

Discuss Jeanette Winterson's exploration of sexuality and identity in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*.

Daniella Delaney

Throughout *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985), Jeanette Winterson is trying to challenge some of the cornerstones of patriarchal and heteronormative sexuality. One of the ways Winterson challenges these ideas is by rewriting; she looks to reinvent the patriarchy and the power of institutions by rewriting the bible and fighting against sexual and personal identity repression. I will be discussing the ideas of Adrienne Rich, rewriting compulsory heterosexuality alongside themes of ghosting and exorcism and using these to explore sexuality and identity within *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. In addition, I will be commenting on Winterson's subversion of Romance fiction and how she uses this to challenge heteronormative relationships and sexuality.

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit challenges the power of the institutions which are trying to control and tame sexuality and identity, as Rich argues "The autonomy and equality of women threaten family, religion and state. The institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled- patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality" (1980, p. 3). Winterson guides us through the exploration of sexuality through the interweaving of the bible and fairy tales. The use of fairy tales intertwined within the text interrupt fixed writings of the bible and the fixed intolerant mentality we find from the religious institutions within the novel. Fairy tales interrupt the fixed narrative and make the text a queer narrative with its non-linear structure and from this we see that the bible isn't the only text within our culture. More importantly, fairy tales are not fixed, they can be adapted and changed and are more open to be transformed. In interweaving these texts and modes, Winterson is breaking the rigid mould of the power of the church and showing us that sexuality, much like the styles used throughout the novel, does not have to be fixed and is a spectrum that can change. The use of the bible can be seen as a rewrite to become something that is more inclusive; Winterson merges together what the church sees as separate: sexuality and religion.

While the Old Testament has been used as chapter headings to structure the novel, Winterson ends the last chapter with the 'Book of Ruth' which is significant. As explained by Bollinger, The Ruth text enables Winterson to address the "two major conflicts in Jeanette's life: her sexual orientation and her connection to her mother" (Bollinger, 1994, p. 364). Therefore, highlighting loyalty and emphasising the importance of female loyalty to female development, Jeanette is forever attached to her mother even at the very end of the novel: "she tied a thread around my button, to tug at when she pleased" (Winterson, 1985, p. 224). As such, her mother's presence will continue to impact Jeanette and her development. There is also speculation that the 'Book of Ruth' was the only one written by a woman, giving it an important stance against the patriarchal readings of the bible, and therefore

challenging the cornerstones of how the church is treating sexuality and female identity.

Another example of this challenge of institutions can be seen in Winterson's depiction of heteronormative relationships. In this instance not only is Winterson challenging powerful institutions and patriarchal structures, such as the church and family, but she is also subverting the conventions of romantic fiction in doing so. The heteronormative relationships within the novel are not depicted as 'happy marriages'. An example of this can be seen in the representation of Mr and Mrs Winterson's marriage. Mr Winterson never speaks throughout the novel; we never see any displays of affection or even communication between them. In addition to this, they never seem to sleep in the same bed, instead we are told that one of them stays up all night. This prompts the readers to ask why they never want to share the same bed and could this be due to a lack of sexual desire and an unhappy marriage. Furthermore, Winterson shows us another sceptical view of marriage and this is demonstrated by Jeanette's recurring dream of her impending nuptials: "my dress was pure white and I had a golden crown. As I walked up the aisle the crown got heavier and heavier and the dress more and more difficult to walk in. I thought everyone would point at me, but no one noticed" (Winterson, 1985, p. 91). This alludes to it being an institution which weighs you down, and that it is a burden which everyone is expected to bear, hence nobody noticing the difficulties she is facing. Another example is Winterson describing the fictional husband; she has several different versions: "sometimes he was blind, sometimes he was a pig [...] and once, just a suit of clothes with nothing inside" (Winterson, 1985, p. 91). None of these are viable options but instead are something comical, as though the institution of marriage is something to be laughed at. The suit of clothes with nothing inside alludes to a hollow and empty institution which has no credibility, as demonstrated by the lack of credible husbands.

