Lesbian Visibility in Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Jeanette Winterson’s first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, focuses on young fictional Jeanette’s struggle coming out as a lesbian in her very Evangelical family and community. Nearly every event of the novel explicitly deals with Jeanette’s sexuality, so it is surprising that a great deal of the novel’s critics and reviewers fail to address that she is a lesbian. As Isabel Anievas Gamallo observes, the mainstream interpretation of *Oranges* “has insisted on seeing it mainly as a story about a child growing up within an Evangelical set,” and frequently ignoring or downplaying the lesbian content (Gamallo 123). Ignoring the lesbian content of the novel converts *Oranges* into a classic Bildungsroman where Jeanette’s sexuality is viewed “merely as a suitable foil to her mother’s evangelicalism” (Hinds 55). Following this interpretation, Jeanette’s sexuality is reduced to nothing more than her own particular brand of teenage rebellion.

Unfortunately, these universal interpretations are very common. In their analyses of *Oranges*, Mark Wormald and Keryn Carter each write more than a dozen pages that completely ignore the significance of sexuality in the novel. Other critics, such as Sonya Andermahr, decenter the lesbianism in the text more directly by addressing it but claiming that it is not intended to be crucial to the text’s meaning. Andermahr argues that Winterson is intentionally writing beyond gendered relationships in order to make a statement about
universal human experiences of love. Julie Ellam’s analysis manages to address all of these themes—transcendent love, religion, and Jeanette’s relationship with her mother—while also completely skimming over the issue of sexuality. Reina van der Wiel also ignores the presence of lesbianism in the text. She claims that Jeanette’s adoption is the ultimate trauma of the novel and that this event was the most significant in forming Jeanette’s identity. This is a surprising interpretation considering that only a couple pages of the narrative are dedicated to Jeanette’s discovery of her adoption. Despite the prevalence of lesbianism in the text, none of these critics regard Jeanette’s sexuality as significant to the novel’s meaning.

Many critics base their general and more neutral readings of *Oranges* in the fictional mythic tales that Winterson weaves throughout the Jeanette narrative. Such critics understand these tales as a way to universalize Jeanette’s experiences; they claim Winterson uses other characters and different contexts to make Jeanette’s narrative more relatable to all readers. Because so much of the rest of the novel deals explicitly with Jeanette’s identity as a lesbian, it is dubious that Winterson would intend the mythic narratives to detract from the significance of her sexuality. Rather than universalize Jeanette’s story, the perfection tale, the Winnet narrative, and the Sir Perceval narrative deepen the readers’ understanding of Jeanette’s emotions and experiences and suggest that the meaning of the novel is inseparable from its lesbian content.

To understand the significance of the myths for Winterson, it is important to consider their significance for Jeanette in the novel as well. Jeanette’s upbringing is extremely religious; everything for her is interpreted through a biblical lens, so she
struggles with the language to express what she is experiencing. The word “lesbian” is never actually used in the text, although there are several women in the text who are at least implied lesbians. There are many instances in the novel in which adults are gossiping about lesbians without actually using the term, which confuses Jeanette. For example, when discussing the female couple who owns the local candy store, Jeanette’s mother tells a friend that “they dealt in unnatural passions,” which Jeanette thinks means there are chemicals in their candies (Winterson 6). Even when her pastor confronts Jeanette about her sexuality, he does so in terms of demon possession and unnatural passions. Since Jeanette is at such a loss to understand and express her lesbian desire, she must find another way to manage her feelings. Jeanette creates the tales “in order to cope with this crisis of language and belief” (Reisman 24). These myths allow her to work through her own experiences as she discovers her lesbian identity by turning them into fiction.

