Silvia Antosa

Crossing Boundaries
Bodily Paradigms in Jeanette Winterson’s Fiction 1985–2000
Contents

Acknowledgements 7

Introduction 9

Chapter I

The Body of Evidence in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*
1.1 A Lesbian Postmodern *Bildungsroman*? 27
1.2 The Body of Evidence 31
1.3 The Lesbian Body and the Patriarchal Law 38
1.4 Punishing the Sinful Lesbian Body 46
1.5 Overcoming the Patriarchal and Heterosexual Grid: the Female Body Unbound 52

Chapter II

(Un)Mapping Bodily Boundaries: The Passion and Sexing the Cherry
2.1 Fluid Boundaries and Plural Interpretations 57
2.2 Passion, Possession and Desire 61
2.3 Dismembered Bodies and the Failure of the Empire 66
2.4 Cross-dressing in Venice: Villanelle’s Weird Corporeality 72
2.5 Imaginative Journeys Towards an Embodied Lightness: Jordan and Fortunata 81
2.6 Dog-Woman and the Grotesque Body 89

Chapter III

“And so the word was made flesh”: Written on the Body and the Language of Bodily Anatomy
3.1 Ungendering the Narrator 95
3.2 Body Language and the Discourse of Romantic Love 98
3.3 Louise and the Language of Bodily Anatomy 112
Chapter IV
“The word and the kiss are one”: The Erotics of the Artistic Word in Art & Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd
4.1 Art vs. Lies? 129
4.2 Handel and the Mystic Body of the Scientist 140
4.3 Picasso and the Transfigured Body 150
4.4 Sappho and the Poetics of Transubstantiation 157

Chapter V
Virtual Bodies in the Expanding Universe: Gut Symmetries and The PowerBook
5.1 Body, Space and Time: from Classical to Modern Physics 163
5.2 The Quest for Unity 170
5.3 Cross-Gender Role Plays in Cyberspace 176

Bibliography 185

Index 215
Chapter I

The Body of Evidence
in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Genesis, 2:16–17

1.1 A Lesbian Postmodern Bildungsroman? Jeanette Winterson achieved her first public recognition with the publication of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (hereafter Oranges) which won the 1985 Whitbread Award for Best First Novel. Defined by many critics as a mere autobiographical work¹, Oranges is a postmodern fictional autobiography where life experiences are so extensively reworked and transfigured as to be made unrecognizable. This point is aptly emphasised by the writer herself in the introduction to the volume: “Is Oranges an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course”². In an interview, she explained: “In Oranges the narrator has my name, because I wanted to invent myself as a fictional character. There has been some confusion around this […] all writing is partly autobiographical in that you draw on your experience […] in a

¹ This definition has sometimes been used, according to Winterson herself, “as a way of minimizing the work and trying to make it controllable, manageable”. Audrey Bilger, “The Art of Fiction”, cit., p. 75.
way that transforms that experience into something else. In her view, autobiography is the raw material which provides inspiration to the writer, while art has the power to transform real events into transpersonal and universal experiences. Elsewhere, Winterson added further details to this argument: “art must resist autobiography if it hopes to cross boundaries of class, culture…and…sexuality.”

From a generic viewpoint, Oranges is modelled on the traditional Bildungsroman. The autobiographical events are arranged into a diegetic structure that has much in common with the novel of formation, in which the male hero’s growth into maturity entails a separation from home and from the female, nurturing figure that is usually his mother. The overcoming of this Oedipal phase is necessary for him to come of age and, eventually, to return home after his initiation is complete. But Winterson introduces a main element of subversion, since she characterises the protagonist as a female gendered heroine. For a female main character the perspective is quite different: the few models that the literary tradition offers to girls, such as the protagonists of fairy-tales, are passive women whose fate is determined by patriarchal norms. Moreover, these static female characters posit the impossibility of establishing female bonds of friendship and cooperation, since they make women competitive against each other and exorcize the creation of any assertive model of femininity, which would be threatening to the patriarchal system.


4 Jeanette Winterson, “The Semiotics of Sex”, in Art Objects, cit., p. 106.

5 In her study on the use of parody in English literature, Mirella Billi points out the important function that fairy tales have in shaping the female sense of identity: “La favola […] è particolarmente incisiva nell’indurre un forte senso di identificazione con i suoi personaggi e costituisce il modello migliore per mostrare il modo in cui la psiche integra il mondo dell’esperienza
Oranges problematises this pattern by redefining the ideological and formal features of the Bildungsroman. By telling the story of a young lesbian girl’s education and growth in a religious community in Northern England, Winterson questions the long-established representation of the feminine in Western culture. The definition of this innovative version of Bildungsroman has been an object of critical contention. Since it is the story of a lesbian coming to terms with the outside world, Paulina Palmer opted for the expression “(Lesbian) Coming Out narrative”, while other critics saw the protagonist’s artistic (self) education as following the archetype of the Künstlerroman, or “portrait of the artist as young (wo)man”.

But Winterson did more than revise the Bildungsroman plot into a female story of formation. To make her novel more subversive, she crisscrossed and parodied several literary genres. Romance, myth, fairytales, dreams and realistic passages as well as quotations from the Bible are combined into an original pastiche, which sheds light onto the interior world of the protagonist. This narrative strategy allows Winterson to provide

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6 According to Paulina Palmer, the recurring motifs in the lesbian Coming Out novel which can be found in Oranges are: “[…] the naïve but intelligent protagonist who feels cramped by the narrow confines of her provincial surroundings, her discovery of her lesbian orientation through a first love affair, her subsequent betrayal by her lover who reverts to heterosexuality, and the punitive treatment meted out to her by her family and the community”. Contemporary Lesbian Writing, cit., p. 100.

alternative views on girlhood and femininity, since the juxtaposition of realistic sections and fantastic stories suggests the idea of a multi-directional process of identity-making. In the introduction, Winterson herself points out this correspondence between genre and identity structures:

*Oranges* is an experimental novel: its interests are anti-linear. It offers a very complicated narrative structure disguised as a simple one [...] you can read it in spirals. As a shape, the spiral is fluid and allows infinite movement. [...] I don’t see the point of reading in straight lines. [...] Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway, every turning yields to another turning, not symmetrical, not obvious (*Oranges*, p. xiii).

