

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEANETTE WINTERSON

Born in Manchester to a seventeen-year-old factory worker and adopted by the Winterson family six months after her birth, Jeanette Winterson was raised by Pentecostal Evangelical Christian parents in Accrington, a manufacturing city in Northern England. Winterson was raised to be a missionary, but after coming out as a lesbian at the age of sixteen, she was forced to leave home, live in her car, and work odd jobs to put herself through college at Oxford University. Shortly after graduating, Winterson published her first book—the autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*—in 1985, at just twenty-five years old. The novel was an enormous success, winning the prestigious Whitbread Award for a First Novel, and was eventually adapted into a serial television program for the BBC—Winterson wrote the screenplay, and the program premiered in 1990 to even more buzz and acclaim. A prolific writer, Winterson is the author of over twenty-five books of fiction, nonfiction, and literature for children. She was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2006. She is married to the writer and psychoanalyst Susie Orbach, and teaches at the University of Manchester. She makes her home in the Cotswolds, just west of Oxford.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson charts the histories of both Manchester, the place of her birth, and Accrington, the stuck-in-time city where she grew up, in order to explain the historical context of both *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy*. She describes Manchester as a “raw,” working-class city, which became a “radical” hub due to the “uncontrollable reality” of harsh factory conditions and the “success and shames” that accompanied them. Religion was a hub and a refuge in the “raw” world of the factories, and the Pentecostal Church was the center of young Jeanette’s life, as it was the center of life for so much of her community—so much so that, for Jeanette’s family, church life subsumed almost everything else.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

According to Winterson and her reviewers alike, *Oranges* contains a greater levity and takes a much vaguer shape than what happened in her actual childhood. In her 2011 memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*—which Winterson describes as the “silent twin” to *Oranges*—Winterson, having gained some temporal and emotional distance from the events of her childhood, writes much more starkly and unforgivingly

about the physical and psychological abuse she endured at the hands of her mother and the officials at their family’s church. In the memoir, Winterson writes that she gave herself a friend—the character of Elsie Norris—because the lonely truth of her own childhood was too much to bear at the time she was writing *Oranges*. The texts interlock with one another, with the fanciful and inventive tales that pepper the narrative of *Oranges* serving as a balm against the cruelty of Jeanette’s actually childhood, which was finally revealed in *Why Be Happy*. Some other notable novels which feature an LGBTQ coming-of-age story include the graphic novel-slash-memoir *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown, and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily N. Danforth—this title also dealing directly with the control religions attempt to exert over their adherents’ sexualities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1985
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction; autobiographical fiction; coming-of-age story; LGBTQ fiction
- **Setting:** Accrington, Lancashire; Oxford; London
- **Climax:** After being discovered engaging in her second homosexual affair, the teenage Jeanette is kicked out of her family’s home, and the book’s narrative, propelled by the intense emotions surrounding Jeanette’s feelings of betrayal by her mother, splits and spins off into a fantastical story about a young girl named Winnet who seeks refuge in the hut of a duplicitous sorcerer.
- **Antagonist:** Mother; the “demon”
- **Point of View:** First person, with third-person “interludes”

EXTRA CREDIT

Stranger Than Fiction. In addition to using fictionalized versions of herself, her mother, and her childhood friends and teenage lovers in *Oranges*, Winterson has created versions of herself that have appeared in later novels. The orphan Silver, in 2004’s *Lighthousekeeping*, can be read as a Jeanette-figure, while her 1989 magical-realism novel *Sexing the Cherry*, set in 17th-century London, follows the metaphysical adventures of a domineering mother known as The Dog Woman and her adopted son Jordan.



PLOT SUMMARY

When Jeanette was a girl, she writes, she lived, like most people, with her mother and father. Her mother was combative, devout, and saw the world in black-and-white. Jeanette, who is adopted, was brought into her mother's home to join her in a "tag match against the rest of the world." Jeanette's childhood is full of rigorous daily prayer, and she spends most of her time assisting her mother, who is very involved with their Evangelist church.

When she is very young, Jeanette meets a gypsy woman who foretells that she will never marry and will never be able to be still. Jeanette is more curious about than haunted by the woman's prediction and begins wondering at an early age what her future will hold. Jeanette peppers the story of her childhood with fanciful interludes: tales of her own invention which mirror whatever she is going through at a certain point in her life. One story is of a beautiful woman who comes upon a hunchback in the woods. The hunchback wishes to die but has too much to complete—the woman offers to take on the hunchback's responsibilities, and the hunchback promptly dies. This story reflects Jeanette's servitude to her mother from an early age, and the ways in which all of Jeanette's mother's burdens became the young Jeanette's own. Jeanette is prevented from going to school, and instead her mother brings her to daily sermons at church, some of which are frightening. Pastor Finch, a traveling evangelist, warns Jeanette's congregation of the evils of demon possession, and how anyone—even the pure young Jeanette—could become a tool of the Devil. Jeanette learns to read from the Book of Deuteronomy, and though Jeanette longs to go to school, her mother insists it is a "breeding ground"—however, one day a letter from the government arrives, stating that if Jeanette does not begin attending school her mother will be sent to prison.

At school, Jeanette has a hard time fitting in. She knows that the way things are done in her church are not always right or correct—some years ago, as a young child, she went deaf due to a problem with her adenoids, but no one noticed, believing Jeanette to be in the throes of a divine episode—but in school, she cannot stop herself from spreading the gospel of evangelism every chance she gets, and crafting "disturbing" creative projects which terrify her classmates. Jeanette's mother tells Jeanette that she has been "called to be apart" from her schoolmates and will one day find peace in her true calling as a missionary.

Jeanette's mother's devotion to the church results in tense and even angry relations with the "heathens" next door and a blind allegiance to the church's many outreach endeavors. Jeanette's mother requires her to stand on an **orange** box for hours in the rain, passing out pamphlets for their church, and when Jeanette's pastor delivers a sermon on perfection, another

illustrative story springs to Jeanette's mind. She imagines the story of a prince who is so desperate to find the perfect wife that he beheads anyone who opposes his ideal that perfection can be achieved, ultimately beheading a kind, beautiful woman who he feels has deceived him into seeing her as flawless.

At fourteen, Jeanette begins to worry about men and women and the relationships between them. Jeanette fears that all men are beasts in disguise, and fears she will one day have to marry a beast, too. One day, while running errands downtown with her mother, Jeanette meets a beautiful young girl named Melanie. The two become close over the next several weeks as Jeanette repeatedly travels downtown to visit her new friend, and eventually Jeanette invites Melanie to church. Melanie is accepted into the fold, and the two begin spending more and more time together. Jeanette's mother, sensing something is wrong, warns Jeanette of the perils of falling in love, and tells her not to ever let anyone touch her "down there." That night, Jeanette and Melanie sleep together for the first time, and over the next few weeks they become absolutely inseparable. Jeanette worries that the two of them are engaged in "unnatural passion," but Melanie reassures her that their love is pure. Jeanette tells yet another story, this time of a calm and happy festival banquet in a high-walled castle being stormed by angry rebels.

In a brief, lyrical interlude, Jeanette considers the relationship between time, fact, fiction, and history. She writes that people are more likely to believe history as fact rather than stories or fiction or memories, even though history is what is most often rewritten to accommodate the mistakes, embarrassments, and pain of the past.

One morning, Jeanette comes down to the parlor to find a woman from church, Mrs. White, cleaning the parlor. Her mother is not home. Jeanette takes the dog for a walk, and as she walks through town reflects on her attempts to explain her relationship with Melanie to her mother after her mother found them sleeping in the same bed together, as well as an "Awful Occasion" from her past in which Jeanette's birth mother showed up to their house and tried to reclaim her. That night at Melanie's, Jeanette tells Melanie that she loves her, but Melanie does not say the words back. The following morning at church, there is an ambush. The pastor and Jeanette's mother reveal the girls' relationship in front of the entire congregation and call them up to the pulpit to confess. Melanie repents and is taken away to be prayed over, but Jeanette does not. A woman from the congregation, Miss Jewsbury, invites the devastated and shell-shocked Jeanette over for a cup of tea, and reveals that Jeanette's close friend, the elderly Elsie Norris (who had frequently allowed Jeanette and Melanie to stay together at her house) was the one who told Miss Jewsbury about the girls' relationship. Miss Jewsbury comforts Jeanette and slowly begins stroking her, and soon the two are making love, though Jeanette is full of self-loathing and disgust.

The next morning Jeanette sneaks home and finds the parlor full of church elders as well as the pastor. They pray over her for more than twelve hours, and at the end of the night, Jeanette still refuses to repent. The pastor orders her mother to lock Jeanette in the parlor without food for three days, and her mother follows his command. During her time in isolation Jeanette hallucinates an **orange demon**, who warns her that if she forsakes him she'll be destroyed by grief, though if she accepts him and keeps him around, her life will be difficult in a different way. The hungry, exhausted Jeanette decides to repent, but chooses to keep her demon, symbolically choosing to remain true to herself and to not deny her desires. Jeanette has Miss Jewsbury drive her to Melanie's family's house nearby to say farewell, and Jeanette and Melanie spend one final, tearful night together. When Jeanette returns home she is struck down with a fever, which her mother interprets as sin leaving Jeanette's body. Jeanette's mother burns all of the letters Jeanette and Melanie sent one another while Jeanette is convalescing, and Jeanette, feeling deeply betrayed, knows that her relationship with her mother is beyond repair.

By summertime, Jeanette is feeling like her old self again. She joins her church on a revival mission to a seaside town, and strikes up a friendship with a pretty girl from the church named Katy. Months later, at Christmastime, Jeanette and Katy are assisting Jeanette's mother with the Nativity play when Melanie walks back into church in the middle of it. That night, Melanie calls on Jeanette, and attempts to rekindle their friendship, but the traumatized Jeanette pushes her away. Melanie follows Jeanette all over town, and Jeanette cannot escape her feelings of shame and longing. Katy, sensing that something is wrong, invites Jeanette to spend the weekend camping in her backyard in her parents' caravan. Jeanette accepts, and the two make love on their first night together. As their sweet and reciprocal love affair unfolds, the girls spend time together at church and Bible study and take comfort in the spiritual dimension of their relationship. Melanie returns to town once more, a year later, to announce that she is getting married to an army man. When Melanie introduces her fiancé to the congregation, he leans into Jeanette and whispers that he "forgives" both Jeanette and Melanie for their transgression, and Jeanette spits in his face.

Jeanette's mother angrily throws Jeanette out of the house. Jeanette has finally been caught with Katy when the two attempted to spend a week together at their church's guest house in the town of Morecambe, and Jeanette, not wanting Katy to be forced through an exorcism the way she was, has taken the fall. In the wake of all that has transpired, Jeanette has decided to renounce the church and her dream of becoming a missionary. Jeanette then tells a story about Sir Perceval, the youngest Knight of the Round Table and King Arthur's favorite. Perceval sets off from Camelot in search of something, leaving the devastated Arthur behind and alone. In

church one day, Jeanette's mother and the pastor announce that women will no longer be allowed to preach or teach Bible study in their church—Jeanette's corruption, they believe, is the result of her trying to take on a "man's role" as a preacher and a religious educator, and they hope that if women are prevented from preaching and teaching, no one else will be corrupted by homosexuality. Meanwhile Sir Perceval, lost in the woods, dreams again and again of his King, but each time he dreams of reaching out to touch him he wakes with thorns in his hands or poison ivy in his face. The next morning, the pastor calls on Jeanette and explains his intent to subject her to yet another exorcism, but Jeanette refuses to undergo it, and announces her intent to leave the church. Her mother, incensed, casts her out of the house. On her last morning at home, Jeanette is amazed when she wakes up to find that it is just another ordinary morning, and not the chaotic Judgement Day she had imagined it would be.

Jeanette then tells the story of a young girl named **Winnet** who becomes lost traveling through a great wood. A sorcerer offers her food and shelter, and though Winnet is wary of him, she agrees to a bet—if he can guess her name, she will be his, and if he cannot, he must help her out of the woods. The sorcerer guesses Winnet's name and takes her back to his castle, where she quickly forgets her past life and comes to believe that she is the sorcerer's daughter, and has always lived in his castle. As Winnet makes friends with the villagers who live in the town surrounding the castle, she meets a strange boy and begins a friendship with him. At the annual harvest festival, she brings her new friend to meet her father, but the sorcerer, enraged that Winnet has come to love another, banishes the boy. Winnet begs her father to let her stay, but he tells her that if she wants to remain in the village she will not be allowed to live in the castle, and will have to work as a goatherd. One of the sorcerer's magic ravens urges Winnet to leave lest her life be "destroyed by grief" and her heart turn to stone. As Winnet prepares to leave the castle, the sorcerer creeps into her room disguised as a mouse and ties an invisible thread around her coat button.

Jeanette is working odd jobs in town, driving an ice cream van and helping out at a local funeral parlor. One day, making the rounds in her ice cream van, Jeanette passes Elsie's house and decides to stop in to visit her old friend. She finds that the parlor is full of people from church, and she learns that Elsie is dead. Jeanette begs to attend the funeral, but as an outcast, she is forbidden. At the funeral parlor, though, Jeanette's boss tells her that Elsie's funeral will be held there, and she will need to help him serve the food for the wake. Jeanette reluctantly agrees, knowing that if anyone from her church sees her, there will be chaos. Jeanette is able to lay food out surreptitiously and unrecognized in the beginning, but at the end when her boss calls her out to serve ice cream to the mourners, chaos indeed erupts, and her mother publicly disowns Jeanette.

Winnet, lost in the woods again, is taken in by a woman from a nearby village and brought back to the new town. She struggles to learn the language spoken there, and is continually told by the villagers of a magical, faraway town where buildings stretch to the sky. Winnet dreams of leaving the village, and begins building a boat that will take her far away. On the day she leaves, Winnet is full of fear, but knows she must set out on her own.

Jeanette has left her hometown and is living in a big city, but she feels her past has caught up with her. Her friends often ask when she last saw her mother, and if she ever thinks of going home again, and Jeanette admits that she thinks of home all the time. She cannot deny where she came from, and she decides to go home for the Christmas holidays. When she arrives home, small things have changed: her mother has acquired an electric organ and radio and the church's Morecambe guest house, Jeanette learns, has fallen into disrepute and disrepair. Her mother, however, treats her as if nothing has transpired between them, and Jeanette wonders if her mother has forgotten why she left, or if she ever even really left at all.

Sir Perceval, weary from his travels, stays the night in the castle of a warm and welcoming host who questions him about his journey. Perceval is embarrassed to admit that he left Camelot in search of something holy and perfect that he could keep all to himself, but he has been unable to find it and misses his home and his King very dearly. Feeling selfish and ashamed, Perceval goes to bed, and dreams that he is a spider hanging from a web. A passing raven cuts the thread with its beak, and Perceval-the-spider drops to the forest floor and scuttles away.

Jeanette stays with her parents through Christmas. More bad news arrives about the Morecambe guest house, and Jeanette realizes that her mother is struggling every day to keep her religious community together as it falls apart at the seams. Jeanette watches as her mother, having just come home from church, immediately sits down at her broadcast radio, frantically trying to connect with other Christians elsewhere in England.

sorcerers, all of which reflect the very real and complicated trials she faces as a young queer woman in a repressed environment, despite their fanciful characters and settings. Jeanette's selfless devotion to God and to her church is, she finds, unfortunately in direct competition with her burgeoning sexuality. Though Jeanette is an involved member of her church, preaching and teaching Bible study weekly, her desires are seen as "unnatural," and Jeanette begins to realize that the future she thought she wanted for herself—a future as a missionary and an evangelist—may not be possible. As Jeanette realizes that she is a lesbian, her church attempts to exorcise the **demon** that has taken hold of her—but during her exorcism, Jeanette realizes that to relinquish her demon will be to relinquish all that makes her who she is. As Jeanette becomes more self-secure and more driven by her own quest for love and for self-understanding, she questions the church more and more, eventually renouncing her desire to become a missionary and leaving the church rather than submit to another exorcism when her second lesbian relationship is discovered. Jeanette is cast out of her home and must fend for herself, and as her physical circumstances become more and more difficult and demanding, Jeanette retreats further and further into the world of fantasy. The stories she tells herself grow darker and darker as Jeanette reckons with the tensions between who she thought she was and who she has come to be; what her responsibility to the woman who raised her, challenged her, and ultimately sought to destroy her is even after she has left home; and whether her own search for happiness and fulfillment is, at its core, selfish. At the end of the novel, as Jeanette watches her mother struggling desperately to hold their religious community together, Jeanette sees her greatest adversary in a new light, and contemplates the relationship between history and fiction, past and present, and the endless spiritual births, deaths, and rebirths of the self that are part of every woman's coming-of-age.

Mother – Jeanette's mother (unnamed in the book) is an intimidating, God-fearing woman whose domineering attitude, stringent adherence to evangelism, and desire for control eventually ruin her relationship with her adopted daughter, Jeanette. Despite the fact that Jeanette has discovered her adoption papers, her mother claims that Jeanette was "hers from the Lord." Jeanette's mother is deeply involved in church life, and she seeks to immerse her daughter in the world of religion as well. Jeanette's mother keeps her daughter from going to school until legal action is threatened, and from an early age begins training Jeanette for a life as a missionary. Jeanette's mother is often so wrapped up in her religious community that she is detached from her young daughter (and frequently gives her **oranges** to eat in order to distract her during moments of intense emotion or pain, rather than helping her to work through her emotions or problems). Religion, and the keeping of an insular and strict religious community, is a means by which Jeanette's mother can exert control over her



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jeanette – The protagonist of the novel, Jeanette is a fictionalized version of the writer Jeanette Winterson. Headstrong, self-sufficient, devoted to God, and a natural story-teller, Jeanette grows from a young girl to a young woman over the course of the novel, and as the story progresses she wrestles with her homosexuality, her uncertainties about evangelism, and her relationship with her domineering adoptive mother. As Jeanette grows up, she struggles to make sense of the complicated and rule-ridden world around her through stories of princes, knights, and

daughter, and keep Jeanette from all the evils and perils of the world. Jeanette's mother finds herself again and again torn between her desire to "save" her daughter and what it would actually mean to save her daughter; when Jeanette is caught in a lesbian affair and subjected to a cruel exorcism, her mother goes along with the pastor's orders to keep Jeanette isolated without food for days on end, and burns all of Jeanette's letters exchanged with her lover, Melanie, along with many of Jeanette's precious things. Later, when Jeanette is caught in yet another affair, Jeanette's mother stands alongside their church's pastor when he announces his plan to strip women of their right to preach and teach within the church, using her own daughter as an example of the corruptive forces of women doing "men's work." When Jeanette refuses to undergo another exorcism, Jeanette's mother casts her out of the house, seemingly not caring where she goes and telling her daughter that "the Devil takes care of his own." When Jeanette returns home for the Christmas holiday after an indeterminate but seemingly long time away, Jeanette's mother, peculiarly, acts as if nothing is wrong—she is distracted by the woes that have befallen the church, and for the first time her intense desire for connection and community is transparently revealed as, perhaps, the reason for all of her cruelty and strictness.

Melanie – A local girl whom Jeanette finds attractive, and soon recruits to join her church. Melanie and Jeanette study the Bible together several times a week, and soon find themselves tumbling into a sexual relationship. Jeanette and Melanie question whether what they're doing falls under the umbrella of "Unnatural Passion," which they have been warned against in church, but decide that their love is so pure and makes both of them so happy that it can't possibly be wrong. Eventually, the girls are found out, and are called before their congregation to be publicly shamed. Jeanette, who is more in love with Melanie than Melanie is with her, refuses to repent and admit she has sinned, but Melanie repents right away. Melanie, who is a bit older, is sent to live with relatives for a time, and then goes off to university. When she returns she tries to resume a friendship with Jeanette, but Jeanette—who was heavily punished and subjected to a kind of "exorcism" when she refused to repent for her affair with Melanie—is too traumatized to accept. Eventually, Melanie returns home one final time to announce she has gotten engaged to an Army man, and Jeanette is disappointed to see that Melanie has resigned herself to a relationship that has rendered her "serene to the point of being bovine." Melanie represents themes of women and womanhood, transgression and forgiveness, and religion and control—she is one of the many women in Jeanette's world who helps her to become who she is, though their relationship was ultimately fraught, tumultuous, and even traumatizing for Jeanette.

Elsie Norris – An elderly member of Jeanette's church and Jeanette's first—and only—childhood friend. It is Elsie who

visits Jeanette in the hospital most frequently when Jeanette is recovering from surgery on her adenoids, and Elsie who encourages Jeanette to make creative religious-themed projects for school despite her classmates' and teachers' disdain for them. Elsie also allows Jeanette and Melanie to sleep over at her house. It's revealed that Elsie knew what the two of them were up to the entire time, but wanted to shelter them from harm. Elsie does eventually reveal the truth of Melanie and Jeanette's affair to Miss Jewsbury, and as Jeanette grows older Elsie grows increasingly sick and is frequently absent from church services and events. When Jeanette is called out as a sinner in front of her congregation, though, Elsie stands up for her, and calls on the church to stop attacking Jeanette and do something to actually help her come to terms with who she is. It is the last time Jeanette ever sees Elsie, as she is soon after expelled from the church and Elsie, unbeknownst to Jeanette, passes away. Elsie's death is a major moment of reckoning for Jeanette, who, as a result of being cast out of the church, is not even made aware of her friend's death. When Jeanette, who works at the local funeral parlor, serves ice cream to church congregants during Elsie's wake, chaos breaks out as members of the community balk at Jeanette's presence among them, though it was Jeanette who was perhaps closest to Elsie out of all of them. Elsie's arc ties in most directly with themes of women and womanhood, as she is one of Jeanette's first models of kindness and piety without agenda, meanness, or desire for control.

