“Examining the Role of the Bible in Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*”

by

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Less than ten years after the publication of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, author Jeanette Winterson wrote in an unrelated book review: “Imagine a work of fiction that moves through time but is unconcerned by time; that chooses its coordinates in space, not history; whose characters, because they stand for all of us, are soap opera as well as sublime. This book is bawdy, dignified, [and] painfully to the point…It is the Bible.” (*New Statesman* 37).

Indeed, the life and works of Winterson are deeply influenced by the Scriptures because their characters “stand for all of us” and her presentation of them as a “work of fiction” suggests that Biblical material can be easily re-shaped in order to suit her writing. This paper will explore the role of the Bible in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* with respect to its use as a literary construct for Winterson. It will also focus on Biblical teachings that manifest themselves within the novel, and their use in both creating *and* reducing emotional distance between Jeanette and her mother.

Although a wide range of texts are somehow incorporated into *Oranges*, the Bible itself provides the most obvious structural framework for Winterson. The chapter titles offer a very explicit example of this, as they present the first eight books of the Old Testament (Genesis to Ruth) in tandem with the plot and character development of the novel. Despite the fact that the overt references she makes to most of these Biblical books are “redunctionistic, in that she relies upon only the most general and conventional sense of each text” (Bollinger 365), the major ideas are nonetheless present: “Genesis” recounts Jeanette’s origins; “Exodus” describes her leaving home and going to school; “Leviticus” establishes a framework of religion and law, as highlighted by Jeanette’s “initiation into her mother’s brand of evangelizing” (Bollinger 366); “Numbers” parodies the wandering of the Israelites through the desert with Jeanette’s
“wandering” from both her mother and her heterosexuality (Bollinger 366); “Deuteronomy” further establishes rules for human behaviour; “Joshua” and “Judges” both detail the pain Jeanette experiences in the public battle of her sexual orientation and also the troubles she encounters in her ministry as such; the final chapter, “Ruth”, is a special case and will be discussed later.

There are a great deal of examples that provide evidence of intertextuality amongst each Biblical chapter and its namesake in Oranges. Assuming that many of these connections are obvious to the informed reader, a more interesting analysis focuses instead on how Winterson appropriates certain aspects of the Bible to reveal a feminist perspective. Amy Benson Brown argues that what should be noted about Winterson’s use of the Bible as a literary construct is “not merely the intertextuality of each chapter [of Oranges] with the Bible but the broader process of resignification through which the Bible becomes a vehicle in the representation of a lesbian subject” (234). Laurel Bollinger further supports this point by arguing that Winterson’s modification of certain Biblical themes is a result of her finding “no place in the text already constructed for her” (377). The “Genesis” chapter provides an important example of this resignification, as the reader finds that a predominantly female perspective of creation is presented in lieu of a male one:

She [Jeanette’s mother] had a mysterious attitude toward the begetting of children; it wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, more that she didn’t want to. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. That was me. I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special. We had no Wise Men because she didn’t believe there were any wise men, but we had sheep. (Winterson, Oranges 3-4)
Here, in this “female Genesis”, it is a woman, Jeanette’s mother, who does the “begetting” and is therefore responsible for the act of creation; furthermore, the mother’s insistence of the lack of Wise Men not only fits with a feminist re-telling of an otherwise patriarchal text, but also accounts for the relatively minor role Jeanette’s father plays in the formative years of her life, as well as the reason why the mother’s evangelical community is largely dominated by women for much of the novel.

