



## Read and Respond

### *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* By Jeanette Winterson

*Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* by Jeanette Winterson, is included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2027 and 2028. It may be used as part of the Comparative at Ordinary Level or Higher Level.

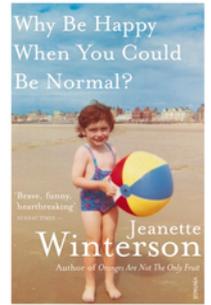


Image courtesy of Penguin Books UK

#### Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- Please note that *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* covers themes which could be considered sensitive or controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.



Scan the QR code or [click here to access a Getting Started with Guide for this Text](#)

### Before you read (Teacher Guidance)

Adapt as appropriate for your class.

#### 1. Unpacking the Title

Ask pupils to write the novel's title in the centre of their page. Have them create a mind map exploring the following questions: What contradictions can be seen? What might we expect from a novel with this title? What might this suggest about society?

#### 2. Autobiography vs. Fiction discussion

Have a discussion with pupils about the genre. You may want to consider the following questions: Why might an author choose to write their own life story as memoir rather than fiction (or vice versa)? What differences might the genre provide an author?

#### 3. Quotation prediction

Ask students to read the quote and note down ideas for the questions below.

*I began to realise that I had company. Writers are often exiles, outsiders, runaways and castaways. These writers were my friends. Every book was a message in a bottle. Open it.*

- a) What might this suggest about the narrator's view of the world?
- b) What kinds of conflict or themes might come up in the memoir?
- c) How might these connect to the title or to identity?



## Extract from

### ***Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?***

This extract is from the opening to chapter one of the memoir.

*When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said, ‘The Devil led us to the wrong crib.’*

*The image of Satan taking time off from the Cold War and McCarthyism to visit Manchester in 1960 – purpose of visit: to deceive Mrs Winterson – has a flamboyant theatricality to it. She was a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge. A woman who stayed up all night baking cakes to avoid sleeping in the same bed as my father. A woman with a prolapse, a thyroid condition, an enlarged heart, an ulcerated leg that never healed, and two sets of false teeth – matt for everyday, and a pearlised set for ‘best’.*

*I do not know why she didn’t/couldn’t have children. I know that she adopted me because she wanted a friend (she had none), and because I was like a flare sent out into the world – a way of saying that she was here – a kind of X Marks the Spot.*

*She hated being a nobody, and like all children, adopted or not, I have had to live out some of her un-lived life. We do that for our parents – we don’t really have any choice.*

*(Jeanette Winterson, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal, 2011, page 3)*

## **Activities Based on the Extract (Teacher Guidance)**

**The following may be completed in written or oral format, as individuals or as part of a group activity.**

[Click to watch a clip of Winterson discussing her memoir](#) courtesy of Youtube



1. Ask pupils to explore the phrase “The Devil led us to the wrong crib” a partner. Pupils could discuss what the language suggests about this family. Pupils should bullet point how the language of this accusation shapes their impression of the mother’s attitude toward Jeanette.
2. Read aloud Winterson’s description of her mother: “a revolver in the duster drawer.. two sets of false teeth – matt for everyday, and a pearlised set for ‘best’” to pupils. Ask pupils to identify possible symbolism in these details. Prompt them to consider: What do these details suggest about her mother’s character? Instruct pupils to discuss their ideas with a partner. Tell pupils to note down key words from their discussion to record their observations.
3. Direct pupils to Winterson’s reflection: “like all children, adopted or not, I have had to live out some of her un-lived life.” Ask pupils whether they agree that children are often shaped by their parents’ unfulfilled dreams or struggles. Direct pupils to explain their reasoning in pairs through discussion. Instruct pupils to write a short piece that connects their personal response to the extract.



## Reflect and Respond

The following question may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel.

### 1. Comparison

Instruct pupils to compare how Winterson presents personal memories and experiences in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* with how a poet they have studied explores memory, self, or family. Remind pupils to consider: How does each writer use form, style, and language to shape individual experiences into something meaningful for the reader?

Direct pupils to structure their response as a comparison, making clear links between Winterson and the chosen poet.

### 2. Personal Essay

Present the statement: *Being true to yourself is not always the same as being accepted by others.* Instruct pupils to write a personal essay about a time when they faced a choice between meeting others' expectations and following what felt right for them. Ask them to reflect on what they learned from the experience and express this clearly in their writing.

### 3. Paired Planning

Ask pupils to work with a partner to discuss and highlight the imagery in the given extract. Direct them to identify the tone of the poem and the perspective offered. Instruct pairs to plan how they could transform this extract into a poem. Encourage them to decide:

- What style of poem to use.
- Which perspective to write from.
- What message they want to communicate.

If time allows, tell pupils to draft their poem.

### 4. Debate

Share the statement: "Being 'normal' is a system of oppression." Organise pupils into small groups, allocating sides "for" or "against." Give pupils 10 minutes to prepare their arguments and talking points. Lead into a debate, encouraging each group to present and challenge ideas.

### 5. Short Story

Remind pupils that in Winterson's text, there is conflict between the speaker and her mother. Ask pupils to write a short story that centres on a complex relationship between two characters. Instruct them to show how one character completely disagrees with the views of the other, making the conflict central to the story.