The concept of the apparitional lesbian (Castle, T. 1993) can be seen throughout the novel, in which Winterson uses ideas of invisibility or being 'ghosted' continually. The first instance is through the two characters who run the paper shop. Jeanette identifies with the two women and enjoys their company but, after asking her mother if she can visit the seaside with them, she is prevented from seeing them again: "my mother said firmly and forever, no. I couldn't understand why not, and she wouldn't explain [...] Then she cancelled my comic and told me to collect it from another shop" (Winterson, 1985, p. 10). They are permanently removed from Jeanette's life and from here Winterson shows us how lesbians have been expunged from novels and life; support and services are withdrawn from Jeanette and, as Rich explains, *Oranges* foregrounds the "erasure of lesbian existence" (Rich, 1980, p. 1, p. 8). Throughout the novel we return to this concept of the apparitional lesbian which, as explained by Terry Castle, can be seen as a way "to drain her of any sensual or moral authority- she can then be exorcised" (1993). This concept is demonstrated by Jeanette's exorcism and the idea that she is possessed. Anything that challenges the church and its immovable religious attitudes is explained by demons and possessions: "a terrifying sermon on how easy it is to become demon-possessed" (Winterson, 1985, p. 15) and is further emphasised after Jeanette's weekend with

Melanie is discovered and the Pastor performs an exorcism. The Pastor explains “I was afflicted and oppressed” (Winterson, 1985, p. 168). Winterson gives us this ironically as the thing that is actually oppressing Jeanette, her sexuality and her identity are the powerful institutions around her that are trying to control and tame her, which ultimately doesn’t work. Instead, Winterson demonstrates the harmful effects the church and its patriarchal structures and heteronormative attitudes have on mental health. The use of hallucination is seen within the church as an example of madness and possession caused by her sexuality, whereas Winterson uses this hallucination as an externalisation. Jeanette has been locked in a room and not been fed and, as Winterson says on the BBC Bookclub in 2010, it would be natural that she would experience these kinds of ‘brain episodes’ as a result. Instead of it being the work of the devil which Jeanette is responsible for, it is actually her mother’s actions which have caused these hallucinations, so not only does Winterson frame Jeanette as innocent but we actually see her mother as the one who has caused this evil.

The role of the family is an important aspect in this novel. Winterson emphasises the role of Mrs Winterson within Jeanette’s life and she uses this relationship as another way to demonstrate how institutions, such as family, suppress sexuality and identity. We can look at Mrs Winterson’s role in relation to Gough’s *‘Origin of the Family’* who states “With the growth of class society and male dominance in the ruling class of the state, women’s subordination increased and eventually reached its depths in the patriarchal families” (Gough, 1971, p. 770) and we can use this as a way to understand methods used to deny sexual and personal exploration. This idea is further explored by Rich who makes a similar point, criticising the family and its role in failing to allow sexual and personal exploration due to it being a patriarchal institution: “men’s ability to deny women sexuality or force it upon them” (Rich, 1980, p. 6). We can use this idea when thinking of the pastor, Mrs Winterson and the church congregation denying any sexuality out of the heteronormative structure. Another example from *‘Origin in the Family’* as cited by Rich: “to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement” (Rich, 1980, p. 639). Winterson uses this to highlight the dysfunction of the family dynamic and how suffocating this is on sexual and personal identities. Winterson uses both of these examples within the novel: Jeanette being kept from her biological mother and her being physically locked in the kitchen to restrict movement. Jeanette’s challenging of the family structure and her eventual departure of the family home is Winterson rewriting *‘Origin of the Family’*. Jeanette’s reluctance to be tamed by the family dynamic, in particular her mother, challenges the power of the institution of family and the compulsory heterosexuality it attempts to enforce. During the novel, we see the character of Jeanette acquire a large amount of power and respect within the church, however, when her sexuality is not what the church expects of her and she goes against the compulsory heterosexuality expected, this power is removed. Winterson makes a connection to the church and patriarchal power and how this is used as an attempt to tame sexuality and identity: “she ended by saying that having taken on a man’s world in other ways I had flouted God’s law and tried to do it sexually.” (Winterson, 1985, p. 171) In this speech, Winterson is depicting the power of the church as male and heterosexual and, when someone defies these immovable religious attitudes, they are stripped of their power. Prior to this, Jeanette had been

elevated by the church but Winterson is highlighting that challenging the cornerstones of the patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality is her eventual downfall: “my inability to realize the limitations of my sex” (Winterson, 1985, p. 172).

