

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21093422>**ALIENATION, THERAPEUTIC CAPITALISM, AND THE RECOVERY OF SPECIES-BEING IN GAIL HONEYMAN'S ELEANOR OLIPHANT IS COMPLETELY FINE****Farhan Nazir & Syeda Ujala Zahra**

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a Marxist interpretation of Gail Honeyman's debut novel *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017), demonstrating how its much-celebrated story of "recovery" makes most sense not as private psychological healing but as a nascent, ambivalent undoing of capitalist alienation. A qualitative close reading from within a Marxist critical context, this study will focus on the novel's recovery arc – episodes in which the protagonist is confronted with the sister's death (Marianne), creates a home, and gains capacity for feeling - and read Eleanor as a model of late capitalist reified and atomized subjectivity. Utilizing classical Marxian categories, alienated labour, species being, Lukács reification, Adorno and Horkheimer / Marcuse (culture industry, false needs, Althusser (ISAs), and contemporary critics of neo-liberal subjectivity, this article argues that Eleanor's loneliness is textually represented as a structural, not personal, problem. Her turn towards what Marx terms *Gattungswesen*, a non-instrumental, sensual, human relation with Raymond, Glen the cat, and the dying Sammy, represents a reclaiming of the de-alienated human. However, the therapeutic ending of the novel simultaneously re-privatizes what amounts to a collective wound through its reduction to personal recovery. Situating this central tension within Fisher's discussion of capitalist realism and stress privatization, the article concluded that Honeyman's novel diagnoses but itself succumbs to the very ideology it uncovers.

Keywords: Marxist literary criticism; alienation; reification; therapeutic capitalism; capitalist realism; contemporary British fiction.

Introduction

Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine was released in 2017 to near-universal acclaim as an empathetic comedy of isolation, the feel-good tale of a socially inept woman who starts to listen to a kind colleague and begins to accept friendship. It was warm praise from readers & reviewers alike, mordant (first-person voice), ultimately consoling praise from reviewers. In this article, I argue that such a reading is not exactly incorrect, but it fails to account for the most interesting political aspect of the novel. Eleanor Oliphant is not a romance about healing; however, in a Marxist literary analysis, it is an anatomy of alienated subjectivity, and the movement towards its end toward healing is not a pure romance of an individual, but a precariously negotiated effort to heal social damage, and a particularly nasty one, using individual force.

The analysis is focused on the novel's recovery sequence, the movement during which the recovery of Eleanor is made the obvious focus of the novel. The sequence alternates three interconnected things: oral surgery, to exhuming a long-forgotten trauma: Marianne's death in a fire caused by her mother; moving back through the process of forming a home interior that Eleanor allowed to become despoiled; and slowly gaining access to a sense of feeling that had been dulled over the years through all the routine work she performed for others. Here, each is experienced as a dialectic of alienation/de-alienation. At the outset of his novel, Eleanor is a fully reified consciousness, as Georg Lukács would label her, an individual who "lives her inner life as an alien object," who asserts in a chillingly sincere fashion, "I [Eleanor] have no emotional needs." Toward the end of the sequence, she has started to recover what Marx, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, refers to as *Gattungswesen*, or "species-being," the specifically human ability to act freely, consciously, sensuously, in relation to others (Marx 1959). asks that the reader reconsider the grammar of that recovery at every moment. The staple of this

article can be seen as a grammar of class and commodity, the dialectic that encompasses alienated labour, the commodity form, ideology, and the species-being, until, ultimately, before closing the article with the novel's central ambivalence: the possible return of the human or just a better hammered topic.

Literature Review

Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine has been read with an overwhelming response within two adjoining perspectives: in one as a story of loneliness, and in the other as a trauma- or mental-health experience. Widely read, reviewed, and loved by reading groups, this novel displays all the hallmarks of an uplifting story of social reconnection, and critical attention has tended to focus on the presentations of isolation, childhood trauma, and therapeutic process. There is a great deal about the class content of this novel that has not been discussed by this body of commentary: its underpaid protagonist, her isolation set into the particular political economy of austerity-era Britain, and her “recovery” that comes entirely via private routes. This work of literature thus comes into a field that has not yet been explored with respect to the novel: the social contradictions of late capitalism, and Eleanor's feelings of loneliness and recovery are not psychological features of her, but markers of the social.

