The Mother’s Complex Character in Jeanette Winterson’s
*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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BA Degree Project
Literature
Fall 2022
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Abstract

Jeanette Winterson’s debut novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is regarded as an epitome of feminist fiction. The novel centres around Jeanette, a young homosexual girl, and her mother Louie who does not accept her daughter’s sexuality. Just like most mothers in feminist fiction Louie is described, by other scholars, as a one-dimensional character who forces normative femininity upon her daughter and defends patriarchal structures. However, this thesis argues that subtle instances of characterisation create tensions in Louie’s character, especially in regard to gender norms and heterosexual norms. Although Winterson’s novel has been explored from several perspectives most scholars focus on Jeanette. Few scholars have attempted to examine Louie and how she is characterised. Thus, Louie’s character is largely unexplored. To analyse Louie, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s narratological theories on characterisation are used, such as characterisation through direct definitions, actions, and speech. By showing that Louie is marked by tensions she is characterised as a mother who both upholds and challenges patriarchal structures. Since Louie cannot only be perceived as an agent of the patriarchy, she is consequently a complex character.

**Keywords:** feminist fiction, characterisation, Jeanette Winterson, gender norms, heterosexual norms, patriarchal structures.
A complicated mind, my mother had.

- Jeanette Winterson

During the 1960s a second wave of feminism emerged, and fiction was used to promulgate ideas of the women’s liberation movement. New feminist publishing houses such as Pandora and Virago appeared. They created a space for female writers in a literary field which was dominated by men. Since the 1960s feminist fiction has evolved and developed in accordance with the feminist thought and women’s shifting living conditions. Furthermore, feminist fiction continues to criticise patriarchal structures and gender norms that support female subordination and male dominance in order to spread the message of equality (Parker 2015, 79). Jeanette Winterson’s debut novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (henceforth referred to as *Oranges*), from 1985, has been described as an epitome of such fiction.

Winterson’s semi-autobiographical bildungsroman centres around Jeanette, a young homosexual girl. Jeanette is brought up in a small village in Northern England by her fundamentalist adoptive parents. The family are members of a congregation within the charismatic Christian movement, the Pentecostal church. Jeanette’s mother Louie believes that Jeanette is her gift to the Lord and that mother and daughter together will enter a “tag match against the Rest of the World” (Winterson 2014, 5). Up until the age of seven Jeanette is home-schooled by her mother with the Bible as her textbook, but she is then forced by the local welfare committee to start school. In school Jeanette encounters other books, and she is exposed to a world beyond her religious community. As Jeanette grows older, she starts to realise that she does not always agree with the teachings of her church. When she finds herself attracted to another teenage girl, Jeanette is troubled by the weight of figuring out what is right and wrong since her mother and her congregation do not accept homosexuality. Eventually, Jeanette’s
congregation become aware of her sexual orientation, and hours of exorcism are performed on Jeanette in an attempt to get her to repent her sexuality. However, Jeanette refuses to repent. Because she refuses Jeanette is forced to quit her church and move out of her parents’ house. After taking up various jobs Jeanette moves to the city. At the end of the novel, after an unspecified period of time, Jeanette returns home to her family for Christmas. Although much has changed, like the fall of the religious organisation Louie worked for and Jeanette’s parents “go[ing] all electronic” (208), Louie still listens to the same missionary reports on the radio like she did when Jeanette was a child.

The mother-daughter relationship is often explored in feminist fiction. According to Parker stories such as *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) by Kate Atkinson and *Four Bare Legs in a Bed* (1990) by Helen Simpson portray the mother-daughter relationship in different ways (2015, 87). What they have in common with many other feminist works is that mother figures are often despised by their daughters since the mothers conform to patriarchal structures and gender norms as well as force these structures and norms upon their children. Furthermore, the daughters usually reject their mothers in fear of sharing their fate (Parker 2015, 87). Scholars who have examined Winterson’s debut novel seem to believe that this is the case for *Oranges* as well. For instance, Mónica Calvo Pascual links the mother to Zeus and claims that Louie is “responsible for the imposition of gender difference” and a “defender of patriarchal supremacy” (2000, 26-27). Similarly, Susan Rubin Suleiman states that Louie is “disastrously hampering to her daughter” and “the most vigorous defender of patriarchal values” (1990, 137). Indeed, Keryn Carter acknowledges that all the women in *Oranges* “are defined and sustained by patriarchal law” (1998, 19). While other scholars argue for Louie’s trust in patriarchal values, I claim that by carefully reading subtle instances of characterisation through direct definitions, actions, and speech, tensions in Louie’s character can be found, not least in relation to gender norms and heterosexual norms. These tensions portray Louie as a complex character.