Miss Jewsbury – A churchgoing woman and a closeted lesbian. When Jeanette is very young and goes deaf due to a problem with her adenoids, no one notices Jeanette's sudden lack of hearing, and assumes her withdrawn attitude and ignorance of her surroundings means she is having a divine episode. Jeanette eventually confesses to Miss Jewsbury that she cannot hear a thing, and Miss Jewsbury takes Jeanette to the hospital and helps her to get medical help. Years later, when Jeanette and Melanie's affair is revealed in front of the entire congregation, Miss Jewsbury warns Jeanette of what is to come and offers her support in the aftermath. When Jeanette goes to Miss Jewsbury's house after having been publicly shamed at church, she and Miss Jewsbury make love, and the following day Miss Jewsbury drives Jeanette to the house where Melanie is staying so that Jeanette can say goodbye. Shortly after that, Miss Jewsbury leaves town for good, returning only for Elsie's funeral, during which she briefly reconnects with Jeanette and invites her for a visit—which Jeanette, older and wiser, declines.

Katy – A girl from church with whom Jeanette has a love affair one year after her relationship with Melanie ends. Katy and Jeanette have a sexual relationship for several years before they are found out, at which point Jeanette decides to take all the blame so that Katy is not subjected, like Jeanette was, to a torturous exorcism. Jeanette describes Katy, who is nearly as

spiritual and devoted as she herself is, as her “most uncomplicated love affair,” and Katy’s relationship to Jeanette ties in with the novel’s themes of women and womanhood, as well as religion and control.

Ida – A woman who, with her lesbian partner, runs the town paper shop. She and her partner are kind to Jeanette, and offer her sweets, but when Jeanette tells her mother that the women have invited her to the seaside for the weekend, Jeanette’s mother forbids her from returning to the shop. As Jeanette grows older, she and her mother run into Ida quite frequently, and Jeanette’s mother is just barely tolerant of Ida’s presence.

Mrs. Vole – The head of Jeanette’s school. Together with Mrs. Virtue, she corners Jeanette and demands that Jeanette explain why she is terrorizing her classmates with her morbid religious sayings and bizarre understanding of the world. Jeanette attempts to explain to Mrs. Vole that she simply has no other way of seeing things, as her mother has taught her everything she knows based on the Old Testament. Mrs. Vole and Mrs. Virtue essentially throw their hands up in the end, declining to punish Jeanette for her oddities but never helping her to overcome them, to learn as quickly as the other children, or to make friends and fit in.

Mrs. Arkwright – A woman who runs a pest control shop in Factory Bottom, an impoverished neighborhood in Jeanette’s hometown. At the end of the novel, unable to revive her floundering business, Mrs. Arkwright tells Jeanette of her plan to burn her shop down for insurance money, symbolically mirroring Jeanette’s own “burning” of her previous life to the ground.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Pastor Spratt – One of the pastors at Jeanette’s church.

Pastor Finch – A traveling pastor who frequently preaches at Jeanette’s church.

Alice – A friend of Jeanette’s mother.

May – One of Jeanette’s mother’s closest friends.

Doreen – A neighborhood woman who fears that her daughter is having an inappropriate relationship with a female friend.

Mrs. Virtue – A teacher of Jeanette’s school who repeatedly criticizes her creative work in class, which is often of a “disturbing” religious bent.

Mrs. White – A pious woman from Jeanette and her mother’s church.

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



STORYTELLING, FANTASY, AND INVENTION

Jeanette Winterson the writer and Jeanette the character are both keenly aware that life can often be stranger than fiction. In writing an autobiographical novel based heavily on her own experiences growing up as an adopted child in an evangelical household in a small, working-class English town, Jeanette Winterson the author blurs the line between the real and the unreal, the recorded and the invented, to communicate the emotional experience of her childhood. Though most of the novel closely tracks the “realism” of her own childhood, several interludes—fairy tales, parables, and stories of King Arthur’s knights—explore the cruelty of Jeanette’s circumstances through her escapist fantasies of knights, sorcerers, and princesses. As the narrative unfolds, Winterson uses these fantastical tales to impose a narrative on her childhood, imbue it with morals and meaning, and, in doing so, make her horrible experiences into something she could survive.

Jeanette (the writer and the character) seeks solace from her traumatic childhood in invented tales of fantasy and adventure, which shows the importance of storytelling to everyday life. Each time the narrative splits off into these flights of fancy, there is a direct or indirect parallel between what is happening in Jeanette’s “real” life and what is happening in her fantasy world, showing that Jeanette makes sense of her life through stories. For example, when Jeanette’s pastor speaks menacingly of perfection and flawlessness during a sermon, the narrative splits from the main action and bounds off into a story about a prince who sought the perfect bride—unable to find her after years of searching and meditating on the nature of perfection, the prince beheads every woman who does not meet his standards of flawlessness. This tale mirrors the pressures the young and faithful Jeanette felt to be a flawless and unquestioning member of her church, despite her burgeoning homosexual desires and escalating conflicts with her mother.

Likewise, the story of **Winnet**, who leaves home and seeks refuge in the hut of an evil sorcerer who attempts to claim her forever by guessing her name, comes right after Jeanette’s mother has ordered her to leave home after learning about Jeanette’s second lesbian relationship. Adopted and “named” by the sorcerer, Winnet’s experience mirrors Jeanette’s adoption by her mother as an infant. When Winnet experiences love and desire for the first time, the sorcerer insists that Winnet has been “spoiled” and casts her out. The sorcerer tells Winnet that if she stays, she will find herself “destroyed by grief,” but if she leaves, she will have to use the powers she has



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

learned under his apprenticeship “differently.” Just as Jeanette knew that to stay in her mother’s home against her mother’s wishes would be to subject herself to more pain and abuse, she was fearful of leaving and being unable to make her way in the world, practically or emotionally.

It is purposefully unclear whether the stories woven throughout the text are the child Jeanette’s fantasies or the elder author-Jeanette’s reflections on the lessons learned and unlearned from her own past. This ambiguity speaks to the tension between past and present, and the blurred line between fiction and nonfiction. Because the novel is so closely tied to Jeanette’s own life, it is both invented and reported, but Winterson seems to want to muddy the boundaries between things she has remembered from her past and things she has created in order to dramatize it. “I wrote a story I could survive,” Jeanette Winterson has said of the process of writing *Oranges* in her early twenties. In combining the reality of her abusive childhood with fantasy, therefore, Winterson allowed herself to imagine a version of her life that was not as painful as her reality. The novel then saved her in two ways: it gave her that imagined reality, and the success it garnered allowed her to claim her identity as an artist, to profit off her talent, and to escape mentally and physically from the despair of her childhood.



RELIGION AND CONTROL

Jeanette and her mother’s lives revolve around a religion that is evangelical, strict, and often fatalistic. While the church offers solace, community, and even fun to the young Jeanette, as she grows older and discovers her sexuality, the church becomes a place of hate, control, and fear. Even when Jeanette breaks free of the church, she cannot leave behind these vestiges of her religious upbringing, which prevent her from feeling at peace with who she is. In giving the fictional version of herself this ending, Winterson argues that the total control of her religious upbringing can never be fully escaped. She will always bear its scars, and the pain she endured will never leave her.

When Jeanette is a very young child, religion is an important part of her life, and even a joyful one. Despite her mother’s strict beliefs and disdain for “heathens” like the family that lives next door, Jeanette feels drawn to rather than repelled by the fire-and-brimstone rhetoric of her family’s church. Religion makes her feel as if she has power, agency, and purpose—all needed things in a household where she is often treated badly by the people who are supposed to love her most. However, religion is also the means by which Jeanette’s mother controls her daughter. Throughout Jeanette’s childhood, her mother tells her that the Devil himself is everywhere and the world is full of sin. Jeanette’s mother dreams that Jeanette will grow up to be a missionary, and she does not even let Jeanette go to school until the government threatens her with legal

action—she sees school as a “breeding ground” for sin, and wants to keep Jeanette’s education strictly religious for as long as possible.

The tension between religion controlling and empowering Jeanette comes to a head when she falls in love with Melanie, a high schooler in her church. Jeanette and Melanie have both been warned about the dangers of “unnatural passions,” but when they begin their love affair, neither feels that what they are doing is wrong. When the girls are eventually discovered, they are condemned as sinners, and Jeanette is subjected to an “exorcism”—during which her mother keeps her sequestered in the parlor of her house without food or water for days. During this time, Jeanette has a hallucinatory vision of an **orange demon**, who tells Jeanette that everyone has a demon, and her demon has emerged to help her decide what it is that she wants. If Jeanette “keeps” her demon, the demon says, she’ll have a difficult life—but a life that might be worth all that difficulty. Jeanette resolves to keep her demon around but pretend to repent. When the demon reappears days later, it tells Jeanette that there is “no going back” from her decision.

The demon represents another kind of religious control. The demon is born of and yet directly opposed to the Evangelical values Jeanette was raised with, and when she relinquishes herself to it she shirks the religious control of her mother’s religion but enters under the control of all the demon represents—darkness, abandon, and opposition. Where Jeanette’s life up until this point has been controlled by the fire-and-brimstone, end-of-days rhetoric of her church, she now realizes she has the option to relinquish control to a different “master.” Keeping the demon around will allow Jeanette to live her truth, but also to forever be enslaved to the concept of control—someone, or something, will always have its hooks in her. This is the effect of Jeanette’s upbringing—even in opting to be “free,” she will always be beholden to the guilt, shame, and longing which are the products of her childhood indoctrination.

The hold that Jeanette’s religious upbringing continues to have on her is also apparent in how the novel is organized: the chapters are named for the first eight books of the Bible, beginning with Genesis and ending with Ruth. In this way, religion exerts a formal control over the novel as well as a thematic one. Going even deeper, this organization of the book reflects the older Jeanette’s allegiance to the forms and constraints of religion, even within the bounds of her safe space—storytelling—and even once she is presumably separated a little more physically and emotionally from the events of her childhood. Jeanette has been freed from the emotional control religion once had on her, but pays homage to it—or reveals how bound she still is to its impact on her relationship to storytelling and the narrative lens through which she views the world—in choosing to structure the novel in a way that reflects the structure and themes of several books of the Bible.

At the end of the novel, Jeanette is right where she started—in her parents' kitchen, watching her mother listen to religious broadcasts on the radio. Jeanette fears she will never fully escape her mother's control, describing her mother's influence on her through the parallel fantasy story of **Winnet** and the sorcerer—when Winnet left her adoptive father, he crept into her room disguised as a mouse and tied an invisible thread around the button of her coat, so that he would always be able to tug her back to him. Though Jeanette is living on her own, having escaped her hometown and her stifling religious community, Jeanette feels as if there is a thread around her coat button which her mother will forever be able to tug on whenever she pleases.



WOMEN AND WOMANHOOD

The world of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is ruled by—and mostly populated by—women. With the exception of Jeanette's pastor and her father (who is only mentioned in passing), the characters in the “real” story of the novel are overwhelmingly women. In addition, the fantastical stories that occupy Jeanette's dream life depict men as being somewhat flat: evil sorcerers, weary knights, or judgmental princes. In populating the story of her childhood primarily with women, Jeanette Winterson argues that womanhood is an endless becoming. She shows women at all stages of their lives grappling with emotional and intellectual quandaries, and struggling to live in a way that they feel is righteous, godly, or simply most convenient. In this way, Winterson investigates the many stages of womanhood and argues for a more complicated understanding of what it means to be a woman in the world.

Jeanette's adoptive mother is the most important figure in her life for the entirety of the novel, and she is Jeanette's initial model for what it means to be a woman: polite, demure, godly, and self-denying. Jeanette's mother instills these values in her so deeply that when Jeanette loses her hearing due to a problem with her adenoids, Jeanette is so self-denying and religious that she is unable to recognize what is wrong with her or find the courage to ask herself. Believing instead that she is having a divine experience, Jeanette walks around in silence for weeks before finally confiding in a neighbor that she has gone completely deaf.

Jeanette's mother also speaks frankly to her about the values of propriety and prudishness. She tells Jeanette a long story about an infatuation she once had with a young man in France. Feeling a “fizzy” feeling inside which she believed was love, she engaged in premarital sex; at a visit to the doctor a few days later, she was told she had a stomach ulcer, which explained the “fizzy” feeling and left her realizing she had risked everything for carnal pleasure. She wants Jeanette never to let anyone touch her “down there,” and refuses to discuss sex or love again. Jeanette, dissatisfied with this vision of womanhood that her

mother presents, defies her mother's wishes—and the status quo—by embarking on relationships with two different girls, attempting to figure out for herself what womanhood can be.

Jeanette's relationship with Melanie—both girls' first—is marked by sweetness and naiveté. Melanie is one of Jeanette's “recruits” to the church, and as such their relationship revolves mostly around church life. They see the members of their church as their “family,” and are each devastated when their relationship is discovered and they are publicly labelled as sinners and deviants. From this experience, Jeanette learns that her attempts to follow her “unnatural passions” will be met with anger and even violence, but nonetheless she elects to keep the “demon” of her rebellion around, even while knowing that it is the more difficult choice.

Jeanette's relationship with Katy, one year later, ends similarly—the two are discovered, and Jeanette is deemed sinful, deranged, and is even considered to be possessed. In the wake of this discovery, there is a change at church, which Jeanette believes her mother and the pastor have conspired to bring on: women are no longer allowed to preach or testify in church. Jeanette—who drew strength and happiness from preaching, even in the wake of her exorcism and all the pain it brought her, feels that the “devil [has] attacked [her] at [her] weakest point: [her] inability to realize the limitations of [her] sex.”

In wanting more out of womanhood than missionary work, marriage, or the small-town monotony she has witnessed all her life, Jeanette has opened herself up to the deep hurt and disappointment of realizing that there are “limitations” on what women can be or do—at least in her church and in her town. When Jeanette's mother kicks her out of the house it is a terrifying time, but also a necessary and in a way blessed one, as it enables Jeanette to strike out on her own and discover for herself what womanhood can be. By populating her novel overwhelmingly with female characters, Winterson makes a statement about women's visibility, women's complexity, and women as they relate to one another and negotiate male spaces. The women in *Oranges* are rarely kind, or even nice; they are duplicitous, fearful, headstrong, self-assured, selfless, and self-denying. Jeanette's interrogation of her own womanhood as she grows older is informed by the women she has known since childhood, and in the novel she maps the ways in which the women she has known throughout her life have made her into the woman she herself has become.



TRANSGRESSION AND FORGIVENESS

At the heart of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* lies the question of what constitutes a transgression against someone you love, and what it means to forgive someone who has transgressed against you. This question comes up again and again as the conflict between Jeanette and her willful (and often abusive) mother escalates.

As their sins and slights against one another mount, the prospect of true forgiveness becomes more and more uncertain, and yet the book ends on a note that seems to forecast a truce, although it is an uneasy one. Instead of positing a solution whereby two conflicted people become at peace, Jeanette Winterson suggests that the back-and-forth of transgression and forgiveness is a lifelong struggle in which there is no winning and no ultimate bestowal of righteousness. As she explains in one of the parables that thread through the novel, “no emotion is the final one.”

At the novel’s end, Jeanette—having endured shame, ridicule, and cruelty at her mother’s hands for years—has left home and moved to a new city in order to escape. However, she has found that when one carries demons, the demons travel along, too—in other words, wherever you go, your past is with you. Unable to answer her new friends’ questions about whether she misses her mother, what would have become of her if she had stayed in her hometown, and whether she’ll ever go back, Jeanette boards a train home for the Christmas holiday. Despite the anger and vitriol which marked her and her mother’s relationship after the discovery of Jeanette’s affair with Katy, Jeanette arrives home to find things at her house relatively calm.

As Jeanette wanders town running errands for her mother, she thinks of how she longs for the comfort of a relationship with God, but also knows that she wants more. She longs for a love with someone who will “destroy and be destroyed by [her],” signaling her desire for the push-and-pull dynamic of forgiveness and transgression established in her youth by her mother and her church. That night, after dinner with her mother, she considers how she longs to “go to bed and wake up with the past intact.” She feels as if she has “run in a great circle and met [her]self again on the starting line.” In having reached a point with her mother at which forgiveness is possible, she wonders when the other shoe will drop, knowing that a state of total forgiveness or total betrayal is impossible—in Jeanette’s world, the two go hand in hand, and the ground beneath her is constantly shifting to reflect the infinite cycle of transgression and forgiveness.

The ever-changing tides of betrayal, transgression, forgiveness, and moving forward that have rocked the boat of Jeanette’s life leave her exhausted, confused, and pulled between two poles—being true to herself at the cost of being outcast and shunned, and forever tempted by the renewing force of forgiveness at the cost of her individuality and her personal truth. No feeling is the final one, though: no transgression is insurmountable, and no forgiveness is ever eternal. Jeanette ends the novel on a bittersweet note, as she is—for the moment—in her mother’s good graces, but she is simultaneously aware of the fact that the pendulum will inevitably and terribly swing back the other way.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE DEMON

When Jeanette is caught having an affair with Melanie, another young girl from church, both of them are publicly shamed in front of their entire congregation. Jeanette is then subjected to an exorcism when she refuses to repent—her pastor advises her mother to lock her in the parlor for three days without food, and during this time, Jeanette reckons with what she has done and why it is considered so evil and bad. Knowing that demons get in when there is a weakness, Jeanette wonders how such a pure thing as love could create a demon. As if in response to her wonderings, an orange demon appears in front of her, and tells her that everyone has a demon—keeping one around and acknowledging its presence makes life more difficult, but will perhaps make Jeanette’s life in particular more enjoyable. The demon then disappears. It reappears every once in a while to Jeanette, ensconced in an orange or in the corner of her bedroom, to remind her of the choice she has made to keep it around—to be true to herself will be challenging, but she cannot deny her nature and the truth of her identity. The demon symbolizes Jeanette’s wary self-acceptance, and her inability to repress who she truly is. It is significant, too, that the demon is orange—the color of comfort, for Jeanette, and a reminder of the ever-present gulf between the care she has always deserved and the care she has received. **Oranges** were her mother’s paltry way of comforting her—now the orange demon has stepped in to offer a new kind of comfort, which is not warm and fuzzy either, but which at least allows Jeanette to accept herself, even tentatively, and move forward with her life.



ORANGES

As a child, Jeanette’s mother frequently comforts and plies Jeanette with the sweet treat of an orange. In moments of sickness and sadness, Jeanette’s mother roots through her purse or goes to the cupboard to retrieve an orange, which Jeanette peels and eats with focus and delight. Jeanette’s mother, though physically present and overbearing, is emotionally absent and unequipped. Rather than comforting her daughter with words or actions, Jeanette’s mother simply hands her an orange, and oranges come to symbolize the inadequacy of Jeanette’s mother’s mothering, and the inadequacy of Jeanette’s emotional life in general.

When Jeanette is in the hospital, after having had everyone around her ignore her deafness (brought on by adenoid trouble but believed to be a divine experience), her mother offers her

oranges to pacify her while she lies in her hospital bed, afraid and alone. When Jeanette is made to stand on a street corner in the rain, testifying and handing out church pamphlets, her mother gives her an orange crate to stand on. When Jeanette is sick with fever after her exorcism, her mother, rather than comforting her at a time of deep trauma and pain, offers her an orange, in which Jeanette sees the **orange demon**. After being caught having a second affair with a girl, Jeanette, again approached by her mother and her pastor and begged to repent, hallucinates oranges dropping onto her windowsill. In this moment of deep pain and isolation, Jeanette is not offered any comfort—and this time, her mother does not even offer her an orange. Jeanette’s psyche, though, associating oranges with comfort, procures them for her, and Jeanette even offers her mother and her pastor, who are standing over her bed, an orange—perhaps to comfort them, or perhaps to throw in their faces the inadequacy of their “help.”



WINNET

After Jeanette is discovered having an affair with a second friend, a girl named Katy, her mother tells her she must leave the house—she is not welcome anymore in her childhood home. At this moment in the narrative, the story splits off into the tale of Winnet—a young girl who, wandering the forest, encounters a sorcerer who offers to adopt her in exchange for tremendous powers. After years in the sorcerer’s care, Winnet betrays him by falling in love, and the sorcerer tells Winnet she must either leave, or stay but be banished to a lifetime of caring for the village goats. A raven appears to Winnet and tells her that her life will be full of grief if she stays. While Winnet wonders what to do, the sorcerer—disguised as a mouse—sneaks into Winnet’s room and ties a thread around her coat button, which he can use at any time to tug her back to him.

The story of Winnet is a parable that symbolizes the story of Jeanette’s life. Winnet and Jeanette even rhyme. Winnet was adopted, just as Jeanette was, by someone who purportedly could give her powers—in Winnet’s case, magic, and in Jeanette’s case, the “power” of evangelism and salvation. When Jeanette and Winnet betrayed their “masters” they were cast out, but the thread tied around Winnet’s coat button symbolizes Jeanette’s mother’s ability to tug her back to her past at any moment.

1. Genesis Quotes

☞ Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn’t matter what. She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies. Enemies were: The Devil (in his many forms), Next Door, Sex (in its many forms), Slugs. Friends were: God, Our dog, Auntie Madge, The Novels of Charlotte Brontë, Slug Pellets, and me, at first. I had been brought in to join her in a tag match against the Rest of the World.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with a quotation that sets up the world in which the young Jeanette is living. She says she is “like most people,” but just within the space of these short opening lines her family is revealed to be exceptional—and odd—in several ways. Jeanette’s father is a fan of wrestling, but her mother is a wrestler who will take down anything in her path. Her judgement is swift and unforgiving, and she sees the world in black and white. Because this is a book partly about the ways women learn from and lean on one another, it’s safe to gather from this quotation that Jeanette’s mother’s harsh worldview is deeply ingrained in the young Jeanette. As Jeanette lists the things her mother likes and does not like, a portrait of a simple, strict, and fearful woman emerges. In the final line of the opening paragraph, Jeanette (who is adopted) reveals that she was brought in to become her mother’s friend, and to stand beside her against all the things she hated and feared. This is a great burden for a young child to bear, and as the novel unfolds, Jeanette will illustrate the ways in which her service to and love for her mother gradually become more and more complicated, as her mother adheres to the strict, essentialist worldview espoused in this passage while Jeanette, a worthy opponent, challenges all that her mother believes.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove edition of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* published in 1985.