Eleanor Oliphant hit the fringe of loneliness, being a public concern in Britain, which was to soon be institutionalised with a government minister appointed in 2018, for loneliness. This discourse was and is at present presented mainly in terms of the individual loneliness being seen as a risk to health, which can be mitigated by befriending initiatives and social prescribing, rather than an understanding of how the institutions that were once used by the working class for the collective organization of their lives have disappeared. The sociological backstory is provided by Zygmunt Bauman's “liquid modernity,” where permanent fastening gives way to a chain of provisional and disposable ties (Bauman 2000), and Richard Sennett's “corrosion of character” that results from permanently replaceable, short-term employment (Sennett 1998). Here, Eleanor, despite having a stable job, shares a class location of insecurity and benefits shadowed, one described by Guy Standing's analysis of the ‘precariat’ (Standing 2011).

The suffering of Eleanor's solitude can only be understood as a social reproduction. Our working lives are split in capitalism between work with a wage and “unwaged” work of caring, including feeding, cleaning, providing affection and attention, etc., which is systematically underpaid and privatised in capitalism, first put upon the isolated household, and ultimately onto an under-funded care system (Federici 2004). This exact type of breakdown is what Eleanor has suffered through: abuse in childhood, a house fire, and a disjointed journey through different foster- and residential care placements. The recovery narrative of the novel is, after all, the narrative of an unexpected, unplanned, highly informal, and untidy delivery of the care the institution does not provide. That dot of care reaches us via friendship, via a borrowed cat, via an old woman's open door: not via some public means; this, too, is a political thing the novel broods in silence.

There is a considerable body of critical scholarship that has examined not only the education she has received entering this new therapeutic culture, but also the culture. A technology of the self, the ‘psy’ disciplines have been described by Nikolas Rose as producing subjects who conceive their suffering as a private, internal problem that must be addressed by specialists (Rose 1990). Eva Illouz explains how intimacy and feeling have become the basis for the creation of an “emotional capitalism,” in which they are already expertly measured and optimized for exchange over productivity (Illouz 2007), and William Davies follows how this measurement and optimization of “well-being” has evolved into a new industry for everyone's benefit. Some attempt to find a cure for this “achievement subject”, who makes full use of herself for self-improvement (Byung-Chul Han 2015), and there are those who formulate a “wellness syndrome” diagnosis to alleviate the suffering of her own insufficient self-care, which refers to the problems of the structure as personal defects in self-care (Carl Cederström and André Spicer 2015). The synthesis that has made the most impact on this criticism is Mark Fisher's idea of “capitalist realism”: a form of resocialization of capitalism that affects not only its rise but also its reproduction, in part by the process of quieting distress as if it merely constituted and were merely an individual manifestation of depression and anxiety (Fisher 2009). By the phrase “cruel optimism,” Lauren Berlant refers to the affective regime in which subjects are caught in the existence of those objects and fantasies that drain

them (Berlant 2011). As a whole, the novel provides the necessary lexis to read through the therapeutic cure of Eleanor against its grain.

In the past, the Marxist critique of the novel has focused on how the realist story works to reconcile the personal and the political. A materialist focus on the affective surface of the novel, both as a reflection of social reality and a structuring of social reality, is found in Fredric Jameson's work on a "political unconscious" permeates popular-mass-cultural texts like Utopian landscapes, implicitly conveying utopian aspirations despite their assertion of containment, in "Writing against the Grain: The White Imaginary and the Rise of Capitalist Man" (1981; 1991), and in Terry Eagleton's analysis of popular "reading matter" as a "mediation" of social existence and Raymond Williams's (1977) notion of the "structures of feeling." The present study argues that Eleanor Oliphant has, of all things, such a utopian impulse; a desire for an alienated and authentic sense of community, and that this same exercise of utopia and ideology, through its therapeutic and consumerist resolutions, performs just such ideological containment of that desire, to which the individual's horizon remains open. Both movements can be seen in detail at the same time in the recovery sequence.