Since the publication of *Oranges*, there has been considerable scholarly interest in the novel. A focal point among these previous research papers, which is also relevant for this thesis, is the relationship between mother and daughter. For instance, Carter explores how Jeanette attempts to separate and narrate herself out of the overpowering mother-daughter relationship. Carter explores the separation by examining the novel
through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection (1998, 15). For Jeanette to develop and become a subject, Carter claims, Jeanette needs to separate herself from her “dominating, even monstrous, mother who threatens to engulf her selfhood” (17). A different perspective on the mother-daughter relationship is put forward in an article by Laurel Bollinger. Bollinger suggests that *Oranges* offers a new model for female maturation narratives where female loyalty forms the basis of female development (1994, 364-365). Bollinger argues for her thesis by focusing on the last chapter of the novel. She claims that Jeanette chooses female loyalty when she returns to her mother at the end of the novel despite Louie’s disapproval of her daughter’s sexuality. With Jeanette’s decision to return, *Oranges* portrays a model for female maturity that is not depicted in traditional stories. Winterson shows that maturity is reached not only through flight but also in the return to the maternal and the familiar as well as through female connection instead of separation (Bollinger 1994, 372-374). Julie Ellam offers a middle ground perspective between Carter’s and Bollinger’s. She argues that Winterson displays through her novel how impossible it is to fully escape the past. Ellam continues by stating that Jeanette must separate herself from her dominating mother. However, it is impossible to fully escape her influence (2010, 15, 24).

Another focal point which has been of interest to scholars is the structure of the novel. Within the novel fairy tales with an external author-narrator interrupt the narration. Susana Onega explains that the fairy tales “recur with a difference and/or elaborate on key motifs in Jeanette’s narration, like musical variations in a symphony” (2006, 22). According to Calvo Pascual the “chaotic” structure of the novel, with these fairy tales, makes it possible to connect feminist and postmodern tenets. The structure is compared to an incomplete spiralling structure aiming for infinity. The structure is what Calvo Pascual suggests enables Winterson to create a space for a lesbian narrative where women are not portrayed as complete opposites to men. The additional narrative layers supplement Jeanette’s maturation process and stand against masculine linearity all whilst escaping gender binarism and constructing feminist claims (2000, 25, 30). Similarly, Vaishali Shivkumar Biradar displays in her article “Rebellious Homosexual Daughter vs. Religious Orthodox Mother – A Study of Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*” how Winterson through her storytelling narrative technique demonstrates “a strong alternative to the patriarchal constructed binary oppositions between the masculine and feminine identities” (2017, 441).
Although previous scholars have examined *Oranges* and the mother-daughter relationship in the novel from several different perspectives, their focus is mainly on Jeanette. Few attempts to examine the character of the mother appear to have been made, which is what this thesis intends to do. To uncover instances which highlight the tensions within Louie’s character I will analyse the mother in the light of three different characterisation techniques outlined in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s work in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2002). Rimmon-Kenan explains that characterisation can be implemented through direct definitions, actions, and speech. First, when prominent features in a given character are described it is considered to be characterisation through direct definitions. The definitions of a character’s qualities are only accepted by the readers if they are expressed by the most authoritative voice in the story (62). In *Oranges* Jeanette is the most authoritative voice since she is the narrator, and it is her descriptions of Louie that will be analysed. Second, a character trait can be implied through action. An action can occur on a single occasion, to call forth dynamic qualities of a character, or repeatedly, to reveal static or unchanging traits (63). Last, Rimmon-Kenan outlines characterisation through speech. She states that “[a] character’s speech, whether in conversation or as a silent activity of the mind, can be indicative of a trait or traits both through its content and through its form” (65). Characterisation through actions and speech are indirect presentations used to display and exemplify a character’s traits. When indirect presentations are used, it is up to the reader to interpret which characteristics are revealed. Conversely, when using direct definitions, the reader is told what the characters are like.

In order to analyse Jeanette’s mother and how her character challenges gender norms and patriarchal structures within the novel a light must be shed on these structures and norms and how they are endorsed. Jeanette’s world revolves around the Pentecostal church, and most of the characters Jeanette interacts with are also part of that religious movement. Thus, the world Jeanette resides in is quite particular. Pentecostalism originated around a hundred years ago and has shown for one of the fastest religious growth spurts ever. Today almost half a billion people, which is 25 percent of the Christian population, can be recognised as Pentecostal. The Pentecostal faith centres around the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostals are aware of, filled with, and empowered by the Spirit. Moreover, they believe that the Spirit can work miracles and change people’s lives (Jacobsen 2006, 1-4). The Pentecostals have defined morality
based on a variety of biblical texts, and certain behaviours have been condemned. Homosexuality is one of those behaviours (Kay and Hunt 2015, 357).