While sexuality is a strong theme within the novel, Winterson does not use the term lesbian once in the novel to describe Jeanette or any other characters. In doing so, Winterson shows readers that sexuality does not have to define a person and, as such, avoids defining and identifying characters by their sexuality. The lack of use of the term ‘lesbian’ can be seen as Winterson’s way to normalise sexual orientations outside of heterosexuality because we rarely, if ever, explicitly say that a character is heterosexual and so there is no reason to explicitly say this when discussing other sexualities. This could also be Winterson’s way of showing us that sexuality is a spectrum rather than definitive. Many characters in *Oranges* deal with the idea of the lesbian continuum, for example Mrs Winterson has a photo of a ‘pretty woman’ in the old flames section of her photo album. Winterson is demonstrating that these characters are part of the lesbian continuum and that their existence is a challenge to the fundamentally patriarchal structure of society and the church. Winterson’s refusal to have the expected ‘coming out moment’ of a lesbian novel is once again her rewriting to challenge patriarchal and heteronormative structures and expectations. Instead, Jeanette’s sexuality is found in a serendipitous moment: “at first, for me, it had been an accident” (Winterson, 1985, p. 164).

Another example of Winterson using rewriting is through subverting the stereotypes of romantic fiction. ‘Lesbian panic’ is a tool often used to expel lesbians from plots and neutralise lesbian love, often resulting in a heterosexual resolution. While Melanie does have a heterosexual resolution within the novel, this is seen as a betrayal of Jeanette and her true identity and sexuality, a theme that is also explored in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. With this heterosexual plot resolution, Winterson explores the concept of memory and its subjectivity; we can rewrite our memories and versions of the past and play with the truth, it is ambiguous. Melanie’s betrayal of her true sexuality with her heterosexual resolution is an attempt to rewrite her past: “she said she hoped I hadn’t kept any letters, silly to hang onto things that had no meaning. As though the letters and photos make it more real, more dangerous. I told her I didn’t need her letters to remember what had happened” (Winterson, 1985, p. 218). Again, Winterson is challenging heteronormative structures. She may have given Melanie a heterosexual resolution but it is a betrayal, and a memory that she cannot escape, no matter how much she may want to rewrite her past.

Throughout the novel, there are specific references to eating oranges and this extended metaphor has been used to represent compulsory heterosexuality. No alternative is ever offered; the orange, much like heterosexuality is the only option available and we associate it with sexual repression. Jeanette’s acceptance of the orange is her way of going along with the heteronormative and patriarchal structures enforced by the church and family. She knows of no alternative: “Elsie Norris and me ate an orange every day” (Winterson, 1985, p. 39). Until she finally starts to see the orange ‘demon’ in her hallucinations, Winterson is demonstrating that the orange and the compulsory heterosexuality that it represents are the problem or ‘evil’

within her life. Before the end of the novel, Winterson gives us some form of resolution between Jeanette and her mother and this extended metaphor comes back. This time, however, we see that “oranges are not the only fruit” (Winterson, 1985, p. 219) and instead pineapples are being offered. Through this metaphor, Winterson is demonstrating the redemption of her mother and the values she has stood for; she has progressed and become more accepting. We see the breaking down of the rigid heteronormative ideals that have been at the forefront of the novel and a move towards a reconciliation between Jeanette and her mother and with that, more understanding and accepting from the patriarchal institutions that have tried so hard to tame and force conventionality and sexual repression.

Throughout the text, Winterson explores sexuality and identity, rewriting the rigid patriarchal structures of powerful institutions, such as the church and family. By rewriting the bible and interweaving it with fairy tales, the braided narrative represents the spectrum of sexuality. Winterson is reinventing the patriarchy with her rewriting and uses it to fight against the repression and compulsory heterosexuality by showing the extent to which lesbian existence is attempting to be erased by patriarchal institutions. The struggle for identity within these rigid confines is showcased within a queer, anti-linear narrative which subverts romance fiction and Winterson gives us an alliance between women who are the main voice of the narrative, shirking the institution of the family. The eventual reconciliation with Jeanette and her mother is a way for us to see that there is potential for changing attitudes within the cornerstones of patriarchy and heteronormative sexuality and that we can continue to challenge these archaic mindsets without betraying our sexuality or identity.

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