Methodology

The research in this study is a qualitative literary analysis. Its approach is defined as close text reading using the interpretation model of the literary work, which is based on Marxist theory. On the contrary, it does not do hypothesis testing against measurable data, but rather the hermeneutic track of moving from the literary text, which serves as the main evidence, to understanding that text, in a sense of hermeneutics, in the context of a theoretically developed set of concepts. Both the primary source and the analytical focus are, in fact, the novel Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman (2017), and the novel's recovery sequence, in which the protagonist goes through counselling, rebuilds her domestic life, has a memory brought to the surface, and tries to feel. The sequence is chosen because it is in this area of the novel that the theme of being alienated and then re-alienated reveals itself more overtly and ceases to be metaphoric, but rather open to materialist analysis.

There are three stages to the analytical process. The passages chosen to emphasize Eleanor's labour, consumption, isolation, family formation, therapy, and relationships occurred as a result of multiple close readings of her recovery sequence and the narrative around it. Second, these texts were read in a Marxist framework that is presented in the following section: alienation and species-being, reification, commodity fetishism, the Ideological State Apparatuses, and a newer discourse focused on 'therapeutic capitalism'. Third, concerned with the "symptomatic" (against-the-grain) or esthetic reading of the text as much as with its statement, Jameson gave attention to the "narration" enacted in the process of reading, as well as to the elements contained within it, such as its "individualizing" logic in resolving its conception of "community" (Jameson 1981). Textual quotation is used to illustrate; the interpretive weight is led by the analysis, in accordance with the conventions followed in close reading and principles of fair usage.

This analysis is not attempting to offer statistical generalizability, being an interpretive study focused on the reading of a single text rather than a survey. A Marxist perspective would foreground class, labor, and commodity relations and purposefully sideline other productive approaches and methods that could include feminist, psychoanalytical, disability studies, or trauma theoretical approaches, several of which the novel is also open to. It is delivered here, accordingly, not as the definitive critical reading of Honeyman's novel, but as one that sees a dimension of the novel that has been suppressed by popular readings of the book.

Theoretical Framework

As a Marxist literary critic, as Terry Eagleton put it in a nutshell, that is not Marxism applied to literature, it is literature as a complicated mediation of the social and historical reality which produces it (Eagleton 1976). In a critical moment that is essentially characterized, as Fredric Jameson said, by the "contradictions of its moment" (1981), the critic performs an act of "always historicizing" the text, reading it as a "socially symbolic act" that "registers, in the very form of its narrative desire, the position of critical contradictions" (Jameson 1981). The contradictions are those of a financialised, service-

sector capitalism that has hollowed out stable work and the communal forms of life that once reduced its isolation, as was the case for a novel likewise published in 2017 during these times of austerity Britain and dedicated to a low-paid clerical worker alone residing in a rented flat.

In this reading, alienation (*Entfremdung*) is the main theme. In Marx's *Manuscripts* (1844), four aspects of the alienation of the working class are distinguished: from the product of her labor; from the act of laboring itself; from her “species-being”; to other human beings (Marx 1959). All four are critical to Honeyman's novel. Without a free association with others, the human essence—which for Marx is irreducibly social—faces other people through a competition grid, barrier, or medium. Eleanor's remarkable separation, her literal silence on entire weekends, is not a matter of weirdness, but rather the inevitable culmination of this alienation of “man from man.”

The concept of reification (*Verdinglichung*) of Georg Lukács (*History and Class Consciousness: Marxist Poetry* 1923) provides a systematic account of alienation as described phenomenologically by Young Marx in his writings. With generalised commodity production, Lukacs says, the worker herself becomes a “commodity” to be produced; even her faculties are made into commodities to be sold; and she looks at the same possibilities for her psyche with the outside observer's cool, calculating eyes (Lukacs 1971). Moreover, more recently, Axel Honneth rereads reification as a “forgetting of recognition”, as forgetting that other humans, as well as their own bodies, should first and foremost be treated as objects of care, instead of objects of knowledge (Honneth 2008). An opening of the recovery sequence finds awful little Eleanor startlingly realizing, while the narration of her feelings and her body with a clinical taxonomy tends to reify her consciousness and her feelings over time.