In Winterson’s novel the Pentecostal community considers homosexuality to be a sin. This is illustrated in several ways. For instance, most women in the novel are married and unhappily so. The married women would rather their daughters experience the same kind of marriages they have instead of their daughters being happy in a homosexual relationship (Ellam 2010, 27.). In addition, the two unmarried women who live together are accused of dealing with “unnatural passions” (Winterson 2014, 10, 98). At one point Jeanette even states that “romantic love for another woman [is] a sin” (164). Whilst homosexuality is believed to be wrong, heterosexuality is the dominating norm the Pentecostals are forced to surrender to. Compulsory heterosexuality is seen even in the sweets Jeanette receives from the post office. The sweets are shaped like hearts and engraved with sayings like “Maureen 4 Ken” and “Jack ’n’ Jill, True” (92). According to Nick Bentley the post office passage “represents the way in which seemingly innocent cultural products such as sweets help to reinforce dominant heterosexual codes of sexuality” (2008, 111). Thus, heterosexuality as a norm is forced upon Jeanette not only by her church but also by society, and other sexual orientations are by default believed to be wrong or at least not as accepted.

Although we as readers have a sense that the novel features strong women and men are background figures, the underlying religious and social structures are essentially patriarchal. Jeanette tells the reader that her church “always had strong women” and that “the women organized everything” (Winterson 2014, 171). Hence, the women that surround Jeanette are described as strong, active, and driven. However, according to the male priests in Jeanette’s congregation the qualities ascribed to the women are not appropriate for their gender. To demonstrate, in Oranges female power and women taking on male roles such as preachers or missionaries are blamed for Jeanette’s sexual orientation (171-172). Bentley comments on this passage in the novel and explains that “the authority of the male pastors at crucial times in the text, show[sic] that [female power] is a contingent and localized form of female power” (2008, 110). In a similar fashion, Biradar adds that “the right to preach, to lead, to make rulings and other expressions of power are solely masculine privileges” which keep the male supremacy intact (2017, 446). In addition, several scholars acknowledge that the Pentecostal church and God uphold and symbolise patriarchal laws in Oranges (Onega...
2006, 29; Ellam 2010, 32-33; Bentley 2008, 114). As a result of blaming the women in the church for Jeanette's sexuality the prevailing gender norms within the Pentecostal community are revealed. Women are not permitted to hold positions of power, and they should not have active roles. Therefore, women are subordinate to the dominating men. In other words, there are tensions between the prevailing gender norms surrounding Jeanette, namely that women are powerful and active figures, and the gender norms within the Pentecostal community, which impose male supremacy. Even though Jeanette is surrounded by strong, powerful, and active women, it is clarified that these qualities are meant for men.

To further the research on Oranges and argue for there being tensions in the mother’s character, this thesis will examine how Louie is characterised in the novel by using a narratological method. The following section includes an explanation of why Louie so often is viewed as a defender of patriarchal laws. Then Louie’s character is analysed in accordance with Rimmon-Kenan’s theories on characterisation through direct definitions, actions, and speech. Throughout the analysis, I argue that Louie is a character marked by tensions and therefore complex, an argument largely overlooked in previous research.

Louie: a one-dimensional character

In this thesis I argue that Louie is a complex character. In previous research, however, Louie is often viewed as “one-dimensional” or a “flat” character. Flat characters represent a single idea and do not develop through the course of the narration (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 42). One-dimensional characters can be traced back to fairy tales and folklore. For example, mothers in fairy tales and folklore often belong to one out of two stereotypical roles – fairy godmothers or wicked stepmothers. The division between fairy godmothers and wicked stepmothers allows readers to explore the relationship between mother and daughter without considering the mother’s complex emotions (Bollinger 1994, 373). By connecting Louie to the one dominating idea of her upholding patriarchal values the reader does not need to examine the mother in order to understand Jeanette’s narration.

When scholars discuss Louie, she is linked to the one idea of upholding and protecting patriarchal structures. For example, Onega states that Louie militantly succumbs to patriarchal values (2006, 29). Similarly, Biradar claims that Louie does
not develop through the novel since she never accepts her daughter’s sexuality (2017, 445). Although Calvo Pascual argues that the structure of *Oranges* allows women to not be presented as binary opposites to men, thus challenging patriarchal structures, she does not recognise Louie as a complex character. Instead, Calvo Pascual describes Louie in the same manner as Onega and Biradar. Calvo Pascual accuses Louie of being solely responsible for and a defender of male supremacy (2000, 26-27).

