UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Treball de Fi de Grau

Curs 2022-2023

Jeanette's journey to happiness in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

NOM DE L'ESTUDIANT: Helena Ocharan Centeno

NOM DE LA TUTORA: Dra. Cristina Alsina Rísquez

Barcelona, 20 de juny 2023

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Coordinació d'Estudis
Facultat de Filologia

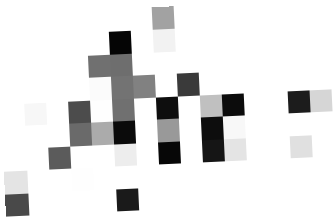
Gran Via
de les Corts Catalanes, 585
08007 Barcelona

Tel. +34 934 035 594
fil-coord@ub.edu
www.ub.edu

Amb aquest escrit declaro que sóc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva
elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el
treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres.
Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18, del capítol 5 de les Normes
reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la
qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 20 de juny de 2023

Signatura:



But mother is our first love affair. (…) And if we hate her later, we take that rage with us onto other lovers. And if we lose her, where do we find her again?

(Winterson, 2012, p. 160)

ABSTRACT:

This project aims to determine the implications of Jeanette's "happiness" in the fictional memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* by Jeanette Winterson. The research has focused not only on the dichotomy implicit in the title's question, but also on the ramifications that the choice of "being happy" has throughout the entire narrative. The theoretical framework for this paper has been based mainly on Sara Ahmed's critical analysis of the concept of happiness in *The Promise of Happiness* and the queer perspectives and alternatives that she suggests, and ultimately on the need of redefining an inclusive happiness.

Key words: happiness, normative, unhappiness, belonging, queer.

RESUM:

Aquest projecte pretén entendre les implicacions de la "felicitat" de Jeanette (personatge) a la memòria de ficció *Per què ser feliç quan podries ser normal?* de la Jeanette Winterson. La recerca del projecte s'ha centrat en la dicotomia implícita a la pregunta formulada al títol i en les ramificacions que té la decisió de "ser feliç" al llarg del llibre. El marc teòric s'ha basat sobretot en la crítica del concepte de felicitat de la Sara Ahmed a *The Promise of Happiness* i les perspectives i alternatives *queer* que hi suggereix. I, finalment, en la necessitat de redefinir una felicitat més inclusiva.

Paraules clau: felicitat, normatiu, infelicitat, pertinença, *queer*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

It is a fair assumption to say that everybody wants to be happy. Is it not an idyllic and politically neutral concept, naturalized so as to make it accessible and desirable for everyone? Idyllic and desirable, yes. Accessible, however, perhaps not so much. Generally speaking, people tend to attach happiness to their family and friends, to time well spent, or careers with good prospects… to the smell of coffee, even. Those are not overly ambitious enterprises, and it is rather easy to evoke them when asked, because those are the images that we are programmed to summon when we think of happiness. Therefore, it is the agreed-upon definition of what happiness is that we have immediate access to, instead of the emotion itself. But cultural studies beg to differ on that definition, and Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* reveals the many layers behind the promise of happiness, and the intrinsically harmful tendencies of its perpetuation. This research project is going to be primarily concerned with the conception of happiness in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (henceforth *Why Be Happy*) and what it entails to choose or alternatively renounce happiness, especially for Jeanette. How does she assert her happiness in relation to her mother's demand for normality? And what does this happiness entail, what does it mean?

When Jeanette tells her mother that she is happy with her girlfriend and wants to stay that way, she is articulating a happy present, not projecting a happy future. She is not trying to direct herself towards what *might* bring her happiness, but she is acknowledging the situation that is presently enabling her to experience belonging and joy. Her sexuality, her being free to love women, to be a lesbian, is the happy realization that she formulates. For her mother, who holds a heteronormative, religious perspective, this means Jeanette must choose between being happy or being "normal," as her mother's question "Why be happy when you could be normal?" (2012, p. 114) suggests. However, I argue that the issue here is not merely a question of why happiness and normalcy cannot coexist, but also a subtle rebellion against the normative order of things implied by the narrative.

Why Be Happy is a work that draws heavily from Jeanette Winterson's own life, including her upbringing and family experiences, yet it is presented as a work of fiction. Winterson's decision to fictionalize elements of her life in this memoir allows for creative interpretation, blending real events with invented ones for narrative effect. I will approach the text as a fictional narrative, acknowledging the author's use of fictionalization. This means that when I refer to "Jeanette" in this paper, I am specifically discussing the character as she is presented in the book, not the real Jeanette Winterson, whose life and experiences are, of

course, much more complex than any fictionalized version can capture. When I refer to Winterson as the author, I will use her last name to avoid confusion, while "Jeanette" will always refer to the fictionalized version in the narrative.