These goods should be supplemented by an examination of ideology and consumption. These should be supplemented with an analysis of ideology and consumption. These social relations that are present in the produced things but cannot be directly recognized in the subjects find their way into the nature of the things themselves, if human relations are lived through the mediation of things, as Marx describes it in the first volume of *Capital* (1976). This goes beyond Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and their critique of the “culture industry,” which creates standardized pleasures and conditions people for their own domestication (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972); Herbert Marcuse refers to the desires the culture industry creates as “false needs” (Marcuse 1964). Eleanor is making this sort of commodity-like sociality over and over—she's trying to buy the connection that the system has denied her, the sociality denied by the commodity.

Lastly, Louis Althusser's description of the “Ideological State Apparatuses”, and specifically of the three institutions that have a specific influence on the subject: the family, the school, the welfare or care system, and the “psy” professions, through which the subject is “interpellated” and assigned to its position within the relations of production (Althusser 1971). Antonio Gramsci defines the process of the social reproduction of the social order as the “manufacture of consent”: “the saturation of everyday common sense” (1971), while Raymond Williams orients us to the structures of feeling, the level at which the social order registers itself pre-ideologically, as felt experience (1977). It is in this emotional space – a space in which a consciousness is stripped of its rational function, then made susceptible to feeling and re-sensitively re-stabilized – that Honeyman's novel will do its most interesting political maneuver.

These are classic categories that need supplementation - Eleanor lives in the office, not in the factory of the analysis of Marx, but rather in the medical offices and therapeutic cultures of the early 21st century. It therefore situates three concepts from contemporary scholarship explored above, and drawn from these texts, within this analysis: Fisher's “capitalist realism” and its process of privatising distress, which reveals a “solution” on offer in the novel; the actor's emotional or therapeutic “capitalism” (Illouz 2007; Davies 2015; Rose 1990; Han 2015), which names the self-destructive attachments of the novel's protagonist Eleanor; and “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), which describes the debates surrounding the teaching of “the novel of the self” to children whose mental conditions, such as depression and anxiety not only fail to be perceived as such, but are also themselves treated as commodities. This conceptual system is in place, giving way to analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion***Eleanor as Alienated Worker***

Eleanor's prior alienation will need to be determined before she can be understood in terms of the recovery sequence, and in terms of her journey of recovery, can provide a backward recreation of her alienation. Eleanor remembers there was a routine for her for over nine years - rise, go to work, come home, and at the weekend, there was always Vodka. The repetition (rep) is the nub of the matter. Her work in the finance department of a graphic-design company is the abstract, indifferent, time-serving labour that Marx places at the centre of alienation – a labour which is no longer the worker's, but another and which doesn't exist for itself but only to be used to produce wages and simply a facet of life's reproduction (Marx 1959). At the heart of this novel is the distinction Eleanor makes to organise the novel: she notes Laura's hairdresser, who is a businesswoman and "seems happy", because she has a life "not just an existence."

The hours at the office, the days loaded with nothing but the contemplation of "no food time" and the "three long sleeps until Monday," the evening before work, and the morning after, all form a strangely vacant use of time for Eleanor. It is the phenomenology of self-development as lived reality, as the reification of time itself in the search for which Lukács speaks of time as the medium of self-development that diverges from how one normally experiences time, not as a space of self-development, but rather as a quantitative extension to be conquered: a homogeneous, measurable sphere for the consummation of becoming. The vodka serving as a punctuation mark in this temporality isn't a mere accident. The primary means of bearing an intolerable affect is the medicalization of the subject's dissociation, anaesthetization without anesthesia. Chemical management of an intolerable effect, the privatized anaesthetic allows the subject to continue functioning. To Fisher, this is the personal, self-released aspect of the systemic, privatized stress; to Berlant, it's the omnipresence of the cruel hope that "attachment" is to have to engender its own capacity to tolerate itself.