●● The old woman got hold of my hand. She looked at my palm and laughed a bit. “You’ll never marry,” she said, “not you, and you’ll never be still.” She told me to run home fast. I ran and ran, trying to understand what she meant. I hadn’t thought about getting married anyway. There were two women I knew who didn’t have husbands at all. They ran the paper shop and sometimes they gave me a banana bar with my comic. I liked them a lot... [Once] I heard [my mother] telling Mrs. White about [them]. She said they dealt in unnatural passions. I thought she meant they put chemicals in their sweets.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mrs. White, Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis


As a young girl, Jeanette has an encounter at the market with a Romani (“gypsy”) woman who foretells that Jeanette will never be still and will never marry. Jeanette is frightened by the woman’s words, and too young to really understand what they mean—though the words will echo through her formative years. The young Jeanette is uninterested in adult affairs such as marriage, and is naïve to boot: she knows there are two unmarried women who run a paper shop together, and while everyone in town can see clearly that the women are a lesbian couple, Jeanette has a hard time understanding that that’s even an option. When her mother speaks of the women’s “unnatural passions,” Jeanette, through a comic stretch of the imagination, wonders whether the women are tainting the goods they peddle. As a result of her mother’s unflinching worldview, Jeanette is only able to see certain things about the world around her, and is blind to anything outside of what is acceptable within her mother’s house.

2. Exodus Quotes

●● “Dear Jeanette,” [my mother wrote], “there’s nothing wrong, you’re just a bit deaf. Why didn’t you tell me? I’m going home to get your pyjamas.” What was she doing? Why was she leaving me here? I started to cry. My mother looked horrified and rooting around in her handbag she gave me an orange. I peeled it to comfort myself, and seeing me a little calmer, everyone glanced at one another and went away.

Related Characters: Jeanette, Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25


Explanation and Analysis

When the young Jeanette suddenly loses her hearing, she believes that she is in the middle of a divine episode. Unable to hear the world around her, she retreats into herself and tells no one about the fact that she has gone deaf. When she finally tells a woman from church, Miss Jewsbury, she’s taken to the hospital, where doctors find that she needs to have her adenoids operated on. Jeanette’s mother, unable to ever truly console her, puts the blame on Jeanette for not having spoken up about her deafness, and then leaves her alone at the hospital. Before going she offers Jeanette an orange—a major recurring symbol throughout the novel, which represents Jeanette’s mother’s inability to understand or comfort her child. Jeanette’s mother often supplies her with oranges in dire moments, and the oranges function as a stand-in for the emotional support she cannot give her daughter.

●● My mother came to see me quite a lot in the end, but it was the busy season at church. They were planning the Christmas campaign. When she couldn’t come herself she sent my father, usually with a letter and a couple of oranges. “The only fruit,” she always said. I filled my little bucket with peel and the nurses emptied it with an ill grace. I hid the peel under my pillow and the nurses scolded and sighed.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette’s stay in the hospital continues, oranges continue to serve as a surrogate parent and one of the only sources of true comfort Jeanette is able to find. Her mother is more preoccupied with church life than with her daughter, and her father is only a conduit for the small comforts her mother sends—he offers Jeanette no tangible or even visible emotional support. Jeanette’s orange

obsession puzzles and upsets her nurses, but they seem to recognize that Jeanette is more or less on her own at an early age and begrudgingly allow her to continue her ritual peeling and eating of oranges.

“Jeanette, we think you may be having problems at school. Do you want to tell us about them?”

“I’m all right.” I shuffled defensively.

“You do seem rather pre-occupied, shall we say, with God. Your sampler, for instance, had a very disturbing motif. And why did you choose to write about hoopoes and rock badgers in your animal book, and in one case, I believe, shrimps?”



“My mother taught me to read,” I told them.

“Your reading skills are quite unusual, but you haven’t answered my question.”

How could I?

My mother had taught me to read from the Book of Deuteronomy because it is full of animals (mostly unclean). Whenever we read “Thou shall not eat any beast that does not chew the cut or part of the hoof” she drew all the creatures mentioned. Horses, bunnies, and little ducks were vague fabulous things, but I knew all about pelicans, rock badgers, sloths and bats. This tendency towards the exotic has brought me many problems.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mrs. Vole

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette enters school—a “Breeding Ground,” according to her mother, for sin, vice, and miseducation—she finds that the education her mother has given her differentiates her from her classmates and singles her out as odd. When her teachers confront her about her preoccupation with religion and ask her to tell them why she thinks and writes the way she does. Jeanette is unable to answer them, unable to let them into the insular world her mother has created for her, and the spotty, hyper-specific knowledge Jeanette has of the world around her. Jeanette’s whole life, and her understanding of all things, has been completely calibrated by her mother’s religious life, and she is unable to communicate the “problems” this has created for her even to those who are in a position to help her.

When the children of Israel left Egypt, they were guided by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. For them this did not seem to be a problem. For me, it was an enormous problem, perplexing and impossible. I didn’t understand the ground rules. The daily world was a world of Strange Notions. I comforted myself as best I could by always rearranging their version of the facts. One day, I learned that Tetrahedron is a mathematical shape. But Tetrahedron is an emperor... The emperor Tetrahedron lived in a palace made from elastic bands. The emperor was beloved by all. Many brought gifts; [fine] material and stories of love and folly. One day, a woman brought the emperor a revolving circus operated by midgets. The midgets acted all of the tragedies and many of the comedies. They acted them all at once, and it was fortunate that Tetrahedron had so many faces, otherwise he might have died of fatigue. They acted them all at once, and the emperor, walking round his theatre, could see them all at once. Round and round he walked, and so learned a very valuable thing: that no emotion is the final one.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jeanette, unable to solve a “perplexing and impossible” religious problem in her head, turns to storytelling in order to rearrange the “facts” of the Biblical story in front of her so that they’ll make sense. Jeanette, for all her religious education, is unable to understand the “ground rules” of the world that made such mystical, impossible things happen, let alone the ground rules of the strange and ever-changing emotional landscape of her life with her mother. When she learns about a strange, multifaceted shape, Jeanette spins off into a tale about a many-faced emperor who is able to witness and comprehend several things at once, and finally comes to understand that “no emotion is the final one,” a lesson Jeanette is still struggling, as a young and emotionally neglected child, to understand.

3. Leviticus Quotes

☝☝ The conference was booked for a Saturday, and there was always a market on Saturdays, so my mother gave me an orange box and told me to shout at everyone what was happening. I had a bad time. It was raining and I wanted to do a good job. Eventually Mrs. Arkwright took pity on me. She let me put my orange box inside the shelter of her stall, so that I could give out [pamphlets] without getting too wet.

“[Your] mother’s mad,” she kept saying.

She might have been right, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was relieved when two o’ clock came and I could go inside with the rest.

“How many tracts did you give out?” demanded my mother, who was hovering by the door.


“All of them.”

She softened. “Good girl.”

The sermon was on perfection, and it was at that moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement.

Related Characters: Mother, Mrs. Arkwright, Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

Though Jeanette up to this point has been deeply religious and has gotten a sense of joy and community out of religious life, things begin to take a turn as, in this chapter, she grows older. After her mother forces her to stand out in the rain passing out pamphlets for their church—albeit on an orange box, possibly symbolic of the love and protection Jeanette’s mother wishes she could give her daughter despite her emotional distance and constant prioritization of religion over caring for her own child—Mrs. Arkwright, a member of their community, tells Jeanette that her mother is mad. Jeanette for the first time concedes that this might be true, and when she reunites with her mother that afternoon at church, she comes up against her first “theological disagreement.” Fittingly, Jeanette finds herself in disagreement with a sermon on perfection, which her mother always requires from her and which Jeanette is increasingly finding more and more difficult to achieve as the expectations that her mother—and her church—have for her mount and grow.

4. Numbers Quotes

☝☝ It was clear that I had stumbled on a terrible conspiracy. There are women in the world. There are men in the world. And there are beasts. What do you do if you marry a beast? Beasts are crafty. They disguise themselves like you and I. Like the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood.” Why had no one told me? Did that mean no one else knew? Did that mean that all over the globe, in all innocence, women were marrying beasts?

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette grows older, she begins to interrogate the world around her, growing unsatisfied with the narrow, esoteric understanding of the world her mother and her religion have bestowed upon her. The “gypsy” woman’s vision echoing in her ears, Jeanette begins to consider the institution of marriage and the relationships between men and women. She suddenly understands that many men are “beasts,” and wonders why no one has warned her of the dangers that exist in the realm of relationships. In true Jeanette fashion, one of her only ways of relating to this concept is through storytelling, and she considers the tale of Little Red Riding Hood as she wonders how anyone—especially men—can ever be truly knowable to another person, and fears that a “beast” is lying in wait for her somewhere in the future, ready to deceive and decimate her.

☝☝ I now know she had rewritten the ending [of] [Jane Eyre](#). It was her favourite non-Bible book, and she read it to me over and over again, when I was very small. I couldn’t read it, but I knew where the pages turned. Later, literate and curious, I had decided to read it for myself. I found out, that dreadful day in a back corner of the library, that Jane doesn’t marry St. John at all, that she goes back to Mr. Rochester. It was like the day I discovered my adoption papers while searching for a pack of playing cards. I have never since played cards, and I have never since read [Jane Eyre](#).

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75-76

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette grows older, her relationship with her mother begins to shift. Jeanette begins to see the cracks in the things her mother has told her all throughout her life, and one of the major turning points is Jeanette's discovery of the fact that her mother has lied to her for years about the ending of the novel *Jane Eyre*. This lie mirrors the traumatic discovery of finding her adoption papers—it's unclear whether Jeanette knew she was adopted before she found the papers or not, but she makes it understood in this passage that the discovery was upsetting and scarring. Likewise, the discovery about the true ending of *Jane Eyre* is another assault on the trust between Jeanette and her mother, and serves to crumble Jeanette's perception of her mother, and all she has ever told her.

☝ We read the Bible as usual, and then told each other how glad we were that the Lord had brought us together. She stroked my head for a long time, and then we hugged and it felt like drowning. Then I was frightened but couldn't stop. There was something crawling in my belly. I had an octopus inside me. After that we did everything together, and I stayed with her as often as I could. My mother seemed relieved that I was seeing less of Graham, and for a while made no mention of the amount of time I spend with Melanie.

"Do you think this is Unnatural Passion?" I asked [Melanie] once.

"Doesn't feel like it. According to Pastor Finch, that's awful." She must be right, I thought.

Melanie and I had volunteered to set up the Harvest Festival Banquet, and we worked hard in the church throughout the day. When everyone arrived we stood on the balcony, looking down on them. Our family. It was safe.

Related Characters: Melanie, Jeanette (speaker), Pastor Finch, Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette embarks on her first lesbian relationship with another girl from church, Melanie, she discovers the emotional and physical pleasures of first infatuation. Though Jeanette has been warned about "Unnatural Passion," she and Melanie refuse to believe that what they are doing is wrong, because it feels so good and so natural

for each of them. As the girls observe a festival at their church, they feel profoundly safe and at home. They are unaware of how violently the church might react at the discovery of their relationship, and instead feel ensconced by the presence of their friends and families, blissfully ignorant of the prejudiced views that the members of their community hold.

5. Deuteronomy Quotes

☝ That is the way with stories; we make them what we will. It's a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained... Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently... People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe. This is very curious. Very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognize its integrity. People have never had a problem disposing of the past when it gets too difficult, and if we can't dispose of it we can alter it.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 94-95

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief interlude, Jeanette the writer intervenes to offer some wisdom and perspective on the nature of history, storytelling, fact, and the past. She proclaims that stories are a way of making sense of the past and explaining the world in which we live, but that storytelling and history must be studied and absorbed responsibly. History, which is broadly understood as fact, is, Jeanette argues, actually often a revisionist tool of altering the past. When the past becomes too difficult to remember, to honor, or to understand, revisionists step in and often pass their rewriting of history off as fact—whereas stories, often taken to be false, can do a more solid, holistic, honest, and responsible job of "explaining the universe" from a variety of competing but equally worthy points of view.

☝ Constipation was a great problem after the Second World War. Not enough roughage in the diet, too much refined food. If you always eat out you can never be sure what's going in, and received information is nobody's exercise. Rotten and rotting. Here is some advice. If you want to keep your own teeth, make your own sandwiches...

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jeanette constructs a metaphor out of historical fact. In the post-war era of prosperity and levity, people consumed unthinkingly and thus felt physically terrible. Jeanette, in this interlude, warns her readers against receiving information without being sure what it truly is and what it truly means, lest they “rot” from the insides. She symbolically warns her readers to make their own sandwiches if they want to keep their own teeth—in other words, to be conscious of what stories they are consuming and believing, and never trust blindly in received information. This lesson was a hard one for Jeanette herself to learn, as she blindly took in all the church’s rhetoric for years before realizing that the doctrine was “rotting” her and making her life poorer. Jeanette attempts to pass wisdom on in this brief interlude, sharing all she has learned about the nature of storytelling, the inescapability of the past, and the dangers of retroactively altering one’s own history.

6. Joshua Quotes

“Renounce her, renounce her,” the pastor kept saying, “it’s only the demon.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I just can’t.”

“We’ll come back the day after tomorrow,” he confided in my mother. “Meantime, don’t let her out of this room, and don’t feed her. She needs to lose her strength before it can be hers again.”

My mother locked me in [the parlor.] She did give me a blanket, but she took away the light bulb. Over the thirty-six hours that followed, I thought about the demon. I knew that demons entered wherever there was a weak point. If I had a demon my weak point was Melanie, but she was beautiful and good and had loved me. Can love really belong to the demon?

“They’re looking in the wrong place,” I thought. “If they want to get at my demon they’ll have to get at me. If I let them take away my demons, I’ll have to give up what I’ve found.”

“You can’t do that,” said a voice at my elbow. Leaning on the coffee table was the orange demon.

“What do you want?”

“Everyone has a demon,” the thing began, “but not everyone knows how to make use of it.”

“Demons are evil, aren’t they?” I asked, worried.

“Not quite, they’re just difficult.”

“If I keep you, what will happen?”

“You’ll have a difficult time.”


“Is it worth it?”

“That’s up to you.”

The demon vanished.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis

After Jeanette and Melanie’s relationship is discovered, the two of them are shamed publicly in front of their entire congregation for engaging in the sin of homosexuality. As if that weren’t bad enough, when Jeanette refuses to apologize and repent, her mother and her pastor become convinced that she is possessed, and attempt to perform an exorcism on her. Jeanette is locked in the parlor for three days and denied food in an attempt to strip her of her

strength so that she will repent more easily. During her days alone, starving and miserable, Jeanette wonders whether what she has done is truly wrong—she feels that she and Melanie experienced pure, beautiful love, and has a hard time believing that love in any form is evil. Just then, an “orange” demon shows up, and warns Jeanette not to “give up what [she has] found”—in other words, her newfound identity and her excitement about the possibilities of love, sex, and romance. The demon warns Jeanette that if she “keeps” it, her life will be more difficult, and that whether it’s a worthy exchange—difficulty for happiness—is up to her. Then the demon disappears, leaving Jeanette alone to decide what kind of life it is she wants to lead.

“The Lord forgives and forgets,” the pastor told me. Perhaps the Lord does, but my mother didn’t. While I lay shivering in the parlor she took a toothcomb to my room and found all the letters [from Melanie,] all the cards, all the jottings of my own, and burnt them in the backyard. There are different sorts of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. She burnt a lot more than the letters that night in the backyard. I don’t think she knew. In her head she was still queen, but not my queen any more.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Melanie, Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

After Jeanette at last repents—but falsely, wanting only to get the exorcism over with and have something to eat, and with the demon watching the entire time—she is struck with a fever, perhaps as a result of the physical neglect she has endured, or perhaps as a result of having experienced a harrowing emotional and psychological experience. While Jeanette lies prone and ill in the parlor, her mother—rather than caring for her sick, traumatized daughter—goes through Jeanette’s room and sets fire to every physical token or remembrance of Melanie she can find. Jeanette, having suffered yet another betrayal by her mother, reflects on how her mother burnt “more than letters” when she destroyed Jeanette’s correspondences with her first love—her mother also burnt the trust and love her daughter had for her. Jeanette speculates that her mother wasn’t aware of how this betrayal would affect Jeanette, or how it would cause her to fall so far in Jeanette’s eyes. Despite the fact that Jeanette lost all respect and love for her mother

after this instance, Jeanette’s mother still saw herself as “queen,” and still acted as if she was the reigning force in her daughter’s life.

“Here you are,” said my mother, giving me a sharp dig in the side. “Some fruit. You’re rambling in your sleep again.” It was a bowl of oranges. I took out the largest and tried to peel it. The skin hung stubborn, and soon I lay panting, angry and defeated. What about grapes or bananas? I did finally pull away the outer shell and, cupping both hands round, tore open the fruit.

“Feeling any better?” sitting in the middle [of the orange] was the orange demon.

“I’m going to die.”

“Not you, in fact you’re recovering, apart from a few minor hallucinations, and remember you’ve made your choice now, there’s no going back.”

Related Characters: Jeanette, Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis



After the catastrophic burning, Jeanette remains in bed sick with fever. To comfort her, as always, her mother brings her oranges. Jeanette is too weak even to engage in her favorite ritual of peeling the fruit, and is defeated, so to speak, by the one object that has brought her comfort throughout her youth. Jeanette feels betrayed not just by her mother but by the oranges themselves, and wonders why she is never allowed to eat any other fruits. This symbolizes a major change in Jeanette, as she turns away from her mother the “queen” and oranges as a symbol of comfort. Moreover, when Jeanette finally is able to break through the skin of the fruit and open the orange, she finds an orange demon—one she hallucinated during her exorcism—inside. The demon reminds Jeanette that she has made a choice to keep the demon around, and that there is no going back from this decision—she has chosen not to truly repent, and to keep her identity, and as such will always be “haunted” by the demon, a symbol of her rebellion and self-acceptance.



7. Judges Quotes

☞ I was almost asleep when the pastor appeared with my mother hovering in the background. He stood a safe distance away like I was infected. The pastor explained to me as quietly as he could that I was the victim of a great evil. That I was afflicted and oppressed, that I had deceived the flock. My mother gave a little cry, then got angry again. They started arguing between themselves whether I was an unfortunate victim or a wicked person. I listened for a while; neither of them were very convincing, and besides, seven ripe oranges had just dropped on to the window sill.

“Have an orange,” I offered by way of conversation. They both stared at me like I was mad. I lay for a long time just watching the oranges. They were pretty, but not much help. I was going to need more than an icon to get me through this one.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 133-134



Explanation and Analysis

After Jeanette is caught having an affair with a second girl, yet another intervention is attempted by her mother and her pastor. While this time no one is attempting to perform an exorcism on Jeanette, the two of them still believe her to be possessed, and struggle to categorize her behavior as that of someone being led astray by a demon or someone willfully opposing the godly teachings of her youth.

Jeanette, exhausted by the pressure, humiliation, discrimination, and outright physical torture that has been inflicted upon her by her mother, her pastor, and her church community, is indeed acting a little mad, hallucinating a bunch of oranges on her windowsill. Oranges, which comforted her in her illnesses and moments of loneliness during her youth, appear to her now as “icons” of comfort—but even Jeanette can concede that she needs much more than just a symbol of comfort and safety to get her through this new pain.

☞ I made my bed carefully the last morning at home, emptied the waste paper basket, and trailed the dog on a long walk. At that time I could not imagine what would become of me, and I didn't care. It was not judgement day, but another morning.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette prepares to leave home, having been disowned by her mother and her church, she marvels at the oddness of the atmosphere on the day she is to depart. The day proceeds as normal, only Jeanette is making preparations to go—she is surprised, as she completes the tasks that need completing, to find that the day of her departure does not feel like judgement day but rather just another ordinary morning. This feeling symbolizes Jeanette's disenchantment with the ritual, mysticism, and symbolism of religion. She is not experiencing “judgement” because she has distanced herself from allowing herself to be judged, and the climactic abandonment of her home, her family, and her childhood is as routine as anything else. Jeanette is emotionally disconnected from the place which reared her as much as she has abandoned her religious faith and love for her mother.

8. Ruth Quotes

☞ “Daughter, you have disgraced me,” said the sorcerer, and I have no more use for you. You must leave. Winnet could not ask for forgiveness when she was innocent, but she did ask to stay.

“If you stay, you will stay in the village and care for the goats. I leave you to make up your own mind.” He was gone. Winnet was about to burst into tears when she felt a light pecking at her shoulder. It was Abednego, the raven she loved.

“[If you leave] you won't lose your power, you'll [just] use it differently. Sorcerers can't take their gifts back, ever.”

“And what if I stay?”

“You will find yourself destroyed by grief. All you know will be around you and at the same time far from you. Better to find a new place now.

Winnet sat silent at the edge of the fireplace. The raven, struck dumb, could not warn her that her father had crept in, in the shape of a mouse, and was tying an invisible thread around one of her buttons.

Related Characters: Mother, Jeanette

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  



Page Number: 148-149


Explanation and Analysis

In the story of Winnet and the sorcerer, which Jeanette launches into at a crucial point in the narrative and which she uses to describe the history of her own relationship with her mother, there is no happy ending. As in Jeanette's own childhood, Winnet is adopted by a sorcerer who offers Winnet "powers" in exchange for her name. Jeanette's mother adopted her, named her, raised her, and gave her the "powers"—but really the hindrances and misinformation—of evangelism. When Winnet betrays the sorcerer by falling in love, as Jeanette "betrayed" her mother by falling in love with Melanie and then Katy, the sorcerer offers Winnet a choice. She can stay and be subjected to toilsome work and emotional exclusion, or she can leave. Winnet's beloved raven—possibly a stand-in for Jeanette's orange demon—advises her to leave lest she become "destroyed by grief." As Winnet makes the difficult decision to leave, her father, unseen, ties a thread around one of her coat buttons, which will allow him to tug her back at any time. As Jeanette made the decision to leave home, she did so knowing that her mother would always have a thread around her button, and would always be able to tug her back—if not physically, then emotionally—to the trauma of her past.