If there exists a disconnection between Oranges’ “Genesis” and its Biblical counterpart, it is most evident in Winterson’s decision to incorporate imagery from the New Testament in this particular chapter (consider the references to the Virgin Mary and the Wise Men above). As a result, Jeanette’s birth and initial upbringing are reflective of both the creation of the Earth (Old Testament, the “begetting”) as well as the embodiment of Christ: “We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘This world is full of sin.’ We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘You can change the world.’” (10). This particular passage characterizes the young Jeanette as a Christ-like figure, or “saviour of the novel”, and is certainly appropriate given the strong role Christianity plays in the novel and, in turn, the fact that Christianity itself is a faith with foundations in both the Old and New Testaments. This detail notwithstanding, the chapters beyond “Genesis” are, to borrow a phrase from Jeanette about her mother, “Old Testament through and through” (4). This is not to say that the Gospels fail to influence peripheral aspects of the plot [consider the hymns that are sung within the community (53, 72), the mother’s belief in her daughter’s ear infection as a sign of the rapture (22-23), and Jeanette’s questioning of the patriarchal composition of the Trinity (87)] but that the Old Testament is the preferred text that is used allegorically to describe the major events that occur between Jeanette and her mother and this, as can be expected, increases the emotional distance between them.
Keryn Carter describes Jeanette’s mother as being a “powerful, forbidding figure who dominates the young girl’s life” (16), and although this is true throughout the course of this novel, it does not manifest itself in a negative form for Jeanette until her realization of the incompatibility of her sexual orientation with the Church’s teachings. At first, she is quite naive (or perhaps ambivalent) of this fact: “Do you think this is Unnatural Passion?”, she asks of Melanie before they spend the night together, a reference of course to the “sins” the mother first introduces to her daughter in “Genesis” when she speaks of the lesbian bookstore owners; Jeanette, of course, initially misinterprets this and equates “unnatural passions” to them putting “chemicals in their sweets” (Winterson, Oranges 86, 7).

As the plot unfolds, the mother becomes increasingly unforgiving of Jeanette’s “deviance” and, by the latter portion of “Joshua”, considerable attention is given to the “orange demon” that is said to possess her. She first encounters this “demon” in a hallucination when her faith community confronts her about her lesbianism: “Leaning on the coffee table was the orange demon. ‘I’ve gone mad,’ I thought.” (106). Carter argues that the orange demon is “linked to Jeanette’s distinctive creativity, her humour, her lesbianism, to all those qualities that the people around her would have her hold in check” (16). Indeed, demonic imagery plays a significant role in this novel, as it is a means of legitimizing the growing separation between mother and daughter. Eventually, Jeanette is forced to leave home, and when the circumstances of Elsie’s death bring her and her mother together again, there exists an attitudinal shift from Jeanette being portrayed as a demon to all-out disownment: “‘Oh she’s a demon your daughter,’ wailed Mrs. White...‘She’s no daughter of mine,’ snapped back my mother, head high, leading the way out” (Winterson, Oranges 153). At this point, it is clear that although Jeanette never truly abandons her faith, her faith abandons her because of clear disagreements over her sexual identity.
In contrast to this sense of abandonment and distance, the final chapter, “Ruth”, also speaks volumes to the concept of loyalty. One example is the mother’s continued service to a Church that has both been exposed as corrupt (159) as well as insistent of the “limitations of [the female] sex” (132), but an even more poignant illustration arises from this very fact, that Jeanette returns home to find little has changed. As with all bildungsromans, this portion of the text highlights maturation, but there is a key difference in Oranges: Laurel Bollinger asserts that “conventional stories of female maturation require that the daughter leave the mother in order to experience adulthood…[but] Winterson suggests that maturation consists in the return to, not the flight from, familial or maternal ties” (374). Despite the mother’s loyalty in remaining the “Kindly Light” who oppresses her daughter by not accepting her sexual orientation, Jeanette remains in solidarity with the woman who raised her: “Families, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own” (Winterson, Oranges 171). With respect to the Biblical influence upon the novel, this sense of connection between women in spite of adversity mirrors the pledge Ruth makes to Naomi when she refuses to return to Bethlehem to seek a new husband: “Whither thou goest, I will go…thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16, qtd. in Brown 248).

According to Jeanette Winterson, “Whether or not you know the Bible, whether or not you believe, or how you believe, doesn’t change the fact that it profoundly affects all our lives” (New Statesman 38). In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Winterson uses both the Old and New Testaments as a structure wherein a young, God-loving girl comes-of-age and experiences both nearness to, and separation from, a God-fearing mother. Indeed, “profundness” can describe not only the Bible’s influence on Jeanette and those closest to her, but also Winterson’s ability to construct a unique narrative within the framework of such a conventional, and patriarchal, text.
Works Cited


