



# THE RESILIENCE PORTRAYED IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S "*HAPPENING*"

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## ABSTRACT

*Happening*, is Annie Ernaux's incredible moving autobiography in which she describes her journey of being a 23 year old woman enduring an abortion in a country where it's illegal and considered shameful. She recounts her memories of being a very bright college student, full of life and dreams flowing through her veins with determination to work her way out of her middle class mundane life but when she finds out that she's gotten pregnant by a summer fling, her whole world flips upside-down.

This paper grazes over the horror she felt growing inside her belly, her tenacious ways to kill the baby in order to get back to her ambitious college life and the everlasting effect that the death of the child would cause her. "*I had found no solution. I had decided to take matters into my own hands*" p.37. Throughout this book, we can observe that Annie is a brave young woman who never let failure or the absence of help perturb her in any way, instead when there wasn't a solution she diligently created one. She has written about her story of continued resilience with utmost candidness and takes the readers on an emotional rollercoaster of being able to experience what she went through from a first-hand narrative.

**Keywords:** resilience, autobiography, abortion, trauma

## INTRODUCTION

Annie Ernaux was born on 1st September 1940. Being born from a working class background, she had known that her only gateway into a comfortable life was through education. She studied literature and then went on to gain a higher degree in modern literature. She then became a literary prodigy who had written books that stole the hearts of France and were later translated to English to captivate the world forever. She has swept all the esteemed awards like Prix d'Honneur in 1977 for her book "*Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*", Prix de la langue in 2008 for her immaculate contribution towards the French language and Strega European Prize for "*The Years*" in 2016.

Annie Ernaux has lived an eventful life scattered with a multitude of challenges and troubles that she bravely endured. She has written numerous autobiographical books, each describing a very special part of her life. In her books, she has described the excitement of going to summer camp and experiencing her first sexual experience, the detrimental loss of her father and the toll that it took on her life, undergoing an illegal abortion, dealing with the salient death of her mother and many other unvarnished incidents in her life.

## RESUME OF THE NOVEL:

*Happening*, by Annie Ernaux entails the trials and tribulations that she encountered on becoming pregnant by accident while exploring her romantic and sexual side; and her journey of surviving the abortion in a place where it's not only deemed illegal but also shameful. Undergoing the abortion with the lack of support from her parents who only wanted her to succeed in her academic career and her absence of someone in her life whom she could truly lean on, she had to find a solution to get rid of the baby by herself. When friends of hers did her wrong by taking advantage of her pregnancy and several doctors misled her into seemingly helping her abort but instead did the opposite, she finally decided to take matters into her own hands. In this book, she describes her unprecedented emotions during this extremely cardinal part of her life and her pure determination combined with stubbornness to not let this incident determine her life forever.

## HER LIFE BEFORE THE BABY

Annie Ernaux lived the life of a typical college girl. Her life comprised of attending an array of classes, watching movies of varied genres, writing a thesis, making new friends and creating lifelong memories with them.

But she was soon presented with a fork in the road. Being born in a working class family, she had to decide if she wanted to solely focus on achieving academic accolades or follow her desire to explore what everyone else her age is, and go down a valley of sexual exploration and discovery. She then made a critical decision to dive all in and experience both during her college life. She had a very interesting relationship with her parents who had always been extremely stubborn with her in pursuing scholastic endeavors, that she could never open up to them about her personal life. But nevertheless, to put a smile on their faces, she would visit them on special weekends. She had spent the summer with “P”, a boy whom she had met during her summer vacations and would later visit in Bordeaux. She never hesitated to explore her sexual demeanor with this boy as never in a million years had she ever imagined that their casual love making would arise in the creation of a human being. The very idea of that had seemed way too far-fetched and almost impossible to perceive, so she was never cautious and was extremely carefree.

### **HER LIFE WHILE PREGNANT**

However, on a trip to the gynecologist, she had found out that she was pregnant. Ever since the diagnosis, she had never, even for a moment ever thought of keeping the baby. She preferred calling it “that thing” and didn’t even want to come to terms with her pregnancy or try and establish a relationship with the baby because she knew for sure, that she wanted to get rid of the baby at the earliest. The thought of terminating the pregnancy had overshadowed the shame that she might feel or the risks involved in getting an abortion in a country where it is deemed illegal by the law.

