The Limitless self: desire and transgression in Jeanette Winterson's "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit" and "Written on the Body"

This study analyzes the ways in which Jeanette Winterson's novels "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit" and "Written on the Body" address the exploration of sexual desire and the self. Through the use of characters that have lesbian and [homo-bi] sexual identities, or an ambiguous gender identity (as in "Written on the Body"), Winterson deconstructs narrative conventions and shows how storytelling need not be subordinated to the constraints of the grand narratives. She advocates alternative ways of understanding the sexual, emotional, and intellectual self, and persuasively challenges the constructed binary patterns of patriarchal Western thought.

To analyze how identity is constructed in Winterson's "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit" and "Written on the Body", I provide a close reading of the novels and examine both works by drawing on several theoretical frameworks including Julia Kristeva's definition of identity in terms of a 'subject-in-process', which contends that the self is never finished and complete but always in the process of becoming. Reference is also made in this work to Catherine Belsey's poststructuralist theories on Desire which are largely based on her interpretation of the work of Lacan and Derrida. Consideration of Judith Butler's Queer Theory is included to examine the ways in which gender roles, lacking any biological basis, are socially constructed and thus artificial and essentialist categories. I also make use of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's theories which posit the notion of the reader as co-writer of the text every time a reading is effected. And finally, I borrow from Jean-François Lyotard's theoretical work "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" (1979) in which the author proclaims the collapse of the 'grand récits' and the emergence of 'pétit récits' or 'language games'. I conclude my analysis of these two novels by considering Winterson's bold attempt to challenge stereotypes and disrupt hegemonic discourses on gender identity. In her subversion of the conventional limits of narrative, Winterson rejects oppressive definitions of subject identity, and views the self as an unstable entity that relies on the power of stories to construct subjectivity.
Oranges presents “the confusion and self-consciousness of the adolescent girl who must deal internally and externally with a maturing body and the self-consciousness of her own difference, causing her to engage in the struggle to retain her identity in spite of the hostile environment” (Preda: 228). In her search for her identity, Jeanette uses stories to explain her own choices. The title of the novel Oranges are not the only fruit, demands an explanation that can only be provided through analyzing the multiple occurrence of oranges in the story. When Jeanette is old enough to decide for herself, she circulates oranges as herself, within the novel. As she writes in an introduction to a later edition of the book, “Oranges is a threatening novel. religion, and repression, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit conducts a moving psychological study of a young British lesbian. Across the novel’s eight chapters, Winterson follows a fictionalized version of herself, Jeanette, as she grows up in a strict, working-class Protestant household; in plain but incisive prose, the author considers the teen girl's struggle to reconcile her sexuality with her faith, charts the highs and lows of her first romances with women, and paints a vivid portrait of an. Embedded within the main plot are hypnotic fairytale stories and Arthurian legends that illustrate key themes, from the emotional toll of patriarchy to the impossibility of returning home unchanged. The first-person novel has often been read as thinly veiled memoir “They are the only fruit, Jeanette,” she said, portentously. Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who was worried people would not realise she was a cutting-edge postmodernist. As if we could forget. I got into a lot of trouble at school because the heathen did not understand they were possessed by the Devil. I was also upset not to win a prize for my tableau of the second coming made from a wilting daffodil. Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who also chose to weave in the allegorical quests of Winnet Stonejar and Perceval with Jeanette's metaphysical journey, but no one was very interested in those bits. “She is possessed again,” my mother sobbed, burying me in a crate of oranges. My father didn't say a word. Perhaps he had died. Oranges was therefore read as an example of a new sexual/textual politics, expressed and explored through the vigorous and indeed vital “coming out” of the young heroine Jeanette. It was political because defiantly feminist, and radical because of the downright explicitness of the young girl's sexuality. Ideal of a perfect community: Jeanette is precisely one such exception to the norm, and writing the story of this “disorientated” subject will sketch a new trajectory for the self, not within her community but without it. But in fact, this chapter gives to hear a self-assertive metafictional voice which completely It seems Winterson's autobiographical character, Jeanette, could have offered the same reply: gender in Oranges comes across as an unattainable locus.