Earlier, she'd fixated on Johnnie Lomond, a musician who had returned to public view in a newspaper article, bringing a sense of clarity to her search. For fantasy is about the unattainable, or idealized, lover and, as Eleanor discovers, with the aid of Maria, a misdirected projection of desire to connect: directed to a commodity-image, that is, a celebrity, sighted across a stage, through the apparatus of mass culture. It is exactly this type of attachment to a lack of sustenance that Berlant refers to with her term "cruel optimism" (2011) and is what Adorno and Horkheimer would identify as the "standard... substitute for... real desire" of the "culture industry" (1972). At this point, it is as if Eleanor suddenly manages to say, "I am not a failed human being. I am not responsible for this. I do not have this capacity." It's as if she manages to break out from this particular cruel optimism into the harder, realer, actual relation.

What's most striking is the objectification of Eleanor's relation with inner data. The narrative voice she has earned in this blistering comedy is that of a consciousness which itself considers itself as an object outside itself, in Marxist parlance. She makes very careful lists of what she wants and needs, what she is looking for, and how she wants to be treated, and she thinks as a problem solver thinks when she addresses issues of feeling and emotion, saying "no emotional needs" with flat conviction when Maria Temple suggests that that is an option. I think it was just as fitting that Honneth spoke of the reification as the "forgetting of recognition," for in a sense Eleanor has already forgotten herself as a person of care and therefore cannot recognize the category by its name (Honneth 2008). Her separation from people is being absorbed by her own feelings and desires for separation.

The Commodity Form and the Therapeutic Apparatus

The recovery sequence sees two competing answers to Eleanor's crisis put side by side and, as it were, captured by the ideological impulse to 'compare'. The first one is the commodity. All she had tried to do throughout the previous novel was to work out a connection by buying things: the makeover, the clothes, the gifts that she had collected for a man she barely knew. This consumer logic continues in the recovery sequence and is focused on domesticity, home affairs, and the care of Glen, their cat. Eleanor tidies up her dingy apartment and instantly pictures it being enhanced by having a different houseplant, bright colored pillows, the rich interior of Laura's secretary, etc. She specializes in a trip to a pet super store, arrives with a comfortable bed, a litter tray that can be covered, four different food options, coat oil,

and toys, all of which amount to a small party of eating. In the corner store, before Raymond's visit, she agonises over bits of biscuit, wafer, cracker, and cheese to choreograph everything "all bases covered".

To interpret such purchases in terms of "false consciousness" would be too coarse a description. Care is a nuanced term that Honeyman speaks carefully, and the performance is moving, but "care" is the only vocabulary of care that ELEANOR's society has instilled in her. The human relationship itself is mediated by things, as Marx once said, and only now and then does the feeling of loving begin to be represented as a shopping list, according to the assertion of Marcuse and Adorno-Horkheimer, as the culture industry "has conquered the mind" (Marx 1976; Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964). The art of these scenes is that the objects are really vehicles, not interchangeable; the cat food is important because we are interested in the cat, and the biscuits are important because Raymond is coming. That the commodity is being forced, however, into "new" service, to the new species-life.

The second answer is the therapeutic apparatus; a counsellor, Maria Temple, is a representation of it. The sessions are highly overrated, and in the language of the novel, these sessions do something: Eleanor recovers Marianne's memory in them and gains the grammar of feeling. However, a Marxist analysis requires the basis of this benevolence to be balanced with the critique of therapeutic culture elaborated by Rose, Illouz, Davies, and Fisher. The "psy" sciences are part of a vast "technology" by means of which modern power operates on the soul and creates subjects that think of their pain as something inside them, personal, manageable, an object for the experts (Rose 1990). Illouz follows the way intimacy and emotion become items of knowledge and trade for the therapeutic culture of "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2007). Davies demonstrates how the journey towards measuring and managing well-being has become a multi-billion-dollar industry aimed most of all at productivity (Davies 2015).

Fisher's is the breakthrough regarding insight. Even for the half-see-through social reading of Eleanor's miseries, which the novel admits, the therapeutic frame operates a covert "ideological operation", which reads it as a private psychological issue amenable to individual psychological interventions provided by counselling and/or drugs. It transforms collective wounds into individual pathologies and public shortcomings into a course of personal therapy (Fisher 2009). No mocking therapy, no painkiller, because the novel's concept of repair is an activity that can only be achieved in privacy, via personal therapy, via psychological or biological treatment (antidepressant drugs), or via individual courage; never through the agency of the collective or the political. The minister for loneliness's logic is inherent in the book's emotional framework. That Eleanor's recovery is authentic, that for her, solidarities, if they ever arrive, are sincere, does not negate this observation: it adds a canvas upon which to cluster these anxieties.

