

The color purple by
alice walker and
oranges are not the
only fruit by jeanette
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Religion, ' a system of ideas and rules for behavior based on supernatural explanations'. The concept of religious belief is one that takes raw faith and packages it in an attempt to standardize something that exists independent of proof or explanation. It can be both wholly fulfilling and entirely destructive to an individual as it forces one to conform to specified guidelines for conduct and belief. Some thrive under these conditions as they give them something to grasp and understand, others flounder under the weight of expectation and obedience.

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit and The Color Purple are two novels which explore the emotional and physical journeys of human beings living within a social group that is subordinate to the religious beliefs imposed upon it. Jeanette Winterson and Alice Walker place religious ideas at the centre of their novels and use them both as a method for exploring their characters' development and as a symbolic gesture that adds richness and depth to their tales. Both of these novels contain a short commentary from their author, explaining their intentions and giving important context to their works.

The Color Purple is a self-proclaimed ' theological work' that explores the emotional journey from the ' religious back to the spiritual'. Alice Walker also comments that this purpose is often mistaken by the analyst, and that her stated intentions and the context of the novel are essential for a full understanding of her book. In comparison, Jeanette Winterson describes Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit as a ' threatening novel', one that exposes the Church's delusion concerning the nature of love.

However, she makes it apparent that the semi-auto-biographical novel is intended as an exploration of the growth of an individual and their choices over 'whether to stay with a ready-made world... or push forwards'. The theological aspect exists as part of the journey of development and struggle and is not the defining theme in the novel. Yet, it appears that of the two novels, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* is the more overtly religious in its presentation and tone. Many of the religious concepts present within the two novels are in fact common to both.

This is certainly true of the central idea in each of the novels, that of a girl who is born into a restrictive religious and social group and who must fight in order to establish her needs. In *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* this is dealt with in terms of a child who is initially compliant to those ideas but realises that the religion she held dear is in fact deeply flawed. In *Genesis* Jeanette describes her adoption by a religious fundamentalist and how she is dedicated 'to the Lord'. This episode is ascribed a semi-divine status by Jeanette's mother.

Jeanette recalls how Louie 'followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage'. This is a direct reference to the journey of the Magi: "'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and came to worship him'" (Matthew 2. 2) Winterson also provides a list of Jeanette's 'purposes' in life. She is to be a 'missionary child', 'a servant of God' and a 'blessing'. These phrases, listed in this order, follow an interesting pattern. The first, 'missionary child,' is one of independence through devotion.

The child must go out into the world and spread the 'Message'. The second, the 'servant' has a much more domestic connotation that has had its independence stripped from it. The third, the 'blessing' reduces Jeanette to the status of an idea. There is no sense of self, only of sacrifice for those who would seek to benefit. This gradual reduction in purpose exposes Louie's hypocrisy and selfishness. She sees Jeanette as hers, as someone who will submit to her and she cares little for how Jeanette may feel.

Winterson's presentation of Louie as someone who cannot see beyond her own 'needs' is repeated throughout the book and is the factor that contributes the most to Jeanette's eventual break from the church and quest for someone who will not betray her. Louie becomes the embodiment of the church, its prejudices and restrictions and Jeanette cannot establish her individuality in the face of this oppression. Jeanette comes to understand the nature of her mother's betrayal when she witnesses her mother forfeit her foundling child for her own needs: If there was such as thing a spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore'

In *The Color Purple*, Celie faces similar emotional betrayals that she relates through a series of letters, initially addressed to God. These betrayals also lead Celie to challenge her beliefs about the nature of God and religion. The first betrayal is by her 'Pa', when he rapes her and sires two children that he then takes from her. She initially believes that he 'kilt' the 'first one... out there in the woods'. Walker uses this to alert the reader to Celie's perception of God.

In her second letter to God, she recalls how she tells her 'mama' that 'God took it'. Immediately after this statement she elaborates: 'He took it... kilt it'. This linguistic structure, placing 'God' directly above 'He' (her Pa) with no detectable shift in subject, alludes to a cruel, domineering God to whom she is entirely at mercy. She also clearly identifies God as a man when she recalls telling her mother that her first child is 'God's... I don't know no other man or what else to say. ' This view of God as the eternal patriarch is one that is fragile and open to challenge.

If one believes that He should be fatherly and caring, one will be deeply disappointed as God is rarely understood to intervene in the people's lives, regardless of letters and prayers. When Celie faces her second great betrayal, this time when her husband Albert conceals letters from her sister, she is forced to reassess her perception of God's role and she comes to believe that He is in fact 'just like all the mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown'. This is the only way she can reconcile her religious indoctrination with her understanding of how God has reacted to her prayers.