It has also been helpful to regard this piece of work as entirely fiction because it has allowed me to insert myself in the narrative (while reading it, not writing about it) and acknowledge all the emotions I could not feel as a child myself. When I was a younger, I went to a Catholic school for a few years, because my mother (supposedly) believed in God at that time. For a while, I thought I did too. But at this school I was once asked what parts of religion were true to me, and I did not know what to answer or what I was supposed to answer. I considered the fact that my mother had performed exorcisms to my 4- to 7-year-old self, and I wondered if that meant I could not believe in any God because I had the Devil inside. Fortunately, I grew out of it and used common sense to live my life henceforth. And I had forgotten this period of my life ever happened until recently, just a few months before finding *Why Be Happy* and reading how Jeanette's mother performed an exorcism on her daughter as well. Not only was this similar in our life narratives, but so many other aspects of Jeanette's upbringing resonated with my own. The book instantly became a very personal one, and I resolved it had to be my choice of primary source for this project. After finishing the fictional memoir, I realized many people have probably endured similar traumatic events in their lives, or perhaps not *that* similar but equally terrifying, and it is not entirely Mrs. Winterson's fault that she did not know any better, nor my own mother's; this meant that there is something intrinsically wrong with some social aspects of parenthood, or rather motherhood, in this case, that are partially to blame. Women are socially coerced to become mothers, and rather than a choice, it becomes a duty. If the aspiration of motherhood does not fulfill the mother's needs, if it does not carry the happiness it has promised, the aftermath is not that woman's unhappiness, but the abandonment of a completely new person left to the mercy of, again, society's expectations. And if the baby happens to grow into a prospective mother, the cycle continues. I cannot yet research and try to fully understand something that I am at odds with personally, cannot yet go into a deep analysis of motherhood and the fragmented foundations it is based upon. But I can try to research why people fight to grow out of unhappiness and still find themselves in an everlasting cycle. My approach to *Why Be Happy* will be following Sara Ahmed's critique of the idea of happiness and the stressed need to strive for it. I will explore the apparently innate desire for happiness and the nature of it, as well as inquire why it is a sought aspiration for so many and still it remains a myth to which so few have access to.

It is important to remark here that, since I cannot access Mrs. Winterson's cognitive world, every analysis I make will be based on theoretical approaches and will not take into consideration any specific personality disorders that the narration might have hinted at. Sara Ahmed's theorization on happiness is the main theoretical framework through which this project is envisioned. Other concepts such as Judith Halberstam's critique on the queer renunciation of the inheritance of family expectations are used along with Ahmed's in order to analyze the memoir and Jeanette's stance on happiness.

1. THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

"Pursuing happiness, and I did, and I still do, is not at all the same as being happy (…) The pursuit isn't all or nothing – it's all AND nothing." (Winterson, 2012, pp. 24-25)

1.1. Orientations towards happiness

The idea of happiness is conventionally evoked by means of positive thinking and images of "good" behavior through which to obtain "good" (thus happy) rewards. We can anticipate that an object shall cause happiness by adhering to how it has affected others in a positive way, or by having faith in the expectations that others have placed in it beforehand. The object becomes both the cause and the result of a feeling, even when it has not yet been reached. Sara Ahmed (2010) said it best:

> To think of happiness as involving end-oriented intentionality is to suggest that happiness is already associated with some things more than others. We arrive at some things because they point us toward happiness, as a means to this end. How do we know what points happily? The very possibility of being pointed toward happiness suggests that objects are associated with affects before they are even encountered. (…) We can even anticipate an affect without being retrospective insofar as objects might acquire the value of proximities that are not derived from our own experience. (pp. 27-28)

Essentially, Ahmed illustrates how we are conditioned to follow a predetermined life path, with specific needs and goals, having a blind confidence that, by achieving certain milestones or persevering through virtuous actions, we will eventually reach a point of happiness. This wiring begins from such an early age that does not allow for a questioning of whether those presumed happy objects truly hold a possibility for happiness for each individual. Furthermore, this premature orientation becomes a double-edged sword the second it is instilled by an external person (namely a parent, as in the following argument), because it automatically creates expectations for all ends involved.

When a parent directs a child toward certain objects, the expectation is set on the object to bring happiness to the child, on the child to conform to that happiness and on the child again to bring happiness to the parent in turn. The family, then, becomes one of the objects that should bring happiness. But it also becomes a chain of obligations that, by definition, fails to evoke the idea of happiness itself. Some parents might direct their children to objects they did not have access to in the past, and now bestow the possibility of that happiness to their children; however, this possibility is very easily transformed into a duty that children will have to carry on, extracting and forcedly enjoying the unlived happiness that their parents could not have. In

Why be Happy Jeanette starts her narration with a hint to this idea, she says: "and like all children, adopted or not, I have had to live out some of her unlived life" (Winterson, 2012, p. 1). However, in Jeanette's case it is not only that she has been expected to live some of her mother's missed opportunities, but she was also adopted and brought to a new family to fulfill one of her mother's goals of having children, who, according to society, ought to bring her happiness. In theory, the object of happiness was reached by Mrs. Winterson, but the baby did not bring the expected satisfaction (i.e., the promise of happiness was broken). In her case the idea remains the same, the child needs to be exposed to everything the parent determines to be beneficial, whether by their own choice or by an external influence. Equally, therefore, people are directed first toward the objects that their parents have considered for them, and second toward the objects that society and other institutions in their environment deem worthy of conveying happiness. The causality of objects related to happiness is always predetermined and follows historical patterns that aim to reconduct one's own interests from the very first moment these appear.

Likewise, sometimes parents prevent their children from having real proximity to other certain objects (people, morals, ideas), infusing them with unjustified fear so that their children will beware of them. This way, certain objects are not made available for these children, reinforcing then the linearity of the parents' ideologies. To some extent, this is the case of dogmatic, religious beliefs and values as well, transmitted not only in church but also in religious households, or even in school. When you are a child, your parental figure holds the absolute truth, and you believe what they have to say about life and your environment. In the cases where this leads to a harmful and restrictive conditioning of which object a child may have access to, the consequences can only be detrimental to the child's wellbeing (mental, maybe even physical), and even when the child grows and is able to assess that their parents might be wrong, inaccurate, and unfair, it may take them a lifetime to heal and abandon those beliefs. This sort of indoctrination is essential in the analysis of object orientation in Jeanette's life. Mrs. Winterson's religious beliefs are made clear from her "The Devil led us to the wrong crib" (Winterson, 2012, p. 1), which it is later proved was meant in a literal way, and they become an increasingly prejudicial experience for Jeanette from there on. Jeanette's life becomes a survival trial since her baby-self is considered to be possessed by the Devil as she screams uncontrollably—a belief her mother held during the sixteen years that Jeanette lived with her parents. During her whole childhood, Jeanette's life was forcedly entwined with church services and Bible verses and her mother's Christian sense of morality, all of which served as the objects put to her reach. These would make any other lifestyle out of the question,