Her life in University had soon become a blur too. Her classes were filled with bounds of nothingness and her envy towards other women and their empty wombs, kept increasing with time. She started feeling helpless and knew that she needed the help of other people to help her with the abortion, so she confided in one of her only friends in college, Jean T. He was a married student with a scant knowledge of free contraception and birth control. So she disclosed the secret to him during lunch hoping that he would help her during this gruesome period. On hearing the news, he was shocked and enthralled at the very thought that a model student like her would now be desperate for help. *“I didn’t think Jean T had shown contempt for me. In his mind I had moved on from the girl who might say no to the type who had undoubtedly said yes”*.p.25. He had then taken advantage of

her condition and offered her to make love with him. But she was so desperate for a solution to end the pregnancy as soon as she possibly could, so she met him for lunch once again anticipating some kind of remorse and guidance. He then told her about a doctor, LB who performed the surgery illegally. She had waited for LB for 2 days in the rain but the doctor was never to be seen. Her determination to find a solution had led her to visiting an elderly doctor on the Boulevard de l'Yser. He had prescribed her with two injections which she hoped that they would aid in a miscarriage but she had later found out that those shots had rather been injected to improve the chances of growing a healthy baby.

*“One morning, while I was standing in the hall waiting for a lecture to end, the figures of the students around me suddenly broke up into small shiny dots”.* p 34. Her symptoms of pregnancy kept haunting her and her disinterest in boys and everything else had begun to escalate. Her desperation to become normal again led her to buy 2 knitting needles to perform the procedure by herself. She had known that women in the past had done it so she figured that she could endure the pain. But she couldn't pull through with the plan. To her surprise, a week before Christmas, LB had come knocking on her door with the news that she knows of a lady, Madame PR who would insert a probe into the womb that would eventually terminate the pregnancy. *“She would insert the probe on its own- no soapy water, no bleach”* p. 49. The procedure had been completed and Madame PR was kind enough to drop Annie Ernaux back to the train station. But when the probe didn't cause a miscarriage, she had visited Madame PR again who had replaced the old probe with a new one. *“Madame PR's practical contribution was over”.* p.56. Alas, this time the probe had induced labor. She had successfully pushed out the baby and her friend, O had helped cut the umbilical cord and dispose the fetus in the commode. But Annie began losing tremendous amounts of blood which caused O to call the paramedics immediately. She was then admitted in the hospital for 5 days to cure the hemorrhage.

## HER LIFE AFTER THE ABORTION

*“In my student bathroom, I had given birth to both life and death.”* p.69. The abortion felt like a relief but also brought into her life a feeling of emptiness that she hadn't known before. She felt like a different woman now. Her enthusiasm towards life became a void and she had become the ghost of her previous self. Alluding

through the trauma of the procedure and getting back to her sense of normalcy wasn't an easy feat and it was rather challenging. The thoughts of her water baby had kept her up at night and she had almost felt like she had experienced a huge loss- of both the death of her baby and the woman that she was before the pregnancy. She took up babysitting and tried to immerse herself into different activities to distract her from her mundane life. Even though she is aware that life would never be the same from now on, she tries and holds on to the little pieces of normalcy in her life.

## CONCLUSION

In her autobiography, Annie Ernaux is honest and doesn't try to sugarcoat her reality when she was 23. This novel portrays both the birth of her immense courage that she didn't know she had possessed and the loss of a human being who had been conceived by mistake. She remains straightforward throughout the book while sharing the miniscule details of the number of the people who did her wrong throughout this pertinent part of her life while exposing her beaming strength and her persistence to not take no for an answer. Even though at the end of the day, she had aborted the baby, she lets the readers into a very personal part of her life where she explains overcoming the grueling pain of loss, the resilience and the trauma she went throughout the whole process.

## REFERENCE-

The Happening by Annie Ernaux