In contrast, Jeanette's understanding of God undergoes little change. Winterson's focuses instead on how God is interpreted by his 'servants' and Jeanette's treatment within the church. Essentially, it is the nature of religion and not the nature of God which is being challenged in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*: 'I still do not think of God as my betrayer. The servants of God, yes, but servants by their very nature betray. ' Within both of the novels, betrayal is linked to social and religious prejudices concerning the nature of gender and sexual identity.

In *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* the fundamental cause of the church's betrayal of Jeanette is its inability to see beyond the strict religious dogma it has subscribed to. Jeanette comes to believe that there are no 'wise men' and that men are 'unfit for romantic love'. While these beliefs have turned her mother against the whole concept of sexuality and love, Jeanette simply searches elsewhere for the fulfillment she craves. She finds 'love' and comfort with Melanie but is later betrayed by both her and the church community they both live within.

They accuse her of having 'fallen under Satan's spell' and having succumbed to 'unnatural passions', forcing her to repent. The church chooses to interpret the Bible so as to vilify anything that it cannot easily and collectively understand and often in this process the original meanings are replaced by glib attitudes showing the intolerance of the church. One such area of possible misinterpretation is the matter of homosexuality, something from which Jeanette 'suffers' and for which she is cast out. The other key area that applies to Jeanette's situation is that of a woman's position relative to a man concerning power.

Jeanette attributes much of her 'downfall' to 'her weakest point; [her] inability to realise the limitations of [her] sex'. The church, personified by the pastor, subscribes to the teachings of St. Paul, believing that women should not concern themselves with 'the message' (131), nor should they 'wield power on the home front' (131). Winterson presents this religious idea as one to be ridiculed by showing Jeanette to be far more rational and intelligent than virtually the entire church congregation, men included.

She challenges the church's binary view of gender and sexuality by showing Jeanette to have understood that someone's value as a person cannot be attributed to their gender or the gender of their lovers, but that 'to the pure all things are pure.' (103) In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker presents a society where similar but far more aggravated views on the differing gender roles prevail. In her novel, it is these harsh expectations concerning the treatment and position of women that are shown to lead to Celie's betrayals by her family and her subsequent deviation from the accepted religion of her society.

Her Pa is presented as someone who is cruel, domineering and abusive towards the women in his life, seeing them as little more than toys for his pleasure. In Celie's first letter to God, his violation of her is described in detail: 'You gunna do what you mammy wouldn't... He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it' This attitude and behavior prevalent in Celie's society is presented as having originated from the restrictive and mistaken concept that God is man and as such gives men a mandate over women, the power to treat them as they will.

Celie describes an incident when she was beaten 'because [she] winked at a boy in church' (letter 5). For her, the church becomes an increasingly destructive force and this is represented by recollection of negative occurrences that are in some way linked to physical attendance at church; the death of Albert's first wife, 'kilt by her boyfriend coming home from church' (letter 4) and her beating as a result of having 'got something in [her] eye' (letter 5).

However, despite her ill treatment and the treachery of her family, Celie found some limited solace in writing her letters to God, feeling that as long as she ' can spell G-o-d [she] got somebody along' (letter 11). This use of God in a broken form, G-o-d, indicates her sense that God and humans are inexorably linked. She makes God personal to her by believing that she can write him down and that he is defined by his name. Walker uses this to show the reader the extent to which she depends upon this human-centric view of God, as this is all she has ever been exposed to.

She is unable to understand that even if she stopped writing her letters, God would still know her and care for her plight. When she discovers her husband has hidden years worth of letters from her sister, Nettie, she is no longer able to accept God as someone personal to her who cares about her and she seeks to abandon him in the same way she feels he has abandoned her: '... deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf...' (letter 73)

Ironically, it is through the gender stereotypes and strict roles Celie finds she must conform to that she is able to turn this sense of desolation into a personal epiphany. Her fear of men and subsequent inability to ' look at mens' (letter 5), induced by her harsh treatment at their hands, leads her to seek comfort in the arms of the ' beautiful' (letter 6) but ' evil' (letter 23) Shug Avery. Like Jeanette, Celie discovers that she has a greater capacity to love women than men, as she finds that she is ' not scared of them' (letter 5).