and her pursuing them led to psychological abuse and a monumental lack of affection. Mind-opening literature was strictly taboo, Jeanette's books concealed and set on fire when discovered by her mother (2012, p. 41); happiness was evidently frowned upon, because Mrs. W's happiness amounted to an insurmountable grief for herself. Sex was also utterly forbidden. And what of lesbian sex? It led to exorcisms. The remote suggestion that Jeanette might have loved a woman at sixteen was punished with a literal exorcism (2012, pp. 80-81). This might come not entirely as a surprise, seeing as every "insubordination" from her daughter was interpreted as sign of Devil possession and reprimanded as such, but it is an extremely gruesome, violating, and terribly out-of-touch response to a daughter not following her imposed heteronormative, Christian linearity. It was the mere attempt at rejecting the predetermined path that ignited her mother's fear, anger and desire for control, culminating in such traumatic experience for her daughter, which would thereafter lead to her mother vanishing her from her home, and Jeanette "finally" being able to envision a life without ongoing trauma.

1.2. "Just happy"

Fictional Jeanette's pursuit of happiness becomes self-evidently queer the moment Mrs. Winterson claims "I gave you a chance" (meaning she performed an exorcism on her daughter and hoped for the best) and proceeds to ask the infamous "Why be happy when you could be normal?" (2012, p. 114). The journey of happiness that Jeanette is to embark will necessarily be entwined with her (unwelcomed) sexuality and her queer identity, and her lack of love language—that is, not knowing how to love nor be loved. However, because every day before and after that one conversation Mrs. Winterson prayed, "Lord, let me die" (p. 9), and because "the battle between [them] was really the battle between happiness and unhappiness" (p. 21), I believe that this pursuit is not a single epiphany. Rather, it is a constant—if not always stable—survival essential, a fundamental ambition required to persist. It is a resistance against the temptation to abandon the pursuit of happiness, and instead, to explore normality or even suicide, which she still contemplates at some point. And so, I believe that this revelation, in itself a sort of unconscious determination, has been present throughout her entire childhood and early adulthood, but did only become a commitment to follow through after she realized that life cannot be about "being alive, but about choosing life" (2012, p. 168). Therefore, when the narration mirrors Mrs. Winterson's "why be happy?" and poses the question to the reader, becoming the title, the whole narrative is reassessed and redirected to answering that question. The narrative becomes an ongoing attempt to justify the pursuit of happiness, to find reasons

and the emotional strength to continue fighting for it. In this sense, her pursuit of happiness transcends specific context and becomes open-ended, perhaps even left to the reader's interpretation.

In order to understand at least a fraction of what it means to be happy for Jeanette, a starting point might be to analyze her determinate (and preceding Mrs. W's question) "When I am with her I am happy. Just happy" (2012, p. 114). Does this "just" aim to convey simplicity, or perhaps justice? It is simple in the sense that it is hopeful, that it is not embellished to trigger any emotion other than pure and honest understanding from her mother, who cynically wrecks that hope. "Just happy" might be the substitute to the linearity of happiness, referring to the normative idea that happiness follows a fixed, progressive path. Even if, by context, her happiness stems from her relationship, so the girl becomes the happy object, her "just" comes to represent the absence of happy objects, and the possibility of just happiness. Tyler Bradway (2015) suggests:

> The feeling of "just" happiness intersects so many "varied potentialities": a future without the "glass wall" that divides sexuality into normative and queer; a future where her love will be seen as "just"; a future where her happiness can be "just" happiness, without an immoral underside. The visceral experience of being "just happy" combines with the performative declaration of "just happiness," and together, they point toward livable futures worth pursuing. (pp. 196-197)

It can be also understood that "just happiness" is an antithesis to the "all or nothing" romantic (thus heteronormative) love, which she realizes cannot bring happiness; or, at least, not to her. Jeanette is aware that the only possibility of love she would be allowed was to marry a man and, if necessary, have sex with him until the reproductive goal is fulfilled. In leaving her parents' home, however, she realizes the almost co-dependent relationship that she had with Mrs. Winterson, and the contradicting yet alluring effects that the attract-and-repel dynamic may have on her future relationships. She ultimately considers how this relationship with her mother was, in a sense, the epitome of the normative love reproduced in the domestic. Her mother was "a secret society of one" (2012, p. 119), where only the *one* could be admitted. The mother-daughter relationship ceases to be such when Jeanette, daughter, becomes a project through which Mrs. Winterson, mother, might find a sudden purpose, or companionship, thus transforming daughter into object with prospects of utility. Jeanette was very soon aware that the basis of romantic love she was being pushed to reproduce, the "you + me against the world. A world where there are only two of us" (2012, p. 119), the control over one another, cannot

be the legacy to carry forward, because it represents exactly that which repudiates her, and because it is a legacy doomed to disappointment.

