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Bachelor thesis: The Theme and Motifs of Sexual Identity in Selected Novels by Jeanette Winterson

This work has many strong qualities, not least the clear interest shown by its author in a wide range of texts relating to women's literature, and in particular lesbian writing of the second half of the twentieth century. Its stated focus is the theme and motifs of sexual identity in two works by one of the leading British contemporary novelists, Jeanette Winterson; her first, semi-autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* of 1985 and her fifth work, *Written on the Body*, of 1992.

The author begins the thesis by providing an extensive theoretical overview, which mentions a number of key authors and works. She discusses some specifics of lesbian fiction, for example the feature of the “defiant heroine” (p. 5), the “coming out novel” which prevailed in the 1970s, and the popularity of the detective genre in the 1980s. This is all a very good contextualization of the work of Winterson, whose biography ends this theoretical section, though its very wide range and ambition means that it is at times rather sketchy and lacking in coherence, e.g. on p.5. It is mentioned that Adrienne Rich believed that lesbians needed to form a new language to express their experience, and that ignoring a “protagonist’s sexual orientation results in misreading the work fully”. Rich’s approach is not further discussed, though her views are very relevant to the analysis of the novels later in the thesis (as is her influential concept of the ‘lesbian continuum’, which is not mentioned at all). The paragraphs on Rich are followed immediately by a brief description of the work of Angela Carter, another important author of the 1970s; the desire to provide a chronological overview overriding coherence.

In the next section the author provides an analysis of *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, focusing on topics such as family, the symbolism of oranges and biblical allusions. (One clear error in this section is in referring to Catholicism in the heading of section 2.1.2. The book is clearly focused on a very restrictive Pentecostal community, an evangelical faith which emphasises the reliability of the Bible, an important aspect of the book, and one which has no relevance at all to Catholicism, - in fact Jeanette's mother is highly critical of the ‘heresies’ of the Catholic church.) The author also explores the extent to which *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* follows the story of Jeanette's acceptance of her sexuality and emphasises that this is a semi- autobiographical novel.

The author then turns to the novel, *Written on the Body*. This book is remarkable for its attempt to deny the reader knowledge of the gender of the narrator. The plot is a relatively simple love story; the narrator is passionately in love with a married woman, sacrifices her love when her lover becomes ill and her doctor husband is the only one able to save her, retreats into isolation in the countryside where she writes a kind of prose poem exploring the nature of her love, and, at the book's end, the possibility of a reconciliation with her lover is suggested. The author considers a number of motifs in the novel, including clichés, loss/separation, and certainty/uncertainty.

The analysis of both novels is thoughtful and interesting, though discussion of the topic of the thesis itself is often elusive. The author herself acknowledges this when she writes, in considering the story of Winnet in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, “As for the link between this chapter and the theme of sexual identity, this connection is rather indirect” (p.20) and, when discussing the theme of certainty/uncertainty in *Written On The Body*, “The relation between the theme of sexual identity and this chapter is rather indirect and metaphorical”

(p.29). Her conclusion states that “The most essential motifs and aspects of sexual identity which appear in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* and *Written On The Body* have been analysed in this thesis” (p.30), but many of the aspects of the novels she analyses do not, in fact, relate directly to her chosen theme. The thesis rather focuses on motifs in the novels in general and the only real conclusion that can be drawn is that “each of the two analysed works deals with the motifs of sexual identity in a different way” (p.30).

I feel that the chosen theme was perhaps too broad and ambitious and was not thoroughly focused on in discussion of the novels, and wonder if the author could see ways in which Winterson's experimentation with narrative form could have provided a fruitful approach in discussing sexual identity in what are two very different works, a semi-autobiographical work and a lyrical prose poem. In *Written On The Body* Winterson's attempts to 'de-gender' the narrative seems to connect with concerns about the virtualisation of the real in the postmodern era when she writes of sexual identity, “If you like, you may live in a computer created world all day and all night. You will be able to try out a Virtual life with a Virtual lover. You can go into your Virtual house and do Virtual housework, add a baby or two, even find out if you'd rather be gay. Or single. Or straight. Why hesitate when you could simulate”. (p. 97) In this novel she also challenges scientific discourse, the historical 'naturaliser' of gender difference, as being simply another belief system – could this be connected to her use of the religious framework and Jeanette's narrative strategies (e.g. Winnet) in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*? Or maybe the author on reflection might choose two different novels to explore the theme of sexual identity (in the introduction the reason for her choice seems slightly random “I have chosen *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, not only because it is the author's first novel, but also because it is autobiographical” (p. 1).

Sadly, though in general the thesis is very well written, there are a number of typos peppering the work (e.g. p.4 gived, p.26 discourses, p.27 aquinted etc.) that could easily have been picked up by a spell check.

Despite feeling that the thesis is lacking in coherence and lacks focus on the central theme, I admire the author's wide reading and thoughtful and often insightful approach and I am happy to recommend it for a mark of 2/3.

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May 2012