

'oranges are not the  
only fruit' and the  
theme of music



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The autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson explores the themes of religious tolerance and relationships affected by differences of beliefs. It tells the story of Jeanette, a girl who struggles to find her sexual identity in a deeply religious Christian community that is unable to see eye to eye with her. Jeanette must decide on how to balance conforming to the standards of the church and her mother, as well her individual personality and acceptance of who she really is. As the story progresses Winterson uses the presence and absence of music and sound to highlight the growing rifts between her true identity and that of the church. In the beginning of the novel Winterson describes the two sides of Jeanette's life with equal joy and nostalgia, reminiscing about her mother's singing as well as Elsie's piano and accordion. But a difference in sounds soon appears as problems in the relationship between Jeanette and the church, specifically her mother, start emerging. When Jeanette's conflicts with the church and her mother are at their strongest, such as after Jeanette is found having a lesbian encounter for the second time, the music is sharply contrasting, with the church musician Mrs. White unable to even play correctly, compared to Mrs Jewsbury, who has found happiness away from the town, teaching music classes. As Jeanette gets older and more experienced, the more she realizes the polarity between her ideas on right and wrong and those of the church, and Winterson expresses this through changing qualities of the once harmonious music into a combination that is dissonant and unable to come together. Winterson uses music and sound as a medium to express the themes of breaking relationships and self realization, and to facilitate the change that occurs through those themes. In the beginning of the book the two role models Jeanette looks up to are her

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mother and Elsie. At first both of them are described positively through music. Jeanette said that " She[her mother] used to sit at the piano and sing Have you any room for Jesus?" ...The men cried into their tankards and stopped playing snooker while she sang. She was plump and pretty and they called her the Jesus belle...many a man will still stop in the street when my mother goes past and raise his hat to the Jesus Belle"(36). Jeanette's first portrayal is entirely positive, complimenting her mother. This positive description is one of the only ones found in the book. Another early one is Jeanette's description of Elsie, saying " Elsie Norris...was a great encouragement to our church...I liked her a lot because she had interesting things in her house. She had an organ that you had to pedal if you wanted to make a noise. Whenever I went there she played Lead Kindly Light"(23). Elsie is the only friend that Jeanette bothers to mention in the first chapter of the book. With these two descriptions it is shown that Jeanette seems to associate friendship and love with music, with the primary details that she uses to describe her mother and friend being musical qualities. At this point in her life Jeanette is content and happy with her life in the church, but a difference soon emerges. The first moment where Jeanette starts to realize that the strict religious life of the church is not for her is when she turns deaf. Finally Miss Jewsbury screamed so loud even I heard it ' This child's not full of the Spirit,' she scream, ' she's deaf' ...Then my mom arrived and seemed to understand what was going on. She signed a form, and wrote me another note. ' Dear Jeanette, There's nothing wrong, you're just a bit deaf. Why didn't you tell me? I'm going home to get your pajamas"(26)When Jeanette falls deaf she goes unnoticed by the church, who assumes that she was in a state of rapture and that they shouldn't do anything. This is symbolic of the <https://assignbuster.com/oranges-are-not-the-only-fruit-and-the-theme-of-music/>

neglect that the church and mother commit towards Jeanette because they are too religious to realize anything. It takes the intervention of Miss Jewsbury, who was earlier described as "not holy" to make the church realize what was happening with. This polarity is furthered when Jeanette undergoes the surgery to fix her hearing and later wakes up "I knew it, I'd died and the angels were giving me jelly. I opened my eyes expecting to see a pair of wings. 'Are you an angel?' I asked hopefully. 'Not quite, I'm a doctor. But she's an angel, aren't you nurse?'...I might've languished alone for the rest of the week, if Elsie hadn't found out where I was, and started visiting me. My mother couldn't come till the weekend, I knew that"(29)Winterson uses the contrast of scenarios between when Jeanette loses her hearing and when she regains it to show the differences between the church and her. While Jeanette was deaf Winterson surrounded her with members of the church, who were all ignorant to her plight and didn't stop to listen to her. When Jeanette wakes up from the operation she thinks that she is in heaven and that angels were talking. However she realizes that the people she mistook for angels were simply the doctor and nurse. This signifies that Jeanette's idea or concept of heaven isn't that of blind or "deaf" religiousness, but rather that of religion mixed with science, more grounded in reality instead of the strict guidelines imposed on her by the church. Another detail Winterson stresses is that after the operation the only one to regularly visit her was Elsie, not her mother, who was generally unconcerned about Jeanette. Her mother, who is associated with the deafness of the church, basically abandons Jeanette at the hospital, and she doesn't seem to react to or feel concerned about Jeanette's condition at all.