As for the mother's response to Jeanette's "When I am with her I am happy. Just happy" (2012, p.114), the disbelief at her daughter choosing to be happy rather than normal, it is necessary to understand what these concepts mean in her logic in order to assess her discrepancy. What are the implications of "normal" in being put against "happy? For Mrs. Winterson, the struggle between "happy" and "normal" is inherent precisely in the binary opposition between "queer" and "normative"—it is the same battlefield and the same war. Happiness is automatically queer in this context, hence normality being heterosexual. Fortunately, Sara Ahmed goes into detail about what "just happiness" might specifically mean in queer contexts. She first brings attention to the idea of romantic love, where love becomes a responsibility in which all parts involved depend on to other's happiness in order to experience their own, claiming that "If to love another is to want that person's happiness, then love might be experienced as the duty to be happy for another" (2010, pp. 91- 92). In a heteronormative context in which a parent rejects their lesbian daughter's happiness[1], she argues that the parent envisions an unhappy future for the daughter insofar as it is not a heterosexual one. By identifying lesbianism as the lack of a happy futurity that a husband and children would procure, the daughter's queer future is inevitably unhappy. Based on the common idea that parents "just want their children to be happy", this "just" does not come to represent anything that might make the child happy, but everything that *must* make the child happy. On this, Ahmed determines that this speech act only creates "the very affective state of unhappiness that is imagined to be the inevitable consequence of the daughter's decision" (2010, p. 93). She argues that, while the parent believes the child can only be happy by not giving up on the things that are supposed to bring said happiness, the queer alternative is doomed to bring the opposite: unhappiness.[2] And this belief is actually what might provoke the unhappiness in the queer child. Once again, it is a chain of affects tied to the expectation of linearity. Accordingly, for Mrs. Winterson to disapprove of Jeanette's "just happiness" within a lesbian relationship might then mean to disapprove of precisely the aftermath that it promises. However, I would argue that Mrs. Winterson's dichotomy of normality and happiness goes way further than that. It is undeniable that her Christian mentality, and an unstable one at that, will denounce "abnormality

[1] In this context, Ahmed's analysis is based on an extract from the lesbian novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden, which is perfectly comparable to my chosen extract in *Why Be Happy* (2012).

[2] This idea is further developed in chapter 2.

and a commitment to eternal damnation" (Bradway, 2015, p. 197) in her daughter's utterance of being at peace with her sexuality, of being happy *because* she is queer; it is evident that her notion of "normal" is rooted in traditional social norms and values, and that any deviation from these norms is to be perceived as a threat to her social order. But her normality, she has proven with her actions, is not limited to conventional heteronormativity.

One of the first instances in which Jeanette prematurely considers how hard it is to be normal is when her excessive crying as a baby is taken as "evidence in plain sight that [she] is possessed by the Devil" (2012, p. 20). This moment paints a paranoid portrait of her mother's relationship with normality—and, by extension, Jeanette's own. She struggles with her mother's twisted sense of normality and the penance that she will make her do after the slightest misconduct. She offers a glimpse to some arbitrary punishments she had to endure:

> I hated being locked in [the coalhole] much more than I hated being locked out in the doorstep. I used to shout and bang on the door but this had not effect. I once managed to break the door down, but that was followed by beating. My mother never beat me. She waited until my father came home and told him how many strokes and what with… the plastic cane, the belt, or just his hand. (2012, p. 45)

As a child, she was locked up in either a burning coalhole, or outside her own house, sometimes for entire nights. When she would trick the punishment system, physical abuse would follow. Additionally, the incessant comparisons to the Devil are established as a marker of *her* abnormality through constant repetition. It is mentioned again when Jeanette explains how she engaged in fights at school and her mother "believed [she] was demon possessed" (2012, p. 55). The fact that a child would get into fights in school should not be normalized, but it can absolutely never be determined that it is she, rather than her behavior, who is not normal. It is precisely Jeanette's automatic fight or flight disposition, and the fact that the one place in which she should be at ease—her home—represents pure fear and instability, what lacks normality. Neglect and abuse are not normal, even if frequently enforced, and cannot ever be assumed to be normal, or even remotely the aftermath of the norm. It can be, however, the result of object imposition, and it reflects a deeply distorted idea of parenthood. For Jeanette to leave home, then, meant to start the learning and the healing that she sought and could not get from her parents. Basically, to find of her own choice of happiness without punishment nor guilt.

2. THE ALTERNATIVE TO HAPPINESS

On the basis of how happiness is seen as *the* way of living life, it can be said that people aim for a horizon that has been painted for them. They reach certain points that are supposed to bring happiness on the way, and, in reaching these, they are supposed to simultaneously bring happiness to those who painted the horizon in the first place. It is presented as "a duty, a way of being good" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 47). To break with the legacy of inheriting heteronormative prospects of life and ending with generational trauma seems, then, an undesirable enterprise. And it is indelibly queer. Only by not being welcomed to the norm can someone realize that it is something not worth perpetuating. To quote Judith Halberstam (2011):

> De-linking the process of generation from the force of historical process is a queer kind of project: queer lives seek to uncouple change from the supposedly organic and immutable forms of family and inheritance; queer lives exploit some potential for a *difference in form* that lies dormant in queer collectivity not as an essential attribute of sexual otherness but as a possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives. (p. 70)

By following the path that one's family has decided upon, there is an established continuity of happiness which can only be maintained by extending the line of the family. While heteronormative models of families are intoxicated with repetition and the inheritance of that repetition to ensure, again, its repetition, Halberstam comes to envision an utterly separate alternative. To deviate from said path would be to disturb happiness, and to ultimately bring unhappiness. This is a reiteration and confirmation of Ahmed's aforementioned idea: the child who fails to reproduce this linearity, who fails to inherit the family's choice of happy objects, becomes unhappy by means of being ascribed the attribute of being the source of unhappiness (Ahmed, 2010, p. 95).