The generic complexity of the novel is difficult to detect at first sight, since the Biblical intertextuality tends to obscure the presence of other narrative layers. The story of the protagonist is overtly structured on the history of the Israelites narrated in the first eight books of the Old Testament, from the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis to the Book of Ruth, which narrates the female loyalty between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. The reader follows Jeanette’s life from her ‘creation’ to her initiation to the world, which calls into question her relationship with her mother. The shift is from the patriarchal and monolithic perspective of the Old Testament to a personal journey made by the young girl into the external world. According to Susana Onega, “The story moves [...] from the ‘monologic and totalising’ history of creation of the world by God to the ‘individual’ story of the redemption of a woman enduring ‘threefold’ marginalisation, as a woman, as a poor widow and as a stranger”8.

The Bible is the master text against which the life and experiences of Jeanette are set. The parodic rewriting of the Bible and the adoption of its narrative style, in which myth, poetry

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and historical narration are blended together, reveals Winter-
son’s narratorial project of overcoming a rigid model of femi-
ninity both in semantic as well as textual terms.9

1.2 The Body of Evidence. At the core of the Western phi-
losophical tradition is its Platonic concern with the world of
ideas; knowledge is purely conceptual and pertains exclusively
to the domain of reason. The exclusion of the body from the
field of knowledge, and its hierarchization in a subordinate po-
sition, characterises the mainstream thought which laid the
foundations of our cultural tradition. Once the equivalence be-
tween Truth and Idea is asserted, the oppositions Ideal/Material
and soul/body are given moral connotations since they are made
to correspond to Good/Evil and True/False. As a consequence,
the mind/body polarity lays the ground to a whole system of
thought that conceives reality in binary terms, which are rigidly
organised in a (positive) primary and a (negative) subordinate
term, such as man/woman, culture/nature, heterosexual/homosexual,
history/story, form/matter and so on.

The Bible proclaims the sinful and inert nature of the body
and its association with death. The dialogue between the created
soul and its Creator can therefore be broken through the body,
which may mislead man from his path to salvation and re-direct
him towards the road to perdition. With bodily sin, man breaks
his Alliance with the Living and is fated to live inside the flesh,
which is no longer vivified by the Divine Spirit (Ruah). Death,
sin and flesh are thus opposed to life, Alliance and to the vivify-
ing Spirit of God (Ruah)10. The only agent who can redeem the

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9 According to Laurel Bollinger: “In blending Biblical references with
Jeanette’s story, Winterson deliberately challenges the distinction between
fact and fiction, as well as between the novel she is writing and the biblical
texts she uses for her parody”. “Models for Female Loyalty: The Biblical Ruth
in Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”, Tulsa Studies in

57–68 (chap. 2: “La religione biblica e il sacrificio del corpo nell’economia
della salvezza”).
body is the Son of God; his Resurrection establishes life as an absolute value and death as its total negation. Christian life is thus based on the faith in a postponed eternity, and the politics of Christian individual salvation entails the negation and the sacrifice of the body, which will be judged on the last day.

The implications of the Platonic/Christian dichotomy mind/body are of fundamental importance for understanding the web of references underpinning Oranges. Though many critics have widely discussed Winterson’s use of dualisms in this novel, little attention has been paid to the way in which she narratively overcomes binaries through the reconfiguration of the female body. This chapter focuses on the Wintersonian project of rewriting the first Books of the Bible by tracing the individual (hi)story of the corporeal (female) self, as opposed to the Platonic/Christian rejection of the matter. What the writer symbolically represents is the development of Jeanette’s body, from its initial enclosure within the “body” of the family and the Church to its gradual and difficult self-reconfiguration. In the course of narration, her body becomes a culturally constructed sign which defies the norms of the social order, erases its inscriptions and transforms itself into a site of resistance and re-signification. In Elizabeth Grosz’s words: “Bodies speak [...] because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. [...] If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also [...] become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practises”11. Through the discovery of her lesbianism, Jeanette is called to walk a difficult path that leads her to a rejection of the heterosexual and patriarchal Signifier, which establishes the language spoken by the body of the community. The rejection of this unitary model makes her become the body of evidence, which balks to the inscription of the Lacanian Name of the Fa-

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ther and traces a new position for the female subject in the symbolic order.\footnote{Jacques Lacan asserts that it is possible to have access to the Symbolic Order only through the acquisition of language. The subject is reduced to an empty signifier (“I”) within the field of the Other, which is to say, within an already pre-determined field of language and culture, which identifies it as a gendered being. Thus, through the acceptance of the Laws and the restrictions of the Name of the Father, whereby the phallus is the supreme signifier, masculine and feminine subjects are instituted. The feminine becomes the signification of a lack – as subordinated to the male predominance – and is not granted access to that language. Therefore, according to Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo: “Winterson’s novel […] exemplifies the ongoing process of female reappropriation of the symbolic realm. […] In her literary construction of lesbian girlhood, Winterson’s storytelling engages in a literary project of self-creation and self-explanation that boldly rewrites the position of the female heroine in the patriarchal realm of language. She explores the bounds of traditional genres. […] Her risqué experiment convinces us that a young girl’s access to language and representation does not have to be necessarily self-limiting and self-annihilating”. “Subversive Storytelling: The Construction of Lesbian Girlhood through Fantasy and Fairy Tale in Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”, in The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women, ed. Ruth O. Saxton, New York, St. Martin’s, 1998, p. 120.}

The grid of binary oppositions whereby everything is part of the perennial struggle between Good and Evil is established from the beginning of the novel:

Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn’t matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that. […] She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies.

| Enemies were:          | The Devil (in his many forms) |
|                       | Next Door                     |
|                       | Sex (in its many forms)       |
|                       | Slugs                         |
| Friends were:         | God                           |
|                       | Our Dog                       |
|                       | Auntie Madge                  |
|                       | The Novels of Charlotte Brontë|
|                       | Slug Pellets                  |

[12] Jacques Lacan asserts that it is possible to have access to the Symbolic Order only through the acquisition of language. The subject is reduced to an empty signifier (“I”) within the field of the Other, which is to say, within an already pre-determined field of language and culture, which identifies it as a gendered being. Thus, through the acceptance of the Laws and the restrictions of the Name of the Father, whereby the phallus is the supreme signifier, masculine and feminine subjects are instituted. The feminine becomes the signification of a lack – as subordinated to the male predominance – and is not granted access to that language. Therefore, according to Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo: “Winterson’s novel […] exemplifies the ongoing process of female reappropriation of the symbolic realm. […] In her literary construction of lesbian girlhood, Winterson’s storytelling engages in a literary project of self-creation and self-explanation that boldly rewrites the position of the female heroine in the patriarchal realm of language. She explores the bounds of traditional genres. […] Her risqué experiment convinces us that a young girl’s access to language and representation does not have to be necessarily self-limiting and self-annihilating”. “Subversive Storytelling: The Construction of Lesbian Girlhood through Fantasy and Fairy Tale in Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”, in The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women, ed. Ruth O. Saxton, New York, St. Martin’s, 1998, p. 120.
and me, at first [...] (Oranges, p. 3, my emphasis).