☞ There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back. Mind turns to the pull, it's hard to pull away. I'm always thinking of going back. When Lot's wife looked over her shoulder, she turned into a pillar of salt. Pillars hold things up, and salt keeps things clean, but it's a poor exchange for losing yourself. People do go back, but they don't survive, because two realities are claiming them at the same time. Such things are too much. You can salt your heart, or kill your heart, or you can choose between the two realities.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 164


Explanation and Analysis


As Jeanette reflects on the decision she made to leave her hometown, her family, and her church behind, she invokes the invisible thread that Winnet's father, the sorcerer, tied

to the button of his adopted daughter's coat. Her own situation—her own story—has become so layered with metaphor and reference that Jeanette is overwhelmed by the parallels between her own life and the stories, Biblical and invented, that have shaped her awareness of the world. She compares herself to Winnet, a character of her own invention, but also to Lot's wife, the Biblical character who famously turned to salt when she looked back on the burning town she left behind. She lost herself in thinking of her past and regretting her decision to leave, and what she did not know, Jeanette is now aware of: two realities cannot exist at once. One cannot leave and regret leaving, or stay and regret staying. Jeanette, in a moral conundrum over her choice to leave, now must confront the decision she has made and "kill" one of her realities.

☞ If demons lie within they travel with you. Everyone thinks their own situation most tragic. I am no exception.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Towards the end of the novel, Jeanette considers returning home. After being prompted by her friends in her new city, she begins thinking about the family—and the world—she left behind. Though she has reinvented herself far away from the severe rules of her mother's household and the violent punishments of her evangelical church, Jeanette's demons have traveled with her. She considers her situation to be the "most tragic," torn between the life she was forced to abandon and the one she has made for herself in the ruins of what she used to know. Jeanette, forever a storyteller, sees her own story as a tragedy, and knows at last that she cannot escape her difficult past emotionally just by leaving it behind physically.

●● I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever been anywhere. My mother was treating me like she always had; had she noticed my absence? Did she even remember why I'd left? I have a theory that every time you make an important choice, the part of you left behind continues the other life you could have had. There's a chance that I'm not here at all, that all the parts of me, running along all the choices I did and didn't make, for a moment brush against each other. That I am still an evangelist in the North, as well as the person who ran away.

Related Characters: Jeanette (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

When Jeanette returns home for the first time after having left for the city, she is shocked to find that everything is more or less the same as it was when she left—most notably, her mother is treating her as if nothing has transpired between them, despite the emotional violence of their relationship in the wake of Jeanette's affairs. Confronted with the puzzle of her mother's relative calm and civility, Jeanette begins to wonder—and worry—about the alternate versions of her life that might exist somewhere in some parallel universe. All the choices she has made that have borne her away from her stifling home have left pieces of her behind, and she wonders now, taken aback by her mother's unflappable attitude, whether she ever lived her other life at all, and which self is her true self.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. GENESIS

Looking back on her childhood, an older Jeanette writes that “like most people,” she lived with her mother and father for a long time. Her father enjoyed watching wrestling, and her mother was, Jeanette says (metaphorically), a wrestler—no matter what Jeanette’s mother was up against she was “in the white corner,” or, in other words, always felt that she was right.

Jeanette’s mother had a clear list of friends and enemies. Enemies included the Devil, sex, the family next door, and garden slugs. Friends were God, the family dog, Charlotte Brontë novels, and the poisoning gardening pellets used to kill slugs. Jeanette says that she herself was also on her mother’s list of friends “at first,” after having been adopted into the family “to join [mother] in a tag match against the Rest of the World.”

It wasn’t that Jeanette’s mother was unable to bear children, but rather that she didn’t want to, and so she adopted Jeanette. As a child, Jeanette was always told that she was special, and that this specialness derived from her mother’s evangelical beliefs. On Sundays, “the most vigorous day of the whole week,” Jeanette and her mother sat and listened to the BBC World Service news broadcast on the radio to record the progress of their church’s missionaries who had gone out into the world.

On Sundays, Jeanette’s mother prayed alone and standing up in the parlor until ten in the morning. Of her mother’s unusual prayer stance, Jeanette says that she believes her mother’s relationship with God “had a lot to do with positioning.” Jeanette’s mother was Old Testament “through and through,” and her approach to religion reflected the scorched-earth, unforgiving nature of the Old Testament God; Jeanette’s mother ended each Sunday morning prayer by calling upon God to smite her enemies.

Jeanette often sat in the kitchen while her mother prayed in the next room, and Jeanette knew when her mother began praying for vengeance that it was time to boil tea and get ready to turn on the radio. Jeanette’s mother would frequently quiz her on facts about the Bible to prepare her for the Bible quizzes that took place in church, and Jeanette’s mother would grow angry if she did not know the answers to her questions.

Jeanette begins her narrative by setting up her mother as the novel’s adversary—her mother is combative, but always believes she is in the right. This energy will propel Jeanette and her mother’s tumultuous relationship throughout the entire book.



Jeanette reveals that she was brought into the family to be her mother’s friend and ally. Because Jeanette’s mother adopted Jeanette in order to make her own life easier rather than to make Jeanette’s life better, their relationship is, from its very beginning, off-balance and completely oriented towards Jeanette’s mother’s comfort and pleasure.



Religion is introduced as the means by which Jeanette’s mother controls her. This works in several ways. There is the practical matter of the frequency, rigidity, and routine of prayer, which requires Jeanette to remain close by her mother at all times. Then there is the emotional component, in which Jeanette’s mother tells Jeanette that adherence to religion brings her into the fold of “specialness” and separates her from everyone else.



Jeanette’s mother is painted early on as a fierce woman with real vitriol for her enemies and a desire to see justice meted out at every turn. Jeanette’s mother’s rage, unpredictability, and severe moral beliefs makes her similar to the God of the Old Testament, who Jeanette’s mother both seeks to worship and to best.



Jeanette’s mother is grooming her to be an exceptional member of their congregation from an early age, and Jeanette has fallen into—and even seems to enjoy and anticipate—the strict and slightly absurd routines her mother has instilled in her. They’re the only way of life she’s ever known.



During the World Service on the radio, Jeanette was tasked with writing down notes for her mother, who was the Missionary Secretary at their church. According to Jeanette, if the Missionary Report on any given Sunday was good, her mother would cook a delicious meal for lunch. If the news was bad, and the church's missionaries were struggling or dying out in the world, Jeanette's mother would spend the rest of the day listening to the radio, making only boiled eggs for lunch. Jeanette writes that her father was "depressed" by the paltry meals served when the news wasn't good, but that he wasn't allowed to cook, as Jeanette's mother believed she was the only person in the house who knew her way around the kitchen, and would not be told otherwise.

In the afternoons, after prayers and lunch, Jeanette and her mother would take the dog for a walk. While passing the house next door, Jeanette's mother would denigrate their neighbors, calling them drunks and insulting the fact that they shopped for their clothes at Maxi Ball's, a warehouse full of cheaply-made clothes.

Jeanette's town was "a huddled place full of chimneys and back-to-back houses with no gardens," surrounded by rolling hills. The town was a "fat blot" on the landscape, and Jeanette's family's house sat on the top of a sloping hill, which enabled her to look down on the rest of the village "like Jesus on the pinnacle."

Jeanette recalls travelling to a viaduct behind a tenement building to purchase black peas from the "gypsies" who'd set up shop there. On one such trip, a gypsy woman grabbed Jeanette's hand, looked at her palm, and foretold that Jeanette would never marry and would never be able to stay still. Jeanette ran home without paying for the peas, unable to understand what the gypsy woman had meant; she'd never even thought about marriage before.

Jeanette knew only two women in town who didn't have husbands. They ran a paper shop and often gave Jeanette sweets with her purchases, and once invited her to go to the seaside with them. When Jeanette told her mother about the women's offer, Jeanette's mother firmly told her no, but would not explain why. Jeanette was not allowed to return to the shop again, and, weeks after the incident, Jeanette overheard her mother telling a woman from church, Mrs. White, that the women at the paper shop "dealt in Unnatural Passions." Jeanette, hearing this but not understanding what her mother meant, wondered if the women had put chemicals in the sweets they sold.

Jeanette, nervously taking notes on her mother's behalf, hopes to improve her mother's mood, which directly affects how things will go for Jeanette on any given day. Jeanette knows that her mother controls every aspect of her life, and knows too that that control can become vindictive and violent based on things that are out of Jeanette's own control. Jeanette, who does not control anything, seeks to influence her mother's moods in small ways, as a way of deflecting the emotional and physical ramifications of her mother's fickle attitudes.



Jeanette's mother considers the neighbors next door to be her enemies, and one of the reasons why is the lack of order and control she observes in their lives, as evidenced by their shoddy dressing and their careless use of alcohol.



Even Jeanette's house is positioned in a way that allows her mother to feel superior and judgmental, as if she has been positioned high above the rest of the people who live around her.



This fateful meeting with the woman gives voice to many of the hesitations and confusions Jeanette will experience as she grows older and begins thinking about love, marriage, and sexuality. The prediction from the woman seems, at first, to be a kind of curse; as Jeanette grows older, however, it will become a blessing.



The obviously lesbian couple who run the paper shop are an anomaly in their town, and their kindness to Jeanette is met only with prejudice from Jeanette's mother, who wants to keep her daughter from anything "unnatural"—or, for that matter, anything having to do with "passion." The lesbian couple represent, early on, an alternate vision of womanhood—but Jeanette is too young and too sheltered to understand the freedom they possess.



On their Sunday walks, when Jeanette and her mother got to the top of a hill on the outskirts of town, Jeanette's mother would begin telling Jeanette stories of God's wrath, as well as stories of sinners' miraculous conversions. Often Jeanette's mother told Jeanette the story of her own conversion, a story which Jeanette considered deeply romantic.

One night, by mistake, Jeanette's mother had walked into Pastor Spratt's Glory Crusade, which had been set up in a revival tent. Mesmerized by the handsome Pastor Spratt's tales and demonstrations of healing miracles, Jeanette's mother joined his flock, and soon recruited her husband to join the congregation as well. For the remainder of the tent revival, Pastor Spratt had stayed with Jeanette's parents, and had extolled the glories of missionary work to Jeanette's mother. Jeanette suspects that her mother was propelled toward religion by "all the things she couldn't be," and the fear of not knowing what else to do with her life.

The narrative switches over to a story of Jeanette's invention. She tells of a princess who was so sensitive that even the deaths of insects left her despondent for weeks. One day, wandering in the woods, the princess came upon a hunchback, who warned the princess that she was in danger of being "burned by [her] own flame." The old hunchback woman, skilled in magic, confessed to the princess that she was old and wished to die, but could not because she still had so many responsibilities on earth. The hunchback asked the princess if the princess would take over her duties caring for the people of a nearby village. The princess, forgetting all about her life in the palace and the sorrow she once knew, agreed to take over the hunchback's duties. The old hunchback thanked the princess and then, at once, died.

Jeanette imagines her mother out walking one night after attending the Glory Crusade, and devising a plan to get a child and dedicate it to the Lord. Sometime later, Jeanette speculates, she was adopted, and become her mother's "vision."

Storytelling is a major part of Jeanette and her mother's relationship. Jeanette is being reared on stories, both Biblical and personal. Jeanette finds herself entranced by stories of any kind, and her mother's stories—due to her mother's larger-than-life presence, total control over Jeanette, and urging of the importance of learning through stories—are especially "romantic" and exciting.



Jeanette's mother quite literally stumbled into her religious life, but has not looked back since. Jeanette's speculation that her mother devoted herself so deeply to evangelical Christianity because she was afraid of failure and stasis will never be proved or disproved, as Jeanette's mother's inner world and once-held fears, dreams, and beliefs will remain esoteric to Jeanette even in her adulthood.



This fairy-tale-esque story, the first of many Jeanette will tell throughout the course of the novel, can be interpreted in different ways. The princess can be seen as Jeanette, coming to her mother to become the steward of her religion and the heir to all her tasks with the church. Another reading positions the princess figure as Jeanette's mother, forgetting the sorrows of her own life and investing herself completely in the duties of her newfound religion.



Though she is young, Jeanette knows that her purpose in life is to serve her mother's vision for her—not to pursue any vision of her own.



One night, Jeanette and her parents go to church. There is a visiting speaker, Pastor Finch, who delivers a “terrifying” sermon about how easy it is to become possessed by a **demon**. The sermon leaves all of the congregants “uneasy.” After the church service there is a banquet. Pastor Finch asks Jeanette how old she is, and she tells him she is seven. Pastor Finch tells her and her mother that seven is a blessed number—but also a cursed one. The best can become the worst, the pastor says, and a demon can return “sevenfold.” He warns Jeanette’s mother—and all the congregants gathered around her—that her “little lily could herself be a house of demons.”

Jeanette, feeling awkward, retreats to the Sunday School Room to play with the children her age. She begins making a piece of felt art inspired by the story of Daniel in the lion’s den, and soon Pastor Finch comes back to the room to check on Jeanette. He notes that in her felt art, the lions are eating Daniel, when in the true story Daniel escaped. Jeanette insists she merely got mixed up, and Pastor Finch helps her to rearrange the felt. Jeanette leaves the room, and when she returns to the banquet hall a member of the congregation, Miss Jewsbury, asks where Pastor Finch is. Jeanette tells her that he is with the children playing with felt, but Miss Jewsbury tells her that she’s being “fanciful.”

Jeanette and her mother leave the banquet with Jeanette’s mother’s friends Alice and May. Jeanette thinks of how horrible Pastor Finch is, and feels badly for his wife. She remembers the gypsy woman’s words—“you’ll never marry”—and thinks that perhaps that won’t be so bad.

As the women continue their stroll home through a bad neighborhood, Factory Bottoms, they pass an open pest control shop run by a woman named Mrs. Arkwright, who calls the women in to say hello. Mrs. Arkwright complains that business is bad, and hopes for a hot summer that’ll bring some vermin out so that she can have some customers again. Mrs. Arkwright gives Jeanette a few empty tins as a present, and then the women go along on their way.

Back at home, Jeanette heads to bed, but knows her mother will stay awake for hours—Jeanette’s mother never goes to bed until four in the morning. When Jeanette is up in the middle of the night needing water or having had a nightmare, she and her mother often sit in the kitchen reading the Bible together.

Pastor Finch’s fearmongering rhetoric of possession and corruption will come to drive a deep wedge between Jeanette and her religious community. Here, in their very first meeting, Pastor Finch lays the foundation for Jeanette’s mother’s distrust of her daughter—and Jeanette’s distrust of herself as well. The idea of Jeanette as a corruptible commodity frightens her mother, who hopes to keep her on a straight and narrow path through careful grooming and control, and perhaps has not considered that her pious daughter could grow up to be anything but perfect.



Jeanette and Pastor Finch are adversaries from the start, and this scene in which he attempts to intrude upon her creative life and storytelling foreshadows the ways in which the church will, over the course of Jeanette’s adolescence, continually intervene and keep her from ever truly expressing herself. Additionally, Jeanette’s fanciful nature is shown to be common knowledge, as Miss Jewsbury writes Jeanette’s (true) words off as mere invention.



Jeanette is already beginning to question the relationships that seem predestined for her, and feels grateful to have the gypsy woman’s prediction as a failsafe against having to submit to a man as awful as Pastor Finch.



This passage shows Jeanette to be a well-loved member of her community, often babied or given special treatment, even by those in other neighborhoods. By establishing Jeanette as a kind of religious prodigy and a sterling example of piousness, Winterson sets her readers up for Jeanette’s inevitable fall from grace.



In this passage, readers see yet another example of Jeanette’s mother’s bizarre religious rituals, which are framed as a source of comfort and familiarity to the young Jeanette.



This, Jeanette says, is how her education began: with her mother teaching her to read from the Book of Deuteronomy in the Bible. Jeanette's mother teaches her many things about the world that are plainly incorrect: that rain is caused when clouds collide with a tall building, and that everything in the natural world is a symbol of the struggle between good and evil; for instance, snakes can outrun a horse over a short distance, but will never stay ahead for long. Jeanette asks her mother to teach her French, but Jeanette's mother refuses, stating only that French was nearly her downfall and that, one day, she will tell Jeanette the story of a man named Pierre.

One day, Jeanette asks her mother why she isn't allowed to go to school. Her mother often calls school a Breeding Ground, a term which, like Unnatural Passions, Jeanette does not understand. Her mother only tells her that school will lead her astray, and then refuses to say anything more. As her mother continues educating her, Jeanette helps her mother with the gardening and learns to interpret "signs and wonders"—a skill she will need, her mother tells her, when she becomes a missionary one day.

One morning, an envelope is dropped through the letter box. When Jeanette's mother opens the envelope, she becomes upset. Jeanette asks her mother what the matter is, and her mother tells her that it is time for Jeanette to be sent to school. Jeanette, full of excitement, runs to the outhouse out back to be alone with her glee: she is going to the "Breeding Ground" at last.

2. EXODUS

The night before her first day of school, Jeanette asks why she is being sent now. Her mother tells her that if she doesn't go to school, she herself will be sent to prison. Jeanette's mother makes her a sandwich for dinner, and then the two of them listen to a religious program on the radio. Jeanette's mother proclaims that though the Devil is out in the world, he is not in their house, and she reverently gazes upon a watercolor picture of the Lord which hangs over the oven. The painting has become splattered with bits of food over the years, but no one has taken it down to clean it.

In the morning, Jeanette's mother rouses her, complaining that she herself has had no sleep all night. As Jeanette struggles to get her pyjama top off to put her school clothes on, she irritates her ears, which are constantly sore after a recent three-month period during which she went deaf suddenly and seemingly without explanation.

Jeanette's mother is controlling her through providing her with false information, and withholding the more useful, practical information that Jeanette wants to learn, such as how to speak French. Such total control not just over Jeanette's physical world, or her emotional and spiritual worlds, but also over her intellectual life puts her mother in a position of tremendous power.



Jeanette's mother wants to keep Jeanette out of school because she fears that the "real world" will corrupt her special and pious daughter. Instead of getting Jeanette excited about school, Jeanette's mother instills in her the dream of becoming a missionary, and further devoting her life to God and to the church.



At last, Jeanette's mother's control over Jeanette's education—and entry into the "real world"—is legally terminated, as this is a letter from the government. Jeanette is excited by the prospect of school, eager to find out what exactly the Breeding Ground is all about.



Jeanette's mother begrudgingly prepares to send her daughter to school, growing more and more anxious about Jeanette leaving the safe haven of their home and entering the cruel, evil world. The portrait of Jesus hanging in the kitchen, and Jeanette's mother's gazing at it on this particular night, reveals Jeanette's mother's desire to keep her home a safe and holy place, and to keep Jeanette ensconced within it.



The extraordinary or the bizarre often intrudes upon the ordinary in Jeanette's household. As she tries to get ready for her first day of school, the memory of her bizarre illness rears its head, plunging her back into the realm of the divine and the strange.



One night, months earlier, Jeanette was lying in bed and realized that life had been “very quiet” lately. She was unable to hear sounds around her, and Jeanette assumed she was in a state of rapture, which was “not uncommon [at] church.” Her mother assumed the same, telling her friends who asked why Jeanette had gone quiet that the Lord was working in mysterious ways—Jeanette was seven, after all, a holy number, and odd things happened in sevens. As an example, Jeanette’s mother told her friends to consider Elsie Norris. Nicknamed “Testifying Elsie” by the other members of the congregation, Elsie, an elderly churchgoing woman, frequently testified in church to the Lord’s goodness and listed all the things He had done for her lately. Elsie prayed two hours every day, made a hobby of numerology, and had a home full of interesting things—Jeanette loved visiting and playing on Elsie’s organ.

One Sunday, during Jeanette’s period of deafness, the pastor at church proclaimed to the congregation that Jeanette was full of the spirit. Unable to hear what the pastor was saying, Jeanette sat silently and read her Bible in the pews; this seemed like a godly demonstration of modesty to the rest of the congregation. One night soon after that, Jeanette realized that something was very wrong, and went to her mother to tell her that the world had grown quiet. Jeanette’s mother, reading in the kitchen, simply nodded, still believing that Jeanette was having a divine experience. Jeanette took an **orange** from a nearby fruit bowl and went back to bed to test her ears.

Upstairs in bed, Jeanette played on a recorder she’d received as a gift. She could see her fingers moving, but no sound came from the instrument. In the morning, Jeanette went downstairs to tell her parents that she had lost her hearing completely, but no one was home—a note on the kitchen counter stated that Jeanette’s mother and father had gone to the hospital to pray for an ill member of their congregation.

Jeanette decided to take a walk, and while she was out she ran into Miss Jewsbury, who had not been to church for a long time and did not know that Jeanette was “full of the spirit.” Miss Jewsbury tried to talk to Jeanette, but Jeanette could not understand what she was saying, and led her into the post office. There, Jeanette wrote a note telling Miss Jewsbury that she could not hear a thing. Miss Jewsbury asked what was being done about it, but Jeanette wrote back that her mother didn’t know the extent of her illness, and besides was at the hospital.

Jeanette’s bizarre upbringing has left her with great holes in her common sense—she does not realize that a sudden episode of deafness is a serious medical condition, and her only language for understanding what has happened to her comes from her religious education. This search for a religious lens through which to view one’s life was seen as normal and even encouraged; members of the congregation like Elsie created a culture within Jeanette’s community of constantly trying to see who could get closest to God, and so Jeanette sees this as a blessing rather than a trial or an ailment.



When Jeanette begins to realize the seriousness of her condition, and fears that it is not an enviable and admirable divine blessing but perhaps a true ailment, she turns to her mother for help. Her mother, for the first time but certainly not the last time within the narrative of the novel, offers Jeanette an orange in place of any actual comfort or help. Oranges will come to be Jeanette’s “icon,” and will serve alternately as a comfort or as a reminder of her pain as the novel progresses.



Jeanette’s mother discounts her daughter’s agency so completely that she does not even stick around to see how Jeanette is doing in the morning, though Jeanette had expressed concern for her own physical well-being the night before.



Jeanette, unable to get through to her parents, seeks help from another member of her congregation, who thankfully is not so swept up in the rhetoric of divine episodes and moments of rapture that she can see that Jeanette is, deep down, truly troubled and in pain and discomfort.



Miss Jewsbury snatched Jeanette's hand and walked her to the hospital, where Jeanette's mother and several other churchgoers were gathered around the ill woman's bed singing hymns. Miss Jewsbury, unable to get Jeanette's mother's attention, shouted loudly that Jeanette was not full of the spirit, but merely deaf.