As demonstrated Louie is often perceived as a one-dimensional or flat character. One explanation for this perception of the mother is the way Louie thinks. For instance, on the first page of the novel the mother is described as follows: “She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies” (Winterson 2014, 5). The description urges the reader to believe that Louie thinks in binary oppositions. By thinking in binary oppositions, two related entities are viewed as logically opposed and without any middle ground between them, just like friends and enemies (Chandler and Munday, 2011). For Louie, things are either true or false, good or bad, and right or wrong. Louie applies this way of thinking when it comes to gender and sexuality, as shown by the following three examples. First, thinking of gender in terms of binary opposites draws on gender stereotypes (Bennett and Royle 2016, 211). For example, on one occasion Louie forces young Jeanette to wear a pink raincoat even though her daughter does not like the colour (Winterson 2014, 100-102). Pink is often associated with the female gender. Hence, Louie seems to think that different colours are appropriate to wear depending on if you are a boy or a girl. Second, Louie rejecting homosexuality is also an example of her binary thinking. Louie rejects same-sex relationships when she, for instance, comments on two men holding hands whilst they enter the church. Louie then exclaims that one of them “[s]hould have been a woman” (164). Thus, in Louie’s view heterosexuality is right and other sexual orientations are viewed as wrong. Third, when Jeanette’s sexuality becomes known to her church, Louie declares that men and women have different roles within the church:

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women had specific circumstances for their ministry, that the Sunday school was one of them, the Sisterhood another, but the message belonged to the men [. . . ] having taken on a man’s world in other ways [Jeanette] had flouted God’s law and tried to do it sexually. (171)
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With binary oppositions the entities are arranged in a hierarchal order (Bennett and Royle 2016, 211). Such a power relationship between men and women in the church is portrayed through Louie’s statement. When Louie agrees with the male priests that
God’s message belongs to men, she also agrees with the ideas of men having more power and that they should take on the active roles within the church. Women are seen as subordinate to men and should therefore approach religion in a more passive way. In other words, the idea of Louie thinking in binary oppositions in combination with actions that display this type of thinking, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality, make it easy to perceive Louie as a one-dimensional or flat character instead of viewing her as a complex one.

However, just because Louie’s world is shaped by binary oppositions does not mean that she is a one-dimensional or flat character. From the beginning of the novel gender norms are questioned and Louie’s tensions are highlighted. Next to the description of Louie as a person who thinks in binary oppositions, Louie is also described by Jeanette as an active figure: “My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle” (Winterson 2014, 5). Jeanette’s parents are ascribed qualities that oppose the prevailing gender norms within the Pentecostal movement. According to the Pentecostals, men are active, and women are passive which is also what Louie claims she believes in the quotation from the previous paragraph. Yet, through the wrestling description Louie is portrayed as the active character and Jeanette’s father as the passive one. Bollinger states in her article that women in feminist literature are not objects but subjects actively taking part in their own story (1994, 375). Louie is described as such a woman. The description of Louie as a subject and an active character challenges gender norms and patriarchal structures. This description produces tension in the belief of Louie being a flat character who thinks in binary oppositions and upholds gender norms and patriarchal laws. Thus, already from the outset of *Oranges* Louie is linked to both the idea of thinking in binary oppositions regarding gender and sexuality as well as the idea of a woman being an active character. Louie upholds gender norms and patriarchal structures at the same time as she also challenges them. In the following sections I will look at passages in the novel where I believe these types of tensions in Louie’s character are elevated.

## Characterisation through direct definitions

Characterisation can take the form of direct definitions such as naming a character’s traits or indirect presentations through a character’s speech, action, environment and so forth (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 61-69). To examine and argue for the complexity of the
mother character, this thesis will analyse both direct definitions and indirect presentations of Louie, beginning with the former. In *Oranges* there are numerous occurrences where Louie is described directly. Mostly these descriptions are presented by Jeanette. However, the nature of some of the descriptions requires more interpretative work from the reader. In what follows, I will look at three instances where Jeanette describes her mother and examine how these descriptions define Louie as a character fraught with contradictions.

Firstly, when Jeanette describes her mother, she often does so by attributing conflicting ideas to Louie. For example, Jeanette tells the reader that Louie “is enlightened and reactionary at the same time” (Winterson 2014, 164). By drawing on the meaning of enlightened and reactionary as defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, an enlightened character has a “greater knowledge, understanding, or insight” and displays “a rational, modern, and well-informed outlook; free from prejudice or superstition” (2022a). Conversely, a reactionary character is “inclined or favourable to reaction”, “against radical political or social reform”, and “in favour of a reversion to a former state of affairs” (2022b). Through the explanations of the terms several conflicting ideas are notable. To begin with, to be enlightened is to have knowledge and act rationally. However, someone who is reactionary does not act according to knowledge or rationality. Instead, the actions are based on emotions and instincts. In addition, the concept of modernity, supporting new ideas, and changes in society are a part of being enlightened. By contrast, reactionists strive backwards to former states and oppose social changes. Thus, Louie being described as both enlightened and reactionary defines her as a character whose actions are founded on rationality as well as emotions and as a character who is progressive and regressive at the same time.

