

Traumatic Affections: Intergenerational Wounds, Emotional Neglect, and the Pursuit of Love in Jeanette Winterson's Semi-Autobiographical Works — from Deleuzian-Gabor Maté Perspective (2026 Edition)

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Abstract: Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) form a unique semi-autobiographical writing that demonstrates the affective intensities of childhood trauma, adoptive family predicament, emotional suppression, and the lifelong quest for love. While existing scholarship has fruitfully explored Winterson's work through queer theory and postmodern narratology, there remains a significant gap in integrating clinical trauma psychology with philosophical affect theory to understand the underlying causes and recovery of her emotional wounds. This paper addresses that gap by bringing Gilles Deleuze's concepts of affect intensity and bodily capacity into dialogue with Gabor Maté's trauma-informed model of childhood emotional neglect, stress, body-mind connection, and healing. Through close reading of the two texts, the paper illustrates that Winterson's emotional writing performs a dual movement: it records the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the affective starvation of her upbringing, while simultaneously enacting a reparative process that transforms pain into narrative catharsis, forgiveness, and gratitude. The analysis echoes Winterson's late-life reconciliation with both her adoptive and biological mothers, arguing that her writing ultimately affirms that wounds, when observed and expressed, can become sources of compassion.

Keywords: Jeanette Winterson; Affect theory; Gilles Deleuze; Trauma; Gabor Maté

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1. Background

Jeanette Winterson occupies a singular position in contemporary British literature. Her debut novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), announced a voice that was at once fiercely original and personal. Based on

her own childhood in an Accrington Pentecostal home, the novel intertwines fairy tale, biblical pastiche, and realist narrative to tell the story of a girl who discovers her identity and is ultimately expelled by her adoptive mother. Twenty-six years later, Winterson published her semi-autobiographical memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011), which revisits the same material but in a direct, unadorned prose that recalls the coal-hole where she was locked, and traces her search for her biological mother. Together, the two books constitute the self-writing of personal growth, a sustained attempt to make sense of a childhood defined by emotional deprivation, religious fanaticism, and the absence of unconditional love.

2. Literature review: Winterson criticism and the affective turn

Critics have approached Winterson's work from multiple angles. Social theorists celebrate her subversion of societal expectations; narratologists examine her metafictional strategies and postmodern play with genre; and memory studies scholars explore how she reconstructs identity through autobiographical acts. More recently, Chinese scholars have begun to analyze the affective dimensions of her writing, using terms such as "emotional poetics" and "traumatic memory" to illuminate her narrative techniques^[1-2]. Yet despite this rich body of work, no study has systematically integrated a clinical trauma framework with philosophical affect theory to study the specific dynamics of Winterson's emotional life as it unfolds across her two signature semi-autobiographical books.

This paper proposes such an integration. It reads Winterson's writing through the twin lenses of Gilles Deleuze's affect theory and Gabor Maté's trauma, stress, and body-mind connection psychology. Deleuze, building on Spinoza, brings forward affect as pre-personal intensity — the body's capacity to be affected and to affect. Affect is not only emotion but the virtual potential that precedes and exceeds linguistic codification^[3]. Maté, a Hungarian-Canadian physician and trauma specialist, argues that childhood physical abuse, emotional neglect and abuse — particularly in unstable families — creates lifelong patterns of vigilance, addiction, and compulsive relationship-seeking^[4]. Reading these two thinkers together enables a dual perspective: Maté provides the interpretation of Winterson's somatic symptoms of stress and emotional wounds, while Deleuze provides the flow of her affective experience.

The paper assumes that Winterson's writing is not merely expressive but diagnostic and reparative; it registers the intensities of affect and trauma, tracks the adaptation of the self to an emotionally barren environment, and gradually reclaims affective capacity through narrative. The outcome of the purifying narrative develops in forgiveness and understanding — first of her adoptive mother, then of her biological mother — it is a sort of hard-won gratitude and love — that does not erase pain but transmutes it.

3. Theoretical framework: Deleuze and Maté in dialogue

3.1. Deleuze and affect: Intensity, threshold, capacity

Gilles Deleuze's engagement with Spinoza's *Ethics* provides the philosophical foundation for contemporary affect theory. For Spinoza, affectus (affect) is "the passage from one state to another, taking into account the correlative variation of the affecting bodies"^[5]. Affect is not a feeling but a variation of intensity — an increase or decrease in the body's capacity to act and be acted upon. Deleuze and Guattari develop this idea in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), where the body is conceived as a set of thresholds that determine what affects it can enter into^[3]. A body that has been traumatized, they imply, has a constricted affective range:

its thresholds are lowered, its capacity to be positively affected diminished. Crucially, Deleuze distinguishes between affect (the prepersonal intensity) and emotion (the social-linguistic capture of that intensity). “Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that capture”^[6]; hence, it is named, categorized, and disciplined. This distinction is vital for reading Winterson, whose work often shows the complex emotions like “love or hatred” during her girlhood.