A doctor took Jeanette back to an examination room, and Miss Jewsbury joined them for the examination. Soon, Jeanette's mother arrived, conversed with the doctor, and wrote Jeanette a note. "You're just a bit deaf," it says; "Why didn't you tell me?" Jeanette's mother prepared to go home to fetch Jeanette's pyjamas, and Jeanette started to cry. Jeanette's mother fished around in her purse for an **orange**, which calmed Jeanette down.

This episode of deafness and neglect allowed Jeanette to see that even the church, which she had seen as an unimpeachable institution, made mistakes sometimes. In the hospital, Jeanette played with **orange** peels and waited for her mother to return. When her mother came back, she brought a "huge carrier bag of oranges," and Jeanette sat with her mother and thought of Jane Eyre, who had faced many trials but had remained brave. Jeanette's mother wrote Jeanette a note telling her that her surgery would be the following day, and promising to return soon. Jeanette feared she would die, and recalled words she'd heard her mother speak to a friend: that the Lord brings back as ghosts those who he still believes have work to do. Jeanette prayed that if she died, she'd be brought back.

On the morning of Jeanette's operation, smiling nurses arranged her **oranges** in a symmetrical tower just before she was brought off to surgery. After the procedure, she believed the doctor standing over her bedside to be an angel, and was greatly relieved to be able to hear again. Her mother could not visit her until the weekend, and so Elsie Norris came to call each day, telling jokes and stories, which she said would help Jeanette to understand the world.

Toward the end of Jeanette's stay, her mother came to see her frequently, but often couldn't stay long because it was the busy season at church, and congregants were planning the Christmas campaign. When Jeanette's mother couldn't come, she sent Jeanette's father with a letter and some **oranges**. Jeanette ate the oranges in bed, much to her nurses' chagrin, and shared them with the toothless Elsie during her daytime visits.

Miss Jewsbury acts as an advocate for Jeanette, seeking to call Jeanette's mother out for neglecting her daughter in favor of attending to her religious duties. Jeanette sees for the first time two competing versions of maternal care, as Miss Jewsbury takes her mother head-on.



Jeanette's mother, upon learning of her daughter's condition, blames her ignorance of the situation on Jeanette herself, despite the fact that Jeanette asked for help multiple times. Again, an orange is a stand-in for any real support or comfort.



Jeanette's deafness is the first time she realizes that the church is not immune to problems. Though she is still young and devoted, this incident lays the groundwork for Jeanette's later struggles with the church. In this passage, though Jeanette has seen the church's failings, she still remains fearful of death and faithful in the Lord's power to listen to her and enact change upon her life. The mechanism of religion both controls and enriches Jeanette's life, and just as [Jane Eyre](#) functions as a lesson and a touchstone in dark moments, so does the "story" of Christianity.



Jeanette is attended to in this passage by everyone but her mother. Her nurses, her doctor, and Elsie Norris all appear to her as benevolent, caring figures, and even angels in the case of the doctor. Jeanette's mother is nowhere to be found, and Jeanette must rely on the other women around her to show her care and tenderness.



Jeanette's mother does visit her daughter, but still sees church as her priority even over her own child. In her place, Jeanette's mother sends oranges and missives as a stand-in. Jeanette gobbles the oranges in her bed, consuming hungrily whatever she can get of her mother's attention and affection.



Elsie told Jeanette about the power of manifestation—thinking about something for long enough that it happens in real life. Jeanette asked Elsie if praying for something was the same thing, and Elsie replied only that God was in everything. Elsie and Jeanette played board games and word games and read poetry together, and all the while Jeanette worked on a massive igloo made of **orange** peels.

When Jeanette got out of the hospital, her mother was away on a church endeavor, and Jeanette stayed with Elsie for a few days. At Elsie's house, the two played music and built religious-themed dioramas which always featured Elsie's three pet white mice. One night, Elsie told Jeanette that there were two worlds, but spoke vaguely of what they were. Jeanette fell asleep troubled, hoping that school would give her the answer to Elsie's questions.

Jeanette flashes the narrative forward. She has been in school for three terms now, and she is beginning to despair. Besides country dancing and needlework, she has hardly learned anything at all. She hates the children she is in school with, and she is often bullied. Jeanette often hides in the mudroom, despite the horrible smell of feet which not even the school cleaning lady can eradicate.

On the last day of term, Jeanette's teacher Mrs. Virtue helps one of Jeanette's enemies at school to sew a summer party dress. Jeanette comforts herself with thoughts of church summer camp. Pastor Spratt is becoming a famous and successful missionary throughout England, and as a result the local church is thriving—Jeanette will get her first real missionary experience in the coming months, and she cannot wait to get started gathering new converts.

As excitement for the summer mounts, Jeanette has lately been listening to her mother's stories of the early days of their church, and how she reformed Jeanette's father, converted him to evangelical Christianity, and married him. Though Jeanette's grandfather told her mother that she was marrying down and cut off all communication with her, Jeanette's mother insisted that the church was the only family she needed.

The devout Elsie's interest in the power of thought is one of the first times Jeanette has been told that there's any agency in the world other than that which comes from God. Moreover, Elsie plays with the orange peels with Jeanette rather than letting Jeanette just eat or play with the oranges on her own, symbolizing her desire to help Jeanette achieve comfort, reassurance, and peace, rather than just throw it at her and hope it takes.



At Elsie's house, Jeanette encounters the same fervent and all-consuming religious devotion, but there is something more fun and carefree about Elsie—she helps Jeanette make craft projects rather than take Bible quizzes, and she hints at mysticism whereas Jeanette's mother only ever speaks of fire-and-brimstone punishment and misery.



Jeanette is miserable. She has left the safety and familiarity of her mother's home and now, because of the strange and spotty way her mother has educated her and brought her up, she finds herself unable to connect with anyone her own age.



Though Jeanette cannot fit in at school or win the approval of either her friends or teachers, she knows that in church she is special, and sees her religious life as her true life, and the place where she can really shine. This brings her some comfort and happiness.



Jeanette loves hearing her mother's stories, even though they are, in actuality, fairly dark. Jeanette's mother's story of being disowned by her own father is upsetting, and demonstrates how Jeanette's mother's blind allegiance to the church over everyone and everything else started when she was a much younger woman.



At school, Jeanette just can't fit in, and she reflects on the nightmare of her first year. In the first week of school, when classes had to write an essay about what they'd done over their previous summer vacation, Jeanette wrote the true but bizarre story of her summer, which was peppered with anecdotes about her mother healing the sick, the strenuous relationship with her next-door neighbors, and baptisms in the public baths. Jeanette's classmates laughed at her, and when she went home, she told her mother she didn't want to return to school. Her mother offered her an **orange** and told her she had to keep going.

As the year wore on, Jeanette continued to find herself isolated—during a cross-stitch project, when her classmates were making samplers that read things like “TO MOTHER WITH LOVE,” Jeanette wanted to embroider hers with fairly frightening quotes from the Bible and the sermons she'd heard at church.

Two mothers with children in the class complained about Jeanette, and Jeanette's classmates physically provoked her into hitting them. Jeanette was called into the office by her teacher Mrs. Virtue and the head of the school, Mrs. Vole, and asked about her problems with the other children. The two women noted that Jeanette was deeply preoccupied with God. They called her obsession and her bizarre religious knowledge “disturbing.”

Jeanette tried to explain to the women that her mother had taught her how to read from the Bible—specifically the Book of Deuteronomy, which describes animals that are “unclean” and should not be eaten, not to mention long lists of Abominations and unmentionable sins. Jeanette's teachers accused her of talking about Hell to her classmates, and Jeanette apologized, saying that she thought what she was telling her school friends was interesting. Mrs. Vole sent Jeanette away, promising to write to her mother.

After her meeting with Mrs. Virtue and Mrs. Vole, Jeanette felt depressed, and began to look fervently ahead to the time when she would be able to attend missionary school in ten long years. When Jeanette's mother received the letter from Mrs. Vole describing Jeanette's bizarre religious leanings, Jeanette's mother rejoiced and took her to the movies to see *The Ten Commandments* as a reward.

Jeanette, who takes refuge in stories and loves telling and hearing them, attempted to show off and connect with her classmates earlier in the year by sharing some of the stories of her life. The stories were too bizarre to be interesting or relatable to the other children, however, and Jeanette was treated as an outcast. Jeanette's mother, again unable to offer her comfort or a solution, as she doesn't even believe her daughter should be in school in the first place, simply offers her an orange.



In one of the most comical examples of Jeanette's total unpreparedness for the world of secular children, she frightens her classmates by trying to embroider fire-and-brimstone-tinged religious motifs rather than simple, friendly sayings. To Jeanette, the frightening world of evangelical fundamentalism is comforting and familiar.



Jeanette's teachers, though they come off as judgmental and condescending, are probably trying to help Jeanette. They see her struggling to fit in but at the same time leaning heavily on her religious background, which will not help her navigate the “real world” with much success at all.



When Jeanette's teachers call her out on frightening her other classmates, and she seems really not to know that Hell is, in the real world, frightening, the teachers realize they must intervene. From Jeanette's perspective, she is just attempting to educate and entertain her classmates, but from her teachers' perspective, she represents a threat to their students' sense of safety.



Jeanette feels like no one at school understands her—and she is right. She has been raised in such an insular and particular community that anything else feels strange and unnavigable, and Jeanette begins looking forward to the future to avoid the present. Meanwhile, Jeanette's mother is thrilled that her daughter has been “testifying” to her classmates and staying to steadfast in her beliefs.



Shortly after the meeting with Mrs. Virtue and Mrs. Vole, all of Jeanette’s classmates began ignoring her, but she did not mind, believing deep down that she was right and just. When she told her mother about her isolation at school, her mother told her that the two of them were “called to be apart” from others, and reassured Jeanette that she herself did not have many friends, either.

Jeanette’s mother reinforces Jeanette’s belief that she is special. She tells her daughter that the two of them are “apart” from the rest of the world—indeed, apart from the rest of their church—and as such shouldn’t worry about the concerns of others. In reality, Jeanette’s mother is so fanatical that she has driven everyone close to her outside of the church away, and if Jeanette follows in her footsteps, she will do the same.



Jeanette tried to submit her needlepoint sampler for a prize at school, believing it to be a masterpiece: it showed the “terrified damned” stitched in black thread. When she handed it to her teacher for evaluation, Mrs. Virtue criticized it deeply in front of the entire class. Jeanette chalked her teacher’s disapproval up to the fact that Jeanette had made the right thing in the wrong place—the sampler would be perfect in church or as a gift for Elsie Norris, but was not right for sewing class. After Jeanette didn’t win the prize, she gave her sampler to Elsie, though she told Elsie she was sad about not having won. Elsie reminded her that “the Lord himself was scorned.”

Like Jeanette’s mother, Elsie reassures Jeanette that being an outcast is a holy thing. She tells Jeanette that even Jesus himself was looked down on and rejected, fueling the persecution complex that Jeanette’s mother has tried to instill in her as well. Everyone in Jeanette’s life is helping her to tell the story of herself—to construct a narrative of her life in which she is without fault, holy, and apart from the rest of the world by virtue of her faithfulness.



Jeanette reflects on other projects she made for school throughout the year—many with Elsie’s help, and all focused on religious themes. None won any prizes, and Jeanette grew angry that her other, less talented classmates’ projects garnered praise when hers drew scorn. When Jeanette complained to Elsie, her mother, and other members of the congregation, her mother’s friend Mrs. White told Jeanette that she could rest peacefully in the knowledge that none of her schoolmates were holy.

Rather than capitulating to the status quo, over the course of her first year in school Jeanette leaned even harder into the ostracism and othering that her intense religion brought upon her, making projects that were outliers compared to her classmates’ work. Jeanette’s decision to set herself apart from her classmates even further is supported by all the women from her church.



Jeanette recalls being confused by the story of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt, and about how they were led during the days by a pillar of cloud and through the nights by a pillar of fire. Jeanette never understood the ground rules of this story, or of the daily world in general, and often comforted herself by rearranging the widely-received versions of things.

Jeanette has a hard time fitting in at school, but here she reveals that she also has trouble figuring out the “ground rules” of the larger world in general—including the ground rules of her religion. In order to soothe herself and make sense of things, Jeanette continues to spin stories, more and more fantastical each time.



When Jeanette learned that a Tetrahedron was a mathematical shape, she spun a story in her mind about a many-faced emperor named Tetrahedron who was loved throughout the land. One day, a woman brought the emperor a revolving circus operated by “midgets.” The midgets acted out tragedies and comedies for the emperor, and the emperor, with his many eyes, was able to see them all at once. From watching the circus performance, the emperor came to understand that “no emotion is the final one.”

As Jeanette wrestles with feelings of shame, rejection, and differentness, she constructs a story in which the moral serves to guide her through this difficult transition time in her life: no emotion is the final one, and Jeanette’s life will offer her a never-ending “circus” of emotions. She will not always feel this alone, and she takes comfort in being able to teach herself this lesson.



3. LEVITICUS

Jeanette writes that heathens were a “daily preoccupation” in her mother’s household. The neighbors next door—which her mother referred to only as Next Door—were particularly hated by Jeanette’s mother, and she often played hymns on the piano as loudly as she could in order to disguise the sounds of fighting and copulation that came from the neighbors with whom Jeanette and her family shared a wall.

Jeanette writes that her mother always called herself a “missionary on the home front.” Though she hadn’t been called to far-off places like Pastor Spratt and his Glory Crusade, Jeanette’s mother felt that she was guided by the Lord and that it was her duty to convert those around her as well. Her mother is the treasurer of the Society for the Lost, a religious organization in England that recruits new members by dangling small prizes such as discount hymnbooks and free Christmas records. Jeanette’s mother regularly designs gifts for the Society to give away, such as an outdoor thermometer which doubles as a sliding scale showing the number of possible conversions a member could make each year, were they to convert two souls, who would each convert two souls, and so on.

One year, the Society holds a special conference in Jeanette’s hometown. In preparation for the event, Jeanette’s mother makes Jeanette stand on an **orange** box at the market and “shout at everyone what was happening” while giving out pamphlets. Jeanette has a bad time at the market; it is raining, and many street vendors shout at her to get out of the way. Eventually Mrs. Arkwright from the pest control shop takes pity on Jeanette and invites her to share her stall so that she can give out her pamphlets without getting wet. Watching Jeanette shouting at passerby, Mrs. Arkwright tells Jeanette that her mother is mad.

At two o’ clock, Jeanette is finally permitted to go into the conference with the rest of the Society members. At the door, her mother is waiting for her, and asks how many pamphlets Jeanette has given out. When Jeanette replies “all of them,” her mother moves aside and lets her in. As the pastor begins a sermon on perfection, Jeanette develops her first theological disagreement. She listens skeptically as the pastor proclaims that perfection, the condition of man before the Fall, can only be achieved in the next world, and that perfection can be equated with flawlessness.

As Jeanette delves into her mother’s preoccupation with “heathens” and those who have not been saved, it’s easy to see how Jeanette’s almost desperate adherence to religion, even when flung into the secular world, took root. Her mother terrorizes and shames anyone whose beliefs don’t align with hers, and Jeanette has witnessed her mother’s prejudice and bad behavior her entire childhood.



Jeanette’s mother’s sense of self-righteousness and divine purpose has led her to prioritize connection and community through her religion rather than through the daughter she brought into her home to be a member of her “team.” Nevertheless, Jeanette’s mother is crafty, and seems to truly believe in the gospel of being “saved.” She doesn’t want to participate in church life because she wants to climb a social ladder or secure her own self-advancement; she genuinely believes the world would be better if everyone were a part of her religion, and she seeks to bring as many into the fold as she can.



In this passage, Jeanette’s mother continues to prioritize religion and “saving” others over her own daughter, forcing Jeanette to stand in the rain at a busy market passing out pamphlets. Again, rather than offering Jeanette any real comfort or support, Jeanette’s mother offers her an old orange box to stand on—a symbol of Jeanette’s mother’s inadequate and half-hearted support as the poor Jeanette toils in the storm.



Jeanette, having just gone through a decidedly un-fun ordeal in the name of serving her church, enters services to find that for the first time she disagrees with the “story” being told to her. She has been striving for perfection in her mother’s eyes all her young life, and as the question of what constitutes perfection and flawlessness is raised, Jeanette finds herself with a serious intellectual and philosophical quandary in front of her: how can she ever be perfect if to be perfect is to be without flaw?



Jeanette launches into a fanciful story of a woman so beautiful that the sight of her could heal the sick and cause crops to flourish. Not only beautiful, this woman was wise, and well-acquainted with the laws of physics, and her favorite things to do were sing and weave. The woman lived in a forest; on the opposite side of the woods, in a section of the forest that had become a town, a prince roamed sadly through his palace, lamenting to his steadfast companion, a goose, that he was unable to run his kingdom properly without a wife. The prince told the goose that he wanted a woman who was perfect, without blemish inside or out. He began to cry, and the goose, moved by the prince's pain, went off to find his advisors.

The goose told the prince's courtiers that he wanted a wife who was flawless in every respect. The advisors immediately took up their horns, sounded the cry, and began their search. After three years, the advisors were unable to find a woman that the prince would not refuse. The goose warned the prince that what he wanted did not exist, but the prince insisted that he would find the perfect bride, and chopped off the goose's head.

After three more years of no luck, the prince began writing a book called *The Holy Mystery of Perfection*. Once completed, the prince gave a copy to each of his advisors as a sort of manual for their continued search. One of the advisors took the book off to a clearing in the woods to read in peace, and there heard a woman singing. He followed the sound of the woman's voice and came upon a woman spinning thread and singing—it was the beautiful physicist. The advisor approached her and asked for a chat, but the woman rebuffed him and told him to return at noon. Meanwhile, the prince's advisor asked around about the woman, and was told by all her neighbors that she was perfect.

The advisor returned to the woman's cottage at noon and told her she had to accompany him and return to the prince to marry him. The woman protested, saying that she did not want to get married, and the advisor left, promising to return. Three days later, the prince and his entourage arrived back at the woman's house, and the prince begged for her hand in marriage. Again, the woman refused. The prince showed her his book, and the woman frowned, pulled the prince inside her house, and shut the door.

As she usually does, Jeanette launches into a story of her own invention in order to relate to and understand the real-world happenings in her life. In this story, a prince seeks perfection, not knowing that there is a woman waiting nearby who could very well meet his needs. The central question of the story is whether perfection is ever attainable, and Jeanette creates a dark and bizarre narrative to investigate this question, which has been posed to her in her own life.



When the prince is confronted with the possibility that the perfection he seeks does not, in fact, exist, he becomes defensive and irate, chopping off the head of his most trusted confidant. A goose, pure, white, and governed by separate laws and instincts from humans, perhaps represents reason and practicality, which the prince annihilates without a second thought.



The mystery of perfection is framed within this story as "holy," mirroring the fact that Jeanette's investigation of perfection stems from a pastor equating flawlessness with godliness and asserting that perfection can only be achieved in Heaven. As the prince's advisor stumbles upon a woman who is, according to all accounts, perfect, it seems for a moment as if the prince's search will be over, and perfection will have been found in the earthly realm after all.



When the prince confronts the "perfect" woman who lives in the woods with his life's research on theories of perfection and holiness, she responds by taking him into her home—presumably to teach him a lesson. There is a sense of foreboding in this scene, and the introduction of the idea that though this woman is known as "perfect," she will have a bone to pick with the idea of perfection itself.



The prince's retinue camped three days and three nights outside the woman's home, and on the fourth day, the prince emerged "weary and unwashed," ready to tell the tale of all that had taken place inside. The woman, he had found, was perfect, but not flawless. She was balanced and harmonious, but not without flaw. He announced to his advisors that he intended to rewrite his book on perfection and issue a public apology to his slain goose.

The prince's advisors told him that as a prince, he could not have been wrong in his original theory, and the prince paced the forest in search of a solution. That night, one of his advisors approached him, and whispered in the prince's ear what he thought the prince must do. The prince refused his advisor's advice, at first, insisting that if he followed it no one would believe him, but his advisor told the prince that he must do what he had told him to do. At dawn, the trumpets rang out, and the whole village assembled to see what the prince would say.

The prince called for the woman to come forth. When she emerged from her home, the sun shone on her, and she was more beautiful than ever before. The prince began his speech, conceding that perfection on earth was not to be found, but to be fashioned. The woman called out that there was such a thing as perfection, and the prince countered that the woman would not have taken such trouble to convince him of her beliefs that perfection and flawlessness were not the same thing if she were not flawed herself. The woman insisted she had many blemishes, and begged the prince to understand that what he sought did not exist. The prince called for the woman's head, and his courtiers chopped it off.

The blood flowing from the woman's neck become a lake which drowned the prince's advisors and most of the court. The prince climbed a tree to escape the rising waters, vowing to continue on his quest. From the top of the tree, the prince heard a noise below him. He looked down and saw an old man selling **oranges**. The prince asked for a dozen, and also asked if the old man sold any books or magazines. The old man pulled a leather-bound book from his pocket, offering it to the prince for free, and telling him that it was a book on how to build the perfect person with the right equipment. The prince snatched the book away from the old man and ran.

The prince's mind seems to have been changed after his encounter with the "perfect" woman. She has shown him the error of his ways, and he plans to revise his life and his life's work in light of the information she has shared with him. In the real world, Jeanette perhaps takes refuge in the idea that she needn't ruin herself in the name of chasing perfection.



The prince's fawning courtiers assure him that despite whatever the woman has told him, it is his divine right as a prince to always be right, and the prince is slowly swayed by the whisperings of his retinue. Though the prince has been shown the "light" by the woman in the woods, his advisors—for whatever their own reasons may be—want the prince to uphold the idea that perfection can be achieved.



The prince, not having learned anything, slays the woman who is the closest thing to perfection he has ever found because his courtiers insisted he uphold the belief that perfection could be achieved. If it cannot be found, the prince tells his subjects, it can be made or wrought. This idea will have devastating effects in Jeanette's real life, as she navigates a landscape in which perfect piety is deemed the only thing in the world worth striving for.



The prince's murder of the woman drowns many of his people, symbolizing the devastating and sickening effects of such evil acts in the name of a false ideology. Oranges then appear in the story as the prince, defeated by his own folly, seeks comfort and a way forward. The old man offers the prince a manual on how to achieve perfection, and the prince, still hopeful that perfection can be achieved, runs off in search of it.



