

Religious elements of
a portrait of the artist
as a young man and
oranges are not...



Religious symbols, narratives, and language play prominent roles in both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. In the *Portrait*, religious symbols and language permeate the consciousness of Stephen, such that his spiritual and physical experiences are inextricably entwined. While Stephen attempts to deny and distance himself away from the dominant discourses provided by the state and religion, his artistic sensibility is ultimately entrenched in the language of religion. In *Oranges*, through the retelling of biblical myths and fairytale stories, Jeanette liberates herself from the hold of narratives that entrap her in a system of patriarchy, fundamentalist religion and heterosexuality. In doing so, Jeanette opens the text to a fluidity of interpretations, which results in a destabilization in the narratives of fairytales and biblical texts. As such, she has succeeded as an artist where Stephen has yet to succeed, in her use of narratives and language to subvert dominant discourses such as religion.

In the *Portrait*, the religious and sacred associations are “reshuffled” (Akoi 301) with the secular and physical associations. Spirituality and physicality becomes inextricably intertwined, as seen in the use of sacred language to describe his tryst with the prostitute. His sexual awakening is also an awakening of his spiritual desires; it is a ‘holy encounter’ (106), that allows him to transcend profanity, ‘before which everything else was idle and alien’ (105). He venerates the prostitute with a religious intensity, whose ‘frank uplifted eyes’, moves him to ‘Tears of joy and relief’, he ‘[surrenders] himself body and mind’ ‘conscious of nothing in the world’ (107-108).

Conversely, virgin Mary is described sensually, ‘the glories of Mary held his soul captive... his soul, reentering her dwelling shyly... the savior itself of a

lewd kiss' (112). This intertwining of the physical and spiritual culminates in his vocation as an artist-priest, ' a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life' (240). Here, we can see that Stephen's conception of aesthetics remains construed in the language of priesthood and religion. In doing so, he confers a divine and sacred legitimacy to the artist, who holds the power to materialize and capture intangible experiences of desire and excitement.

In contrast, the ' chill and order' of Catholic priesthood ' repelled him' (174), an anathema to Stephen's desire and longing for excitement, to ' learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering the snares of the world' (175). He accepts his ' destiny... to be elusive of social or religious order', seeking to escape the ' hold... of order and obedience' that ' threatened to end for ever... his freedom' (175). Yet, in spite of the high-minded artistic ambitions of Stephen, his religious influences remain deeply-rooted, as warned by his pastor, ' once a priest, always a priest' (173) and by Cranly, that his ' mind is supersaturated with the religion in which [he] says [he] disbelieves' (261). Nevertheless, he proudly takes on ' the name of the fabulous artificer' (183), ' a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable' (184). His cry joyfully ascribes sacredness to the physical reality, ' Heavenly God!', ' in an outburst of profane joy' (186). His romanticisation of nature and beauty is driven by the intensity of Catholic resurrection and transcendence of the soul. ' By merging the Catholic and Romantic versions of the soul, Stephen essentially creates his own soul, operating as both the Catholic god who

creates the soul and the Romantic poet who finds his soul in the life of experience' (Howell 61).

Stephen becomes a creator just like Daedalus, who crafts wings for himself and his son Icarus to escape their imprisonment. This motif of flying pervades his consciousness, and Stephen desires to 'fly by those nets' 'of nationality, language, religion' (220). Here, Joyce provides us a double meaning of 'fly by', as Stephen's ambitions to fly past, over and beyond the social constrictions, overlook the second meaning of 'fly by', with the meaning of him inevitably using the material of his 'nationality, language, religion'. Also, while Stephen embraces the namesake of the great artificer, he notably does not deny the spiritual associations of his first name, St Stephen, the first martyr who was stoned to death for the defense of his faith. In addition, the myth of Daedalus also warns against the hubris of Icarus, who falls to his death upon flying too close to the sun. Ultimately, while Stephen is hopeful in his calling as an artist, his high ambitions carry the consequence of alienation and suffering for his art, in parallel with Icarus and St Stephen, thus leaving us critical of his ability to 'fly by' the nets of 'nationality, language, religion', without borrowing and relying on them to 'fly'.

In *Oranges*, religious and fairytale narratives are appropriated and rewritten, to deliberately disrupt the binary heterosexual and patriarchal reading that is imposed by the traditional and fixed reading of these narratives.

Furthermore, the autobiographical intertextuality of Winterson's *Oranges* allows an integration of the fantasy in *Oranges* as a story about Jeanette, with the reality of the Winterson's own life. It is through her process of <https://assignbuster.com/religious-elements-of-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man-and-oranges-are-not-the-only-fruit/>

integrating stories and reality, that Winterson collapses the ' walls' of narratives to model a more fluid narrative that accommodates her own personal narrative, ultimately allowing her to ' fly by' the narratives which traditionally oppress her identity.