3.2. Gabor Maté: Childhood emotional neglect and the adapted self

Gabor Maté, a Hungarian-born Canadian physician, has spent decades treating patients with addiction, mental illness, and chronic stress. His core argument, developed across books such as *When the Body Says No* (2003) and *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (2008), is that early attachment trauma — especially emotional neglect, abandonment, or inconsistent care-giving — shapes the developing pain and hurt in ways that persist throughout life. Children who do not receive unconditional love learn to suppress their authentic needs and emotions in order to please the caregivers^[7]. This repressed emotion may lead to stress and illnesses. The child grows into an adult who may be outwardly successful but inwardly disconnected from bodily feeling, prone to stress, anxiety, fear, and even chronic diseases^[7].

Adopted children, even those adopted at birth, often have an “overwhelming feeling of abandonment” and carry preverbal memories of maternal separation that manifest as a deep, often unconscious sense of abandonment, so “it is a deeper wound than anything else”^[7]. When the adoptive environment is itself emotionally repressive, as in Winterson’s case, the child is wounded in a dual way: first by the loss of the biological mother, then by the failure of the adoptive mother to provide the emotional attachment the child is eager for.

3.3. Productive synthesis: Maté grounds Deleuze, Deleuze extends Maté

Reading Maté and Deleuze offers a powerful analytical perspective. Maté provides a developmental account of how the body’s affective capacities become constricted: the child learns to block certain intensities (grief, anger, desire) because they threaten the unstable attachment bond. Deleuze provides a conception that the body’s powers are lowered when the person receives bitterness affect. Conversely, healing, for both thinkers, involves expanding affective capacity. For Maté, this means admitting and reconnecting with the suppressed emotions like grief and anger, learning to feel the pain that was once unbearable, and integrating the adapted self with the authentic self^[4]. For Deleuze, it means entering into a new stage, creating new affects, and affirming the totality of one’s affective history — what he calls “joy,” “the increase of the power to act”^[5]. Winterson’s writing, this paper argues, is precisely such a process of healing: a carrier for unearthing the blocked emotional intensities and transmuting them into a kind of narrative language for reading.

4. The sources of wounds: Family trauma and intergenerational transmission

4.1. Mrs. Winterson as a figure of woundedness

The emotional landscape of Winterson’s childhood is dominated by her adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson — a figure who appears with extraordinary complexity in both texts. In *Oranges*, she appears as “Mother,” an embodiment of religious authority who stores grenadine in the airing cupboard and keeps a revolver in the sideboard. In *Why Be Happy*, she is simply “Mrs. Winterson,” a woman whose own traumatic history is actually impressive — she was adopted, raised in poverty, emotionally starved, and armed with a joyless

faith. Winterson writes: “We circled each other, wary, abandoned, full of longing. We came close but not close enough and then we pushed each other away forever” ^[8]. Meanwhile, apart from the emotional struggles, the protagonist in the novel suffered from physical violence: “I was beaten as a child, and I learned early never to cry” ^[8]. This sentence responds to Maté’s core insight: painful people hurt people. In *Why Be Happy*, the daughter learns to repress her emotions when she receives violence from the family; hence, trauma is not merely an individual experience but a transgenerational transmission, which passes from mother to daughter, inscribed in bodies and reproduced in relationships.

4.2. The adoptive family as affective vacuum

The adoptive home is not a refuge but a site of affective starvation. In *Oranges*, the family’s Pentecostal theory divides the world into the saved and the damned. When young Jeanette falls in love with Melanie, her mother’s response is not anger alone but a ritual of exorcism — an attempt to expel the “demon” of unconventional attraction. The scene dramatizes what Maté calls the child’s impossible choice: either suppress the emergent self or lose the mother’s love. Jeanette, understandably, chooses suppression — temporarily. But the affect does not disappear; it accumulates. Deleuze would say that her body’s capacity to be affected is blocked; the intensities of desire and grief are denied expression and thus become trapped.

Why Be Happy provides the most harrowing symbol of this emotional imprisonment: the coal-hole. Locked in the coal-hole overnight, the young Winterson experiences not only fear but a profound sense of negation and hatred. “It did make me hate them – not all the time – but with the hatred of the helpless” ^[8]. Here, the absence of the mother’s recognition produces an affective vacuum that threatens to destroy the self. In the coal-hole, there is no responsiveness — only the cold and the dark.

