

HAPPINESS IS A NEW IDEA IN EUROPE BY JORDAN PLEVNESH: EUROPEAN IDENTITY, CULTURAL MEMORY, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND THE ETHICS OF HAPPINESS

Anita Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska

MIT University Skopje, North Macedonia, adimitrijovska@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-4468-9307

Milica Denkovska

MIT University Skopje, North Macedonia, milica.denkovska@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-3286-1866

Abstract: This paper examines Jordan Plevnesh's dramatic text *Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe* as a postmodern interrogation of European identity, cultural memory, historical trauma, and the possibility of constructing a new ethical European imaginary. The analysis combines classical literary theory with recent scholarship on European identity, cultural memory, intertextuality, Balkan studies, and subjective well-being. The theoretical framework draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Linda Hutcheon, while contemporary perspectives are provided by recent studies of European narratives, cultural Europeanization, intertextuality, and happiness. The study employs qualitative textual analysis, close reading, intertextual analysis, cultural-historical interpretation, and comparative theoretical analysis. Three research questions guide the investigation: how does Plevnesh construct Europe as a cultural and historical identity; how does the play employ intertextuality and historical memory to question dominant European narratives; and how does the concept of happiness function as a possible ethical alternative to Europe's history of violence? The central hypothesis proposes that Plevnesh transforms the concept of happiness from a private emotional condition into a collective ethical and civilizational project. The analysis demonstrates that the play destabilizes the binary opposition between Europe and the Balkans and repositions the Balkans as an interpretive space from which Europe itself can be critically reconsidered. The play ultimately constructs Europe as an unfinished cultural project whose future depends upon dialogue, historical responsibility, difference, reconciliation, and human dignity.

Keywords: Jordan Plevnesh, *Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe*, European identity, cultural memory, intertextuality, Balkan drama, postmodernism, happiness, Otherness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jordan Plevnesh occupies an important position within contemporary Macedonian drama because his dramatic writing repeatedly places Macedonian and Balkan experience in dialogue with European cultural history. His play *Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe* is particularly significant because it does not treat Europe simply as a geographical or political category. Instead, Europe becomes a cultural imagination, a historical memory, an ideological construction, and an ethical question.

The play was written in the context of the profound political and cultural transformations that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the reconfiguration of Europe after the Cold War. Within this context, "Europe" acquired a particularly powerful symbolic meaning in the Balkans: it represented both an imagined destination and a problematic cultural boundary. Contemporary scholarship continues to identify tensions between national and European forms of belonging in the post-Yugoslav space, including North Macedonia.

The title *Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe* is historically associated with the revolutionary claim that happiness could become a political and social ideal. Plevnesh appropriates this formula and transforms it into a dramatic and philosophical question. What kind of Europe can emerge after centuries of violence, ideological conflict, exclusion, war, and historical trauma? Can happiness become a new European value, comparable in significance to reason, liberty, equality, or progress?

Recent scholarship makes the question particularly relevant. Contemporary European research increasingly approaches happiness not merely as an individual psychological state but as a phenomenon related to autonomy, social capital, equality, political satisfaction, cultural values, and social conditions (Gómez-Balcácer et al., 2023; Messner, 2023; Steckermeier, 2021). Plevnesh's dramatic concept of happiness can therefore be read through a contemporary interdisciplinary perspective in which personal well-being and the ethical organization of society are interconnected.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

The research is guided by three principal questions:

RQ1: How does Plevnesh construct Europe as a cultural, historical, and symbolic identity?

RQ2: How do intertextuality, historical memory, and postmodern dramaturgical strategies challenge dominant narratives of European civilization?

RQ3: How does the concept of happiness function as an ethical and civilizational alternative to Europe's history of violence and fragmentation?

The central hypothesis is:

H1: In *Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe*, Plevnesh transforms happiness from an individual emotional condition into a collective ethical and civilizational ideal through which European identity can be reimagined beyond violence, exclusion, and rigid center-periphery distinctions.

A secondary hypothesis follows from this argument: the Balkans function in the play not simply as Europe's periphery but as a critical interpretive position from which the European cultural and historical narrative can be questioned and reconstructed.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research applies a qualitative humanities methodology based primarily on close textual reading and interdisciplinary theoretical interpretation. The primary source is Plevnesh's dramatic text, while secondary sources include literary theory, cultural studies, European identity studies, Balkan studies, and contemporary scholarship on happiness and subjective well-being.

Four analytical procedures are employed.