On the other hand Elsie is the first person to visit her, being associated with <https://assignbuster.com/oranges-are-not-the-only-fruit-and-the-theme-of-music/>

reality and acceptance. Elsie is a respected member of the church, and deeply religious, but understands that Jeanette has to find her own self. Winterson is saying that the ones who truly care for her aren't the people who have blindly changed themselves to fit the needs of the church, but the people who know who they really are and accept reality, like Miss Jewsbury and Elsie. Jeanette might not be realizing it, but Winterson is using the music to show that the life of the church and who Jeanette really is cannot coexist. These differences only grow more apparent as the book progresses. Not much music is mentioned up until the scene where Melanie is brought to church for the first time and Pastor Finch is there: "The first time Melanie came to our church was not a success...Pastor Finch led us back into the church and asked his choir to sing his latest composition...We had a wonderful time...Before long we were all in a long line going clockwise round the church singing the chorus over and over again...it was only then that I noticed Melanie hadn't joined in...'I feel terrible,' she confided...Poor Melanie, she didn't understand any of it, she just knew she needed Jesus"(83-86)Why exactly is this scenario "not a success" to Jeanette? From the viewpoint of her mother or the church this would've been a great success, as one more soul had found the lord, and she was here to keep Jeanette company and theoretically away from associating with boys. Jeanette regards this event as not a success not because of what happened with Melanie, but what it made her realise. When watching Melanie struggle with her decision, Jeanette realizes that there is a way out of the strict missionary path set out for her that she has become discontent with, and that is simply to stop following what she is told and exclude herself like what Melanie did, instead of obeying the rules of the church. While Melanie seems to actually enjoy becoming a

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part of the church, Jeanette seems to use their " bible study sessions" in order to hang out with Melanie, and doesn't seem to hold the same respect for church anymore. " We talked alot that night about our plans. Melanie really did want to be a missionary, even though it was my destiny. ' Why don't you like the idea?' she wanted to know. ' I don't like hot places, that's all, I got sunstroke in Paignton last year...Over breakfast the next morning she told me she intended to go to university to read theology. I didn't think it was a good thing on account of modern heresies"(103)Here Jeanette is shown simply indifferent to the idea of becoming a missionary, even though she once regarded it as her life mission. Melanie is now the one enthusiastic about learning religion and theology, while Jeanette just wants to be in the company of Melanie. Jeanette has become more of the outsider than Melanie was at this point, with Melanie joining in singing and the beliefs of the church, while Jeanette is left excluded and on her own. These two pieces of evidence are tied in by Winterson in order to foreshadow what ultimately will occur in the book, with Jeanette leaving the church and Melanie settling down as an obedient wife. Winterson leads up to Jeanette's expulsion from the church with Jeanette's last sisterhood meeting " The day after, I did go to the sisterhood meeting.. The meeting was near hysterical with the strain of them all wondering what to do. Mrs White kept banging the wrong notes, and Alice lost the thread of her message when she caught me looking over at her...When I got back to Elsie's it was the first time anyone had talked to me about Miss Jewsbury. ' She living in Leeds' Elsie told me, ' teaching music in one of them special schools. She's not living alone"(132)When Jeanette finally realizes that she's different from the rest of the church, Winterson hammers in this point with the symbol of Mrs White's music and Alice's

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message. While nothing in the church has really changed, Jeanette has and she now understands the irreconcilable viewpoints between her and the church. This is shown through the music, as Jeanette, while listening to the same tunes being played at her church, only hears broken fragments of music instead the once harmonious melodies described in the beginning of the book. However, at the end of the book, when Jeanette returns home Winterson returns the music to the harmonious songs found in the beginning“ I will go into the parlor and hope for the best. In the parlour I find my mother sitting in front of what is best described as a contraption. More interestingly, she is playing. ‘ Hello Mum, it’s me.’ I put down my bag and waited. She swivelled round on her stool, waving a piece of sheet music. The cover said Glad Tidings. ‘ Come look at this, it’s specifically for the electronic organ,’ and she swung back again, rippling the keys”(163)As Jeanette and her mother come back together, they settle right back into the relationship they had earlier on in the book, with her mother never apologizing for what she did to Jeanette. Winterson however implies that no apology is necessary, as Jeanette’s mother has already changed enough for their relationship to blossom once more. Instead of the strict and old fashioned woman shown earlier in the book, here Jeanette’s mother is shown to be changing through the music. She is playing electronic music, trying to stay in touch with the world. They avoid an awkward confrontation by talking and focusing on the music, something Winterson had shown throughout the entire book. This is exactly what Winterson is trying to say, that while music can be used as a sign to show change, ultimately it is best used to heal.