The homodiegetic voice of Jeanette recollects her childhood with an ironically humorous tone which, throughout the novel, underscores the bitterness of her life experiences. In her attempt to introduce herself as an ordinary child who lives a common life, she creates a number of expectations which are soon to be frustrated. She starts her narration by reversing traditional gender roles in the description of her parents (“My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle”). Instead of being a passive woman, her mother (called Louie) is an active, dynamic person whose dichotomic perception of reality moulds Jeanette’s own worldview. There are only positive or negative characters or things for Louie, and her bizarre list includes metaphysics (Devil vs. God) as well as material and almost insignificant elements (Slugs vs. Slug Pellets). The only notion which is not counterbalanced by an opposite is Sex, which she associates with the novels of Charlotte Brontë. The Brontian intertextuality, which will be later examined in detail, emphasises passion and female independence. Significantly, Jeanette does not include herself into either lists, because she can be a ‘friend’ as long as she conforms to her mother’s will. The conflict with her starts when Jeanette makes her first experience of “mixed feelings”, an idea which does not pertain to Louie’s worldview. However, her initiation into life necessitates precisely the exploration of those denied and contradictory emotions. As Ellen Brinks and Lee Talley point out, “[Jeanette’s] acceptance of ‘mixed feelings’ is central to her acceptance of her lesbianism, since a lesbian by definition cannot fit comfortably into a binary view of the world. Ironically, her capacity for mixed feelings and non-binary thought can be attributed to

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13 Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre is part of the ‘narrative’ world created by Louie, who has re-written its ending in order to convey the importance of missionary life to her daughter. Therefore, it can counterbalance SEX only in its revisited form: Jeanette’s later discovery that Jane marries Rochester, instead of St. John Rivers, coincides with a turning point in her life.
her mother’s teachings”. The paradigm of the protagonist’s life and the relationship with her mother are thus inscribed in the first lines of the beginning, which posits a rigid and dualistic view of the world which Jeanette needs to overcome in order to define her (sexual) identity.

According to Laura Doan, “the maternal version of the ‘natural order’ is one permeated with oppositions reminiscent of Genesis, the title of the novel’s first section: light/dark, good/evil, believer/heathen, order/disorder, lost/found, saved/fallen”. Jeanette herself is part of the Biblical world created by Louie, who is ironically said to be envious of Mary, who was the first virgin woman to beget a child. Her strong desire to imitate the chaste Virgin apparently makes her decide to adopt a foundling. The adoption and growth of the child are described in a parody of the Biblical episodes of the Conception and the Nativity. The narrator subtly undermines the mythical overtones of the Biblical account to enhance the fact that Louie meant to forge a role for herself through her (foster)daughter:

My mother, out walking that night, dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord:

A missionary child,
A servant of God,
A blessing

And so […] some time later, she followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child. […] She took the child away and for seven days and seven nights the child cried out, for fear and not knowing. The mother sang to the child, and stabbed the demons. She understood how jealous the Spirit is of the flesh.


15 Laura Doan, “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern”, cit., p. 142.
Such warm tender flesh.
*Her flesh now, sprung from her head.*
Her vision (*Oranges*, p. 10, my emphasis).

The Annunciation scene preceding the adoption of the baby, which is described as an Evangelical Nativity, reveals Jeanette’s feelings both as a child and an adult, and prefigures the events to occur. On the one hand, Jeanette as a child sees herself as the chosen one, elected by both her (foster)mother and by God to become a missionary. Her mother was led to her as the Three Wise Men to the stable where Christ was born, while the seven days and the seven nights of the Creation are an allusion to the days in which God created the world. On the other hand, the use of a parodic register testify to the mature conscience of the narrating voice, who has already experienced a strong disillusion. The parallel drawn between Jeanette and Christ also suggests a quasi-blasphemous reversal of her personal history as a foundling, since she becomes part of a matriarchal genealogy that challenges the male line of descent sanctified by the Holy Scriptures. The reference to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, that put her and Christ within a matrilineal heritage as opposed to a patrilineal one, also strengthens Jeanette’s sense of belonging to a female line which does not revolve around masculine power. Moreover, the rewriting of the Annunciation scene celebrates conception as the paradigm of female independence and artistic inspiration. According to Ruth Vanita, “Mary ‘conceives’ – she has an idea, an inspiration. [...] [She] does not go through a heterosexual experience at this point. Rather, her intercourse and conception are intellectual because she hears – [...] her conception took place through the ear”16. Like Mary, Louie experienced conception as an intellectual experience. Both family and Church in *Oranges* are controlled by strong and assertive female characters who hold roles of decision and responsibility and are self-sufficient. By growing inside this mi-

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lieu, Jeanette soon learns self-confidence and inherits a strong personality which will guide her in harder times.

Since her birth, the child becomes part of a rigid hierarchy and learns how to separate what is holy (the ‘jealous’ spirit) from what is sinful and deathly (the flesh). But the mythical intertextuality is not restricted to the Bible. In addition to the Christian account, Winterson uses classical allusions that reinforce the symbolic pattern of the novel. One of them is the mythical image of the birth of Athena from Zeus’s head, which can be considered as a sort of pagan counter-mythology. The virginity of Athena is clearly linked to Mary’s and, like the Christian Virgin, the pagan goddess is an emblem of female autonomy and power. Moreover, Jeanette associates herself with Athena and her mother with Zeus. Athena is the virgin warrior goddess, who plays a male role in the war – Jeanette will have the same role in the Church, where her lesbianism is seen as a punishment for her attempt to occupy a place forbidden to women. Her inability to conform to social and cultural norms and to settle down in a codified space, leads her to a desperate struggle to find her own place. In the Greek myth, Zeus’ triumph over Gea corresponds to a victory of order over primal chaos; he represents, among other things, the dominance of male patriarchal values (form) on female inert matter. In a similar way, Jeanette’s mother is the defender of patriarchal/heterosexual values against her daughter’s lesbian sexuality. Another interesting feature highlighted by the classical intertext is the sexless view of the act of creation: like Athena, Jeannette is the offspring of a mental, creative action. Nonetheless, it is the FLESH (ambiguously described as “warm” and “tender”) which springs from the HEAD: the negation of the

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body ironically paves the way to its assertiveness and its future reconfiguration. This image suggests that the protagonist will escape from the rational supremacy of motherly/community views and make a personal, corporeal experience which will give her a new knowledge of the world.