Winterson appropriates the religion narrative to construct her identity. Her experimentation with story and narrative begins in her childhood, where she rewrites the Daniel getting eaten by the lions. The Fuzzy-Felt episode is one of the first instances in Jeanette's childhood where biblical narratives are shown to be open to interpretation, a ' place where slippage occurs so that Jeanette can see that meaning is in flux, narrative revision is possible, and that the authority to restructure the story and its embedded power relations lies with the storyteller' (Reisman 14). When confronted by Pastor Finch, she attempts to disguise the story by saying that she was depicting Jonah and the whales, ' but they don't do whales in Fuzzy Felt' (13). The interchangeability of signifiers as proposed by Jeanette in her retelling, presents a threat to the authoritative and exclusivist reading of the church. In response, Pastor Finch seeks to ' put it right' (13), suggesting that ' in his view, there is only one correct version of a story' (Reisman 14). Through the retelling of the scene that is possible through ' the medium and Jeanette's imagination' (Reisman 14), Jeanette discovers the possibilities of interpretation and the rigidity of the singular interpretation provided by the church, comfortable in its static signifiers for the sake of upholding absolute truth. People like Jeanette's mother and Pastor Finch cling on to certainty and order that a single authoritative reading of a text provides, conveniently insisting on their correct interpretation of the text, while rejecting the validity

of all other interpretations. Jeanette argues that this hanging on to a single authoritative reading establishes 'order' and 'security', but it is one that 'doesn't exist' and 'cannot exist' (96).

Initially, Jeanette attempts to reconcile her love for Melanie with her love of the Lord, but she is unable to convey her intended meaning to the priest. She initially sees 'Melanie as a gift from the Lord', that 'it would be ungrateful not to appreciate her' (104). However, she is unable to convey the mutually inclusive nature of her love for both the Lord and Melanie, as the pastor constantly barrages her with loaded questions. He first asks her 'Do you deny you love this woman with a love reserved for man and wife?' (105), to which she replies, 'No, yes, I mean of course I love her.' (105) What appears superficially as a confusion resulting from incoherence and guilt, is better explained as a calm, collected and rational attempt to explain her homosexual love to the church. Her initial 'no' in response is a negated denial that she loves Melanie with the intensity and quality of a romantic love, like that of the heterosexual romance. She then follows with a 'yes', intending to explain that her love is a different kind of romantic love, and that it is certainly not a love that is 'reserved for man and wife' (105). While earnest in her attempt to validate and affirm her homosexual romance, it is the very construction of the question that is informed by the uncontested morality of religious narrative, which causes her superficial inarticulateness. Religious language is simply unable to adequately accommodate her position. Ultimately, it is the unquestioning deference to the authority of the biblical narrative that promotes this exclusive, binary conception of romantic love, and denies the validity of Jeanette's defense.

Through the appropriation of religious narratives and symbols, Jeanette is ultimately able to transcend the constrictive biblical narratives. Like walls that 'protect' and 'limit', Jeanette recognizes the comfort and security offered by these narratives, but also feels that 'It is in the nature of walls that they should fall. That walls should fall is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet' (113). 'At one time or another there will be a choice: you or the wall... The City of Lost Chances is full of those who chose the wall' (114). Here, Jeanette appropriates the story of the battle of Jericho. Like the prophet Joshua, Jeanette puts faith in the power of the trumpet, a sounding horn, to bring down and conquer these walls. However, unlike Joshua who had received the prophesy from God, she is a prophet who 'has no book' and 'are full of sounds that do not always set into meaning' (164). In contrast, she is a prophet who cries out because she is 'troubled by demons' (164), which are 'Not quite' 'evil', 'just different, and difficult' (109). While her church views demons as inherently bad, and to be cleansed away and 'driven out' (109), Jeanette portrays the demon favorably, as an integral inner voice, 'here to keep [her] in one piece' (109).

Jeanette accepts the unstable fluidity of all narratives and chooses only to listen to her inner voice, and it is the strength of her personality that allows her to resist the easy comfort and security of these narratives, while consciously appropriating material and symbols of these narratives to construct her own. She confidently assumes the position of the 'prophet', as with Stephen, who abandons the order of 'priesthood' to become a priest artist. Yet, although both characters reject the dominant discourses of religion, only Jeanette is realistic in recognizing the seductive power of

narratives. Thus, she constructs her own narrative, which successfully appropriates and destabilizes the biblical narrative, while Stephen's desire to 'fly' on his own may prove futile.

Works Cited

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