One example of this is the tale of the prince who is searching for a wife who embodies his theory of perfection. This myth begins immediately after her pastor declares that perfection is synonymous with flawlessness, and in response Jeanette realizes, “it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement” (Winterson 62). This is especially challenging for Jeanette because she “relies on her religious beliefs to make sense of her feelings and situation,” which makes it hard for her to manage conflicting biblical interpretations (Reisman 24). It is surely no coincidence that the myth that follows deals with the theme of perfection and its pursuit; this is Jeanette trying to work out her position on the issue. While this tale does not deal explicitly with Jeanette’s sexual orientation, the issue is present as it marks the moment when Jeanette’s beliefs begin to diverge from the rest of her community’s. She is trying to work through her pastor’s
definition of perfection, which is restated nearly verbatim in the prince’s dialogue when he declares that he is searching for a bride who is “flawless in every respect. She must be perfect” (Winterson 63). Jeanette disagrees with his definition, and in the tale she illustrates the dangers that come with challenging authority, even when you are right. Like the woman in the myth, Jeanette challenges the church’s stance on perfection. Through her relationship with Melanie, Jeanette also challenges the church’s position on homosexuality. In the tale, she expresses her anxiety over what the consequences of her dissention may be. The woman in the tale pays a hefty price for disputing the prince’s account of perfection; he chops off her head. Rather than a literal beheading, Jeanette fears being cut off from her family and religious community as a result of her lesbian identity.

The perfection tale also expresses Jeanette’s growing doubts about the church’s absolute authority; from this moment on nothing her mother or pastor tell her can be accepted as truth without some critical evaluation. This story “reveals Jeanette’s doubts that a fundamentalist paradigm can accurately explain her world,” so she becomes more confident in her own ability to know the truth (Reisman 18). This is especially important when she is asked to publicly renounce her relationship with Melanie. Having previously realized that her pastor is at times fallible, she refuses to do so because she does not think there is anything unnatural about their relationship. Mara Reisman compares this act to the young woman who rejects the prince’s definition of perfection. She says, “Like the perfect woman who will not let her destiny be defined by the prince’s book, Jeanette refuses to let her life and desires be circumscribed by Pastor Finch’s interpretation of the Bible” (Reisman 22). Through this fictional tale, Jeanette asserts her autonomy regarding her beliefs and sexuality. This tale about the prince and the perfect woman is not meant to be a
generic story; Winterson includes this myth because it gives perspective to Jeanette’s internal world that would be missing from the narrative otherwise.

Another important mythic narrative is that of Winnet Stonejar, the longest narrative in the text other than Jeanette’s. The reader is introduced to Winnet immediately after Jeanette’s mother kicks her out of her house after Jeanette’s second lesbian relationship is discovered. There is an obvious parallel between the sorcerer and Jeanette’s mother. Also, the similarity in their names strongly suggests that Winnet is intended as an alter-ego for Jeanette. Woven throughout the Winnet narrative are sections of Jeanette’s narrative in which she is trying to cope with being ostracized from her community because they will not accept her sexuality. In the Jeanette narrative, any feelings of homesickness seem to be missing. These emotions are highly evident, however, in the Winnet narrative, which is full of sorrow and longing for a home to which she feels she cannot return. Shortly after Winnet is forced to leave, “homesickness struck her, and she lay unable to walk for many days” (Winterson 155). She is actually crippled by her intense yearning for her home. Through this myth, Jeanette seems to be expressing how painful it is for her to be removed from her home and religious community. It is essentially a reenactment of Jeanette’s tumultuous relationship with her mother as she faces the consequences of unapologetically claiming her lesbian identity (Gamallo 129).

Like Winnet, Jeanette finds herself suddenly rejected by her adoptive parent, because, as Jeanette explains, “It all seemed to hinge around the fact that I loved the wrong sort of person” (Winterson 128). The platonic friendship that causes trouble for Winnet mirrors Jeanette’s lesbian romantic relationships; both of these relationships are frowned
upon by their parents. For Jeanette, the separation this causes is also a permanent one. While Jeanette does physically return to her home at the conclusion of the novel, she knows she can never truly belong there the way she did before her coming out. Like the perfection myth, this story deepens the reader’s understanding of Jeanette’s specific experience, rather than generalizes it. Her unorthodox sexuality creates such a painful conflict in her life that Jeanette processes her emotions by again turning her experiences into fiction.