The Family, the Fire, and the Care System

But the therapeutic conversations very gradually begin to focus on the underlying cause of the estrangement of Eleanor, and it is here that the Althusserian frame is most powerful. For Althusser, the family is the first and strongest of the ISA (Ideological State Apparatuses), the space where the small subject is called to/or given a new framework (a fixed identity before it can resist Althusser 1971). Eleanor's mom is a distorted caricature of this instrument. She gives directions about phrasing, etiquette, and the family's "supposed superiority": they're not "good enough," she seems to feel, for anyone. She imposes her class fantasy on an impoverished child, a violent schooling of class fantasy for a child in poverty, who sees no one as being "good enough." Policing is the approach Eleanor uses to describe the mother's corrective means, whereby she employs "quite direct methods" that are really sustained abuse. The ideology passed down is a twisted dream of gentility that is utterly incongruous with the reality of the family life; a private version of the false consciousness with which the dominated reproduce the values of domination.

The novel's destructive element, the fire that kills Marianne, the younger daughter, is the literal death of the family as a social group responsible for social reproduction. The therapeutic digging is therefore also a digging up or 'excavation/preparation' of the failure of all institutions that could have and should have protected the children. The one IAA that works well for the good of the family the school is the

one in which the mother has to withdraw the girls and home-school them when the teacher starts asking questions; when the teacher has to put his/her pans of steam on the escape ramp to cook Eleanor's "head so gently", so she can come out, but the moment comes for her to cook "so gently," Eleanor refuses to take a step forward. The one place that can identify and stop the abuse is closed down, and disaster ensues. Christopher Robinson supplied what Eleanor has to say with devastating *tertium* in short supply after the fire, the care system provides mere satisfaction of the physical needs Marx credits as the reproduction of labour-power: food, clothing, shelter, schooling. What about how you feel? Maria asks, but Eleanor doesn't know the question's answer to the question. When she was taken up by the hands of the care system, she was reproduced as a machine, and her humanity was left unacknowledged and unhurt.

The key to the entire operation is to reconstruct the lost name. After a session that swirls around the fire, the fire almost skips past Eleanor, giving rise to two words emerging from the depths of her memory: "Where's Marianne?" The following day, she can finally speak out her sister's name, Marianne. It is, in Honneth's words, 'the undoing of reification as forgetting'--to recover the recognition that there was a beloved other, that there was a self that loved, that was buried in the whole structure of her formation (or formation is forgetting) (Honneth 2008). Exactly, it is also history's recovery. Jameson's dictum, "always historicize," is applicable here, as much to a nation or society as to a psyche, and Eleanor's cure is the painful re-narration of a personal history the violence of her formation had made inexpressible. The novel's narrative self, whose initial posture is borne by an extreme consistency of consciousness, an attitude that reifies the needlessness of the self and its lack of memory by the end of the sequence, is crying because it remembers a sister and a self it never knew.

The Recovery of Species-Being

In this regard, the sequence of recovery is performed quietly, undeniably with another, more radical proper repair against the privatised solutions of commodity and clinic: the recovery of what Marx defined as species-being. The capacity for free, conscious, sensuous and most of all a shared activity through and with the others, in the appreciation of a world apprehended not as raw material to be used but as an end in itself (Marx 1959) – these elements, all of which constitute, so to speak, the proper capacity of free mankind (Marx 1959, 186), are the elements of *Gattungswesen*. A few short pages of alien de-enlightenment. During the walk to her appointment, Eleanor enjoys the crowd, drops a coin to a man with a dog, consumes an ugly doughnut, smiles at a dirty baby, and thinks it would be good to observe things, the "slivers of life" which accrue, "then one feels himself a small piece of humanity, filling a useful space." The world was previously "discovered" by the reified gaze, but now a sensuous, participatory perception is taking over. It is the aesthetic education of the senses, which Marx places in the 1844 Manuscripts at the core of human emancipation, because this is the kind of sense that emanates from human enjoyment; the earlier, brute logic of simple having has been displaced by the truer logic of being.

