

Is Eleanor Oliphant Really Fine?: A Review of *Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine*

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Abstract

This review centers on *Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine*, Gail Honeyman's 2017 debut literary work, which portrays a traumatized female Eleanor. It analyzes the connection between the breakdown of psychological defense mechanism and self-healing. The process of emotional collapse and confrontation with the truth is necessary for healing. This review displays the importance of uncovering and analyzing one's vulnerability. It also offers insights into the power of interpersonal interaction and the significance of confrontation.

Keywords

Trauma; Interpersonal Interaction; Loneliness; Healing

Content

Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine, Gail Honeyman's 2017 novel, has sparked a lot of discussions among people who see themselves on Eleanor Oliphant. *Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine* can be generally classified as chick-lit novels, whose author, protagonist and the target audience are often females. Generally speaking, *Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine* can be regarded as chick-lit novels because of the female protagonist and some scenes such as hair styling, doing beauty treatments and buying clothes. However, instead of considering it as chick-lit novel, trauma literature might be more appropriate. Trauma refers to a shocking experience that imposes overwhelming stress on the individual who is incapable of tackling emotions related to the trauma (Breslau, 2009). Eleanor's trauma stems from an arson committed by her mother. This fire causes the death of her young sister Marianne and also has an incredible impact on Eleanor's body and mind. Currently, many papers mainly focus on the analysis of Eleanor's trauma based on various trauma theories, whereas this paper intends to illustrate the importance of admitting someone's loneliness in today's society.

At the very beginning of the book, Eleanor's narration, "I don't need anyone else—there's no big hole in my life, no missing part of my own particular puzzle," (Honeyman, 2017, Chapter1) displays her disgust towards social activities and satisfaction with the solitude. In the eyes of many people around Eleanor, she is a weirdo with a conspicuous scar on the face, obsolete dressing style and excessive taciturnity. Accordingly, her colleagues often conduct invisible bullying towards her. But, at the same time, for Eleanor, socializing with colleagues is stupid and loneliness serves as a shield against unnecessary social contact. Meanwhile, she doesn't take to heart others' mockery towards her. This is incredible for most people, Eleanor seems to be an individual without mental internal friction who do not attribute social withdrawal to her own faults. This is also the reason why Eleanor always says that, "I was, as I previously stated, perfectly fine (Honeyman, 2017, Chapter3)." In the whole book, the word "fine" appears repeatedly. But does she indeed fine? Does she literally not need anyone else? Actually, saying "I am fine" only means that she is next door to emotional breakdown, but she can manage everything unpleasant.

When unilaterally falling in love with the singer Johnnie, Eleanor starts to pick up herself from head to toe. Doing Hollywood wax, manicuring nails, buying new clothes, making up to cover the scar and doing hair, Eleanor endeavors to dress up herself in order to make herself worthy of Johnnie. After completely changing her appearance, the attitude of the colleagues towards Eleanor also thoroughly reverses. Up till now, the external image of Eleanor has transformed from a weird person to a seemingly normal one. Does Eleanor really become normal and fine? Absolutely not! Changes in appearance are merely the disguise of her inner loneliness. She is not someone who does not need anyone else, instead, she is extremely destitute of social connection.

At the end of the book, the friendship between Eleanor and Raymond is intimate. However, in their first encounter, Eleanor has a callous attitude toward Raymond who works in IT sector in her company. Eleanor's evaluation of Raymond, "A word sprang to mind: porcine" (Honeyman, 2017, Chapter2), is mean and blunt. Obviously, Raymond's appearance is far from her crush Johnnie and she has almost no desire to talk with him. Initially, no matter how enthusiastic Raymond is, her heart is sealed and cannot be approached by others. But later on, she was forced to have more interactions with Raymond. After work, they happen to walk together and they witness an old man faint on the street. Unlike Raymond's warmth, she doesn't want to be involved in such a troublesome matter. She remains to be indifferent, but Raymond insists that they need to send the old man to the hospital safely. Despite reluctance, Eleanor still helps the old man. Though this time her discourses with Raymond and the old man are stiff and embarrassing, she firstly feels a sense of warmth in the course of interpersonal communication.

The real turning point appears when Eleanor visits his mother's home, actively

emails Raymond and has work lunch together at noon. The arson happened in her childhood brings endless shadow to her heart. She lacks family members' companion and the flavor of being cared. Therefore, after she experiences the warm and harmonious environment in Raymond's family, she also has some emotional stirrings. When Raymond's mother talks to Eleanor about her family members, she started to cry, which represents that her emotional hole begins to open to others. Yes, she does cry. Before this, she always says that she is fine. After the visit to Raymond's mother, she narrates that "I felt a little glow inside...I found it overwhelming, but, to my surprise, not at all unpleasant" (Honeyman, 2017, Chapter10). She has conducted several successful attempts to socialize with others. Gradually, she finds that socialization is not a bad thing. Meanwhile, although Eleanor hasn't fully accustomed to social activities, she doesn't reject socializing. And she starts to admit that she doesn't feel that good and there is a hole in her life. The missing puzzle is probably the communication with others.

During the interaction with Raymond, Eleanor gets used to his presence. She begins to open up to Raymond, talking about awful experiences with her ex-boyfriend and her current crush. Eleanor's development of trust and dependence on others demonstrates that the hole in her life is the endless loneliness and insecurity. Her rejection to approach to others stems from the childhood trauma which is never resolved and causes long-lasting emotional seclusion. After Eleanor's failed suicide attempt, Raymond persuades her to go to see a psychologist. From initially being resistant to the psychologist, to gradually recounting the childhood trauma, Eleanor dismantles the psychological defense mechanism in her heart. When she confronts the past experiences and psychological grievances, she reacquires the ability of intimacy (Sabhasundar & Karunakar, 2025). After the psychotherapy, she recounts the cause and effect of the arson, recalls the fact of her young sister's death and acknowledges that it is not her fault. The author divides the book into three parts: good days, bad days and better days. At the end of the book, Eleanor's language expression capability is improved significantly and she finally welcomes her better days when she doesn't have to pretend to be fine.

Before reading the book, many social media platforms and book reviews regard it as a must for the introverted. In fact, this book is indispensable and useful for those who escape the past experiences and seal off their inner world. Is Eleanor Oliphant completely fine? When Eleanor recalls the past trauma and cries out in silence, she is actually healing herself. In the past, we were taught to conceal and digest our emotions on our own. However, only when we confront and resolve the past can we reconstruct ourselves. Admitting we are not fine is the starting point of self-healing. Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine is not only about loneliness, but about how to deal with repression, traumas and emotions.

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