Until now, anytime that emotions, feelings, had threatened to unsettle me, I’d drink them down fast, drown them. That had allowed me to exist, but I was starting to understand that I needed, wanted, something more than that now. (Honeyman 2017, 314)

As this quote demonstrates, only by recognising and embracing one’s vulnerability can the subject do something to identify its source of exploitation, and transform it into growth and resilience. With the help of Raymond and therapy, Eleanor manages to disentangle her traumatic past, working through her guilt and the memories that had been repressed for many years. She leaves her abusive mother behind and her past-oriented life, marked by trauma, transforms little by little into a new, future-oriented sense of herself, as this quote shows: “underneath it all, like an embryo forming – tiny, so tiny, barely a cluster of cells, the heartbeat as small as the head of a pin, there I was. Eleanor Oliphant” (Honeyman 2017, 374).

Intertextual Vulnerability

As explained above, Ganteau has noted how contemporary works of British fiction also perform a deliberate exposure of vulnerability through form (2015, 23). I argue here that

the transformative process that Eleanor experiences in the novel is also sustained by intertextual references as well as by a special attention to how the novel is structured.

As Ganteau contends, intertextuality is a form of “narrative fragility”, as the text becomes vulnerable by being dependent on previous texts in order to convey its complete meaning and at the same time reflecting human interdependence by evincing textual relationality (2015, 56). Jessica Mason, in her thorough study of intertextuality, uses Honeyman’s debut to exemplify different types of intertextual connections in literary works. She distinguishes between “‘marked’ intertextual references”, “those that are objectively present and overt within written texts or spoken discourse” (2019, 89), and “‘unmarked’ intertextual references”, “[those] that are not explicitly marked out by title or definitive assertion of their presence by an author” (2019, 116). The latter mainly become apparent when Eleanor cannot identify pop-culture references from her co-worker Raymond’s T-shirts. These include Snoopy from *Peanuts* described as “a cartoon dog lying on top of its kennel” (Honeyman 2017, 18), the fictional restaurant “Los Pollos Hermanos” from the television series *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*: “This one was yellow and had two white cartoon cockerels on the front. Los Pollos Hermanos, it said. Nonsensical” (Honeyman 2017, 71), and a slogan supporting Thomas Carcetti, a character from the television series *The Wire*: “This one said *Carcetti for Mayor*. Unfathomable” (Honeyman 2017, 161). Whereas, according to Mason, unmarked references like these contribute to characterisation (2019, 119), for example implicitly portraying Raymond as a fan of popular films, series or comics, it can be

argued that they also go further at evincing some of Eleanor’s shortcomings. For example, her failure at recognising Snoopy may indicate certain lacks in her childhood, and her inability to recognise popular referents reinforces her disconnection with socially normal interactions. The use of words like “nonsensical” or “unfathomable” in the previous quotes also seems to stress Eleanor’s judgemental attitude and her apparent complete lack of interest in fixing her social isolation.

The dependence of *Eleanor Oliphant* on other texts can also be seen in more explicit intertextual references. A good example of “marked” intertextuality, as Mason explains, is the epigraph to the novel, two quotations taken from Olivia Laing’s *The Lonely City* (2016) which, according to Mason, act as a warning to take the title of the novel with caution and to associate the protagonist with the feeling of loneliness. I would add that the intertextuality here once again underlines the impossibility of autonomy, isolation and invulnerability and anticipates the key to Eleanor’s transformative salvation: “loneliness is hallmarked by an intense desire to bring the experience to a close; something which cannot be achieved [...] but only by developing intimate connections” (Honeyman 2017, n.p.). However, there are other marked intertextual references that I consider significant. The first one occurs when Eleanor visits Raymond’s mother’s neighbourhood and realises all streets are named after famous poets: “Wordsworth Lane, Shelley Close, Keats Rise” (Honeyman 2017, 101). While she associates these poets and the people who live there with positive ideas, she considers the following for herself: “Based on past experience, I’d be more likely to end up living in Dante Lane or Poe Crescent” (Honeyman 2017, 101). This reference would be associated instead with fire, hell, fear or traumatic events, which are only hinted at here and revealed later on. However, this reference serves to challenge the autodiegetic narrator’s reliability, who, as explained above,

constantly reminds the reader how “fine” she is. The positive association with English romantic poets also connects with Paul Rozenberg’s study of romantic literature and vulnerability, which, as Ganteau summarises, consists of understanding romantic vulnerability as “both a political and ethical tool” (2015, 20). Rozenberg sees the English Romantic writers as an important inspiration in understanding life and salvation without suffering, as well as a way of resisting oppression (1980, 113–4). Thus, the romantic intertext here seems to suggest that Eleanor is looking for ways to resist her isolation and heal her suffering.