The motif is used throughout the sequence. Eleanor cleans her flat, and for the first time she feels as if she's swallowed sunshine, and sits silent: the breeze at the window, two men laughing in the street, the lemony fragrance of the rooms. The change in Eleanor is felt, not understood or even known, and is a new quality of lived experience, not a proposition, as Williams (1977: 6) says: "The structure of feeling is the proper register." Importantly, she understands that this noticing ability is also relational, in that friends and family "might help you be more aware of noticing things more often, or things that you never noticed before." That such a novelist as the author of *The Problem* is a perceptually impoverished subject, but that the isolated subject is also a social achievement: the thesis suggested here by perception, at any rate. The recovery of the world, the recovery of people, is one thing, and the recovery of people is the recovery of the world.

The best thing that Glen says about the theme occurs in the voice of this cat. Eleanor cares for Glen alone, without a double purpose, as a victim who was saved out of a planned fire and is an uncanny rhyme of the one that brought down Marianne. She owns the animal like a baby, and registers its purr "rather than its sound" and the "warm weight of her." It is indeed Marx's sensuous relation to a living other, his alternative to a reified, objectified relation to a thing. Eleanor is, in essence, making herself

"accountable" for the care of a life that suffers: feeding, cleaning, tending, work that is the labour of social reproduction, and that capital does not value, and that she was deprived of during her childhood, as she herself puts it (Federici 2004). Gently given, happily received, it's completely in addition to the salary relation; this caring is a microcosm of unalienated activity. Naming the cat Glen is an exact substitution: the neutering agent (vodka) has been replaced by the vivifying is (cat).

The logic of the interventions in human relationships is similar to that of non-instrumental ones. Raymond brings the cat, and then, just a "nice thing", the cake, and tells Eleanor that she "deserves to have nice things", that is, that she is worthy of being treated as an end rather than a means. Raymond presents her with the cat, and later with an ordinary luxury, the cake, and informs Eleanor that she "deserves to have nice things" (Honneth 2008), that she is deserving of being treated as an 'end'. His mother, Mrs Gibbons, kisses Eleanor on her wound - the very mark of the fire - and Eleanor "didn't even flinch": the wound isn't treated, but rather than being tended to. Her goodbye message – stay for a while – gives Eleanor the chance to be part of the daily life of her family, a regularity that has never been provided anywhere and which she was denied in her own childhood. Because in addition to being a means for holding a scarf, all the way to being a "commodity" in the strict economic sense, Eleanor's red sweater is a gift in the complete anthropological sense, an object that not only carries a felt scarf but also involves an affectionate relationship as well, and rotating affection. They are the humble and informal, non-formal and non-compensated bonds that unite humans without any collective institution, with a very uncertain future, without any safety. They are the modest and informal, non-formal and non-compensated bonds through which the human is restored, albeit with uncertainty, but without security. They are the proverbial utopia of the novel, seeing one in the midst of the wreckage, which capital has wrought in its wake when it comes to care and mutual recognition (Jameson 1981).

The Ambivalence of the Cure

Because the reading so far might support an easy and therefore obvious conclusion: Eleanor's recovery is that of unalienated, species-life, and so the novel is a relatively "emancipatory" piece. This must be opposite to a contrary current. Few novels are as explicitly mechanical in their repair of broken things as the novel here is titillatingly individual, even in the midst of all its utopian glimpses. The solution is not collective, not a dyad, not a small group of solutions, not an institutional solution, not a solidary solution, but only a personal solution, a solution that comes from the therapy, or the medication, or personal courage, or the luck of private acts of loving kindness. In the very end of the novel, nothing has changed in Eleanor's social situation: poverty, a brutal care system, an atomizing life of the service sector; nothing has changed. The next day, she gets back to the same low-paid position with the same indifferent company and is cured. Eleanor has not yet changed; the world that broke her has not changed.