If people are inclined to pursue objects that promise happiness, it follows that they will reject those perceived to bring its opposite—thus perpetuating unhappiness. Once the queer person is marked as a source of unhappiness, they are, by extension, assumed to *be* unhappy themselves. Even if they do not identify as such, the non-queer person around them will become unhappy because the queer one has not complied with their role, thus confirming the queer person's unhappiness (for having brought disappointment). How is any of that fair? It is not.

Sarah Ahmed determines that a bearable life is "a life where what must be endured does not threaten that life, in either the bare facts of its existence or in the sense of its aim, direction or purpose" (2010, p. 97). From here, we can determine that the queer life through the

normative scope is not allowed to be lived. It is predestined to be unhappy and, in being so, to be unbearable.

Furthermore, Ahmed understands queer love as being conditioned by the unhappiness of being queer in a heterosexual world:

> I do wonder whether a queer definition of love might want to separate love from happiness, given how happiness tends to come with rather straight conditions. (…) Queer love might involve happiness only by insisting that such happiness is *not* what is shared (2010, p. 100).

By being perceived as not happy in a world that demands happiness, a queer person in a relationship might not be able to procure the happiness sought by their partner unless the definition of either love or happiness becomes queer as well. In this perspective, queer love might find happiness by asserting that it does not rely on the conventional notions of happiness.

This resonates partially with Jeanette's need to feel in control within a relationship. She has endured an obvious lack of affection that, until healed, would not allow her to love and be loved in a healthy way, considering her mother loved her only "when she was able to love" (2012, p. 76) and that was not often. She grew up in an unstable home with an unstable notion of crime and punishment and of love. However, there is also a strong heteronormative component in her perspective of love (and the expectations of the happiness it can provide) which engages with the concept of "queer unhappiness." On friendship love, she recognizes having self-sabotaged any opportunities to keep friends in school, reproducing the feeling of abandonment she had felt twice, by being adopted and into an emotionally absent family, in the name of feeling "triumphantly in control" (2012, p. 7). When it came to romantic relationships, Jeanette had to embark on a journey of understanding the boundaries that cannot be crossed with other people. She offers a disclaimer that, at the time and place where she grew up, physical abuse and hitting men, women and children was routine. And so she, for a while, endorsed the same behavior with her girlfriends, until she "realized it was not acceptable." She then says: "I've spent a lot of time understanding my own violence, which is not of the pussycat kind" (2012, p. 46). Although never justified, this behavior can be theorized as the result of having fallen trap to the cycle of (hetero)normativity reproduction. In trying to assert her relationships, she would portray what had been available for her, which was a social sphere that was rooted in the impossibility of a love that was not heterosexual, if any. It is not until Jeanette learns her own love language and is able to see it through a different (and queer) perspective that she cannot know love. That, however, is a different battle and requires a

different kind of work. On this, she is asked “You don’t trust me to love you, do you?”, to which she internally responds: “I am the wrong crib” (2012, p. 199).

2.1. Happiness as a broken promise

Sara Ahmed maintains that to be “made happy” by objects is “to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject” (2010, p. 21). Therefore, to be “made happy” is to relinquish one's own capacity of (re)creating happiness. This means that people are at the mercy of the happy objects in proximity to them, and they depend entirely on the promise that these objects carry, hence assuming they cannot change the happy object nor their position towards it. In other words, if the object fails to deliver happiness, it is not up to the person to change the situation. If the object resists change, the individual is left with two options: conform to the object’s demands or embrace unhappiness. Once this autonomy is lost and happiness is located in something external, the subject who desires happiness is reduced to an object of that very desire.

Does this mean that, in actively refusing happiness, Jeanette’s mother is asserting herself as a subject whose fate depends solely on her own will? No—quite the opposite. In Jeanette’s case, it seems that she has renounced all hopes of determining her own path by chasing the immovable idea of happiness; on the contrary, she does not renounce self-determination, but rather the illusion that self-determination is impossible. And yet, to some extent, both positions revolve around that very tension.

Exploring Mrs. Winterson’s happiness, or the lack thereof, reveals a universe of contradictions and paradoxes where the base of the religion she so fervently enforces is simultaneously rejected and subverted. People are led to crave objects that are anticipated to bring happiness to them, and religion has a very clear code of conduct that encourages doing specific “good” deeds and refraining from those deemed as sins, all of which is expected to bring future happiness. By following the Bible’s mandates, the epitome of happiness becomes a behavioral conditioning aimed to achieve salvation (a paradisiac afterlife). For Mrs. Winterson, however, the paradisiac afterlife is substituted for the Apocalypse, for the wish to end all things, however fatal the end is. Her fascination with the Apocalypse is the antithesis of loving life, and even her daughter, though she finds it “exciting” (2012, p. 23) at some point. Mrs. Winterson asserts her religion through a refusal of the universal promise of happiness that it offers. Salvation is not her goal, and happiness is not her journey. Religion does not represent community for her, it does not represent hope, and it does not represent purpose. So why cling to it? Because it still does represent a behavioral reorientation she can follow, emulating the

mechanics of being socially accepted and passively being attached to the possibility of a predetermined happy object, even when that possibility is purposefully wrecked. It is all embellished hypocrisy, though. By refusing happiness, and thus choosing unhappiness, she seems to recover the autonomy she can gather to determine her own future, but it cannot be autonomy if we consider how she still passively but strictly enacts an extremely religious moral compass.