First, close reading is used to identify recurring thematic and symbolic structures, particularly Europe, memory, violence, identity, historical figures, and happiness.

Second, intertextual analysis examines the relationship between Plevnesh's play and the larger European literary, philosophical, historical, and cultural archive. Contemporary scholarship continues to emphasize that intertextuality remains a productive method for analyzing contemporary literature and drama because texts frequently construct meaning through dialogue with earlier traditions (Allen, 2021; Ostropalchenko, 2024).

Third, cultural-historical analysis investigates the representation of Europe and the Balkans in relation to historical memory and identity construction.

Finally, comparative theoretical analysis brings classical concepts of dialogism, intertextuality, deconstruction, Orientalism, hybridity, and historiographic metafiction into dialogue with contemporary scholarship on European identity and happiness.

4. EUROPE AS A CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

One of the fundamental achievements of Plevnesh's play is its transformation of Europe from a geographical location into a symbolic character or cultural construct. Europe is represented through memories, personalities, artistic achievements, philosophical ideas, wars, ideological conflicts, and human suffering.

This approach corresponds to contemporary theories of European identity, which increasingly reject the assumption that Europe possesses one fixed and homogeneous identity. Research on European identity emphasizes the role of narratives in constructing boundaries between "us" and "them" and in selecting which historical memories become central to collective identity (Rohde-Liebenau, 2022).

Plevnesh's Europe is similarly produced through narratives. The presence of major European cultural figures and historical references suggests that European identity is constructed through cultural memory. Europe becomes a textual and symbolic archive in which different historical periods coexist.

Lazarev (2024) similarly emphasizes the importance of cultural memory for the formation of European identity, arguing that Europe's common cultural heritage incorporates both its major intellectual traditions and the ethical lessons of the twentieth century's wars and totalitarian regimes. Plevnesh's dramatic strategy anticipates precisely this tension: Europe cannot understand its identity solely through its cultural achievements; it must also remember its historical catastrophes.

5. INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL ARCHIVE

Intertextuality represents one of the principal mechanisms through which Plevnesh constructs the dramatic world. Kristeva's (1980) concept of intertextuality and Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism remain fundamental for understanding a work in which different voices, texts, historical figures, and cultural traditions coexist.

However, recent scholarship has demonstrated that intertextuality remains highly relevant to contemporary literary analysis. Allen (2021) emphasizes the continuing relationship between intertextuality and tradition, while Ostropalchenko (2024) demonstrates how postmodern drama creates multilayered meanings through allusion, hypertextuality, and cultural reference.

Plevnesh's use of European cultural figures can consequently be understood as a form of cultural montage. Dante, Mozart, Gogol, Nietzsche, and other figures are not simply historical references. They function as symbolic representatives of different dimensions of European civilization. Their presence enables the dramatic text to move across centuries and to place different intellectual traditions into dialogue.

The play thus constructs what may be called a **European intertext**—a network of literary, philosophical, artistic, and historical references through which the idea of Europe becomes visible.

This is also what gives the drama its polyphonic quality. Bakhtin's concept of polyphony is particularly useful because Plevnesh does not reduce Europe to a single voice. Europe speaks through competing traditions, memories, ideologies, and experiences.

6. HISTORY, MEMORY, AND POSTMODERN DRAMATURGY

Plevnesh's treatment of history is closely connected with postmodern dramaturgy. Hutcheon (1988) argues that postmodern cultural production frequently challenges the authority of official historical narratives by exposing their constructed nature. History is not merely reproduced; it is interpreted, rearranged, questioned, and rewritten.

Malkin's theory of memory theatre is also particularly relevant because she identifies memory as a central structural principle of postmodern drama. In such drama, the past does not remain safely behind the present; it returns to the stage as fragmented, traumatic, and unstable memory.

Recent discussions of postmodern drama similarly emphasize the disruption of linear temporality and the use of historical reference to expose the constructed nature of historical representation (Mudasir, 2021).

Plevnesh's dramatic structure can therefore be understood as a theatrical journey through European memory. Historical periods do not simply follow one another chronologically. They become interconnected through memory and symbolic association.

This structure is particularly important because Europe's present cannot be separated from its past. Contemporary European identity continues to be influenced by narratives of war, revolution, fascism, communism, migration, nationalism, and European integration. De Vries (2023) argues that foundational narratives continue to shape contemporary understandings of the European project and that confronting the past remains essential to addressing present European challenges.