Even though Jeanette’s adolescent body is enclosed within the circular structure of the religious community, two important episodes anticipate her future lesbian choice: while reading Jeanette’s palm, a gypsy woman declares that she will never be married (Oranges, p. 7). It is no accident that the person who is able to interpret her bodily signs is someone who lives outside and is almost marginalised from the ‘codified’ world where Jeanette lives. At first, the girl is scared of the premonition but, years later, the memory of the event encourages her to discover different readings of her body. In the second episode, the girl is brooding over two unmarried women she knows, who are said to be driven by “Unnatural Passions” (ibid.). From her naïve perspective, she thinks that they put chemicals in their sweets. But her ingenuous, childish misinterpretation subtly anticipates the tragic nature of the events to come: Jeanette gradually discovers what is hidden in the language of the community and learns to respond, almost unconsciously at first, by using her own body as a means of exploration.

1.3 The Lesbian Body and the Patriarchal Law. In the first chapter of Oranges, which is significantly entitled “Gene-
sis”, Jeanette lives inside the body of the family/church which strictly regulates the life of its members’ bodies. No possibility of re-signification is allowed, since it is a microcosm where the power is exercised by the Pastors, Louie and a few leading women, who establish the values and the disvalues of things according to their religious precepts. In such a reality, there is no freedom of signification for natural bodies, which are instead inscribed by the prescriptions of the Divine Law. Such prescriptions are not traced on the surface of the bodies in a visible way, but are rather enacted as their inner essence. As a consequence, the Law seems natural and does not appear as external to the
corporealities it subjectivates. In a world dominated by the supreme (Supernatural) Signifier, the body becomes an empty vessel which needs to be signified by the soul. According to the philosopher José Gil:

The bodies will be condemned to the endless repetition of the rite of their conformity to the supreme Signifier. [...] This is the way taught by every religion, both in the mystery of the Eucharist (where the incarnation of the body of Christ aims at changing the body – and the soul – of the believer), and in any practice which, as in Buddhism, has the purpose of reproducing in the human body the glorious body of Buddha. It is always the supreme presence of a Signifier which must be achieved. This is called **incarnation**\(^\text{18}\).

In describing a close religious community, Winterson dramatises the condition of individuals that are alienated from themselves and condemned to be perpetually objectified by a Subject (God) who cannot be transcended. The community grants and watches over an immutable order based on divine and ecclesiastical laws which claim to represent the only Truth, but in so doing, it necessarily denies individual freedom. Order is kept through judgements – and punishments\(^\text{19}\) – which are based on a mere observation of one’s presumed guilty deeds, as the rumour of the supposed lesbianism of the two unmarried women suggests. In this way, freedom is denied and order maintained under the Name of Truth.

The semantic circularity which reigns in this system regulates internal transactions and entails a closure towards the outside. In the second chapter, “Exodus”, Jeanette experiences a movement towards the external world for the first time. Threat-

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\(^\text{19}\) Michel Foucault writes: “Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance; [...] it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies”. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Allen Lane, 1977, p. 217.
ened with imprisonment for not letting her daughter go to school, Louie must finally give in, although she warns Jeanette about the dangers of going to the “breeding ground”. What is at stake here is the loss of parental power: the inevitable comparison with a world that escapes the maternal/communal domain could open the girl’s mind to unknown codes which would lead her astray and create an idiosyncratic gap with her own, enclosed system.

Jeanette’s itinerary is thus compared to the exodus and wandering of the Israelites from Egypt through the desert under the guidance of a pillar of cloud which, in her case, is made up by the unwritten school rules she is unable to correctly decipher. In this first experience of personal exodus from the only world she knows, Jeanette realises that she is different from other children, and suffers from several misunderstandings. Mothers complain to the teachers and accuse her of terrifying her schoolmates with her works, samplers and compositions, which usually represent frightening episodes from the Bible. For this reason, she is avoided and marginalised, but she also shows a relatively mature consciousness when, commenting on the school teacher who does not accept her sampler for a competition, she ponders:

she’d do what most people do when confronted with something they do not understand: Panic. What constitutes the problem is not the thing, or the environment where you find the thing, but the conjunction of the two; something unexpected in an usual place […] or something usual in an unexpected place (Oranges, p. 44).

This early experience of marginalisation at school, which is due to her extremist religious education, foreshadows her double call “to be apart” (Oranges, p. 42). First as a religious child and then as a lesbian, Jeanette will learn that there is no absolute Truth. Her growing awareness is evident in an episode in which she finds consolation by comparing herself to Turner, who was insulted by Joshua Reynolds. What this event reveals is that she realises that persecution is an obligatory step in the process of the formation of an artist. Although they are rejected, the sam-
The Body of Evidence in «Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit»

The pliers and the alternative narratives she creates are fundamental to her artistic growth, as she gradually learns to transform life experience into imaginative, artistic visions.

But there is a previous episode in which the child becomes aware of the relativity of the Truth conveyed by her mother. At the age of seven, Jeanette goes deaf and is assumed to be in a state of rapture by the community. Only the intervention of another lesbian, Mrs. Jewsbury, clarifies that the child is ill and needs to be admitted to a hospital. Once again, an appropriate reading of Jeanette’s body is given by an outsider, a woman who belongs to the community but keeps her sexual choices closeted from it. The incapacity of the members of the Church to interpret the signs of her body derives from their dim vision of reality, which they explain from an eschatological and mystical perspective that subdues and mistakes bodily symptoms for manifestations of the spirit. The conclusion drawn by Jeanette is that: “since I was born I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church. Now I was finding that even the church was sometimes confused. This was a problem. But not one I chose to deal with for many years more” (Oranges, p. 27).