Secondly, Jeanette describing her mother as both a priest and a prophet portrays Louie as a character who simultaneously upholds patriarchal structures and threatens them. To analyse Jeanette’s descriptions of Louie, her perception of the difference between priests and prophets needs to be considered:

> The priest has a book with the words set out. Old words, known words, words of power. Words that are always on the surface. Words for every occasion. The words work. They do what they’re supposed to do; comfort and discipline. The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning. The prophets cry out because they are troubled by demons. (Winterson 2014, 205)
Bentley elaborates on the meaning of the passage and emphasises that “[w]here the priest preaches the established doctrine, the prophet’s message is unsettling and threatening to the prevailing power relationships in society” (2008, 114). The quote from the novel and Bentley’s interpretation of the quote present priests and prophets as opposing concepts. A priest operates according to fixed beliefs and the church’s own regulations whilst the prophet criticises these beliefs and regulations. Louie is connected to the role of a priest by Jeanette stating that her mother has an “abiding interest in missionary work” and that she is “good business woman” who almost doubled the membership within the congregation (Winterson 2014, 12, 73). Just like a priest, Louie preaches the established doctrine to promote her church and their believes. Thus, Louie can be thought of as a character that supports the patriarchy since the Pentecostal church and its priests symbolise patriarchal laws within the novel (Onega 2006, 29; Ellam 2010, 32-33; Bentley 2008, 114). At the same time, Jeanette lets the reader know that Louie is one of the prophets who challenge fundamental power relationships by declaring that Louie “was Old Testament through and through” as well “out there, up front with the prophets” (Winterson 2014, 6-7). Bentley claims that “[t]he prophet’s meaning, however, is not necessarily anti-spiritual” but “a different understanding of the religious nature of man” (2008, 114). The prophet's message can still be religious, but it offers a different interpretation and understanding of the established doctrine.

Lastly, Jeanette manifests the definition of her mother as a character fraught with contradictions when she accuses her mother of being a spiritual whore. The second time the congregation finds out that Jeanette is in a relationship with a girl, Louie gives her big speech. In her speech Louie agrees with the priests and states that women and men have different roles within the church and that preaching is a male task (Winterson 2014, 171). After Louie’s speech Jeanette reflects on her situation and her mother: “I knew my mother hoped I would blame myself, but I didn’t. I knew now where the blame lay. If there’s such a thing as spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore” (172). Jeanette accuses her mother of spiritual adultery since Louie, in the presence of the priests, claims that preaching is a male task. However, Louie has earlier repeatedly pointed out how important it is for women to preach and to carry out missionary work. The essence in Jeanette’s description is that Louie is not faithful to her own beliefs.
Jeanette calling her mother “a whore” proposes that the spiritual adultery is not a one-time occurrence but something that happens repeatedly. Suleiman also recognises this quality in Louie’s character. Suleiman acknowledges that Louie is surrounded by contradictions by stating that the mother is lucky that the authoritative priests are “quite distant, which allows her to wield considerable local power while disclaiming it” (1990, 138). Despite her presentation of Louie as a character who both has power and relinquishes power, Suleiman does not argue for Louie being a complex character. Like other scholars, Suleiman connects Louie to the one idea of her being a “narrowminded defender” of patriarchal laws (139). Nevertheless, Jeanette calling her mother a spiritual whore suggests that Louie does not have fixed beliefs and that she adjusts them to the situation to maximise her personal gains. In short, Jeanette constantly describes her mother through contradictions. By Jeanette connecting her mother to these contradictory concepts tensions in Louie’s characterisation are created.

Characterisation through actions

Louie is also characterised through her actions. Similar to characterisation through direct definitions, Louie's actions also suggest that her character is marked by tensions. To provide evidence for this argument, I will examine three events: Jeanette’s parents going to bed, Jeanette's birth story, and the incident of mother and daughter looking through an old photo album. During these events, Louie challenges gender norms and heterosexual norms instead of enforcing them.