Plevnesh's play dramatizes this principle before turning it into a philosophical question: if Europe cannot escape its past, how can it transform its relationship with that past?

7. THE BALKANS AS EUROPE'S OTHER

The relationship between Europe and the Balkans is central to interpreting Plevnesh's dramatic project. Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism provides a useful theoretical foundation for understanding how identities are constructed through the representation of an Other.

In the European context, the Balkans have frequently occupied an ambiguous position: simultaneously inside and outside Europe. Vukasović (2018) argues that the Balkans have been discursively constructed as an Other in relation to European identity.

Plevnesh reverses this relationship. Instead of allowing Europe to remain the unquestioned center from which the Balkans are observed, he allows the Balkan subject to observe Europe.

This reversal is fundamental. The Balkans become an interpretive location rather than merely an object of European discourse. Europe itself becomes the object that must be examined.

Such a strategy is particularly significant for Macedonian cultural identity. Recent research on Europeanization in North Macedonia demonstrates that European belonging is not simply a geographical fact but a complex process of identification shaped by political and cultural narratives.

The dramatic text therefore challenges the binary opposition between "European" and "Balkan." Instead, it proposes a more complex relationship in which Balkan experience forms part of European historical consciousness.

Hybridity and the Third Space

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity provides an additional framework for understanding the play. Cultural identity, according to Bhabha, is created in an "in-between" space rather than inherited as a pure and stable essence.

Plevnesh's Europe exists precisely in such a space. The play brings together East and West, center and periphery, ancient and modern, national and transnational, memory and contemporary experience.

This hybrid structure challenges the idea that Europe can be defined by a single cultural essence. Europe becomes a process of cultural negotiation.

Research on cultural Europeanization similarly shows that European belonging is experienced through encounters, mobility, heritage, and everyday cultural practices rather than through a single fixed definition of Europe (Strandgaard Pedersen et al., 2023).

The dramatic text therefore anticipates a contemporary understanding of Europe as a plural and continually negotiated cultural space.

Happiness as an Ethical and Civilizational Concept

The most important conceptual dimension of Plevnesh's play is the transformation of happiness into a civilizational category.

Traditionally, happiness may be understood as an individual psychological condition. Contemporary research, however, increasingly emphasizes that well-being is shaped by social, economic, cultural, political, and

institutional conditions. Steckermeier (2021), for example, connects life satisfaction in Europe with autonomy, security, social relationships, financial security, leisure, and respect.

Similarly, Gómez-Balcácer et al. (2023) demonstrate the significance of social capital for happiness in Europe, while Messner (2023) shows that personal values influence subjective well-being across European countries.

These findings provide an important contemporary context for interpreting Plevnesh. Happiness in the play is not simply a private emotion. It implicitly requires social conditions in which human beings can experience dignity, freedom, solidarity, security, and belonging.

The title therefore functions as a philosophical proposition: perhaps the next stage of European civilization should not be defined only through economic development, political integration, or institutional structures, but through the quality of human existence.

This interpretation is strengthened by recent European research showing that happiness and life satisfaction are associated with broader political and social conditions. Ward (2020), for instance, demonstrates the relevance of subjective well-being to political behavior in Europe, while Nowakowski (2021) connects dissatisfaction and subjective well-being with European political discontent.

Plevnesh's formulation can consequently be read as an ethical challenge: if Europe has historically produced powerful concepts of reason, progress, freedom, and rights, could happiness become another principle through which European civilization understands itself?

The significance of happiness becomes most apparent when contrasted with the historical violence represented throughout the play. Europe's cultural achievements exist alongside wars, ideological divisions, destruction, and human suffering.

The dramatic tension therefore emerges between memory and possibility. Europe must remember its history, but it cannot remain imprisoned within it.

This distinction is essential. Happiness does not mean forgetting suffering. Rather, it represents the possibility of transforming historical memory into ethical responsibility.

Recent scholarship on European identity emphasizes the continuing importance of historical narratives and collective memory in determining who is included within the imagined European community. Plevnesh's drama similarly suggests that the future of Europe depends upon how its past is remembered and interpreted.

The play can therefore be understood as an ethical project. Its objective is not to produce a new ideological orthodoxy but to open a space in which Europe can question itself.

8. DISCUSSION

The analysis confirms the central hypothesis that happiness in Plevnesh's drama functions as more than an emotional or psychological condition. It becomes a symbolic representation of the possibility of civilizational transformation.

