

# Oranges are not the only fruit

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In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the narrator, presumably Jeanette as a child, presents a view of the world from the eyes of a child, perhaps the most humorous perception of life available to a writer, as a child is a being untainted by life. A child may be heavily influenced by the situation or circumstance they find themselves in, as in this case that of a hugely religion-oriented community, but they nonetheless very rarely lack that little bit of whimsical innocence that can make a child so adorable and amusing at the same time.

This method of narrative is used very well to present the themes of religion and eccentricity in a hugely funny and lightly makes fun out of the notions shared by characters such as the Mother of the importance of rigidity and religion. Religion in the novel is by far the most prevalent notion that Jeanette talks about, and it is one that is almost ridiculously endorsed by the mother.

However this is not the simple situation that the reader finds, there is an emerging depth to the issue, and we become aware of various angles that it is approached from, giving it the kind of depth and plurality that it would not be able to gain from simple, linear story telling (as Jeanette Winterson herself points out in her introduction). There are twists and turns to the storytelling that do not entirely follow a pattern that makes sense but then that is the power a writer has over the reader, the world the reader experiencing being totally under control by the writer.

These methods are presented at various moments on the novel, deviating from the straightforward telling of the story quite a lot but nevertheless

written skilfully enough for the attention of the reader not to wander. For example, an odd and clever angle on the religion issue comes partway into Genesis, when Jeanette makes use of a fairy tale analogy to apparently present a fresh view of the character and motivation of the mother. The mother is referred to as a princess in a limbo of indecision over life until she meets a crone in the forest that gives her certain responsibilities, then " thanked her, and died at once. " How unfortunate.

The symbolic figure of the crone may not refer to a specific person in reality, unless the view is taken that it is solely because of Pastor Spratt's good looks that she became a convert, but is representative of general pressures and directional forces in the world that may have pushed the mother into the path she chooses, and it does seem to be quite pitiful that a woman as potentially talented as the mother settles for a life of religious piety, when she could have been so much more.

It is a gentle mocking of the self importance of religion in the novel, as demeans the princess in the analogy to the position of having the following duties: (1) To milk the goats (2) To educate the people (3) To compose songs for the festival" It can be argued that educating people is not a demeaning position to be in, but the kind of education that is provided here is of a kind that does not hold much importance to many people, as is shown coupled with an earlier point, where Jeanette is describing the Missionary Map that is hung up in the living room by the mother. The way it is presented, it seems that the mother treats the other tribes as simple peculiarities, a group of people simply waiting for the light of the lord to shine upon them and lo, they have religion.

There is no regard for their culture shown, no respect for any individuality they may have. The reader may see this as unworldly, and indeed it is not considerate in the least, so the kind of education that the princess is handing out is an education that is probably culturally and religiously biased, a form of indoctrination, not really embracing differences and dealing with them in a reasonable manner to reach a compromised situation where all ethnic differences are represented fairly.

Through the child's eyes we get a clear impression of this disregard of respect from the mother for other people that do not share the same morals and values that the mother has. For example, Next Door. "You can tell someone by their shoes. ' My mother said. 'Look at Next Door. '" There are two important points in this line; firstly, the declaration the mother makes. You can tell someone by their shoes. It is not a suggestion or anything remotely near one. It is a bald statement, as though there is no possible question that the mother is wrong.

Of course, this is ridiculous. Where there can be some things that can be deduced by the state of ones shoes, which is a far cry from the suggestion that one can judge a person on the basis of the state of their shoes. " She was wrong, as far as we were concerned, but right as far as she was concerned, and really, that's what mattered. " It is typical of the kind of attitude that the mother has throughout the novel, about her absolute correctness in most matters, as she is God's representative on earth?. This is also delving into the issue of eccentricity.

By anybody's standards the mother is a little odd, although the bounds of normality are so ill defined. An example of her eccentricity is an extension of her belief of her utility, as a representative of God's will on earth, by raising Jeanette. " My mother... dreamed a dream... she would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord... " That the mother would want to raise a veritable child of God is a little eccentric but that she would go about it with such zest indicates a total rejection of the earthly plane in favour for higher aspirations.

Such spirituality is shared by a very very few, and these few are either prophets or so into the religion of choice that they become disconnected from the reality of the world, which is contrary to a healthy state of mind of course. But then one realises only when a situation such as this is presented just how serious it can be. The frustrating eccentricity is however used very intelligently to produce some great scenes of humour, such as the scenes in the church service when Pastor Finch comes to visit.

There is of course the amusing one-liners, such as: ' You can always tell a good woman by her sandwiches,' declared Pastor Finch. My mother blushed" Which plays on a coy flirtatiousness that is ever so much more funny as it is between a man of the clergy and the ever-chaste, sex hating woman that is the mother. Then there are the longer jokes that are nonetheless just as hilarious, such as the section that terminates in Jeanette informing an incredulous Miss Jewsbury that: "'[Pastor Finch is] in the Sunday School Room playing with the Fuzzy Felt,' I replied. "

The comic value of this kind of scene should not be misjudged at all. In one move, Winterson casts a strong doubt on the authority of the church, shows up the eccentricity of one of the apparently most powerful figures in an ordinary setting, all to the tune of a hilarity that is rare among writers. This is one of the most powerful tools in *Oranges*, the use of amusing situations and lines to convey a whimsical attitude towards the rigidity of the church and the mother, leading to a conclusion that 'oranges are not the only fruit'.

Which is why the eccentricity of the characters is so well placed, as it is both plausible in the circumstances and extremely helpful in the anti-linear storytelling that Winterson wants to use. It lets tangents of seeming little connection to the preceding text to occur that can provide remarkable insights into the world we are being presented with simply by giving a new angle to it. After all, with every bit of background knowledge a reader gains, the impression of the present line of story changes.

So, the opening of the novel has to impress the importance of the eccentricity of the characters and the overwhelming effect religion has on the community at the time. It does this, but does so through a drifting, wandering narrative that does not fail to please, seen as it is through the view of a child with the innocence and simplicity that should be there, yet still managing a depth that would be difficult to achieve using the most simple ways possible. An example of the simplicity of the narrative is the description Jeanette gives of Pastor Finch: His teeth stuck out, and his voice was squeaky, even though he tried to make it deep and stern. "

This, keeping in mind the schoolgirlish blushes that he gives the mother, and the solemnity with which he commits the most amusing acts (such as fuzzy felt) does not give a good impression of him, and through him of the church. As he is a doddering fool, so the church is incompetent at handling the reality of life, dazzling its patrons with promises of glory and resurrection, but not delivering anything concrete apart from promises of what will come when one dies.

This is a blind faith, and it seems that through her own more simplistic ways Jeanette recognises this on a less conscious level and so does not feel the awe or the fear of the church as her mother has. She simply does as the church says through lack of initiative that is of course not available to children of her age or upbringing. This is because despite being so whimsically, innocently critical, she is still heavily influenced by her mother. "... o I learned to interpret the signs and wonders that the unbeliever might never understand. "

So we are left at the end of the first chapter, with a bellyful of eccentricity and religion that seems to be the ruling passions for the pages to come. It nicely sets up a story about growing up, the age of the narrator being the only linear indication of progression, and as such the opening chapter deals very well with the issues raised by the background of the religion and the eccentricity of the individuals involved.