At this early stage, Jeanette also becomes aware of being deprived of maternal affection. During her stay in hospital, she is given piles of oranges instead of love. Her only friend is Elsie, an old woman who teaches her the importance of literature and story-telling. Elsie work as a substitute mother and as a Moses figure, who guides the protagonist in her first self-conscious exploration of the outside world. More importantly, she instructs Jeanette in the possibility of overcoming opposites: “‘There’s

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20 Ironic relevance is given here and elsewhere to the number seven. In a previous episode, the Pastor of the Church, Pastor Spratt, takes the child aside after a celebration to explain the meaning of the Sacred number: “‘The demon can return SEVENFOLD. […] The best can become the worst’ – he took me by the hand – ‘This innocent child, this bloom of the Covenant’” (Oranges, p. 12). When Jeanette goes deaf, the members of the Church justify her supposedly state of rapture by her age: “‘Oh, it’s not surprising, she’s seven you know’ […] It’s a holy number, strange things happen in sevens” (Oranges, p. 23).
this world’, she banged the wall graphically, ‘and there’s this world’ she trumped her chest. ‘If you want to make sense of ei-
ther, you have to take notice of both’” (Oranges, p. 32). This teaching sounds new to the girl, who had been forced to per-
ceive the world in binary terms. Under the guidance of her sub-
stitute mother, Jeanette learns the importance of plural inter-
pretations, the power of imagination and making one’s own choices to determine one’s own future21.

Soon after this episode, the protagonist has recurring night-
mares of marriage, and questions their meaning in fables in which men are depicted as beasts or pigs. The configuration of
the male body as beastly and monstrous leads her to the conclu-
sion that: “there were a lot of women, and most of them got
married. If they couldn’t marry each other, and I didn’t think
they could, because of having babies, some of them would in-
evitably have to marry beasts” (Oranges, p. 71). In Jeanette’s
cildish perspective, most women are fated to get married to
pigs and they patiently fulfil their duties, because they seem to
have no alternatives. Even Louie is unable to explain the rea-
sons why she got married. In discussing marriage questions,
Louie takes Jane Eyre as an example, and reminds her daughter
how Brontë’s protagonist finds happiness in marrying St. John
Rivers. Her own made-up version of the novel helps Jeanette to
shape her sense of identity according to the laws of the commu-
nity. The idea of family which emerges in Louie’s version of
Jane Eyre is dominated by wilful choice and self-abnegation
rather than blood ties or love. Moreover, by establishing a paral-
lel between Jane and Jeanette as orphans called to fulfil a mis-
sionary duty, she also compares herself to the literary heroine.
Like Jane, Louie is an orphan because she was disinherited by
her family since she got married against their will. She later

21 The chapter ends with a fable: the short tale of Emperor Tetrahedron,
which is a warning against the instability of emotions and the inevitability of
change. What Jeanette learns in fictionally rearranging the contrasting infor-
mation she has received, is that she has no possibility to go back to Egypt and
to her safe childhood: the only chance open to her is to walk ahead towards an
unknown, promised Land.
found a new spiritual family in the church – a family that was founded on choice rather than blood, as her decision of adopting an orphan later confirmed.

Louie’s hard work of self-revision indirectly gives Jeanette some unconventional ideas on marriage and family. Another lesson she learns from her mother is the importance of making one’s own choices. Later in the novel, however, this parental bond becomes a source of terrible disillusion. When she discovers the real conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, Jeanette is assailed by the same sense of betrayal she felt in finding the adoption papers. Both events undermine her own sense of forged identity. In Amy Benson Brown’s words:

> […] the adoption papers and *Jane Eyre* represent the mother’s dishonesty and her denial of sexuality. Jeanette no more came expressly from God than Jane went on to do missionary work. Furthermore, Jane’s choice of independence and a sexual life places Jeanette’s own calling in question.

But the decisive step in her process of growth occurs when she falls in love with Melanie, a new convert to the church. What is emphasised here is the naturalness of the feelings that the two girls develop for each other and their absolute lack of any sense of guilt. In yielding to her sexual desires, Jeanette feels she is following a natural impulse, and she sees her love for Melanie as a mirror of her love for God. According to Laura Doan: “She perceives no discrepancy, moral or otherwise, between her sexual preference (natural and essential) and the prescriptions of the church (cultural and social) because she believes […] that love shouldn’t be ‘gender-bound’.”

The night the two girls make love is significantly compared to the night of creation: “[…] we hugged and it felt like drowning. Then I was fright-

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23 Laura Doan, “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern”, cit., p. 144.
ened but couldn’t stop. [...] And it was evening and it was morning: another day” (*Oranges*, p. 86). The mythical overtones of the scene highlight the importance of this event in Jeanette’s life, in which it marks a new beginning. But the sense of joy and safety that the two girls feel is overshadowed by obscure presages which take the form of a fantastic story of a group of elect, who are attending a banquet in the hall of a castle. They feel safe, but outside the palace there are rebels who are about to stir up a revolution. This allegorical tale foreshadows the inevitable reaction of the church to the forbidden love between the two girls. The image of the elect gathered in the hall symbolises the Harvest Festival that the community is preparing, and reasserts the patriarchal hereditary line: “Father and Son. Father and Son. / It has always been this way, nothing can intrude. / Father Son and Holy Ghost. / Outside, the rebels storm the Winter Palace” (*Oranges*, p. 87). The (male) elect occupy the enclosed space inside the castle, which is assumed to be secure; but the boundaries which delimit the spatial opposition between IN and OUT are about to break. The sense of safety is soon to be undermined by the irruption of external forces, which are to destabilise the very bases on which internal order was founded (the Holy Trinity and, consequently, the whole religious dogma)24.

At the beginning of Jeanette’s relationship with Melanie, Louie believes that her daughter is keen on a newly converted boy, Graham, and tries to give her some advice about how to protect her body from sinful temptations. She tells her about a love affair she had with a man called Pierre when she was in France. She had thought she was deeply in love with him because she was overwhelmed with unknown feelings at first, such as fizzing, buzzing and giddiness. After interpreting them as symptoms of love, she visited a doctor, and found out that

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she was suffering from stomach ulcer. The total misreading that Louie makes of her own body is indicative of her mislead way of connecting to reality and other people. Ironically, her almost complete ignorance of bodily symptoms is contrasted to Jeanette’s gradual discovery of her corporeality. Her warning to Jeanette to interpret her body symptoms with attention properly plays with the literal and the metaphorical, and produces a humorous effect: “So just take care, what you think is the heart might well be another organ” (ibid.). Soon after Louie thunders: “Don’t let anyone touch you Down There” (ibid.). The use of capital letters and the act of pointing with her finger at the girl’s body confirm Louie’s view of female sexuality as a mysterious, dangerous instrument of subversion.