On one occasion in Oranges Jeanette deliberates on her parents’ bedtimes. When Jeanette and Louie come home after a service and a banquet at their church Jeanette’s father has already gone to bed because he needs to be up early for his work shift. Louie, on the other hand, “wouldn’t be going to bed for hours” (Winterson 2014, 20). Jeanette tells the reader that her father going to bed early and her mother going to bed late is usual: “As long as I have known them, my mother has gone to bed at four, and my father has got up at five” (20). In short, Jeanette’s parents only share a bed one hour every night. Thus, the impression Jeanette conveys is that her parents do not have a very active sex life. Bentley even states that they completely lack a sexual relationship (2008, 110). There are additional events in the novel which concern Louie and her feelings towards sexual intimacy. For example, when Louie and Jeanette hear their neighbours fornicate Louie sings as loud as she can to drown out the sound (Winterson
2014, 70-71). In a similar manner, Louie tells Jeanette the story about when she had sex with one of her old boyfriends (110-112). The story ends with Louie stating that Jeanette needs to be careful because what Louie thought was sexual and romantic feelings for her boyfriend was just symptoms of her ulcer. Consequently, these events reveal that sexuality, no matter the sexual orientation, is something that Louie is not comfortable with. Louie does not want to hear sexual intercourse, and she thinks that one can never really be sure if it is sexual desire one feels. In fact, Louie is so uncomfortable with the idea of a sexual relationship with her husband, that she rather adopts a child than makes one with him, which brings us to the next event: Jeanette’s birth story.

Very early in the novel Jeanette shares her birth story, or rather how she was adopted by Louie:

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

    a missionary child,
    a servant of God,
    a blessing

And so it was that on a particular day, 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. A child with too much hair. She said ‘This child is mine from the Lord’.

Jeanette’s birth story is very similar to the birth of Jesus Christ (Onega 2006, 22). In Jesus’s story several males are present: God (Jesus’s father), Joseph (Jesus’s earthly father), and the three wise men. Compared to Jesus’s story almost all the males have been erased in Jeanette’s narrative. For instance, Jeanette’s father and the three wise men are not mentioned once and even the child’s gender has been changed to female. The removal of male characters from the narrative gives Louie the sole power of creation. As Biradar claims, Jeanette’s birth story becomes a feminist rewriting of a religious patriarchal text (2017, 443), and Louie is the star of it. However, Louie claims that Jenette is her gift from God, and she wants to dedicate her child to him. Thus, it is possible to argue that there is a significant male present in Jeanette’s birth story. For that reason, Louie can be perceived to be sustained and determined by patriarchal structures just like all the other women from her church, which Carter points out (1998, 19). Although an omnipotent father could be seen as present, the choice of adopting a
child is only Louie’s. God does not play an active part in Louie’s decision to adopt a child in Jeanette’s narrative compared to Jesus’s story where God decides to impregnate Mary. As Bollinger acknowledges, Louie is the one who chooses Jeanette (1994, 374). Therefore, Louie’s choice to adopt Jeanette alone is a stance against the heterosexual norms in which a man and a woman are needed to beget a child as well as a stance against gender norms which advocate female passivity.

The final event I want to discuss in which Louie challenges heterosexual norms is the incident of Louie and Jeanette looking through an old photo album. Whilst looking through the “old flames” section in the album Louie tells Jeanette stories about her old boyfriends as they look at their pictures. Surprisingly there is a picture of a woman in the section:

right at the bottom of the page was a yellow picture of a pretty woman holding a cat.

‘Who’s that?’ I pointed.
‘That? Oh just Eddy’s sister, I don’t know why I put it there,’ and she turned the page. Next time we looked, it had gone. (Winterson 2014, 48)

Compared to the other people in the section Louie does not share a story about Eddy’s sister. In addition, it also appears that Louie is the one who removes the picture of the woman even though it is not explicitly expressed. I believe these acts are very significant.

A character can be characterised through acts of omission i.e., a character not doing what he/she usually does (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 63). Louie does not share a story about the sister like she did with the rest of the men from the album. By not telling a story about the woman in the picture, which is what Jeanette expects her to do, Louie’s behaviour becomes deviant, and it seems like she has something to hide. The incident raises the suspicion that Louie herself once had a sexual or romantic relationship with a woman. Just because there is only one event which implies that Louie once had a same-sex relationship does not mean that the event should be taken any less seriously. In fact, the dramatic impact of a single occasion act “often suggests that the traits it reveals are qualitatively more crucial than the numerous habits which represent the character’s routine” (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 63). Thus, it is possible to argue that the act of not telling a story and removing the picture is more important and revealing than the numerous occasions Louie conforms to and follows heterosexual norms. There is a comment later on in the novel which supports the suspicion raised from the photo album.
incident. Miss Jewsbury, a woman from church who is also a closeted homosexual, states that Louie is “a woman of the world, even though she'd never admit it to me” and that “[s]he knows about feelings, especially women’s feelings” (Winterson 2014, 135). Even though Miss Jewsbury is not the most authoritative voice in the novel she confirms the suspicion Louie evoked when she so hastily and nonchalantly moved on from the picture of the woman in the photo album. In other words, the photo album incident might seem insignificant on a first reading, but on a second reading with the concept of acts of omissions in mind it reveals the possibility of Louie once being in a same-sex relationship.