5. The affective wounds of emotional neglect and suppression

5.1. Childhood emotional neglect as invisible wound

Winterson’s early coping strategy is intellectualization. She reads voraciously — not as pleasure, but as survival. Books become transitional objects: they bridge the gap between self and world, providing a solution to her panic and sorrow which the surrounding environment and her mother failed to offer. In *Why Be Happy*, she recalls discovering Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein’s radical use of real facts in their novels; Winterson writes: “Reading yourself as a fiction as well as a fact is the only way to keep the narrative open” ^[8]. This moment is affectively charged: the encounter with Woolf’s prose produces a recognition — not intellectual but bodily — that her own interiority is not monstrous but shareable and nameable.

5.2. The body as record of suppressed affect

Yet, the habit of suppression is deeply rooted. In *Oranges*, Jeanette rarely expresses her emotions directly; they are displaced into fairy tales, biblical retellings, and the novel’s signature fairy-tale interludes. When she finally admits her love for Melanie, the confession is immediately pathologized by her mother and church; her mother rejected her and said to her: “I’m not havin’ demons here” ^[9]. The novel’s fragmented form thus mirrors the fragmentation of affect under religious discipline. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “body without organs” is useful here: “which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity” ^[3]. Jeanette’s body becomes a battlefield between the intensities of her own

desire and the prohibitions.

5.3. The compulsive search for love

Maté observes that adults who experienced early emotional neglect often develop an addiction to drugs to “sear emotional pain, loneliness, anxiety and a deep-seated fear of the world,” or, even a compulsive search for love that repeats the dynamics of the original attachment failure — “when one relationship ends, they may immediately plunge into another”^[4]. They are drawn to intense, often unavailable partners; they idealize and then feel betrayed; they fear abandonment and simultaneously provoke it. Winterson’s romantic history, as recounted in *Why Be Happy*, fits this pattern with almost clinical precision. Her first serious relationship, with a woman she calls “Mrs. J,” ends when Mrs. J returns to her husband. The grief is overwhelming. Yet, the intensity of the grief is also proof that she is, after all, capable of feeling.

Deleuze’s account of desire is more affirmative than Maté’s. For Deleuze, desire is not lack but production. Even in its most painful manifestations, Winterson’s desire is productive: it drives her to write, to travel, to seek out new experiences and new forms of attachment. The problem is not desire itself but the social coding that leads it into repetition and suffering. The writing text, then, is not to just renounce desire but to analyze it, interpret it, and, at last, to free it from the heart wounded by the mother and religion.

6. Anxiety as affective signature: Between Deleuzian intensity and Matéan adaptation

6.1. Anxiety as affective signature

Anxiety and panic pervade Winterson’s writing. It is the affective product of a childhood spent in a state of hypervigilance, perpetually scanning the emotional environment for signs of danger. In *Oranges*, anxiety manifests as a kind of existential dilemma: Jeanette is never sure of her place in the world, never certain that she is loved. In *Why Be Happy*, it takes the form of insecurity and separation — “Home was problematic for me. It did not represent order and it did not stand for safety”^[8]. The protagonist in the novel never possessed the key to the house, was usually shut out of the door, and slept on the doorsteps, so finally she determined to leave.

From a Deleuzian perspective, anxiety can be understood as affective intensity without resolution. The body’s thresholds are constantly fluctuating, but the intensity never discharges into action; it remains trapped in a cycle of anticipation and dread. Winterson’s prose style registers this chaos: short sentences, rhetorical questions, dashes and ellipses that mark the points where language fails to capture the body’s agitation. “Why be happy when you could be normal?” — the question that haunts the autobiographical novel — is not an inquiry but a threshold statement, the point at which affect becomes audible in language.

6.2. Writing as re-affectation: From blockage to flow

Winterson’s turn to writing is, in Maté’s terms, a healing strategy. Writing allows her to do what she could not do as a child: name her experience, claim her emotions, and integrate the dissociated parts of herself. The trajectory from *Oranges* to *Why Be Happy* is instructive. In the novel, the autobiographical material is heavily mediated: the narrator is a fictionalized Jeanette, the story is punctuated by fairy tales, and the ending is ambiguous — Jeanette leaves home, but her destination is uncertain. The affect is encoded, not directly expressed. By contrast, the semi-memoir is direct, confrontational, and courageous. It names Mrs. Winterson,

describes the coal-hole in explicit detail, and recounts the search for the biological mother with painful honesty. This shift from indirection to directness is itself an affective achievement: it signals that Winterson is no longer afraid of the knock on the door. She has opened the door herself.