But Louie’s knowledge goes somewhat further, for she is able to infer from her daughter’s accounts of her friendship with Melanie, that there is something more between the two girls. This capacity of understanding Jeanette’s real feelings may derive from her own sexual experience. Two episodes in particular hint at her possible past lesbianism. A first hint can be traced in a passage in which she shows Jeanette the pictures of the ‘Old Flames’ section. Among them there is also a “yellowy picture of a pretty woman holding a cat” (Oranges, p. 36), which she pretends is there by chance and afterwards removes. A second clue is given by Miss Jewsbury. In reproaching Jeanette for telling her mother about her affair with Melanie, the woman adds that Louie “knows about feelings, especially women’s feelings” (Oranges, p. 106).

25 As Margot Gayle Backus acutely suggests, “[…] her misreading of the ‘fizzing’ in her stomach in response to Pierre” may be interpreted as “a parodic reversal of fundamentalist homophobia, which mistakes passion for a disease”. “‘I Am Your Mother: She Was a Carrying Case’: Adoption, Class, and Sexual Orientation in Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”, in Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture, ed. Marianne Novy, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 141, my emphasis.
Chapter I

1.4 Punishing the Sinful Lesbian Body. When she discovers the lesbian relationship between Jeanette and Melanie, Louie informs the community of their “Unnatural Passions” 26. To the accusation of the Pastor: “Do you deny you love this woman with a love reserved for man and wife?”, Jeanette promptly replies: “No, yes, I mean of course I love her” (Oranges, p. 103). What is at stake here is her denial that a lesbian relationship is a mistaken reproduction of the heterosexual model. In order to justify her supposedly ‘wrong’ sexuality, Jeanette’s ‘fall’ is explained as a consequence of her break of gender roles: she is accused of having exceeded her role as a woman in the Church, and of having thus broken the laws which establish a definite place for each sex. Her strong activism in the Church is ironically condemned by the very women who have leading roles and have taught her to preach and devote her life to active evangelisation: “‘Aping men’ my mother had said with disgust” (Oranges, p. 125) 27.

The patriarchal system, which is symbolically incarnated by the Pastor, is founded on a “compulsory heterosexuality” 28 which is assumed to be natural and founded on the Divine Scriptures 29. According to Judith Butler:

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26 The same Biblical expression is used before this episode to define many ambiguous relationships between women. On other occasions, “Unnatural Passion” connotes heterosexual relations in sinful terms, such as in the “Next Door Fornicating” episode, where a man and a woman are accused of having sex on a Sunday morning, the day dedicated to the Lord.

27 As Jeanette states later in the novel: “The women in our church were strong enough and organised. If you want to talk in terms of power I had enough to keep Mussolini happy” (Oranges, p. 121).


29 In an interview with Helen Barr, Jeanette Winterson affirmed: “Oranges look(s) at the way that the Church is offered up as a sacrament of love when really it is an exercise in power. It looks at the hypocrisy of family life and suggests very strongly that heterosexuality is not the only way to live and, indeed, might not always be the best way to live”. Helen Barr, “Face to Face: A Conversation with Jeanette Winterson”, English Review, 2 (1991), p. 30.
The institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire.\(^{30}\)

Sexual differentiation is the model which confers the subject a specific identity, which grants him/her the modalities of access to the social, juridical and religious order. The constituted relationship among sex, gender and desire\(^{31}\) therefore marks the apparent coherence of identity, which is enforced by the absence of any external subversive element that could put it into question. To quote Butler again:

\[\text{[T]he “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as “identity” is assured through the stabilising concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of “the person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. [...] [T]he spectres of discontinuity and incoherence [...] are [...] prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted gender, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. [...] The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist” – that is, those in which gender does not}\]


\(^{31}\) Judith Butler defines the relationship among sex, gender and desire as established by the heterosexual grid: “[a] ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ [...] characterize[s] a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositinally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality”. *Ibid.*, p. 151, my emphasis.
follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. The heterosexual paradigm retains its hegemony by segregating its transgressions (homosexuality) into the realm of the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines the meaning of “abject” by saying: “[W]hat is abject […] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. […] It lies outside, beyond the set […] and yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master”. Therefore, subjectivity is defined by the rejection and the apparent (non)existence of its opposite(s): alterity is intrinsically constitutional of the Self.

The creation of a binary grid depends on the exclusion of each negative counterpart, which must be repressed and controlled to prevent the destabilisation of the system. To this purpose, the Law has divided space into two parts, the feminine and the masculine social spheres, and has naturalised its constructed nature through discursive strategies. In the case of Jeanette, the grammar of power, which by definition needs to avoid semantic ambiguities, can be subverted by the sexual indeterminacy of the body. According to philosopher Umberto Galimberti:

Organizzato lo spazio sociale come spazio del maschile e del femminile, il discorso della legge si vede messo in questione […] dal corpo, che gioca la sessualità nel misconoscimento della differenza. Interrogarsi sul significato dell’*òmoios* e quindi dell’*omo*-sessualità, significa interrogarsi non su una cosa, ma su una parola creata dalla legge che, assegnando un nome, ha tentato di esorcizzare quel “sintomo”, quell’“incidente” che, non segnalato, potrebbe sconvolgere la grammatica del suo discorso e smascherarne l’ideologia. La credibilità della legge è infatti proporzionata alla sua capacità di con-fondere i nomi con le

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32 Ibid., p. 17, my emphasis.
34 Jeanette herself stresses the importance of naming as an act of achieving power over things: “Naming is a difficult and time-consuming process; it concerns essences, and it means power” (*Oranges*, p. 165).
Jeanette’s lesbian identity is a site of danger that needs to be kept under control. Her body works as a “symptom”, which can be absorbed and removed only by giving it a ‘name’, thus making its deviancy natural. The process of demonization of the girl, which is triggered by the community to punish her body and purify her soul, invests her body with the relations of power it refuses. To use Elaine Scarry’s words, it is “a convincing spectacle of power” performed by the established order to maintain its apparent stability, as well as “a grotesque piece of compensatory drama”.