4. NUMBERS

Jeanette, now fourteen, dreams that she is about to be married. She wears a pure white dress and a golden crown, and as she walks down the aisle her crown grows heavy and the dress becomes difficult to walk in—still, no one in attendance at the wedding notices. Jeanette reaches the altar, where a fat priest who keeps getting fatter officiates. Jeanette's new husband appears to her in this recurring dream as many different things. Sometimes he is blind, sometimes he is a pig, sometimes he is Jeanette's mother, and sometimes he is a suit of clothes with nothing inside.

In the dream, a woman who lives on Jeanette's street tells all her neighbors that she has married a pig. Taking her words literally, Jeanette asks why; the woman responds that "you never know until it's too late." Jeanette watches the woman's husband closely. He does indeed have pink skin and narrowly-set eyes just like a pig, and Jeanette thinks him horrid. She doesn't know any men who look much better, and wonders about what women mean when they say you'll eventually find the right man. Jeanette is haunted by her dream, and by the pig-like men all around her.

Jeanette goes to the library, avoiding couples who are kissing in the stacks. Jeanette seeks out a book of fairy tales, and reads the story of "Beauty and the Beast." Jeanette wonders if her neighbor who is married to a pig has read this story, and imagined her husband would transform on her wedding day. Jeanette closes the book, feeling as though she has "stumbled on a terrible conspiracy." She wonders what women do when they find they have married a beast—many beasts in stories disguise themselves, and perhaps, she thinks, women all over the world are marrying beasts "in innocence."

That night at her auntie's house, playing card games, Jeanette asks her aunt why so many men are beasts. Her uncle comes to the table, rubs his beard against Jeanette's face, and tell her that women wouldn't love men any mother way. Jeanette's aunt shoos her husband away, and tells Jeanette that she'll "get used to it," and that men "have their little ways." As Jeanette's uncle leaves the room, Jeanette watches him go, half-expecting him to have a tail. Jeanette remarks that she doesn't particularly want a husband; her aunt retorts that there are things one wants, and things one gets. Jeanette is so distracted by her worries about men that she is unable to play cards well, and her aunt sends her home. Jeanette fetches her mother from the parlor, and they leave.

Jeanette's dream reflects her fears about marriage and her uncertainty about men. Jeanette is being raised in a world of women—even her father, whom she lives with, is almost completely absent from her concern or her imagination. Jeanette's dream shows the many fears she has about marrying a man: that he will be unable to see her as she is, that he will be slovenly, that he will be too much like her mother, or that he will be a man of no substance, strength, or constitution.



The idea that men are all pigs—greedy, slovenly, unattractive, and gruesome—takes root in Jeanette's mind at an early age when she is unable to stand the joking and teasing of the women around her. Jeanette fears that she, too, will marry a pig, and fears becoming as blind and gullible as the women all around her.



Couples seem to be everywhere, suddenly, as Jeanette is filled with curiosity for the first time about what it means to be in a relationship and relinquish oneself—especially as a woman—to another. As she reads Beauty and the Beast, a popular fairy tale, she is for the first time frightened rather than enlightened by a story, as she begins to wonder if all around the world women are consenting to marry beasts.



Even in Jeanette's own family, she sees the banal horror of marrying someone coarse, ugly, and "beastlike" unfold before her. Jeanette has really allowed herself to become consumed by the fear of marrying a man only to discover that she has fallen into a trap. Though Jeanette's aunt assures her that men are not all bad and can actually be quite charming and appealing, Jeanette is full of fear and unable to focus on anything but her own worry.



On the walk home, Jeanette asks her mother if the two of them can have a talk. Jeanette's mother offers her an **orange**, and Jeanette begins telling her mother about her dream and her "beast theory." While she is telling the story, her mother hums a hymn and peels an orange. Jeanette asks her mother why she married Jeanette's father, and Jeanette's mother responds that Jeanette does not need to worry about marriage—she is "dedicated to the Lord," and her mother has already put her down for missionary school. Jeanette's mother tells her to "remember Jane Eyre and St. John Rivers," but Jeanette knows that her mother lied to her about the ending of the novel—Jeanette knows that Jane Eyre returns to Mr. Rochester.

On laundry day, Jeanette hides nearby to hear what the women washing their clothes in the alley are saying. Nellie and Doreen, neighbor-women, complain about their husbands—Doreen's husband is cheating on her with a woman who works at the local pub. Doreen also worries about her daughter, Jane, who is seventeen and spends all her time with a girl named Susan. Doreen remarks that if her daughter isn't careful, people will think she and her friend are "like them two at the paper shop." Having heard enough, Jeanette creeps out of hiding and returns home, thinking that it is a good thing she is destined to become a missionary. She puts the problem of men out of her head, and decides to focus on reading the Bible, trusting in the fact that one day she will fall in love just like everyone else.

Jeanette's mother recruits her to run errands in the rain. Jeanette does not want to go, but her mother insists she put her raincoat on and join her. On the bus downtown, they run into May and Ida, one of the women who runs the paper shop. Ida remarks on how grown up Jeanette is and offers her a sweet.

When the bus arrives downtown, Jeanette asks her mother if she can have a new raincoat; her mother refuses. At the market, Jeanette gets the sleeve of her coat caught on a meat hook, and the sleeve tears off. Jeanette's mother takes a roll of tape from her purse and reattaches the arm. One of their neighbors sees Jeanette's mother taping her raincoat together and insists that Jeanette needs a new one. Jeanette, hoping to please her mother, insists that she loves the one she has, but her mother, embarrassed to be seen taping an old raincoat up, informs their neighbor that she's buying Jeanette a new one that afternoon.

As Jeanette approaches her mother, hoping to talk about her latest great fear and be comforted, her mother offers Jeanette yet another symbolic orange before assuring her that Jeanette will never have to worry about marriage if she doesn't want to. Again, Jeanette's mother is framing the narrative of Jeanette's life as special and apart from everyone else's. Jeanette knows, though, that her mother has lied to her in the past, and so is unable to take true comfort in her mother's reassurances—there is a veil of distrust between them now.



Jeanette overhears two women from her neighborhood talking about how awful their husbands are before switching the discussion to one woman's concern that her daughter is not paying enough attention to boys. Jeanette is too young to truly understand the nuances of their conversation, but she understands in a distant way that perhaps marrying a man is not the only option. She takes comfort in the fact that she will not have to marry if she doesn't want to, and decides to throw herself into religion and wait to fall in love in her own time.



The circumstances and chance meetings around Jeanette seem to be prodding her to realize that heterosexuality is not the only option for her, as she reencounters one of the women who runs the paper shop on the heels of overhearing a conversation about a neighbor's daughter's "unnatural passion."



Jeanette's mother is shown in this passage to still be easily and strongly influenced by the opinions of others, despite her belief that she and her daughter are "apart" from the people and the society around them. Jeanette's mother does not want to appear poor, cruel, or uncharitable, as this would affect her neighbors' image of her as a holy, devout, and pure woman.



In a secondhand shop, Jeanette's mother selects an enormous bright pink raincoat for Jeanette to try on. Jeanette hates the jacket, but her mother insists that it is her new raincoat and she'll grow into it. As the two of them walk to the fish stall, Jeanette is miserable, and attempts to lift her mood by having a look at the aquarium of fish. There, she catches her first glimpse of a beautiful girl named Melanie, who is hard at work de-boning fish on a marble slab.

Jeanette strikes up a conversation with Melanie, and the two banter back and forth. Jeanette's mother comes to fetch her, telling her it's time to go to a nearby pub, where they have plans to meet up with Ida and May. When Jeanette turns around, Melanie is gone. While Jeanette's mother, Ida, and May have drinks at the pub, their waitress recruits Jeanette to wash glasses for some cash. Jeanette is happy to have a task she can do that allows her some free time to think about the fish stall and Melanie.

Each week, Jeanette goes back to the fish stall to watch Melanie work. One day, Melanie is not at work, and Jeanette stares at the seafood, feeling miserable. She is just about to leave when at last she sees Melanie approaching. Melanie tells Jeanette she's gotten a job at the library, working Saturdays. Jeanette asks Melanie if she'd like to go get a baked potato, and the two of them eat lunch together. Jeanette tells Melanie about church, and about how she is dedicated to the Lord. Jeanette invites Melanie to church, and Melanie accepts.

The first time that Melanie joins Jeanette at church is, in Jeanette's words, "not a success." Pastor Finch is in town, making a pit stop on a long tour of England, and everyone is fawning over the van he travels in, onto which he has painted the phrase "HEAVEN OR HELL? IT'S YOUR CHOICE." Pastor Finch brings everyone inside to sing some hymns, and the congregation sings excitedly, though Jeanette notices that Melanie is not joining in. Pastor Finch begins bragging about how many souls he has saved on his tour, and describes how he has rescued many people from Unnatural Passions. Jeanette sneaks a glance at Melanie, who looks like she is about to be sick. Jeanette assumes that Melanie has simply caught the Spirit, and squeezes her hand in solidarity.

Jeanette's struggle against her mother is quickly put out of her mind by the sight of Melanie—who, as if in a fairy tale or one of Jeanette's fanciful stories, is alluring and enchanting from Jeanette's very first glimpse of her.



Jeanette is experiencing her first taste of infatuation. Fittingly, having been raised in a world of women, she is entranced by another girl, and must confront these strange new feelings in the company of her mother and her mother's female friends.



As Jeanette and Melanie learn more about each other, Jeanette longs to relate more deeply to her new friend. Jeanette, like her mother before her, has no real way of connecting outside of the context of church and religion, and so does the only thing she can think to do: she invites Melanie to come to church with her, hoping that Melanie will be able to see the world from Jeanette's point of view, and the two of them will be able to relate to one another within the context of holiness and devotion.



The day that Jeanette chooses to bring Melanie to church is a particularly tough one—the frightening and hell-obsessed Pastor Finch is in town, and his rhetoric of fear, damnation, and evil is a little bit much for Melanie to deal with at first. To Jeanette, however, this is all rather normal, and she mistakes Melanie's deep discomfort for a burgeoning spiritual conversion.



At the end of the sermon, Pastor Finch encourages any sinners to raise their hands. Melanie raises her hand, and after the service tells Jeanette that she needs Jesus. She asks Jeanette to be her counselor in Bible study, and Jeanette agrees to visit Melanie's house each week to counsel her. Every Monday from then on, Jeanette goes to Melanie's, and the two pray and read the Bible. Melanie is Jeanette's first real friend other than Elsie, and Jeanette is very excited.

Jeanette talks about Melanie all the time at home, and one day her mother tells her that the two of them need to talk seriously. Jeanette's mother asks Jeanette if she's keen on a boy named Graham, a "newish convert" to the church who Jeanette has been teaching to play guitar. Jeanette's mother tells her that it is time for her to share the tale of Pierre, and pours them each a cup of tea before beginning her story.

As a young woman, Jeanette's mother secured a teaching job in Paris. Though she was not yet with the Lord, she lived a "clean" life. One day, she met a man named Pierre, and he flattered her by calling her beautiful. The two exchanged addresses and began to court one another, and soon Jeanette's mother found herself feeling a fizzing feeling in her stomach—not just around Pierre, but all the time. Jeanette's mother assumed she was in love. One night, Pierre asked her to stay with him, and Jeanette's mother agreed. A couple of days later, in a "fit of guilty anxiety," Jeanette's mother went to the doctor, where after prodding her stomach the doctor asked if she ever felt fizzy in the belly. When she answered that she did, the doctor told her she had a stomach ulcer.

Jeanette's mother took the prescribed tablets and stopped seeing Pierre, and the next time she saw him—by chance—she felt no fizzy feeling. She soon fled the country to avoid him. Jeanette's mother then warns Jeanette to take care: "what you think is the heart might well be another organ." As Jeanette leaves the house that afternoon to go call on Melanie, Jeanette's mother calls out to her, warning her never to let anyone touch her "Down There."

Despite her fear during the sermon, after services are over Melanie offers herself up to the Lord, to the church, to Pastor Finch, and, at last, to Jeanette. She apparently wants to see the world through Jeanette's eyes, which is all Jeanette ever wanted. Finally Jeanette has found someone who wants to commit herself to holiness and perfection as badly as Jeanette does (or who at least wants to be close to Jeanette in any way possible).



Jeanette's mother seems to be willfully misdirecting Jeanette's focus to a boy named Graham, who has not even been mentioned by Jeanette as an object of interest, let alone affection. In this passage readers see that Jeanette's mother has an inkling of what is going on with Jeanette and Melanie, but wants to redirect her daughter's interests without calling attention to the fact that they are beyond the bounds of "normal."



Jeanette's mother is a natural storyteller, as well, and she launches into this comical tale of her own misbegotten youth as an attempt to save Jeanette from the influence of desire—which her mother sees as dangerous, corruptive, and frivolous. Jeanette's mother herself was duped once by feelings of infatuation, and could have ruined her life. She wants to keep her daughter from making mistakes in a similar vein, and so tries to connect with Jeanette through their shared love of storytelling and reminiscence.



Jeanette's mother shows her hand, a little bit, when she begs Jeanette not to let anyone touch her sexually just as Jeanette leaves the house to go and visit Melanie. Jeanette's mother values her daughter's purity and wants to protect it—she is not so naïve that she is blind to what is happening within Jeanette, even if Jeanette herself has not yet found the words for the feelings she has.



Jeanette arrives at Melanie's, and Melanie asks her if she'll spend the night—her mother is away, and Melanie does not like being home alone. After ringing her own mother and getting permission, Jeanette agrees. Jeanette and Melanie read the Bible together, and then thank God for bringing them together. Melanie strokes Jeanette's hair, and the two embrace. Jeanette is frightened, but she cannot stop herself as she and Melanie begin to make love. Jeanette feels as if she has an octopus inside of her.

After that night, Jeanette and Melanie are inseparable. They do everything together, and Jeanette stays over at Melanie's as often as she can. Jeanette notices that her mother does not say anything about how much time the two of them are spending together, and if anything just seems relieved that Jeanette is not really seeing Graham anymore. One night, Jeanette asks Melanie if she thinks that the two of them are engaged in Unnatural Passion; Melanie says she doesn't think so, as Pastor Finch describes Unnatural Passion as awful and painful.

Melanie and Jeanette have volunteered to work together setting up the church's Harvest Festival Banquet, and the two of them work hard in church making everything nice and beautiful. When the congregation arrives and sits down to dinner, Melanie and Jeanette stand on the balcony looking down on them, and feel happy and safe, as if everyone below them is their family.

In a metaphorical, lyrical passage, the Harvest Banquet transforms into a medieval feast, where the chandeliers overhead are shaken every now and then by recurring tremors. The guests look up in interest rather than fear. Outside the banquet hall, the river is frozen; nearby, an army sleeps, waiting to guard the "elect" and elite who attend the banquet. Outside the hall, there is suddenly a rush of torches as the rebels storm the Winter Palace.

5. DEUTERONOMY

In this interlude, Jeanette—writing from an unknown point in the future—considers the relationship between time, fact, fiction, and history. She writes that "time is a great deadener," and that time allows people to make stories "what they will." Stories allow us to explain the universe, and allow the universe to remain unboxed from time. "Everyone who tells a story tells it differently," Jeanette writes, and the only thing that is certain about the stories we tell is how complicated they all are.

As Jeanette and Melanie finally confront their desire for one another, Jeanette's feeling of having an octopus in her stomach mirrors the feeling her mother described of a strange fizziness, though what Jeanette describes herself as feeling is decidedly more animal, more physical, and more alien, and thus is rendered through the bizarre and slightly uncanny symbol of the octopus.



Jeanette and Melanie, as they embark upon their relationship, seem to be flying under the radar. The girls are slightly conflicted about what they are doing together, but it feels so good, pure, and holy to both of them that neither of them can imagine that it would ever be seen as "unnatural" or unholy.



Melanie and Jeanette are truly happy, and feel comforted, embraced, and secure in their community. Nevertheless, there is the fact of their relationship, which despite the comfort and security they feel, each seems to know on some level is taboo and would be frowned upon.



Jeanette and Melanie, happy and carefree at the moment, settle into their Harvest Banquet, unaware of the "rebels with torches" ready to storm the "palace" of young love they have created. There is a true sense of foreboding in this passage, but Melanie and Jeanette are blind to the pain, anger, and danger that is hurtling their way.



At roughly the halfway point of the novel, as the young Jeanette's life is poised on a dangerous cliff, the older Jeanette intervenes to meditate on what it means to tell stories about the past. Stories provide a means of understanding the universe, as they incorporate various points of view—but the influence of time on how stories are told, understood, and spread can "deaden," alter, or influence how they are read, understood, and disseminated.



Jeanette writes that people like to separate storytelling from history so that they know what to believe and what not to believe, but that history only serves the purpose of keeping people where they belong and denying the past. In this way, “we are all historians,” Jeanette says, constantly rewriting our own stories and dispensing with the unsightly parts of our pasts when the past becomes too difficult. The rigidity of the past and the “fact” of history only exists to establish order, and to provide a security that does not exist, whereas there is true “order and balance” to be found in stories. Jeanette is astonished when she looks at a history book and contemplates the “imaginative effort” required to wrangle the world between the front and back covers, knowing that history is not fact but fiction.

Jeanette uses a metaphor to put a fine tip on her point. She writes that constipation was a large problem for many in the years after the Second World War, when prosperity allowed people to dine out more and eat refined, rich foods. “If you always eat out,” she says, “you can never be sure what’s going in.” Jeanette advises her readers to make their own sandwiches if they wish to keep their own teeth.

6. JOSHUA

Jeanette comes downstairs one day to find Mrs. White cleaning the parlor until it sparkles. Fine slipcovers have been placed on the sofas, and all of the brass has been shined to gleaming. Jeanette checks the calendar to see if a house meeting is scheduled, but there is none, and no visiting preacher is due in. Jeanette asks Mrs. White what’s going on, but Mrs. White doesn’t answer her, and only says that her mother has gone out.

Jeanette takes the dog for a walk. As she climbs the hill, she thinks about going to see Melanie later, and thinks about how she recently revealed to her mother “as much as [she] could” about their friendship, though Jeanette herself is not entirely certain what is happening between herself and Melanie. Uncertainty to her is foreign and uncomfortable, and something she has not felt since an incident she refers to as the Awful Occasion.

History, according to Jeanette, is a means of control—just like religion was for her in her youth. History can be changed at a moment’s notice—fact is no more sacred than fiction, as the past is often unsightly, and people frequently revise their histories to fit their narratives. Jeanette seems to be calling herself an unreliable narrator in this passage, calling attention to the gap between the real childhood she is writing from and the fictional one she has put on the page.



Jeanette urges her readers to choose the stories they take in carefully, warning them that if they are unsure what they’re consuming, they might hurt themselves or even lose small parts of themselves trying to digest what is being pushed on them.



Jeanette wakes up to suspicious circumstances at her home, but doesn’t seem to feel threatened or even all that worried. She feels so safe in her community that it doesn’t occur to her that something that spells trouble for her and Melanie could be just around the bend.



Even though Jeanette has told her mother a condensed and possibly garbled version of what is going on between her and Melanie, she does not suspect that her mother will see her actions as wrong or unholy or attempt to change, challenge, or harm her.



The Awful Occasion, Jeanette says, was the time her birth mother appeared and attempted to claim her back. Jeanette had found her adoption papers years ago, but when she asked her mother about them, her mother waved her away, insisting that Jeanette had always been hers. One Saturday, though, there was a knock at the door, and Jeanette's mother answered it. Jeanette asked who was there, but Jeanette's mother told her to go away. From the kitchen, she could hear angry shouting, and pressed a glass against the wall in order to hear what her mother and the stranger were saying. After five minutes, Jeanette put the glass away and began to cry.

When her mother came into the kitchen, Jeanette asked why her mother had sent the woman away when she had been Jeanette's true mother, and Jeanette received a slap. Jeanette's mother told her that the woman was only a "carrying case," and that she had gone and would never come back. Jeanette ran out of the house and up the hill, and when she returned home, her mother was watching television. Neither of them ever spoke of the Awful Occasion again.

Though Jeanette is happy with Melanie, she feels uncomfortable all the time lately, and is sick of lying to her mother about where she's staying at nights. Though it is common for members of their church to spend nights in each other's home, Jeanette feels there is something different about spending the night with Melanie. Often, she and Melanie stay at Elsie's house to evade suspicion, though Elsie seems to know what the two of them are up to. Once, when Melanie stayed at Jeanette's house, Jeanette's mother made up a spare bed in Jeanette's room for Melanie to sleep in. The two slept in Jeanette's bed together, though, and were narrowly caught by Jeanette's mother when she checked on them in the middle of the night.

Soon after that, Jeanette attempted to explain to her mother how she felt, but she was unable to really communicate to her mother all that Melanie meant to her. After the conversation, Jeanette gave her mother a kiss, and Jeanette's mother told her to go up to bed. The two of them have hardly spoken since that night, and Jeanette feels that her mother is "caught up in something," though she is uncertain of what.

The worst memory Jeanette has is of her birth mother's return, which isolated Jeanette and frightened her. Jeanette had found her adoption papers and so knew the truth of how she came to live with her mother and father, but was still jarred and disturbed by the sudden reappearance of her birth mother—and by the fact that Jeanette was not even allowed to get a glimpse of the woman who brought her into the world.



Jeanette calling the stranger who showed up her "mother" hurts and offends her actual mother, who hits Jeanette out of her own pain and anger. Jeanette's mother then refers, awfully, to Jeanette's birth mother as a "carrying case," implying that Jeanette was always willed to her and her alone. The fact that after this confrontation neither of them ever spoke of it again shows the controlling and overbearing but noncommunicative relationship between the two.



Jeanette's happiness has given way to a kind of fear and uncertainty, and since Jeanette has not experienced either emotion since the reappearance of her birth mother, she is unsure of what to do about it. Jeanette and Melanie are more or less flaunting their relationship at this point, and the creeping sense of dread Jeanette manipulates her readers into feeling is palpable as she recalls all the times she and Melanie have nearly been found out.