The analysed events reveal that Louie does not always conform to patriarchal structures and gender norms. In the novel Louie repeatedly rejects homosexuality. However, several events indicate that Louie also rejects heterosexuality. Although Louie rejects several types of sexualities and seems uncomfortable with sexual intimacy, it appears that she has experienced some type of same-sex relationship. In addition, Louie also challenges heterosexual norms and gender norms by adopting a child alone and showing that females can have the sole power of begetting children. By challenging patriarchal and heteronormative structures tensions are created against the dominating image of Louie as a defender of the patriarchy.

**Characterisation through speech**

Subtle details in Louie’s speech at the end of the novel once again create tensions in Louie’s character. The first instances which display these tensions are the topics of Louie’s conversations. The content of a character's speech can uncover different personal traits (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 65). Similar to acts of omission, what a character does not talk about can also be revealing. The topic of Jeanette’s sexuality is not explicitly talked about at the end of the novel. Louie neither apologises for her past behaviour towards Jeanette nor expresses acceptance of her daughter’s sexual orientation. Thus, it is easy to perceive Louie the way other scholars do, namely that she is a one-dimensional defender of the patriarchy who continuously oppresses her daughter. Yet, I argue that the lack of an explicit conversation regarding the topic may indicate a change in Louie’s character. Louie speaks against homosexuality and acts to change her daughter’s preference regarding the gender of her lovers until the end of the narration. For example, when Jeanette refuses to repent her sexuality Louie accuses her
of “[a]ping men”, bringing “evil into the church”, and making her feel ill (Winterson 2014, 163-164). Eventually, Louie forces her daughter to move out since she cannot have a homosexual presence in her house (174). However, when Jeanette returns home for Christmas at the end of the novel after being in the city for an unspecified amount of time, Louie does not speak against her daughter’s sexuality. Instead, Louie tells Jeanette all about the different missions she has worked on to recruit members for the Pentecostal church and how she has gone electronic by buying a build-it-yourself CB radio (208-223). According to Rimmon-Kenan, complex characters develop throughout the narration compared to flat characters which do not (2002, 42). Since the topics of Louie’s conversations change, and she no longer speaks against homosexuality it is possible to argue that Louie’s character has developed between the beginning of the novel and its end.

Just because no explicit conversations regarding Jeanette’s sexuality occur at the end of Oranges, does not mean that the topic fails to appear in a subtle form. In what follows, I will look at two instances from the end of Oranges where Louie implicitly addresses the topic of her daughter’s sexuality.

The first instance which implicitly addresses homosexuality occurs in a conversation regarding Louie’s work for “the town’s first mission for coloured people” (Winterson 2014, 219). Louie then philosophically declares that “oranges are not the only fruit” (219). Even if the comment seems obvious it conveys a deeper message. Oranges frequently occur throughout the novel, and the comment is a revision of an earlier statement. To illustrate, Louie continuously gives Jeanette oranges to comfort her daughter. That way Louie herself does not have to be present or take part in the comforting. For example, Louie gives Jeanette oranges both when Jeanette is sad because she is hospitalised for temporary deafness and when she has glandular fever and rambles in her sleep (36, 144). On one occasion Louie declares that oranges are “[t]he only fruit” (39). Biradar reflects on the symbolism of oranges and claims that they represent heterosexuality and “the only possible way to live life” according to Louie (2017, 446). Louie claiming that oranges are the only fruit circles back to her world being shaped by binary oppositions. Oranges are right and other fruits are wrong or in this case non-existent. By repeatedly giving Jeanette oranges Louie forces heterosexual norms onto Jeanette, a norm which sustains patriarchal laws and male supremacy. However, Louie revises her original claim at the end of the novel and states
that oranges, in fact, are not the only fruit. The revised statement suggests that Louie distances herself from thinking in binary oppositions. By saying that there are other fruits than oranges Louie takes a stand against the idea that heterosexuality is the only right way of living life.