This is particularly true of Shug Avery because she breaks all of the stereotypes Celie is accustomed to, both social and religious. Shug is labeled as a 'slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner' (letter 22) by the preacher in the town for being someone who is relaxed about her behavior and sexual conduct. She refuses to conform to the expectations of women and acts as though 'nothing seem to be troubling her mind' (letter 14), becoming a vital role model for Celie who feels increasingly ground down by the pressures paced upon her.

Through Shug, Walker gives Celie a vehicle for her spiritual revelation and allows Celie to understand that God has not abandoned her, that it is in fact her perception of God which is at fault and not God himself. She realises that the God she is used to is the one portrayed as 'big and old and tall and greybeared and white' (letter 73) in the 'white folks' white bible' (letter 73). God's portrayal has nothing to do with who he/she/it may really be, but rather who he is perceived to be by those who seek to elevate their own position and require religious affirmation to do so.

Once Celie is willing to distance herself from this flawed perception, she is able to see the God that Shug describes as 'inside you and inside everybody else' (letter 73), one that loves 'everything you love' and is 'always trying to please us back. ' Unlike Jeanette, Celie is able to find spiritual peace which in turn strengthens her, enabling her to stand up for herself in the face of her prejudiced and judgmental society and most of all, her husband: ' You lowdown dog... It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. ' Her last letter exemplifies this new spiritual awakening.

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She describes her reunion with Nettie, after many, many years apart, and also her first true meeting with her now grown children. She addresses her letter in such a way that clearly shows the pleasure her new sense of selfhood through spirituality brings: ' Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God' However, in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, Jeanette is unable to find this same spiritual peace. Winterson presents the vehicle for her protagonist's spiritual revolution as a wise and worldly member of the congregation, Elsie Norris, who becomes one of Jeanette's only true allies.

Winterson uses Elsie to describe the nature of spirituality versus religion, much like Walker uses the character of Shug. Elise explains that ' God's in everything' (32) and that in order to ' make sense' of life you have to understand and take note of both the world of physical walls and the world within the human heart. However, while Celie is able to make sense of Shug's God, adopting him as her own, Jeanette is initially unable to ' find an explanations' (32). For Jeanette, this new, spiritual dimension to her faith isolates her from her community.

Like Celie she eventually and openly rebels against her social group, making a final refusal to repent and conform to their restrictive expectations but this rebellion does not lead to resolution. Winterson does not conclude Jeanette's story but instead leaves her in spiritual and emotional limbo: ' I miss God... I don't even know if God exists, but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it. ' (165)

Jeanette's constant fear is that of betrayal, a fear induced by her experiences with her mother, her first lover, Melanie and the church.

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She concludes, quite correctly, that 'betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it' (147). She cannot accept that those who prized religion above love can ever be excused, even on the grounds that they must show the ultimate loyalty to God. As a result of this fear, she is unable to 'settle' (165) with someone who she does not know will 'be on [her] side forever and ever' (165): 'One thing I am certain of, I do not want to be betrayed, but that's quite hard to say, casually, at the beginning of a relationship.' (165)

Walker's tale is undoubtedly the happier of the two.

Celie finds happiness and resolution through her God and is able to accept her past as just that: the past. Winterson does not grant Jeanette this freedom. In her new found reliance upon herself she turns to an absent other, seeking someone to complete her. 'Time is a great deadener. People forget, get bored, grow old, go away... history is a string full of knots... a hammock for swinging and a game for playing.' (166) Jeanette cannot forget her past and the betrayals she faced. For her, the past is the undead; something which should have been laid to rest but keeps mutating through the efforts of humanity.

Both Walker and Winterson have used the power of God, in its many forms, to inspire and mutate their protagonists. For Celie, this change is a demonstrable improvement, a righting of wrongs. For Jeanette, any improvement is a matter for debate. Winterson presented her with walls; her mother's beliefs and hypocrisy, the church's teachings and her own religion. She creates a 'Forbidden City' (110) in an attempt to understand these walls, and realises that it is 'in the nature of walls that they should fall'

(110). In the place of these metaphysical walls she draws a 'chalk circle... for the soul' (111), but is this circle any less limiting?

She remains trapped in a cage of her own 'needs' (165). Winterson uses this concept of cages and walls, circles and souls, to epitomise the spiritual struggle her character faces. All of the religious ideas used to describe this struggle can be reduced to this one concept. For Walker, it is colour that exemplifies her character's spiritual evolution. Celie rids herself of restriction to nondescript colours, 'brown, maroon or navy blue' (letter 12) and her search for 'somethin' purple' (letter 12) is complete when she realises she can 'walk by the color purple in a field somewhere' (letter 73), notice it and please God.