The second explicit or “marked” (Mason 2019, 89) literary work on which *Eleanor Oliphant* relies is Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). This is Eleanor’s favourite book and her common source of comfort: “I could open up the novel at any page and immediately know *where I was in the story*, could almost visualize the next sentence before I reached it” (Honeyman 2017, 82; my emphasis). Although Lauren Cameron sees *Eleanor Oliphant* as a direct contemporary adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (2021, 65–86), I believe this best exemplifies an act of recognition (Felski 2008, 23). Going back to the previous quote, an intended ambiguity can be observed in the sentence “where I was in the story”, meaning both the point in the reading and the internal identification with the characters in the narrative. Taking the latter into account, Eleanor’s inclination to read *Jane Eyre* once again can be understood as an act of recognition, which according to Felski is “seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading” (2008, 23). This theory is later justified by Eleanor’s analysis of Brontë’s famous bildungsroman:

Jane Eyre. A strange child, difficult to love. A lonely only child. She’s left to deal with so much pain at such a young age – the aftermath of death, the absence of love. It’s Mr. Rochester who gets burned in the end. I know how that feels. All of it. (Honeyman 2017, 82)

This direct identification with the fictional character is more explicit than two other marked intertextual references that also appear in the novel: Eleanor mentions Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and notes Austen’s singularity for choosing her name in a different spelling for one of her heroines, identifying herself then with Elinor. Quite significantly, she also remarks on how much she loves the story of “Elinor and Marianne [where] [i]t all ends [unrealistically] happily” (Honeyman 2017, 135). Here the intertextual reference serves to foreshadow Eleanor and her sister Marianne’s alternative traumatic ending. As Macmillan points out, Austen’s intertextual reference also suggests that Eleanor embodies Elinor’s main traits, namely, judgement, intelligence and reason, whereas Marianne’s more emotional attributes are lost to Eleanor once her sister dies (2021, 54–5). The last marked intertextual reference to be discussed also seems to suggest Eleanor’s longing for Marianne. Eleanor directly references Emily Dickinson’s poem “Wild Nights – Wild Nights” (1861). Even if she thinks of the poem in the context of her platonic love for the musician, she comments on how it revolves around “the theme of finding, at long last, a soul mate” (Honeyman 2017, 138). Knowing that, as commented above, her story with Lomond is only a coping mechanism, the longing for a soul mate seems to be more connected to her late sister.

As Santos Brigida claims, these references show that there is a deliberate interest in identifying Eleanor with strong

female characters created by women writers who transformed the Western literary canon (2018, 4). There is also a romantic intertext that can be drawn from these three references. In *Jane Eyre*, *Sense and Sensibility* and “Wild Nights – Wild Nights”, an open evocation to romantic love can be observed: Jane Eyre’s loneliness, Marianne’s passion, Elinor’s coldness and the wildness at work in the poem can be all seen as different manifestations of human vulnerability that Eleanor constantly conceals. By focusing on those works and heroines, Eleanor also seems to be expressing her vulnerability in the shape of longing for romantic connection.

All these examples of intertextuality evince the novel’s formal vulnerability, as the text depends on the reader’s knowledge of previous works to understand it. At the same time, the intertextual references serve to portray the main character’s vulnerability. In this way, the formal choices of the narrative also point to how Eleanor’s goal of invulnerability is condemned to fail.

The structure of the novel also serves to suggest how Eleanor’s transformative process is in the end successful and how vulnerability is not necessarily constrained to negative experiences. Divided into three sections, the novel moves from “Good Days” to “Bad Days” to end with “Better Days”, suggesting with those titles that embracing one’s vulnerability is a necessary step to achieve improvement and transformation. The novel seems to sustain Le Blanc’s approach, namely, that it is necessary to recognise ourselves as vulnerable in physical, psychological and social ways to understand that exclusion is also common to all (2011, 13).