> I think Mrs. Winterson was afraid of happiness. Jesus was supposed to make you happy but he didn't, and if you were waiting for the Apocalypse that never came, you were bound to feel disappointed. She thought that happy meant bad/wrong/ sinful. Or plain stupid. Unhappy seemed to have virtue attached to it. (Winterson, 2012, p. 96)

According to Jeanette's evaluation of her mother, it seems as if she did aim for a happy object but did not know how to reach it, did not know how to access the possibility. It is not that she is renouncing happiness and choosing unhappiness[3], which would seem a willful decision, but it is rather the inability to understand happiness precisely what brings unhappiness for her. "Happiness was still on the other side of a glass door, but at least she could see it through the glass, like a prisoner being visited by a longed-for loved one" (Winterson, 2012, p. 50). She preferred to remain in chronic dissatisfaction and misery, and had no intention nor vision of ever venturing outside of it. And, just as happiness becomes an inheritance, so does unhappiness.

Before fully understanding Jeanette's alternative to the inheritance of happiness, it is crucial to not only determine which objects she will categorically refuse, her mother's (un)happy objects, but also which of society's predetermined ones have been broken after her hopeful pursual. First and foremost, her being a lesbian and breaking the linearity of a heterosexual reproduction of the family, which has previously been explored. However, to "reproduce the family" entails having a family to reproduce. The promise of happiness stemming from her adoptive family is prematurely broken for her, which leads her to believe that "Unconditional love is what a child should expect from a parent even though it rarely works out that way" (Winterson, 2012, p. 76). She decides she cannot embody her adoptive mother's ideals, but she will try to find the capacity to determine her future by looking for her birth mother and finding, perhaps, the answers to all her prayers.

[3] See Chapter 3.

2.1.1. "Longing? Yes. Belonging? No."

Jeanette's sense of identity is intertwined with her need for belonging, and her incapacity to do so. McKenna (2016) ventures that "Winterson's narrative is divided into directions by material melancholy—the unfulfilled mourning of both her birth mother and her adoptive mother" (p. 301), where the former refers to a "lost loss" (Winterson, 2012, p. 161, 223) with present ramifications that are not easily accessible because it is a past loss, and thus the wound it leaves is not mendable. This "ungrievable loss" (2016, p. 302) has fractured the foundations on which her subjectivity and her sense of self are to be based. From this context, Jeanette establishes that she has never been able to belong somewhere/with someone: "Longing? Yes. Belonging? No" (2012, p. 209), and she also embarks on a journey to find her biological mother. She seeks to find the promise of familial happiness that society promotes and that her adoptive family has failed to provide. She places her hopes of belonging on hearing "You were always wanted, Jeanette" (2012, p. 186) and believing it. However, once she reconnects with Ann, her biological mother, and she receives written proof from her that she "was never a secret" and "[was] always wanted" (2012, pp. 205-206), the expectation is still not fulfilled, the happiness does not arrive. Jeanette considers her attachment to Mrs. Winterson and the difference between a life with her (the secrets, the abuse, and the consequences) and a possible life with Ann, but the discourse behind her adoption swiftly becomes the idealization of her abuser, where the abuse becomes the one reason that has shaped her strength. She claims:

> I would rather be this me – the me that I have become – then the me I might have become without books, without education, and without all the endings that have happened to me along the way, including Mrs. W. I think I am lucky. (2012, p. 228)

In this, McKenna reads a strong class consciousness and the rejection of a lost but possible past/future with Ann as her mother. She identifies that "The sentiment that remains unsaid is that Ann *can't be the mother she wants*" (2016, p. 305) because she is uneducated and poor. Nonetheless, while a class analysis is necessary in this context and in Jeanette's declarations, I argue that to relinquish Ann as an impossible fit as her mother has to do a lot with, first, the fact that Jeanette is a fully grown adult when she finds her, and second, that she (unconsciously or not) realizes that she cannot depend on an unfounded promise of happiness to offer her a sense of belonging. She has been placing great expectations on finding a family that wanted her, that chose her, in order to feel loved. But her birth mother had given her up for adoption, and her adoptive mother had not wanted her. During her entire childhood she might have felt that the one missing piece was to find her birth family and finally fit with them, but once she finds the piece, nothing is healed (in fact, she feels disappointed). In other words, she had

placed her whole sense of worth, her ability to love/be loved, on the promise of happiness that a family should bring. And the promise had been broken not once, but twice. Therefore, she becomes aware of the need to find an alternative to that promised happiness. Or, perhaps, a redefinition of happiness.

3. REDEFINING (UN)HAPPINESS

The alternative to happiness is unhappiness. However, rather than conforming to or complaining about unhappiness, there is the possibility of seeking unhappiness as the intentional alternative. Ahmed opts for the vindication of the choice of unhappiness: "The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us" (2010, p. 195). If non-normative people are determinately going to be relegated to being unhappy and bringing unhappiness, they can also exploit the possibilities of their position. "If to challenge the right to happiness is to deviate from the straight path, then political movements involve sharing deviation with others. There is joy, wonder, hope, and love in sharing deviation" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 196). Halberstam agrees, raising the concept of "practicing failure" (2011, p. 120) as an act to rejoice in the possibilities that come from not being ascribed to the norm, and thus not having to comply to its demands.

If we consider this alternative to happiness, the preference for the unhappy, can we not say it is a form of happiness? Maybe not "happiness" as it is socially established and accepted, but happiness as feeling. *Another* happiness, but happiness nonetheless. Not the result of *not* having the normative happiness, but the intention of redefining or widening its conceptualization; or, better yet, the possibility of creating a new, different paradigm. To conceptualize it within the same paradigm and under the same name that perpetuates a straight and successive system might be counterproductive; however, a heteronormative system will preserve that linearity whether unhappy people are unhappy or not. I would like to argue that it is possible to reclaim one's happiness and one's right to determine what it entails. In this sense, Halberstam suggests:

> We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and usable pasts (2011, p. 70)

The possibility of engendering a completely new future using a learned but forgotten past. Not conforming to the norm whatsoever, not striving to make place for what does not fit, but creating a new place altogether. I think this can be brought to the conceptualization of happiness.