Emblematic, in this sense, is the scene in which Jeanette is “exorcised” by the members of the community. Exorcism is here described as a public form of ‘torture’ that aims at inscribing on the culprit’s body a penalty which is directly proportional to the crime committed. The punishment needs to be exemplary to prevent the intrusion of any other subversive agents from the margins. For this reason, the exorcism consists of the

35 Umberto Galimberti, op. cit., p. 430, emphasis in the text.
36 Jeanette defends the naturalness of her love for Melanie and denies its apparent contradiction with the Divine Law; she is accused of being “full of Demons” (Oranges, p. 102) because it is assumed that she goes against God’s will, the uppermost authority of the patriarchal law: “I love her” “Then you do not love the Lord” “Yes, I love both of them” “You cannot” (Oranges, p. 103, my emphasis).
38 The punishment enacted by the exorcism on Jeanette follows the main phases of what Foucault names the ‘Sovereign Punishment’ as opposed to the modern ‘disciplinary’ one. He states that punishment is a public performance which establishes an equivalence between the crime committed and the penalty received through the inscription or dismembering of the body itself. On this view, torture is an instrument used to make Truths permanently visible to the community. In Foucault’s words: “torture […] revealed truth and showed the operations of power. It assured the articulation of the written on the oral, the secret on the public […] it made it possible to reproduce the crime on the visible body of the criminal […]”. Discipline and Punish, cit., p. 55.
three main phases which are the same that Scarry identifies in different forms of torture:

First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person’s body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power.

The connection between the physical act of inflicting pain and the verbal act of the interrogation is clearly highlighted by the critic. The information or the confession, as in this case, which is commonly believed to be the main reason for torture, is intimately connected to the pain which is being inflicted. This link between the physical and the verbal leads to another point: bodily pain brings to the dismantling and eventual destruction of language. As Scarry suggests: “Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes […] this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner’s voice.”

The members of the community do not only want to punish Jeanette and make her confess her sins. They also try to weaken and erase her voice, with the purpose of deleting her sinful lesbian identity which dared to disrupt the heterosexual order.

For many days, Jeanette is kept under lock and key in a dark parlour and deprived of food. But despite her torturers’ attempt to make her motionless and speechless, the protagonist develops alternative strategies that enable her to imaginatively reconfigure the inverted ritual she is acted upon. According to

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39 Elaine Scarry, op. cit., p. 28.
41 Jeanette’s experience of imprisonment in the parlour recalls the confinement of Jane Eyre as a child in the red room at Gateshead. Both characters are marginalised by their adoptive families and punished for their apparent rebellion against patriarchal rules. An additional parallel are the visions they both have in their ‘prisons’: the orange demon that appears to Jeanette, and the ghostly, frightening presences that haunt Jane Eyre.
Francesca Clare Rayner: “Cast as demonic [...] Jeanette takes on and resignifies the demonic […]. When weak after the exorcism, she hallucinates an ‘Orange Demon’, a personification of radical consciousness who promises her ‘a difficult, different time’.” The Orange Demon is a powerful metaphor of her lesbian sexuality and her artistic creativity, two aspects of her identity that the community attempts to eradicate. The Demon also works as a reversal of Louie’s cold answer to Jeanette’s request for love: “Oranges are the only fruit, she said” (Oranges, p. 29). Its appearance is a proofs of her growing awareness of the necessity of separating herself from her mother in order to acquire a deeper knowledge of reality and herself. The chromatic peculiarity of the demon reinforces the strength of the fruit metaphor, which works as a powerful symbolic pivot: Jeanette’s itinerary coincides with her discovery that “Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”. On this view, the first epigraph to the novel (“When thick rinds are used the top must be thoroughly skimmed, or a scum will form marring the final appearance”) is extremely important, since it suggests that it is necessary for the external peel of the orange to be mixed up with the internal juice. The combination of inner and outer suggests the necessity of overcoming binaries to pave the way for a new configuration of the self.


43 “Oranges are not the only fruit”, the second epigraph to the novel, is a well-known utterance by Nell Gwynn (1650–1687), an actress who used to sell oranges outside the Drury Lane theatre in London in the seventeenth century.

44 This sentence is quoted from Isabella Beeton’s cookery book The Making of Marmalade. Beeton (1836–1865) was the first woman who set out recipes in a formal way, and is still the most famous cookery writer in British history.

45 Laura Doan argues that since Jeanette is her mother’s daughter, she cannot transcend dualisms but only challenge them: “[…] because she is caught up in the binary logic of her mother’s (and the church’s) version of the natural order, Jeanette never fully comprehends the political threat embedded
1.5 Overcoming the Patriarchal and Heterosexual Grid: the Female Body Unbound. The final breach in the mother/daughter relationship occurs when Louie burns the letters and the presents that Jeanette received from Melanie, thus literally deleting all the proofs of their relationship. The overwhelming sense of betrayal felt by the protagonist is translated into the fictional image of the White Queen:

There are different sorts of treachery but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. She burnt more than the letters that night in the backyard. [...] In her head she was still queen, but not my queen anymore, not the White Queen anymore. Walls protect and walls limit. It is in the nature of walls that they should fall. That walls should fall is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet (Oranges, p. 110, my emphasis).

Walls may be both limiting and protecting, and Jeanette shows this awareness in the dreams and fairy tales which haunt her after this event. In her oneiric vision of the City of Lost Chances, Jeanette expresses her fears of remaining inside the walls of the church. Her anguish is reinforced by the physical descriptions of the inhabitants of the City, who are “mutilated” and “imprisoned” in a stone turret. These are the people who have chosen to deny their sexuality. The importance of making one’s own in her actions; she can challenge those who question her right to love Melanie, but she cannot break out of the binarism […] Winterson’s own representation of the lesbian […] continues to operate within the same cultural – and binary – opposition: natural and unnatural” (Laura Doan, “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern”, cit., pp. 145–146). A different opinion is held by other critics, who state that Jeanette’s struggle with dualistic thinking very often leads her to overcome them (see, for example, Lauren Rusk, The Life Writing of Otherness: Woolf, Baldwin, Kingston, and Winterson, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 121–123; Ellen Brinks and Lee Talley, “Unfamiliar Ties: Lesbian Constructions of Home and Family in Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and Jewelle Gomez’s The Gilda Stories”, cit., pp. 149–151; Francesca Clare Rayner, “Dialoguing with Demons: ‘(Un)Natural Passions’ in Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”, cit., pp. 88–91). As shall be seen in the last part of this chapter, lesbianism here does not work only as a tertium non datur, the denied option of an unrecognised sexuality, but strategically prepares the reader to explore the shifting boundaries of sex and gender.
choice is stressed again in the fable of the Forbidden City, with which the dream is directly connected:

At one time or another there will be a choice: you or the wall.
Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
The City of Lost Chances is full of those who chose the wall.
All king’s horses and all the king’s men.
Couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty together again.
Then is it necessary to wander unprotected through the land?
It is necessary to distinguish the chalk circle from the stone wall.
Is it necessary to live without a home?
It is necessary to distinguish physics from metaphysics.
Yet many of the principles are the same.
They are, but in the cities of the interior all things are changed.
A wall for the body, a circle for the soul (Oranges, pp. 110–111, my emphasis).