Jeanette should see the warning signs—especially after she tried to reveal to her harsh, judgmental mother the truth about her lesbian relationship—but for some reason, out of naivete, the distraction of being infatuated, or willful ignorance, she is unable to.



Jeanette returns home after walking the dog to find the house still and empty. There is a note on the fridge from Jeanette's mother, which informs Jeanette that her mother has gone to stay at Mrs. White's. Jeanette thinks it is odd that her mother is staying out—she never stays out—but decides that she can use the opportunity to stay the night with Melanie. After a quick bath, Jeanette goes over to Melanie's house, and the two of them spend the night talking about the future, and whether or not they will be missionaries when they're grown up. At breakfast the next morning, Melanie tells Jeanette that she wants to go to university to study theology. After breakfast, Jeanette tells Melanie she loves her, but Melanie does not say the words back.

When the two arrive at church, the first hymn has already started. The girls slide into a pew next to Miss Jewsbury, who turns to Jeanette and warns her to stay calm. Jeanette is confused, and asks Miss Jewsbury what she's talking about, but Miss Jewsbury just tells Jeanette to come find her after services. As Jeanette looks around the room, she exchanges smiles with many of the congregants, and she feels happy and content among them, thinking that there is nowhere she'd rather be.

After the hymn is over, the church goes very quiet, and Jeanette realizes that something is wrong. The pastor is standing at the front of the church, and Jeanette's mother has gone up to join him. She is weeping. Melanie squeezes Jeanette's hand, and Miss Jewsbury urges the girls to stand up and head to the front. They go together, hand in hand. When they reach the pulpit, the pastor announces to the congregation that Melanie and Jeanette have "fallen foul of their lusts" and have been brought under Satan's spell. He proclaims them "full of **demons**," and a pained cry echoes through the church.

Jeanette attempts to deny the pastor's allegations, but the pastor singles Jeanette out as "the best become the worst." He asks Jeanette on the spot if she loves Melanie "with a love reserved for man and wife," and Jeanette admits that she loves Melanie. The pastor speaks about Unnatural Passion and the work of **demons**, and Jeanette screams that "to the pure all things are pure."

Jeanette sees her mother's odd disappearance merely as yet another chance to run off with Melanie. That evening, the differences between Melanie and Jeanette's goals, desires, and feelings are revealed. Jeanette wants to devote her life to missionary work, while Melanie wants to study. Jeanette is clearly more in love with Melanie than Melanie is with her, as evidenced by Melanie's inability to return Jeanette's declaration.



As Jeanette arrives at church, Miss Jewsbury warns her that something is about to happen, and Jeanette feels a tinge of confusion. But as she looks around during the hymn, she sees only smiles and happiness on the faces of those around her. The tension is mounting steadily in this scene, and Jeanette the writer is perhaps engaging in some of the rewriting and revision she alluded to during the brief interlude "Deuteronomy."



At last, Jeanette and Melanie have been found out—and not only that, but they are now being publicly shamed in front of the members of their congregation, whom they had come to see as their family, their protectors, and their allies. Now Jeanette and Melanie are denigrated as the worst of the worst and called out as dangerous sinners in front of everyone the two of them hold dear. This seems exceptionally cruel on the part of the pastor, particularly considering how young the girls are. Note also that in this and the following sections, the pastor is not named as Spratt, Finch, or someone else, but left nameless and almost more terrifying in his anonymity.



Pastor Finch's earlier words of warning have come true, at least in the eyes of the church. The "special" Jeanette has become the gravest sinner among all her church's congregants, and worse than that, she insists that she is still pure—a tension that her pastor and her fellow congregants cannot get their heads around. Notably, Jeanette quotes the Bible here, showing that her religious knowledge is equal to anyone else in the church, and she can use scripture to defend herself just like her antagonists can.



The pastor then turns to Melanie and asks if she promises to give up her sin and beg for forgiveness. Melanie agrees to do so. The pastor instructs Melanie to follow Mrs. White to the vestry, and soon the elders will come pray over her and help her to truly repent. The pastor then turns back to Jeanette, but Jeanette can only say how much she loves both Melanie and the Lord both. The pastor tells Jeanette that the church will not see her suffer. He instructs her to go home and wait for the congregation to come help her.

Jeanette runs out into the street, where Miss Jewsbury is waiting for her. Miss Jewsbury brings Jeanette back to her house and makes coffee for the two of them. She asks Jeanette why Jeanette wasn't more careful, and that no one would have found out if Jeanette hadn't tried to explain things to her "mad" mother. Jeanette asks Miss Jewsbury who told her what was going on, and Miss Jewsbury answers that Elsie Norris did. Jeanette is deeply hurt, but Miss Jewsbury insists that Elsie was only trying to protect Jeanette. Miss Jewsbury gives Jeanette some brandy to drink, and Jeanette falls asleep in the living room. When she wakes up, Miss Jewsbury is sitting beside her, and begins to stroke her head and shoulders. Jeanette kisses Miss Jewsbury and soon the two are making love, though Jeanette "hates" it.

The next morning, Jeanette creeps home, planning to change quickly and sneak off to school before anyone notices. When she arrives at the house, however, there are voices coming from the parlor, and the church elders drag her into the room. They ask her whether she stayed the night with the "unholy" Miss Jewsbury, but Jeanette denies it, and insists she must go to school. The pastor urges her to sit down. It is 8:30 in the morning.

At ten at night, the elders finally go home after having prayed over Jeanette all day and urging Jeanette to renounce Melanie and the **demon** that lives inside Jeanette herself. When all the elders leave, the pastor offers Jeanette one last chance to repent, but Jeanette refuses. The pastor tells Jeanette's mother that he will return with the elders the day after tomorrow, and instructs Jeanette's mother not to let Jeanette out of the parlor and not to feed her until she repents. Jeanette's mother nods and locks her in, taking the lightbulb out of the room so that Jeanette must sit in darkness.

During her thirty-six hours in isolation, Jeanette thinks a lot about the "**demon**" within her. She wonders if the pure love she had for Melanie could really have belonged to a demon, and decides that if the church wants to get at her demon, they'll have to get at her. She realizes that if she does let the church take away her demon, she'll have to give up what she has found.

Melanie, who perhaps does not even really love Jeanette, folds almost immediately and agrees to repent, while Jeanette insists that her love for Melanie is pure and rooted in their shared spirituality. The pastor, however, cannot understand where Jeanette is coming from, and announces his intent to bring the force of the community down upon her and make her see things his way.



Miss Jewsbury is shown in this passage to be both a source of comfort and a predatory force. Miss Jewsbury reveals herself to be a lesbian as well, and so is able to relate to Jeanette and comfort her emotionally in a way that no one else can. However, Miss Jewsbury, as an adult, should know to be more responsible with the fragile and distraught young Jeanette. Jeanette's hatred of the sex she and Miss Jewsbury share is contrasted against the animal desire she felt for Melanie, but Jeanette goes through with the act anyway, as she is hurt and confused almost to the point of numbness.



Jeanette is accosted by the members of her congregation, who have been waiting patiently to "save" her. It becomes clear in this passage that Miss Jewsbury's "unholiness" is common knowledge in their community, but has never been spoken of or acted upon, as opposed to Jeanette's fresh and much-made-of unholiness.



Jeanette puts up a fight, and refuses to capitulate to her congregation's elders as they attempt to exorcise the "demon" that has taken up residence in her. Jeanette's punishment is solitary confinement—corporal and psychological punishment meant to cow her into submitting to the will of her congregation. Jeanette's mother consents to the pastor's order, prioritizing her church's needs over her daughter's, as she always has.



Jeanette still cannot understand how something so beautiful—the love and desire she and Melanie shared—could be considered evil. Jeanette becomes protective of rather than fearful of or angry at her demon, and is actually reluctant to give it up.



Just then, a voice nearby tells Jeanette that she can't give up. An **orange demon** is leaning on the coffee table. The demon tells Jeanette that it wants to help her decide what it is that she wants. The demon tells Jeanette that everyone has a demon, but not everyone knows how to make use of their demons; demons are not evil, just difficult. The demon warns Jeanette that if she ignores him, she's "quite likely to end up in two pieces or lots of pieces." Jeanette asks her demon what will happen to her if she keeps him. The demon warns her she'll have a difficult time. Jeanette asks the demon if it's worth it, and the demon tells Jeanette that the decision is up to her. Then he vanishes.

When the pastor and the elders return, Jeanette tells them that she is ready to repent. In truth, she really just wants to get the repentance over as quickly as possible, as she is starving. As the elders begin to pray over her, she feels the **demon** prickling the back of her neck. Jeanette assures the demon she's not getting rid of him, just trying to get herself out of isolation.

The pastor tells Jeanette that he hopes she'll testify to her repentance the following Sunday, and Jeanette, feeling exhausted and "squashed," agrees. She asks what has become of Melanie. Mrs. White tells Jeanette that Melanie has gone away for a while to "recover." As soon as the elders leave, Jeanette runs to Miss Jewsbury, and asks if she knows where Melanie has gone. Miss Jewsbury invites Jeanette in, and tells Jeanette that Melanie is staying with relatives in a nearby town. Miss Jewsbury agrees to drive Jeanette to see her, and Jeanette calls her mother to tell her that she feels compelled to spend the night in church.

At Melanie's, Jeanette is turned away from the door when Melanie sees her, but Jeanette begs her to talk to her. Jeanette sneaks into Melanie's family's house, and promptly falls asleep upstairs. She has a dream in which she is in a great stone arena, where mutilated men and women are being emptied onto the grass. Jeanette attempts to climb a stone turret with the rest of the prisoners, and eventually finds a bookshop at the top. Inside, a woman tells Jeanette that she is in the Room of Final Disappointment in the city of Lost Chances—she has made a Fundamental Mistake in her real life, and no matter how high she climbs, she will just end up in this room.

The demon's appearance is a hallucinatory product of Jeanette's starvation and isolation, but it also represents the internal struggle she faces as she languishes alone in the parlor. Jeanette is unsure whether she should repent and forget all she has come to learn about herself over the course of her relationship with Melanie, or whether she should hang onto her demon and lose her connection to her faith but retain the knowledge of who she has become.



Jeanette decides to keep her demon, not knowing what it will mean but too fearful to give up the love she has experienced and what she has learned about herself. She "repents" for the sake of saving face and being welcomed back into the fold, but the demon stays with her even as the church elders pray over her.



Jeanette has repented, but still doesn't feel she has any closure as far as Melanie is concerned. Despite their one-sided sexual encounter, Jeanette now considers Miss Jewsbury an ally, and turns to her in a moment of need. Rather than the church women and elders who simply want to erase Jeanette's "sin," Miss Jewsbury wants to help Jeanette understand herself and her desires, and takes steps to ensure that Jeanette is able to see her and Melanie's relationship through to the end.



When Jeanette reunites with Melanie, she is both emotionally and physically exhausted and falls asleep. The dream she has at Melanie's family's house shows her fears of being ostracized not only here and now by her community, but in the next life as well. Jeanette's religious beliefs are still very much alive, and she fears that by keeping her demon she has condemned herself to damnation, or at least endless uncertainty, in the realm beyond.



Melanie wakes Jeanette up and tells her that she is running a temperature. Jeanette touches Melanie's cheek, but Melanie pulls away from her. Jeanette asks Melanie what the elders did to her, but Melanie tells her that nothing happened—she repented, and the elders told her to go away for a week. Melanie tells Jeanette that the two of them can't see each other anymore. They fall asleep crying, and make love in the middle of the night. In the morning, Miss Jewsbury sounds her car horn, and Jeanette leaves Melanie alone.

When Jeanette returns home, she has come down with glandular fevers. Her mother believes the illness is evil leaving Jeanette's body, and tells Jeanette that as soon as she has recovered she will be accepted back into the fold of the church. While Jeanette lies sick in the parlor, her mother goes through her bedroom, collecting all of her notes and letters to and from Melanie and burning them in the backyard. Jeanette, deeply hurt by this betrayal, writes that her mother "burnt a lot more than letters that night," though she still believed that her and Jeanette's relationship would remain unchanged. A wall has fallen, Jeanette says, and "that walls should fall is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet"—in other words, her mother has brought their impending estrangement upon herself.

Jeanette descends into a lyrical meditation on her "ransacked" life, perhaps returning to the scene of the raided Harvest Banquet she alluded to earlier in the chapter. "The Forbidden City lies ransacked now," and even a small pebble at this point could fell a once-mighty warrior. The story becomes associative and filled with children's nursery rhymes as, presumably, Jeanette's fever worsens and breaks. She invokes the tale of Humpty Dumpty, and the myth of the chalk circle. She wonders how a great wall and a chalk circle can be told apart. A wall protects the body, she surmises, but a circle protects the soul.

Jeanette's mother wakes her up with a bowl of **oranges** and tells her she has been rambling in her sleep. Jeanette takes an orange and tries to peel it, but she is weak, and has trouble. She wonders why her mother never gives her grapes or bananas. She finally peels the orange and tears the fruit open, and sitting in the middle of the flesh is the **orange demon**, who asks Jeanette if she's feeling any better. Jeanette tells the demon she feels like she's going to die. The demon assures her that she's recovering, and that now that she's made her choice she can never go back. Jeanette protests that she hasn't made any choice. The demon disappears.

Melanie and Jeanette's tearful goodbye demonstrates the gulf between the two girls—Melanie has taken the easy way out and wants nothing more to do with Jeanette, so frightened is she of what will happen if she does not repent, whereas Jeanette would still do anything for Melanie. Nevertheless, Jeanette accepts what must happen, and leaves Melanie to her "recovery" and her family.



Jeanette's illness renders her weak and helpless. Rather than aiding her daughter, her mother sees the illness as punishment or as a necessary blight upon Jeanette's health as retribution for her transgression with Melanie. Jeanette's mother further betrays her daughter by burning her letters and mementos, effectively severing the bonds of trust that had existed between her and Jeanette. Burning Jeanette's things shows that Jeanette's mother does not truly forgive her daughter, and now Jeanette is unable to ever truly forgive her mother.



As Jeanette's fever worsens, she considers the falling of walls—the wall which held her and mother's relationship up, the wall which separated Jeanette from "sin" and knowledge—as well as the idea of the chalk circle, a mythical (or pagan) emblem of bodily protection used to encircle those in need of safety. This image will come up again later in the novel—for now, Jeanette is unable to do much of anything to protect herself, bodily or spiritually, from those around her who have shown themselves to be bigots, hypocrites, and zealots.



Jeanette's mother offers her daughter little help or medicine, but of course comes to her side with a bowl of oranges. Oranges once represented comfort, but now that the demon has shown up, he has infiltrated every part of Jeanette's life. She cannot go back to seeing oranges as a symbol of comfort, because the demon has revealed to Jeanette the falsities and inadequacies of her "old" life. Jeanette can never go back to seeing things the way she once did, and the demon pops up to make sure Jeanette remembers not to fall back into ignorance.



By the time summer rolls around, Jeanette is her old self again. Melanie has gone away before starting university, and Jeanette is back in the fold, preparing sermons for an upcoming tent revival in the seaside town of Blackpool. No one from church has mentioned the incident, and no one seems to have noticed that Miss Jewsbury has packed up and left town. Meanwhile, Jeanette's mother is collecting canned foods to add to her War Cupboard beneath the church, which she is stocking with nonperishables to prepare for another Holocaust, or for the End of Days. Jeanette finds herself disagreeing with her mother more and more, no longer living under the illusion that the two of them see the world the same way—Jeanette realizes now that she and her mother are “on different planets.”

The meeting the first night in Blackpool is a great success. Jeanette preaches, and after the sermon May remarks how lucky it is that Jeanette has lost none of her gifts in her ordeal. Jeanette's mother simply replies that she “got to [Jeanette] in time,” and then goes off to bed.

The next day, after a successful morning of passing out pamphlets on the street, the pastor gives everyone the afternoon off. May wants to go to the zoo, and Jeanette's mother wants to go to see an exhibition nearby, but Jeanette declines both their offers and heads off on the promenade by herself. Down on the boardwalk, she finds a girl from church named Katy, who is sitting in a deck chair eating ice cream and “look[ing] like fun.” Jeanette sits down next to Katy and strikes up a conversation. She learns that Katy lives in a town just a short bus ride from Jeanette's home. Jeanette tells Katy excitedly that they can see each other often after the beach trip, and the two exchange a meaningful glance. Jeanette “thinks it best” that she leave Katy and go inspect the gospel tent.

Months later, Christmas approaches. Jeanette's mother is chosen to write the script for the Nativity play, and she takes to the task with great seriousness and devotion. Meanwhile, Jeanette is teaching a Bible study class of which Katy is a “lively” member. Jeanette is nervous around Katy, but notes that she hasn't seen the **orange demon** in a long time, so she must be “back to normal.”

On the day of the Nativity play, Jeanette sits next to Katy in the audience, holding the cue cards for the actors. In the middle of the performance, the side door of the church opens, and a figure slips in. Jeanette squints to see who the familiar figure is, and soon realizes that Melanie has come back.

Though life has outwardly returned to normal and Jeanette has been accepted back into her congregation, she now sees everything in a new light. She notices how everyone around her is ignoring what happened, and she is slightly troubled by Miss Jewsbury's sudden disappearance. As Jeanette's mother gathers supplies, hoarding for some future disaster, Jeanette sees what everyone was talking about all those years when they called her mother “mad.” A divide has cropped up between the two of them, and it can no longer be crossed.



Jeanette is not only back in the fold, but she is back in a position of relative power and influence in her church. Jeanette's mother and May make snide reference to the “incident,” but everything is bubbling under the surface.



Jeanette is apparently back in everyone's good graces, and is several months removed from the incident with Melanie, when another girl catches her eye—Katy. As Jeanette talks and flirts a little with Katy, she realizes what is happening, and is able to restrain herself just a bit from getting in too deep too quickly. Jeanette knows the trouble that a flirtation and a relationship with another girl got her into last time, and is hesitant to go there again, though she cannot suppress the desires she now knows are a part of her.



As the year goes on, Jeanette tries to deny her attraction to Katy, still longing on some level to return to “normal.” Perhaps life will not be as difficult for her as the orange demon predicted, she hopes. Meanwhile, Jeanette and her mother separately explore and thrive in the intersection of storytelling, religion, and control.



Jeanette is shocked and alarmed by Melanie's reappearance, especially on such a special night for her and her mother. Jeanette thought things were “normal” again, but Melanie's reappearance reminds her of the past, which, as the older Jeanette has warned, cannot be so easily erased without consequence.



After the play is over, Jeanette heads home and leaves her mother to bask in bravos at the church. Jeanette is shaken, rattled by Melanie's sudden reappearance after having put Melanie out of her mind for so long. At nine o' clock there is a knock on the door—it is Melanie. Jeanette lets her in, and the two of them chat for half an hour or so about Melanie's life at university. Melanie asks Jeanette if she'd like to go for a walk someday, and Jeanette declines. Melanie then tells Jeanette that her mother will be moving away soon, and asks Jeanette if she'll come and say goodbye. Again, Jeanette declines. Melanie puts on her gloves and kisses Jeanette goodbye; Jeanette feels nothing. After Melanie has gone, though, Jeanette falls apart, and sits with her knees tucked under her chin, begging the Lord to set her free.

It is a busy time, however, and so Jeanette cannot linger on her feelings for too long. The day after the Nativity play it is time to sing carols at the town hall, and a big crowd comes to watch. Jeanette spots Melanie in the crowd, but pretends not to notice when Melanie waves to her. The Salvation Army carolers arrive and set up shop nearby, and their competing carols drown out the congregation, so the church carolers disperse.

On the way to the bus stop, Jeanette feels a hand on her shoulder—it is Melanie. The two ride the bus together, and Melanie offers Jeanette an **orange** from her purse. As Melanie starts to peel the fruit, Jeanette tells her that she doesn't want the orange. Melanie talks breezily while Jeanette sits frozen and panicked until it is time for her stop. That night at Bible study Jeanette is visibly upset; Katy notices and wants to help, and invites Jeanette to come stay the weekend at her house, camping out in her parents' RV. Jeanette, who has not stayed anywhere but her own home for a long time, thinks staying out might do her some good.

Jeanette, launching again into a fanciful story, describes a secret walled garden on the banks of the Euphrates River. The entrance is hidden, and "there is no way in for you." Inside the garden grows every plant imaginable, and at the center of the garden is a sundial and an **orange** tree. "All true quests end in this garden," but to eat the oranges that grow on the tree at the center of it is to leave the garden, "because the fruit speaks of other longings." Jeanette writes of reluctantly leaving the garden, and saying goodbye to the place she loves, unsure if she will ever return, and knowing for certain only that she will never return the same way as she got in.

As Melanie tries to reinsert herself into Jeanette's life, Jeanette visibly balks at being reminded of the pain and actual physical torture that her relationship with Melanie brought into her world. Melanie seems to have forgotten everything and smoothed over the past, but to Jeanette, whose world was brought crashing down in the wake of the discovery of their affair, the past is full of only pain and regret. Jeanette still hopes that she can be "set free" by the Lord, in spite of the contract she has made with her orange demon.



Melanie follows Jeanette everywhere—the past is inescapable. Jeanette cannot exert control over this aspect of her life, and neither can she escape the memory of her "transgression" and Melanie's role in her suffering.



In this passage, Melanie offers Jeanette an orange—a symbol of comfort and pacification. Jeanette refuses the orange, however, not wanting to accept anything from Melanie at all, especially attempts at soothing or care. As Jeanette's pain over Melanie's reappearance in town worsens, Katy offers a shoulder to cry on, and Jeanette, desperate for connection and comfort, accepts.



This story possibly symbolizes Jeanette's longing. The walled garden is like a relationship, or desire; the orange at the center is fulfillment. No two relationships can be entered the same way, and once left, they can never be returned to quite the same either. Note also that Jeanette uses more Biblical imagery for this fantasy, as the garden somewhat resembles Eden, a paradise that one cannot return to once exited, with the "forbidden fruit" at its center. As Jeanette approaches a new relationship, she considers the ways she has been hurt and the reward of fulfillment that awaits her through a thick tangle of conflict, both internal and external.