The second instance which addresses Jeanette’s sexual orientation occurs at the end of the novel when Louie takes part in a Pentecostal radio transmission. Louie puts on her headphones, adjusts the microphone, and starts to broadcast: “This is Kindly Light calling Manchester, come in Manchester, this is Kindly Light” (Winterson 2014, 224). Ellam states that the moniker “Kindly Light” that Louie uses is ironic and that a reconciliation between mother and daughter will never happen. For that reason, Ellam argues that it is “more valid to interpret this stage as one of rapprochement, where the child returns to mother for reassurance in order to go back out again into the world” (2010, 47). Whilst this is a possible interpretation, I believe Ellam overlooks an important detail from earlier on in the novel. The phrase “Kindly Light” has been mentioned once before in Oranges, namely in connection with the character Elsie Norris (Winterson 2014, 32). Elsie is an older woman in the congregation, and she often takes on the role of Jeanette’s caretaker when Louie is absent. For example, when Jeanette is caught having a relationship with a girl for the second time, Elsie comforts Jeanette by hugging her and asking her over for coffee. At coffee Elsie and Jeanette do not talk about Jeanette’s sexuality and whether it is right or wrong. Instead, Elsie gives Jeanette what she needs the most, “an ordinary time with a friend” (169-170). On one occasion Jeanette tells the reader that Elsie always plays the song “Lead Kindly Light” on the organ at her house (32). The fact that Winterson uses the phrase “Kindly Light” as a moniker for Louie at the very end of Oranges cannot be a coincidence. I believe the phrase has two functions. First, to link Louie to Elsie. Second, to suggest that Louie herself has become enlightened.

In literature the concept of light is often a symbol for knowledge, truth, enlightenment, and goodness (Ferber 2007, 114-115). By saying that she has become “Kindly Light”, Louie signals that she has gained some sort of truth or knowledge. As the phrase connects Louie to Elsie, a possible reading is that Louie has acquired the knowledge that Elsie always had. Elsie always cared for Jeanette despite her sexual orientation, and she knew that sexuality is not a rightful cause to exclude people from religious communities. At this stage in the novel Elsie is no longer around to take care of Jeanette since she sadly dies shortly after Jeanette moves away from home. When
Louie calls herself “Kindly Light” she demonstrates that she is ready to take over the role Elsie previously had in Jeanette’s life. Louie is now ready to comfort Jeanette, not judge her, and help her just like Elsie did.

In sum, subtle details in Louie’s speech at the end of the novel portray her as a complex character. The changes in Louie’s conversation topics, Louie’s revision of her earlier statement on oranges, and the reuse of the phrase “Kindly Light” show that Louie has developed throughout the narration and that she no longer seems to reject homosexuality. Thus, tensions arise between Louie’s character from the beginning of the novel compared to her character at the end. Since, Louie undergoes character change and starts to accept homosexuality, she cannot only be linked to the dominating idea of her only protecting patriarchal laws. Therefore, she is more complex than other scholars suggest.

Conclusion

The way the mother in Jeanette Winterson’s novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit thinks in binary oppositions is the way other scholars appear to think about Louie. Louie cannot be both either or, and scholars only perceive her as a one-dimensional defender of the patriarchy (Calvo Pascual 2000, 26-27; Suleiman 1990, 137; Biradar 2017, 445). However, as I have argued that subtle instances of characterisation create tensions in Louie, she can be perceived as a complex character who both upholds and challenges patriarchal structures. To argue for this thesis Rimmon-Kenan’s theories on characterisation as well as different works by previous scholars have been used to analyse Louie. Firstly, I have argued that Jeanette defines her mother by using contradictory concepts. Secondly, through some of her actions Louie can be seen to challenge the same gender norms and heterosexual norms she tries to force on her daughter. Lastly, I have argued that a change in Louie’s behaviour and mindset at the end of the novel compared to the beginning is exposed through her speech. Since Louie is characterised through contradictions, challenges the norms she forces on her daughter, and displays a new behaviour and mindset at the end of the novel, Louie’s character is fraught with tensions. Consequently, she cannot only be linked to one idea and is therefore not a one-dimensional or flat character but a complex one.

My conclusion is that the tensions in Louie’s characterisation never allow her to be a character who is either fully on the patriarchy’s side or fully against it. Louie’s
character shows that it is possible for women to be active and powerful and that women do not have to be subordinate to men. For that reason, Jeanette is not the only character who contributes to the novel’s feminist message. Louie also does so but in a subtle way. Simultaneously, when Louie speaks against equality and homosexuality an additional narrative layer is added through Louie’s character. Louie’s character displays that Jeanette is not the only woman in the story who is forced to conform to the Pentecostals’ fixed ideas regarding gender and sexuality. Thus, Louie’s character also serves as an example of what happens when one conforms to these fixed ideas. When Louie conforms, she is forced to repress parts of herself and her beliefs as well as obligated to continue to spread and endorse the Pentecostals’ fixed ideas on heterosexual norms and gender norms. In other words, the tensions in Louie’s character allow her to both further the novel’s feminist message and exemplify what Jeanette’s future would have looked like if she had not chosen to leave the Pentecostal church.

To analyse Louie, I have only explored Jeanette’s narrative and how that narrative characterises the mother. However, *Oranges* is filled with fairy tales which mirror and elaborate on Jeanette’s narrative. To further the research field a possible continuation of this thesis would be to examine how Louie is characterised through the fairy tales.
Works Cited