The references to the White Queen and to Humpty Dumpty, two characters of *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, reveal that, at this stage, Jeanette is unable to yield to her feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, because she still feels her mother’s influence. At the same time, however, she comes to terms with the idea that she cannot recover the happiness of her childhood (“Couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty together again”). Her fall has marked a way of no return for her, and she is aware that she cannot go back in time. The recognition of the inevitable change put forth by events signals a difficult passage from childhood to maturity, which is marked by the necessity of making one’s own choices (“you or the wall”) and, therefore, to play one’s own trumpet. The only escape from the enclosing family walls is exile – a rather frightening but, nonetheless, a necessary perspective for the protagonist. By drawing a distinction between the chalk circle and the stone wall, she shows her

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46 By comparing herself to Joshua, which gives the name to the chapter, Jeanette asserts her belief that she is acting according to God’s will. She is conscious of the necessity of “playing her own trumpet” against the walls of the Church to escape the enclosed space into which her sexual identity has been segregated.
growing awareness that her sexual identity is not only opposed to the rigid walls of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ but is also undefined, since it has no definitive, codified boundaries. At this stage of her evolution, the Orange Demon reappears and, after throwing her a rough brown pebble, exclaims: “[…]
you’ve made your choice now, there’s no going back” (Ibid.). The pebble stands for her reached maturity, and it will reappear in the decisive moments of her life.

Jeanette is cast out forever from the community when she falls in love with another girl, Katy. This new experience is foregrounded by a fairy tale which allegorises the Biblical garden of Eden. Although it is “cunningly walled”, the secret garden of the fable is a strange site in which the boundaries between inside and outside are perplexingly blurred: “There is no way in for you. Inside you will find […] an orange tree” (Oranges, p. 120). This first seeming opposition is followed by a redefinition of the Tree of Knowledge: the traditional apple tree, that is symbolic of male patriarchal knowledge, is replaced by an orange tree, which is an unconventional signifier that represents Jeanette’s lesbian sexuality. At this stage of her formation, she has chosen to eat the forbidden fruit and is thus fated to leave the garden: “To eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings” (ibid.). Although the end of this short fable does not deny the possibility of an eventual return (“So at dusk you say goodbye to the place you love, not knowing if you can ever return, knowing you can never return by the same way as this. It may be […] that you will open a gate by chance, and find yourself again on the other side of the wall”, ibid.), the act of eating the forbidden fruit of sexuality proves that the protagonist has eventually chosen to make an open reading of her body and to recover its destabilising, multiple meanings47. The body becomes the site

47 Eating a forbidden fruit as an act of sexual transgression is also an action that establishes an intertextual link with Cristina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862). In some regards, Jeanette recalls Laura, the sinful sister who eats the fruit and puts her life at risk. She is eventually saved by her sister Lizzie,
onto which infinite signs can be inscribed, and from which infinite readings are generated. No longer conceived as “the prison of the body”\footnote{Michel Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, cit., p. 30.}, the soul is now inseparable from the corporeal element.

When Jeanette comes back home, some years after her self-exile, she notices that:

> I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever been anywhere. My mother was treating me like she always had; had she noticed my absence? Did she even remember why I’d left? I have a theory that every time you make an important choice, the part of you left behind continued the other life you could have had. Some people’s emanations are very strong, some people create themselves afresh outside their own body (\textit{Oranges}, p. 164).

What her words imply is that she has finally rejected the notion of a unitary subjectivity in favour of multiple selves, which expose the constructed nature of sexual and gender relationships. By constructing a series of alternative narrative identities, she has thus managed to become a versatile, fluid subject\footnote{In many fairy tales, for example, Jeanette represents herself as a male character, such as Sir Perceval. In others, her mother’s role is played by a male wizard. The gender displacement they perform represents, as Paulina Palmer notes, “the theme of power-relations between parent and child. It also illustrates Winterson’s refusal to be tied to biological assumptions”. Paulina Palmer, “Postmodern Trends in Contemporary Fiction: Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson”, in \textit{Postmodern Subjects/Postmodern Texts}, cit., p. 191.}.

Jeanette’s return home is narrated in the Book of Ruth, the concluding chapter of the novel, which offers a new paradigm of female loyalty. By connecting the protagonist’s experience with the Biblical story of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, with whom, according to some critics, she has a homoerotic relationship. It is not daring to suggest that Winterson draws from Victorian literature the idea of the forbidden fruit as a signifier of lesbian sexuality that is not only transgressive but also life-giving. For an accurate analysis of Rossetti’s poem, see Francesco Marroni, “Christina Rossetti e le tentazioni della scrittura poetica. Per una lettura di \textit{Goblin Market}”, in \textit{Il punto su Christina Rossetti}, Francesco Marroni and Paola Partenza (eds.), Pescara, Tracce, 1997, pp. 55–71.
Winterson establishes a postmodern paradigm of renewed generational bonds, which is well outlined by Laurel Bollinger:

[…], conventional stories of female maturation require that the daughter leave the mother in order to experience independence and adulthood, and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit does not conform to this pattern. […] By positioning this return at the conclusion of this bildungsroman, Winterson suggests that maturation consists in the return to, not the flight from, familial or maternal ties. Just as her mother had initially selected her, now Jeanette deliberately selects her mother, like Ruth, who freely selected Naomi.

The mother/daughter re-union is by no means a return to the beginning, but rather a self-conscious choice of new female bonds, through which the protagonist can gain an unprecedented position inside the heterosexual discursive realm. Jeanette’s maturity is testified by her re-establishment of a cultural, and not biological, continuity with her mother and with the female genealogy embodied by her family/community. This continuity gives strength, rather than weakens, to her achievement of an independent female sexuality, which has led her to challenge the oppressive Law of the Father, by merging and overcoming the binary terms of its heterosexual grid in a final melting of open possibilities.

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