For Jeanette, a redefinition of happiness might be essential. While her stance on happiness is very contradictory, she is set on her definition: "Pursuing happiness, and I did, and I still do, is not at all the same as being happy (…) The pursuit isn't all or nothing – it's all

AND nothing." (Winterson, 2012, pp. 24-25). This conviction is from adult Jeanette, one that has already gone through the journey of self-discovery and self-determination. She encapsulates all the pain and the rewards of life as the constant pursuit of happiness, not as a goal-oriented pursue but rather as a lifeline. To get there, however, she has had to consciously decline her mother's inheritance and society's, too.

There are critical readings that will agree with the fact that, in order to escape her upbringing and everything it entails, Jeanette tries to overcome the poor/working-class scene she was adopted into, thus following in the (exhausting if not achieved through lineage) capitalist linearity of upward mobility and the desire of economic exceptionalism. McKenna's 'Double Melancholy' (2016), for example, goes into deep analysis of how neoliberal capitalism and bourgeois aspirations cloud the memoir's narrative, denouncing that her social-class lacks represent part of the unhappiness she strives to leave behind. She argues that "in order to think through the text's focus on maternal melancholy and ambivalence" the necessary link with "political melancholy" and her "desires for self-creation" (p. 298) must be established. She also makes a point to contrast bourgeois feminism and the perpetuation of patriarchal and heteronormative tendencies in favor only of middle-class women with Jeanette's "desire for life" (2012, 105) and her literary aspirations. In McKenna's words:

> As opposed to an emergent class consciousness that promotes solidarity with her origins, Winterson's political and subjective development turns away from her past and towards a fantasy of a future 'I' that will be unrecognizable. (…) Thus, Winterson doubles her path of class transcendence into one of artistic gender liberation in order to sustain a melancholic attachment to the class politics at play in her decision. (p. 312)

While a correlation might be established, this reading of Jeanette's upscaling and escaping from her origins rather disregards the queer position from which she departs, and, especially, the abusive one. At the beginning of the novel, Jeanette specifically claims, "I dreamed of escape – but what is terrible about industrialization is that it makes escape necessary" (2012, p.17). Jeanette reflects on the paradox of seeking individualization as the alternative for a structure that demands homogeneity and uniformity, but that simultaneously rejects her for either being her queer self or for not contributing to the capitalist, productive way; "But then what happens to community – to society?" (2012, p. 17). She compares society's embrace of capitalism with its rejection of genuine personal affinity, while still claiming to represent community and belonging. But it does not fulfill that promise. In response, she recognizes the need to redefine what community and belonging truly mean.

It is established that Jeanette is in the constant pursuit of belonging, of her imagined happiness, of a relationship, a family, but ultimately a home. At first, during her teenage years, she resorts to the absolute opposite of what her parents would deem acceptable, to that which was not available to her—or yet, forbidden. For a while she appreciated the community that developed as a result of her ties with the church; she appreciated "the camaraderie, the simple happiness, the kindness, the sharing" while acknowledging "the cruelty of the dogma" (2012, p. 72). She would absolutely explore love as a home, stumbling around relationships and learning to accept the happiness they can bring. And then, clearly, literature was also her home several times, and it would remain her shelter for the rest of her life. "Books, for me, are a home. Books don't make a home – they are one" (2012, p. 61). She even goes as far as regarding "poetry" as "the thinning (…) rescue rope" that grounded her to life (2012, pp. 162-163). Through literature she eventually reached success, "made money, made her way" (2012, p. 168). She made from her traumatic experiences a poetic gift for herself and then for the world. Her political choices and beliefs, though briefly disclosed in *Why Be Happy* and latent in her decisions and her future, need not be at the core of her narration. Jeanette does mention "If I hadn't found books, if I hadn't turned my oddness into poetry and the anger into prose, well, I wasn't ever going to be a nobody with no money" (2012, p. 208), and while this denotes extreme class consciousness, it is a fabricated alternative future and impossible to envision, because it just was not the case. To completely disregard her success because it follows the capitalist pathway is to undermine the history that brought her there. She was not allowed literature, it was not a happy object available for her in her mother's home, and she was not allowed love—and she pursued both and somewhat ruptured the linearity of the capitalist pathway. She did not find a husband and have children, she did not engage in scheming ways of producing for society to reach an upper class, she just wrote. And beautifully so.

CONCLUSIONS

"Doing x as well as having x might be what promises us happiness" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29). In order to achieve social happiness, one must follow the heteronormative and capitalist linearity of life. Sara Ahmed theorizes in *The Promise of Happiness* that people are led to a turmoil of (blissful) conformity and submission, or alternatively a paradox of (enlightening) contradictions and failure, where the happy objects are what hold the possibility of happiness, and so are what people are urged to pursue, or else fail in being happy and face exclusion. After finishing the theorical framework for this project, I have concluded that happiness essentially is a chain of affect with everlasting associations. Being conceived in a straight paradigm, the pursuit of happiness becomes obscured by a series of required steps that one must reach in order to be happy. These milestones both require and promise a happy futurity for those who reach them: the extension of the line is essential to ensure the inheritance of the chain, and so it is required, and the happiness that it offers is presented as the aftermath of this search (not the present but the future), and so it is promised. By not adjusting or not conforming to this linearity, a queer individual is condemned to live with unhappiness, only because a heteronormative criterion does not allow for an alternative happiness and so the narrative that insubordination leads to unhappiness is maintained. This will in turn condemn the heteronormative individuals to suffer from the queer's unhappiness, because they will only conceive the queer's happiness, again, within the same paradigm that restricts the unhappy queer, and because they will only pursue and surround themselves with their preassigned happy objects. The result is queer ostracism. It is the relegation of the queer person to being unhappy, and thus wrong. But we know better. Judith Halberstam argues that the conceptions of the normal and the ordinary "take on an air of inevitability and naturalness simply by virtue of being passed on from one generation to another" (2011, p. 71), which necessarily entails the paradox that the happy objects we are linearly compelled to follow are only regarded as normal by the fact that we are linearly compelled to follow them. It is by inheriting and bequeathing "normality" as "happiness" that the options of what is "happy" are narrowed down to only what is "normal", and so what is "normal" is unable to change and expand insofar as, if it does, it ceases to be "happy".