The first section is marked by Eleanor’s attempts to demonstrate her invulnerability, as mentioned above, whereas the second focuses on Eleanor’s lowest point following her failed suicide. Quite significantly, whereas the first part of the novel is organised into short and chronological chapters marked by Eleanor’s judgemental tone of superiority, in the second section the chapters are interrupted, disjointed and there is not a clear sense of time. Eleanor’s narrative voice is disoriented, less reliable and insecure. The novel here once again performs the vulnerability it portrays in fiction in the way Ganteau anticipated, through the poetics of “narrative vulnerability” (2015, 24). Thus, the use of repetition, fragmentation, disjointed time and omissions stands out in this section of the novel. The third and last part of the novel only takes the last ten pages of the book. However, it is important to show the transformative potential of vulnerability.

Although the resolution seems a little rushed for a person in such a troubled state, its title seems to suggest a promising future. In the last pages we can observe Eleanor as a resilient character who has already accepted her past, which is at last fully revealed. The end of the novel sustains Boris Cyrulnik’s conceptualisation of resilience, namely that a subject’s flourishing is not tantamount to invulnerability but entangled with vulnerability, as “une blessure qui sert de référence” [a wound that serves as a reference] (2001/2, 81–2). In other words, at the end of the novel Eleanor is both “fragilisée et rearmée” [undermined and rearmed] (Le Blanc 2011, 125), demonstrating that vulnerability and agency can co-exist (2011, 157) and that care and empowerment should not be mutually exclusive (2011, 179).² This indicates that the past will no longer haunt Eleanor because she no longer needs to employ any repressive mechanism to survive. Instead, she realises this is the only way to be, once for real, completely fine, as this last quote shows: “I’m fine [...] obviously, I’ve got a lot of things to work through, very serious things [...]. Essentially though I’m fine now.

Fine’, I repeated, stressing the word because, at last, it was true” (Honeyman 2017, 380–1).

Conclusion

A multi-layered analysis of Gail Honeyman’s *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* has served to support the interpretation of vulnerability as an ambivalent notion. As such, it is difficult to reduce vulnerability to a narrowing and paralysing condition. Eleanor’s transformative process serves to illustrate how vulnerability can also work as a potential lever towards personal growth, healing, resilience and connection with others.

Considering this, the pursuit of invulnerability has been portrayed as ineffectual for the subject. The analysis of the novel has served to exemplify that identifying oneself as an autonomous, independent and fully rational individual can be problematic, as it overlooks an inherently vulnerable condition as human and social beings that can serve to establish relationships of dependence, responsibility and care.

It has also been discussed how, as an ambivalent condition, vulnerability can also be isolating, exposed through social exclusion. As Le Blanc’s notion of the outcast has served to illustrate, sometimes the subject can be enmeshed in such profound forms of physical and psychological vulnerability that they force the subject to the margins of social life. Especially, trauma has stood out as the trigger that can drive the subject to a past-oriented reality that complicates healing and connection. This can even lead to the point of considering someone as disposable in society. In these cases, life and survival are barely distinguishable.

Taking Eleanor’s journey as an example, it can be observed how by confronting her traumatic past and by opening herself to others, she is able to find a sense of belonging and a hopeful re-orientation towards the future. Therefore, the novel underlines the idea that only those who are vulnerable are predisposed to be responsible for the other’s vulnerability (Pelluchon 2011, 41). The novel does not, however, elude the pain that confronting vulnerability usually involves. By showing Eleanor in her “Bad Days” on the brink of suicide, the novel does not edulcorate the fact that experiences of vulnerability are often hard to endure. In this way, despite the humouristic tone that can be found in the narrative at some points, the novel rejects the “wonderfulization” (Diego-Sánchez 2020, 90) of resilience that occurs when the network of interdependence that the vulnerable subject often needs in order to thrive is ignored.

Having analysed how vulnerability also manifests itself through formal narrative choices, Honeyman’s novel can be considered a text that aesthetically performs and highlights the vulnerability that is present in the plot. Its heavy reliance on intertextual references, its lack of reliability of its autodiegetic narrator as well as its unbalanced narrative structure in each of the three sections serve to illustrate Eleanor’s vulnerable transformation and holds the promise of a more positive outcome. All this turns Honeyman’s novel into relevant proof of the potential of vulnerability and serves as a reminder that opening up to one’s limitations and to others can be a transformative and enriching experience.

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Notes

¹ All translations from secondary works written in French are my own.

² Le Blanc uses the term "empowerment" in English in the original.

Título:

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Contacto:

mmflores@uma.es