The play's intertextuality allows European history to appear as a dialogue rather than as a single authoritative narrative. Its postmodern dramaturgy destabilizes linear historical time. Its representation of the Balkans challenges the conventional European center-periphery relationship. Its treatment of memory transforms history into an active ethical problem.

The convergence of these elements produces a distinctive vision of Europe as an unfinished project.

Importantly, the play does not simply reject Europe. Nor does it idealize the Balkans. Instead, it places both within a critical relationship. Europe is valuable precisely because it contains traditions of humanism, art, philosophy, freedom, and intellectual inquiry—but these traditions must be evaluated against the violence and exclusions that have also shaped European history.

In this respect, Plevnesh's drama can be situated within what might be called a **critical European humanism**: a form of European belonging that does not depend upon cultural purity or historical superiority but upon the capacity for self-criticism, dialogue, remembrance, and ethical transformation.

9. CONCLUSION

Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe emerges from this analysis as a multilayered dramatic work that simultaneously engages literary history, European cultural memory, Balkan identity, postmodern dramaturgy, and the philosophical meaning of happiness. Its significance lies precisely in its refusal to reduce Europe to a geographical, political, or ideological category. Instead, Plevnesh presents Europe as an unfinished cultural narrative—a space whose identity is continuously produced through memory, conflict, dialogue, difference, and reinterpretation.

The theoretical perspectives examined in this study demonstrate that the play operates through a complex interaction of voices and cultural references. Bakhtin's concept of polyphony illuminates the coexistence of multiple perspectives, while Kristeva's theory of intertextuality explains the relationship between Plevnesh's dramatic text and the broader European cultural archive. Derrida's deconstructive approach makes it possible to understand Europe as an identity that cannot be fully stabilized, while Said's concept of Otherness reveals the importance of the historical distinction between European self-representation and the construction of the

Balkans as an external or inferior space. Bhabha's theory of hybridity further demonstrates that the European cultural space is constituted through encounters between different identities rather than through cultural purity. Hutcheon and Malkin, meanwhile, provide a framework for understanding the play's treatment of history and memory as fragmented, reconstructed, and repeatedly returned to the present.

One of the most important findings of the analysis is that the Balkans occupy a particularly productive position within Plevnesh's European imagination. The Balkans are not simply represented as a problematic margin seeking admission into Europe. Instead, the Balkan perspective becomes a position from which Europe itself can be questioned. This reversal is crucial because it challenges the traditional hierarchy between center and periphery. Europe becomes not only the observer but also the observed; not only the subject that defines identity but also the object whose identity must be examined.

The concept of happiness ultimately brings together these different dimensions of the play. Plevnesh transforms happiness into a symbolic language through which the future of Europe can be imagined. Contemporary research on European well-being supports the broader theoretical possibility of such a reading: happiness is associated not only with individual feelings but also with autonomy, social relationships, values, equality, security, and political and cultural circumstances.

Thus, happiness in the play should not be understood as an escape from history. On the contrary, it becomes possible only through an active engagement with history. Europe cannot create a meaningful future by forgetting its wars, exclusions, ideological divisions, and historical traumas. Its future depends upon transforming memory into responsibility and cultural difference into dialogue.

The title therefore acquires a deeper philosophical meaning. "Happiness" becomes a metaphor for a possible transformation of the European civilizational imagination: from domination toward dialogue, from exclusion toward inclusion, from historical repetition toward ethical reflection, and from rigid identity categories toward cultural hybridity.

Ultimately, Plevnesh does not offer a definitive model of what Europe should become. Instead, he dramatizes the possibility of asking what Europe might become. This distinction is fundamental to the play's postmodern character. Europe remains unfinished, open, internally contradictory, and continually subject to reinterpretation. Its identity cannot be reduced to a single history, culture, ideology, or geographical boundary.

The enduring significance of *Happiness Is a New Idea in Europe* therefore lies in its ability to transform a historical statement into a contemporary philosophical question. The play asks whether Europe can move beyond the memory of violence without abandoning the responsibility to remember it, and whether its future can be founded upon a broader understanding of human dignity. In this sense, happiness becomes neither an abstract utopia nor a private emotion, but a metaphor for the possibility of a more humane civilization. Plevnesh's Europe remains an unfinished project whose meaning is created through the continuous interaction of memory, difference, culture, and ethical responsibility. The "new idea" is consequently not simply happiness itself, but the possibility of imagining Europe through the human capacity for reconciliation, coexistence, and the creation of meaning after historical catastrophe.

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