Deleuze's concept of art as the production of affects illuminates what Winterson accomplishes through writing. The role of art is not to mirror past emotions but to forge new affective potentials, thereby enabling a type of unprecedented modes of perception. Winterson's fairy-tale interludes in *Oranges* are not escapes from reality but affective intensifications: they condense the pain, desire, and rage of the child into images that can be held and reflected. The story of the cursed princess who must choose between love and safety is also the story of Jeanette. The affect is not lost in translation; it is transmuted into a different recording, one that offers the reader — and the writer — a measure of distance and thus a measure of safety.

In *Why Be Happy*, the safety is no longer needed. Winterson writes directly about her mother's death, her own breakdown, and the therapy that helped her reconnect with the grief she had spent a lifetime avoiding. This is Maté's therapeutic imperative articulated in Winterson's own voice. Feeling the pain that was once unbearable is the precondition for healing. It is also, in Deleuzian terms, an increase in affective capacity. The body that can tolerate grief is a body with expanded thresholds, a body that can be affected by joy as well.

6.3. The choice of forgiveness: From wound to gratitude

The final chapters of *Why Be Happy* imply a remarkable ethical-affective turn. Winterson does not remain in the position of a victim; she re-visits her adoptive mother in the nursing home, and she finds her biological mother, Ann. Neither encounter is sentimental. Mrs. Winterson, now aged, is still difficult, still incapable of providing the love her daughter aspired. Ann, when found, is a middle-aged woman who gave up her baby decades ago and has her own life, her own new family, her own reasons for not wanting contact. There is no Hollywood reunion, no tearful embrace. Yet Winterson writes of both women with something that can only be called sympathy and understanding.

This compassion is not naive forgiveness. It is, rather, what Maté describes as the fruit of understood suffering. Winterson comes to see Mrs. Winterson not as a bad mother but as a wounded woman who was abandoned and incapable of giving the love she never received, so she writes like this: "She was a monster, but she was my monster" ^[8]. Similarly, Ann is not idealized but recognized as another woman caught in the impersonal forces of history and class. Winterson does not forgive her for Winterson's sake; she simply sees her limitations.

The book's final pages are filled with gratitude that is a powerful strength that cures the pain and releases the grief. Winterson is grateful for the books that saved her mentally, for the education she fought for, for the partners who loved her, for the house she has made her home. The house, in fact, becomes the book's culminating symbol. It is a real house — Winterson restored a derelict terraced house in London — but it is also a metaphor for the self: repaired, inhabited, capable of holding complexity. Affect is no longer trapped in the past but flowing through the present, connecting Winterson to her readers, to her history, to the world.

Deleuze writes that the ethical goal of life is to become "not to be unworthy of what happens to us" — to affirm the totality of our affective history, the painful as well as the joyful ^[10]. Winterson achieves this affirmation. Her late-life gratitude is not the erasure of suffering but its transmutation. The wound, as she writes, is where the light enters. The light is the writing itself.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Jeanette Winterson's two semi-autobiographical texts constitute a sustained project of affective reparation. By reading them through the complementary lenses of Gilles Deleuze's affect theory and Gabor Maté's trauma psychology, this paper has shown how Winterson's writing records the intergenerational transmission of trauma, the emotional neglect of her adoptive childhood, and the compulsive search for love. It has also traced the gradual emergence of a reparative capacity: the shift from indirect to direct narration, the reconnection with suppressed grief, and the eventual achievement of forgiveness and gratitude.

The synthesis of Deleuze and Maté proposed here has broader implications for literary studies. It offers a model for reading traumatic autobiography that attends simultaneously to the phenomenon of affective experience and the developmental causes of emotional wounding. This dual perspective can illuminate other writers who have used autobiographical forms to process early trauma — Marguerite Duras, Rachel Cusk, Deborah Levy — and can also be extended to non-Western contexts, where the dynamics of family, attachment, and intergenerational transmission take culturally specific forms.

Winterson's work ultimately affirms that emotional pain, when witnessed and articulated, need not be pathological. It can become a source of ethical vision and affective generosity. Her forgiveness of her mothers is not a reconciliation with the past but a reconstruction of it: the past remains painful, but it is no longer determining. In Deleuze's terms, Winterson has maximized her power to be affected — and to affect others. Her books, circulating among readers who recognize their own wounds in her prose, are the living evidence of this achievement.

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