The issue of Jeanette leaving home at her mother’s request is explored further through the tale of Sir Perceval, which is woven throughout both the Jeanette and Winnet narratives. Of the three, the Sir Perceval narrative provides the most insight into Jeanette’s feelings during the period when she is estranged from her mother. This narrative first appears after Jeanette informs her mother that she has no intention of becoming a missionary because she has started to see how complicated her sexuality makes her relationship with the church. She rejects the future her mother has trained her for, and her divergence from this plan is directly caused by the church’s condemnation of her lesbianism. Jeanette must discover and create her own path, which parallels Sir Perceval’s quest for his own identity and the Holy Grail. A few days after leaving Arthur’s court, Sir Perceval is lonely and exhausted, and he dreams of the court “where he was the darling, the favorite” (Winterson 137). Here Jeanette reveals how sad and lost she feels after leaving her home where she was once a beloved leader in her religious community. Now that her sexuality has pushed Jeanette to abandon her mother’s plan, Jeanette is like Sir Perceval wandering in search of a rumored church or chapel far in the forest where he thinks he might possibly find the Holy Grail; she only has a vague idea of what she is hoping to find and where she will find it.
Jeanette feels frustrated during her time away from her family, and she expresses this through Sir Perceval, who feels his journey has been futile and often thinks about returning to the king and Arthur’s Court. Similarly, Jeanette feels discouraged regarding her journey because leaving home did not ease her inner turmoil. Unlike Sir Perceval, Jeanette returns to her home, but this also does little to relieve her emotional pain. Right before the last section of the Sir Perceval narrative begins, Jeanette says, “I seemed to have run in a great circle, and met myself again on the starting line” (Winterson 179). That sentiment is echoed in Sir Perceval’s narrative who laments that his “journey seemed fruitless, and himself misguided” (Winterson 179). This helps the reader discern that Jeanette feels as though, even after everything she has been through, nothing has really changed for her at home. Jeanette realizes that she can never truly reconcile her sexuality with her mother’s religious views; that friction will always exist, and, in that sense, Jeanette is essentially where she started. Winterson uses this tale to “illustrate the circularity of Jeanette’s developmental process, her unresolved conflicts... and her mourning of her lost past” (DeLong 271). Nearly all of the information that is given about Jeanette’s emotional experience in response to this tension is revealed through the Sir Perceval narrative. Reading this narrative in a more general way detracts from the reader’s understanding of the Jeanette narrative and how her identity as a lesbian shapes her experiences.

Fictionalizing personal experiences as a way to cope is a process that Winterson endorses and seems to have employed by writing *Oranges* as way to explain herself. She says, “People’s powerlessness comes from feelings that they can’t manage, and especially those that they can’t articulate. Being able to write a story around the chaos of your own narrative allows you to see yourself as fiction, which is rather comforting” (qtd. in
MacPherson 236). Through this statement, Winterson essentially reveals what she is trying to attempt with the myths. They are not meant to create alternative characters for readers to identify with. As Gamallo argues, “they are carefully selected to lay stress on the most crucial moments in [Jeanette's] development as a female subject and as a lesbian” (Gamallo 121). The novel's construction suggests that it is intended to make a statement about a lesbian experience, not a universal one; Winterson includes the myths to emphasize the importance of Jeanette's sexuality in her development, not to minimize it. Ignoring the lesbian content of the story is a very intentional interpretation that results from a culture that views gay women as monsters that must be possessed by demons. Hilary Hinds argues that “suggesting that Jeanette is a character with whom we can all sympathize because lesbianism is just another human experience” and universalizing Jeanette's story serves to perpetuate lesbian oppression by denying the significance of lesbianism in the text (Hinds 55). This is why it is so important to preserve the lesbian content and themes of the text. Even Andermahr, who argues that Winterson is writing beyond gendered love, recognizes that an important function of lesbian romance fiction like *Oranges* has been “as a corrective to images promulgated by mainstream culture of lesbians as sick or sinful” (Andermahr 83). The work cannot serve this purpose if critics are constantly working to divorce the work’s meaning from its lesbian content, and there is enough evidence in the novel to suggest that Winterson means to tell the story of a “sinful” lesbian and the experiences that often come with that identity. The constant emphasis on Jeanette's sexuality throughout her storyline and through the perfection tale, the Winnet narrative, and the Sir Perceval narrative leaves little ambiguity as to whether or not this novel is entirely focused on a specifically lesbian experience.
Works Cited