So, how does Jeanette assert her choice of happiness? I am not entirely positive that her consideration of happiness has yet left the heteronormative paradigm. She does refuse to renounce her queerness and the possibility of true love that it can bring. She is a lesbian and has been literally exorcised for being one, so she is not extending the line of heterosexual

reproduction, but most of her reflections stem from the need to somehow find happiness in relation to society's definition of it. On the other hand, if we consider that she was often locked out of her house and could not open the doors to her mother's home, neither physically nor metaphorically, and the posterior claim that "[her] door is open and [she is] the one who opens it" (2012, p. 60), it necessarily entails that she has made a home for herself. Therefore, to some extent, she has dispossessed herself from the load of being accepted where she just could not belong and of reproducing what society expected her to reproduce. Although her relationship with her self-esteem and love is fractured by the trauma of not having been cared for during her childhood, and also for not having received the love that society told her she should seek, Jeanette's happiness is not a goal to reach but a philosophy to follow. A journey. To live life according to herself and to seek the meaning of life, and enjoy every bit, even when it becomes excruciatingly painful. There are many intricacies regarding what her position in the world entails for her stance on happiness, but that does not undervalue it. There is, for instance, a clear traumatic pattern of instability and the uncertainty of knowing what parts of her and her mother's life narratives were true or not that would shape Jeanette's predisposition of life, her perspective on love and relationships, and her assertion of happiness overall. But this could not be part of this project, and I had to make peace with that and learn to let go of ideas and other possible critical theorizations that could just not fit the narrative of this paper. In the same way, there were many aspects in McKenna's 'Double Melancholy' that I would have wanted to include in this project (some I agree with, some I do not), but that would have derailed my point and my thesis, so I did not consider them either.

In terms of my learning, this project has allowed me to understand a little bit better the unending layers behind Ahmed's concept of object orientation and its relation to happiness, which I am discovering to be passionate about, and it has unveiled many cracks in the foundations upon which families are based. My research was initially going to be even more thoroughly based on Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* as well. I had the specific idea, to follow Halberstam's theory, that we might need to forget the conceptualization of belonging in order to create different bonds and ways of relating to a community that does not follow heteropatriarchal structures, especially when one is trying to theorize about the family's obsolescence and aiming to find other modes of kinship (2011, pp. 72-73). However, going in depth into this made the project an overwhelming and endless sea of (re)interpretations that were overly intricate and too ambitious to pursue right now.

Throughout this research project, I have argued that we can transform unhappy objects into happiness vessels insofar as we can redirect ourselves to seek alternatives to the presumed

happy objects that just do not follow through on their happy role. To open new ways of relating to people and aspirations, then, means to create new ways of being happy, and that can include the (re)creation of happiness in unexpected objects. In other words, we can create new standards for what brings happiness and what does not; and the new standards might still be demonized as unhappy, but it does not mean that they *are*. Is the unhappy alternative really unhappy if it is embraced? If we imagine queerness (the "unhappiness" that we can thrive in) as a high school student during P.E., for instance, we might assume it will be "the last one to be picked" (drawing from stereotypes in Hollywood films). In not being picked in the first place, people will continue to discard it; but if people do choose it, and it gets picked, then more people might be inclined to pick it for themselves, too. If unhappiness is the future we deliberately decide to pursue, then it necessarily becomes happiness, because it ceases to be the last to get picked in a sports game in high school (which I was never good at, anyways). To make it a welcomed happiness, however, might not yet be so easily achieved.

On a broader sense, historical revolutions have happened precisely as means to make new paths for a future worth living, instead of being condemned to inhabit, a system that does not fit everyone or everything. In the words of Judith Halberstam:

> The history of alternative political formations (…) contests social realties as given and allows us to access traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present. (2011, p. 19)

Most revolutions succeeded and forever changed the meaning of "normal" after every victory. Slowly, but surely, new communities and ideologies have been finding their own place in society rather than adjusting to the existing (heteronormative patriarchal and Catholic-descendent), homogenic one.

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.

Andrijašević, J. (2022). Paranoid religiosity in Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* and memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? Zbornik Radova Filozofskog Fakulteta u Splitu*, (15), 43–61. https://doi.org/10.38003/zrffs.15.3

Berlant, L. (2006). Cruel optimism. *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, *17*(3), 20–36. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-009

Bradway, T. (2015). Queer exuberance: The politics of affect in Jeanette Winterson's visceral fiction. *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, *48*(1), 183–200. https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2015.0006

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press.

McKenna, E. (2016). Double melancholy: The (class) politics of loss in Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? Women: A Cultural Review*, *27*(3), 296–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2016.1256558

Winterson, J. (2012). *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Vintage Books.