This is the kind of thing that Fisher sees as the hallmark of "capitalist realism" when structural problems become individual problems, and even the critique of the system ultimately becomes an assignment of personal adjustment (2009). One might read Eleanor's arc as charitably the body of a functioning organism; a better agent, worker, a person whose socialization works, who can work more or less efficiently, who is pleasanter in the company of others, more desirable to have around. The apparatus of therapy, the self-improvement machine, would have completed its ideological roles and done the correct "repair" on the subject, so that she could be restored, "good as new," to the relations that hurt her in the first place. Transitions and shifts into a 'recovery as self-management' and 'healing as a duty owed...to productivity' await one at the edge of this reading that is only glimpsed in the notion of an 'achievement society'. This is the same catch as Cederström and Spicer refer to as the "wellness syndrome" (Cederström and Spicer 2015).

But this uncharitable interpretation is an incomplete one, as well, and the dialectic deserves to be run through again. The content of Eleanor's recovery is greater than the form in which it is delivered. What she is actually recovering is the power to love, without using, non-instrumental love, love the cat she can't use, the dying old man, love nothing, love it for nothing. Not the effects of the optimiser worker, but in Marx's words, the effects of species-being, and not just extending out into the distance of exchange, but beyond. The novel can't imagine a collective politics – this is its limit, just as it was the limit of its historical moment: in that context, as Fisher noted, one can now imagine the end of the world

rather than the end of capitalism (Fisher 2009). Within this, however, it is both preserving and transmitting a true utopian impulse: a remembrance, and a re-experience, of what unalienated human relations feel like. The text is simultaneously ideological and utopian, longing for what it longs for and longing to be longed for (Jameson 1981; 1991).

The final picture of the recovery sequence and the final picture of a whole novel encapsulate this ambivalence perfectly. Eleanor realizes, for the first time, that she can eat correctly and feel, and that there is a sky. It is a mini-private epiphany – one less person, lifting her gaze – in that way, it's the emblem of all that the article has condemned – the individualised solution. But it is also the basic experience of the alienable perception that Marx put at the forefront of the total release of the human person: noticing, catching a common world, “freely given” for everybody. The sky is no one's commodity. Which is why it has to be, and is for all intents and purposes the smallest – and read generously, the greatest the return to the capacity of Eleanor to inhabit, in sensuous and grateful and principled accord, a world, not for sale.

Conclusion

This article has maintained that *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* and its recovery sequence, specifically, is a Marxist book, one that the original title's spin-off characterization as a feel-good comedy of loneliness often renders confusing. As it opens, Eleanor is a quintessential victim of capitalist alienation: a lowly clerk whose nine-year life is precariously lived out, whose personal and emotional life is already fully objectified, and whose feelings exist only as the by-product of alienation. Her violent family formation, her benign but neutralised school apparatus, and her under-resourced care system apparatus can all be read through Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses; her self-medication machine and methods for connection by means of commodities lend the material to the critiques of false need and emotional capitalism; the therapeutic cure guided by Fisher's analysis of the privatisation of stress.

The research has demonstrated that the degree of recovery is actually double. On one axis, it is the rediscovery of the species-being, the teaming up, even the ticking of a numbed conscience, the renewed ability to perceive the blades of life and, most importantly, the practice of not-instrumental care extended to the cat-glen and to Raymond and his mother and to the dying Sammy. The utopia is this novel's memory of what an unalienated relation is like. Along another axis, that healing process is inescapably private: therapy, drugs, personal courage, personal kindness—the tools of healing leave the social context that made Eleanor suffer untouched and restore her to the society that wounded her. It offers an acute critique of the alienations of late capitalism and is, in the form of its resolution, truly part of capitalist-realist common sense, that is, the idea that there is no solution other than to remake the self.

Again, not to impute an intention of being deceptive on Honeyman's part, but to identify the historical context of her novel and the popular realist form in which she writes. While the book can restore Eleanor's ability to love, it cannot return it to the political object that is man. It is almost, despite herself, a document of its moment, in registering this limit with such precision, to show a woman who learns to be human again in a world indifferent to her humanity, *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*. Eleanor, at the end, eats and observes the sky. The unnamed job done by the novel is to create a world where no one has to get better, without the help of someone else, from a condition that should be impossible to cause in the first place.

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