At Katy's parents' residence, the two girls spend the night in the caravan parked outside. Katy is worried the two of them will be cold, but Jeanette writes that the two of them were never cold—not that night nor any of the nights they spent together in the years that would follow as their love affair unfolded.

In church, Jeanette took care to never look at Katy while she herself was preaching, though Katy always sat in the front row and listened closely. Jeanette concedes that the two of them had a spiritual relationship, and found happiness and fulfillment in both throwing themselves into church life.

On Palm Sunday, Melanie returns to town once more, excited to announce that she is going to be married in the fall—to an army man. Jeanette doesn't object to Melanie getting married to a man—she does not feel threatened by men, as within her church she feels powerful and safe—but objects to Melanie marrying this man in particular, whom Jeanette feels has caused Melanie to turn “serene to the point of being bovine.” When Melanie asks Jeanette what she's been up to lately, Jeanette remains close-mouthed, not wanting to tell her anything about her new love affair with Katy. That afternoon, as Melanie's fiancé prepares to drive her away to his parents' house, he approaches Jeanette to tell her discreetly that he “forg[ives] them both.” Jeanette musters her strength and spits in the man's face.

7. JUDGES

Jeanette's mother wants her to move out of the house. She claims that Jeanette makes her ill, makes the house ill, and has brought evil into the church, and tells Jeanette that her decision to kick Jeanette out is backed by the pastor and most of the congregation. Jeanette does not immediately reveal what has transpired, but knows that she is in deep trouble, and that “there [is] no escaping this time.”

Jeanette takes her Bible and walks up the hill with her family's beloved dog in tow. Jeanette considers the fact that she “love[s] the wrong sort of people”—namely, she engages in romantic love with other women. Her mother has accused her of “aping men,” but Jeanette considers that statement far from the truth, to say the least—she embraces her own womanhood and retains her childhood distrust of and disdain for men. Jeanette reflects on how, after her exorcism, she continued to love God and the church, but began to see that love as increasingly complicated. Jeanette reveals that she has abandoned all plans to become a missionary, no longer willing to devote her life to the service of the church.

Katy and Jeanette embark on a relationship together, and Jeanette chooses definitively to lean into her identity and chase the “orange” at the center of the “garden”—and to fully embrace her “demon” as well.



Jeanette and Katy's relationship is different than Jeanette and Melanie's. Both are rooted in desire and spirituality alike, but Jeanette feels that she and Katy are equals, and she knows that her love for Katy is reciprocated.



Though Jeanette has moved on, it still pains her to see Melanie reject her true identity and marry a “beast.” Jeanette's contract with her demon prevents her from repressing herself as Melanie has, and Jeanette is disappointed to see how “easy” Melanie's life has become at such a great cost. Jeanette feels vitriol towards Melanie's new beau as he condescendingly informs Jeanette that she has his forgiveness. In Jeanette's heart, she knows she and Melanie did nothing wrong, and as Melanie's fiancé steps out of line and insults Jeanette all she can think to do is insult him right back.



Though the audience does not expressly know what's happening at the start of this passage, it is easy enough to figure out: Jeanette has been discovered “sinning” again, and now there seems to be no forgiveness left for her—from her mother or from anyone in the church.



Jeanette takes herself on a walk and contemplates what is “wrong” with her. She knows that she can't help loving women, but where her mother sees this desire as unnatural, Jeanette knows it to be an inextricable part of her identity. Jeanette, faithful as ever, worries that her faith is seen as false because her identity is directly in opposition to the church's beliefs. Feeling rejected and angry, Jeanette has decided to stop giving so much to an institution and a tradition that only scorns and punishes her for living her truth.



Jeanette launches into a tale of Sir Perceval, the youngest of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, who has just set out from Camelot. King Arthur has begged Perceval not to go—the quest he is setting out on is no ordinary one, but the Knights of the Round Table have all left their King's hall, and the Round Table is “almost [a] symbol now.” There is a stone that holds a bright sword, but no one can pull it out. King Arthur sits on the steps of his castle staring at the Round Table, which is decorated with every plant imaginable. At the center of the table is a sundial and a thorny crown. Arthur thinks of the past, “when there were lights and smiles,” and misses Sir Perceval.

Katy and Jeanette recently spent a week together at their church's guest house in the village of Morecambe. Jeanette has been careful throughout the course of her relationship with Katy, keeping any letters that have passed between them in her locker at work so as to avoid suspicion. However, excited by the prospect of a week alone together, Katy and Jeanette were foolish and careless on their first night in Morecambe; they left the door unlocked, and while the two made love in bed that night, someone peeked in with a flashlight and caught the two of them together before quickly disappearing. Jeanette promised Katy that she would think of something to get them out of it, and devised “the most fanciful [plan] of [her] brilliant career.”

At breakfast the next morning, the two girls are summoned to the office of one of Jeanette's mother's friends, who had once been the treasurer of the Society for the Lost. The woman demands the truth. Jeanette spins a story in which her affair with Melanie had never really ended, and says that after months and months of heart-rending correspondence with Melanie, Jeanette had begged Katy to help her arrange a meeting with Melanie in Morecambe. Jeanette's mother's friend believes her, and Jeanette's plan works—the ex-treasurer doesn't want to bother Katy's parents with the explanation, so Katy is left unpunished and undiscovered, while all the blame is forced onto Jeanette, who doesn't want the church to “start the **demon** stuff” up with her beloved Katy. Jeanette packs up and prepares to go home after spending one final, tearful afternoon with Katy at the beach.

The tale of Sir Perceval starts in this chapter and continues through the rest of the book. Perhaps the most inscrutable story-within-a-story that the book presents, Perceval's tale can be interpreted a number of ways. As Perceval leaves Arthur behind, it is unclear what Arthur represents: is Arthur the church, which Jeanette is turning her back on? Is Arthur Jeanette's lover Katy, whom Jeanette will inevitably have to leave? As the story progresses some answers will become clearer, but this mutable story of loss, abandonment, and longing is more thematic and atmospheric, at least right now, than one that tracks Jeanette's “real-life” decisions in a precise allegory.



Jeanette reveals the reason she is being kicked out of the house: she and Katy were caught red-handed due to a momentary loss of foresight. In the wake of being found out, Jeanette comforted Katy—truly comforted her—and put her storytelling skills and inventive mind to use as she struggled to find a way to keep her beloved girlfriend out of harm's way and free from the cruel punishments of their churchgoing community.



Jeanette does not want Katy to be subjected to the same pain, torture, and shame that she was, and so agrees to take the fall—after all, the church has already put her through the worst thing she's ever gone through, and now she knows she can handle it. Jeanette does not want Katy to be told she has an evil demon, though Jeanette feels that the demon within her herself is what has been driving her to fight for her own desires, her own agency, and fulfillment of her own life. Jeanette and Katy break things off, which is for the best, though it brings them both deep pain and sorrow.



At home, the scene is “incredible”—her mother smashes every plate in the kitchen before calling the pastor and ordering Jeanette straight to bed. From her bedroom, Jeanette can hear her mother downstairs, praying for the Lord to send her a sign. When the pastor arrives, Jeanette hears the two of them talking in low voices, and is almost asleep when they both appear upstairs in her bedroom. The pastor stands away from Jeanette’s bed as if she is “infected,” and explains to her that she is the victim of a great evil. The pastor proclaims that Jeanette’s **demon** has returned “sevenfold.”

Jeanette’s mother wails in agony, then begins blaming Jeanette for giving in to her own perversity. Jeanette’s mother and the pastor argue between themselves whether Jeanette is a victim or a wicked person, and Jeanette listens, bemused. Suddenly, seven ripe **oranges** drop down onto the windowsill, and Jeanette asks her mother and the pastor if either of them would like an orange. Jeanette’s mother proclaims that Jeanette has gone mad, but the pastor insists that it is Jeanette’s “master” speaking through Jeanette—meaning the Devil. The pastor, stating that Jeanette’s case has become too difficult for him to manage, instructs Jeanette’s mother to keep an eye on her, ignore her raving, and let her continue attending church. The two leave Jeanette in peace, and she stares for a long time at the oranges, realizing she is going to “need more than an icon” to get her through this latest trial.

The next day, Jeanette attends the Sisterhood meeting at her church. It is the first time Elsie has been in attendance for a long while. Elsie knows what is happening, but holds Jeanette close and comforts her, and discreetly invites her over for a cup of tea after church. As the meeting begins, the other women become hysterical each time they meet Jeanette’s eye, and everyone is relieved when it’s finally over.

After the meeting Jeanette goes to Elsie’s, who reveals that Miss Jewsbury has moved to Leeds, is teaching music, and is “not living alone.” Elsie confesses to Jeanette that it was she who told Miss Jewsbury about Jeanette’s affair with Melanie. Elsie laments having gotten sick and being forced in and out of the hospital, telling Jeanette that she would have “sorted [both her and Melanie] out” had she not fallen ill. Jeanette hugs Elsie and the two of them sit by the fire, not talking about much of anything. Jeanette is grateful to Elsie for having given her the gift of an ordinary evening spent with a friend. Jeanette leaves, and Elsie tells her to come back whenever she needs to.

Jeanette’s mother, who has grown more distant from her daughter over the course of the last year, reacts in wild, unthinking rage. Jeanette’s mother thought her daughter was “back to normal” and had “exorcised” all her demons, and to discover that the opposite is true brings her great shame. Knowing she alone cannot control Jeanette any longer, Jeanette’s mother calls upon one of their church’s pastors (again unnamed as either Spratt or Finch) to help her with Jeanette, believing that something much darker than just natural desire is working on her daughter.



As Jeanette finds herself once again at the mercy of her fanatical mother and her demon-obsessed preacher, she finds herself hallucinating a symbol of comfort: oranges. Jeanette attempts to offer these oranges to her mother and her pastor, to soothe them as oranges have been offered to her to blandly soothe her all her life, but when her mother and pastor realize that Jeanette is hallucinating they become even more frightened of the state she’s in. Even Jeanette realizes that things are more dire than they’ve ever been, and she will need more than a false symbol of comfort and hope to get her throughout whatever is coming her way.



Jeanette is still allowed to go to church in hopes that her soul can be saved, and at the Sisterhood meeting, she is able to connect with an old friend, Elsie, who offers her genuine support, comfort, and solidarity, while the rest of the women treat Jeanette like a leper—or worse.



Elsie laments not being able to help Jeanette, and wishes she could have been able to head off all of Jeanette’s woes and troubles before they came to fruition. It’s unclear whether Elsie would have encouraged Jeanette to “keep her demon” and be herself or would have tried to dissuade her from pursuing relationships with women, but that hardly matters now—Elsie has been the only member of the congregation to show Jeanette true care and kindness, and Jeanette is deeply grateful for Elsie’s support.



The next few days pass by “in a kind of numbness,” and Jeanette is hyper-conscious of the fact that the entire congregation seems to be scared of her. At service on Sunday, the pastor announces that the root of the problem in the church has been allowing women congregants to have power, and he announces that women will no longer be allowed to preach in their church. There is an uproar, but Jeanette’s mother stands up and speaks out in support of the pastor’s decision. Jeanette’s mother goes on about how Jeanette has spurned the call to missionary work and has wielded “inappropriate” power on the home front. Jeanette’s mother speculates that Jeanette’s lesbianism is the result of her taking on “men’s work.”

Suddenly, a voice cries out that all Jeanette’s mother has said is a “load of old twaddle.” Jeanette turns around and finds that it is Elsie who has spoken up. Elsie dissolves into a coughing fit, clearly agitated, and then falls over. Jeanette runs to the back of the church to help Elsie, but the others hold her back. While some members of the congregation bundle Elsie in her coat and help her home, the pastor approaches Jeanette and demands she give up all preaching, Bible study teaching duties, and any “influential contact.” He also tells Jeanette of his intention to subject her to a “further more powerful exorcism” followed by a two-week banishment, alongside her mother, to recover by the sea, once she has agreed to his terms and begun to repent. Jeanette tells the pastor she is tired, and heads home.

The narrative switches over to the story of Sir Perceval, who has been wandering in the woods for many days. He can see the tracks of other knights who have tread this path. He seeks a ruined chapel, which lies “disused and holy” somewhere in the woods. Last night, he dreamed of the Holy Grail moving toward him ensconced in a beam of light. He reached out to touch it, but when he awoke his hands were full of thorns. Tonight, he dreams instead of Arthur’s court, where he was the King’s “darling.” Perceval dreams of his old friends, but knows that they are all now dead. He dreams of King Arthur sitting despondent on a stone step, holding his head in his hands. Perceval reaches out to embrace King Arthur, but wakes up clutching a tree covered in poison ivy.

The next morning, the pastor comes to Jeanette’s house for tea. He asks when he should book her and her mother for their “holiday,” but Jeanette does not answer. Jeanette tells the pastor she refuses to go—she is leaving the church. The pastor and Jeanette’s mother beg her not to leave, and even offer to let her continue teaching Bible study under supervision. Jeanette refuses. The pastor at last asks Jeanette one final time if she will repent, and she tells him she won’t.

As Jeanette is forced to endure yet another ambush in church, this time the stakes are even higher. Jeanette’s position within the church is not the only thing being threatened—now the pastor is planning to take away power from all women within the church, though women have been shown to be the backbone and the heart of the institution throughout the novel. Jeanette’s mother’s most recent betrayal stings even more deeply, as Jeanette’s mother always told her growing up that she was “special” and had the power to change people’s hearts and minds.



Elsie once again speaks out and stands up in support of Jeanette, but she is very old, and the effort takes a toll on her. As Elsie is taken away Jeanette is not even allowed to tend to her friend—she is forced to stay behind with the pastor and be talked down to, shamed, and threatened with even more corporal and psychological punishment, as well as effective banishment from the church and the town until she agrees to sever her contract with her “demon.” Jeanette is just plain exhausted at this point, and refuses to engage with the beast-like man who wields such power in the institution Jeanette once believed was good, pure, and just.



As Jeanette continues on, she grasps again and again for the things she wants—power within her church, relationships with women she loves and cares for, and friendships with members of her congregation who share the same beliefs and values. At every turn, though, Jeanette is wounded and attacked. Perceval’s struggle to grasp for Arthur and the Grail in his dreams mirrors Jeanette’s failures to attain the things she most wants, and failure to protect herself as she pursues them.



Jeanette has made a decision not to hurt herself anymore in the name of her church. She tells her mother and her pastor that she will no longer be a member—she would rather leave the church, the bedrock of her entire life, than deny herself the chance to live freely, without fear or shame.



The pastor and Jeanette’s mother retreat to the parlor for half an hour, and then the pastor leaves. Jeanette’s mother tells Jeanette that she has to leave—she will not allow **demons** in her house. Jeanette protests that she has nowhere to go, but her mother tells her that “the Devil looks after his own,” and pushes her out of the house.

Jeanette’s mother, believing her daughter to be possessed, kicks her out of the house and tells her that if she wants to hang onto her demon, then it’s demons who’ll look after her. Jeanette’s mother never really loved Jeanette for who she was as a person, but only for what she represented and could do for Jeanette’s mother herself. Jeanette’s mother knows she can’t control her daughter anymore, and lashes out in pain and anger.



On her last morning at home, Jeanette empties the trash and walks the dog. Jeanette cannot imagine what will become of her. She is surprised to find that this last day at home does not feel like judgement day, but rather like just another morning.

Jeanette cannot believe that she is leaving home, and more than that, is astounded by how anticlimactic it all is—the end of her childhood, the end of her religious life, and, presumably, the end of her torturous relationship with her mother.



8. RUTH

Jeanette tells a story that took place “a long time ago, when the kingdom was divided up into separate compartments like pressure cookers,” and people took travels to other realms a lot more seriously than they do now, considering problems such as what sort of monsters they might come across and what to do should they encounter a wizard “who wants to keep an eye on you.” In these days of old, Jeanette says, magic was very important, and many people drew chalk circles around themselves to keep themselves safe from magic and harm. Wizards, especially, must spend many years in a chalk circle during their training, until they can push their magic outside the bounds of their own hearts. It is not possible for them to change anything, she says, until they understand the substance they wish to change.

At perhaps the most crucial cliffhanger in the narrative, Jeanette launches into a fanciful tale that is the most involved story-within-a-story in the entire novel. Jeanette explains the world her story will take place in—one in which magic is a means of control (and thus a metaphor for religion), and where one must train for many years to develop the self-protective tools necessary to survive. This story directly mirrors Jeanette’s life as she prepares to push her way out of the “chalk circle” of her childhood, and find a new chalk circle to protect herself in the wider world.



A young girl named **Winnet** wanders the woods, and is followed by a strange black bird with huge wings. After a while, the bird disappears. Later that same afternoon, Winnet comes upon a sorcerer standing on the opposite bank of a rushing stream. The sorcerer calls out to Winnet, and tells her that he knows her name. Winnet is afraid—if the sorcerer is telling the truth, then that means he has power over her. Naming means power, after all; Adam named the animals and then the animals came at his call.

Winnet is clearly a stand-in for Jeanette, and her journey through the forest mirrors Jeanette’s journey for self-discovery. When Winnet comes upon a sorcerer, she knows that if she allows him to name her or to guess her name, she will give him power—just as Jeanette’s adoptive mother named her and thus attained power over her, and just as Adam, in the Bible, gained power over the animals he named.



Winnet tells the sorcerer she doesn't believe him, and the sorcerer tells her to cross the stream so that he can whisper her name in her ear. Winnet, knowing that the land across the bridge must be the sorcerer's territory, refuses. The sorcerer warns her that she will never get out of the forest without his help. After a difficult night struggling in the mud and fighting off an army of water ants, Winnet is taunted by the sorcerer, who smiles at her from the other side of the river. The sorcerer lights a fire and gets out a cooking pot, trying to tempt Winnet to cross the bridge with the promise of food.

Winnet tells the sorcerer she will not dine with him because he will try to poison her. The sorcerer, shocked, promises that he would never poison her. Winnet asks the sorcerer how she can trust him, and he confesses that he does not know her name—if he did, he would have been able to spirit her over the river. Winnet makes a pact with the sorcerer—she will dine with him, and after the meal he will tell her what he wants from her and the two of them will hold a contest to decide what to do. The sorcerer creates a chalk circle for Winnet to ensure her protection.

Winnet joins the sorcerer at his table and eats hungrily. After the meal, the sorcerer reveals to Winnet that he wants to make her his apprentice—he can tell she has gifts, he knows she can take his message to other places, and though he cannot force her to study under him, he hopes that she will tell him her name. If she doesn't, he says, she will never be able to get out of her chalk circle. Winnet is angry to have been tricked, but strikes another bargain with the sorcerer—if he can guess her name, she'll be his, but if he cannot, he must help her leave the forest. The sorcerer agrees, and the two of them play hangman. Eventually, the sorcerer guesses Winnet's name, and the chalk circle around her vanishes. Winnet is nervous, but goes with the sorcerer to his castle.

As **Winnet** settles in to castle life, she finds herself unable to remember how she got there, or what her life had been like before. She begins to believe that she had always been in the castle, and that she is the sorcerer's daughter. The sorcerer has a good relationship with the villagers nearby, and soon Winnet becomes a friend to them as well. One day, a stranger comes to town, and he and Winnet strike up a friendship. On the day of the great feast, Winnet invites the stranger to the castle. She introduces him to her father, and asks the sorcerer if he will present the stranger with a present, as is customary at the feast. The sorcerer replies that Winnet has already decided the stranger's present, and disappears. Winnet's friend tells her that he is frightened, but Winnet assures him there is no need to be.

Jeanette needed her mother for a long time—she could never have found herself, and never survived childhood, were it not for her mother. But her mother was manipulative and selfish, and lured her into the realm of fanaticism with promises of specialness, glory, and fulfillment. Winnet is skeptical, knowing that the sorcerer's powers are great, and is reluctant to travel across the bridge to his land, thus aligning herself with him.



Jeanette's mother promised her that she only ever wanted the best for her—but it became clear over the years that Jeanette's mother longed for control rather than true love for the child she willingly adopted into her home. As Winnet tests the waters with the sorcerer, the sorcerer assures Winnet she will be protected—just as Jeanette's mother assured her.



As Jeanette's mother told Jeanette that she was special, gifted, and bound to be a missionary, and then began to groom her for that life, so the sorcerer tells Winnet that he wants to train her in the magic arts. The sorcerer, though, has tricked Winnet into a trap—just as Jeanette's mother, by falsely representing religion, goodness, and normalcy, tricked and trapped Jeanette into a life of fanaticism.



As Jeanette grew deeper and deeper entrenched in church life and preparing herself for the life of a missionary, she essentially fell under her mother's—and the church's—spell. Winnet's boyfriend from town is a stand-in for Melanie, and the feast Winnet brings him to mirrors the Harvest Feast Jeanette and Melanie attended with their church friends and “family” just before their lives crumbled around them.



The feast is great fun, and at midnight the sorcerer gives his customary speech before handing out presents to the villagers. Soon, though, his face grows solemn, and he speaks of a blight upon the land. Then he seizes **Winnet**'s boyfriend and proclaims that the blight lies within him, and that he must be cast out—he has spoiled the sorcerer's daughter. Winnet protests, but the sorcerer casts the boy down into the deepest darkest dungeon. That night, Winnet goes to the boy and sets him free, urging him to go to her father and deny her, blaming her for anything he wants.

In the morning, **Winnet** goes to her father. The sorcerer tells Winnet that she has disgraced him, and must leave. Winnet begs to stay, and the sorcerer tells her that if she stays she must stay in the village as a goatherd. The sorcerer leaves Winnet to make up her mind. Winnet is about to cry, but then one of the sorcerer's ravens lands on Winnet's shoulder and offers her some advice. He tells her that if she leaves she won't lose her power, she'll just use it differently—sorcerers can never take back their gifts. If she stays, however, she will be "destroyed by grief." The raven offers Winnet its heart, which is shaped like a brown pebble—he chose to stay, long ago, and his heart has grown thick with sorrow. Now it will serve as a reminder to Winnet to remain confident in her choice to leave.

Winnet's father sneaks into the room, disguised as a mouse, and ties an invisible thread around one of Winnet's buttons. She does not notice the thread, and in the morning she leaves the castle and crosses the river, leaving the forest behind.

Jeanette is living with a considerate teacher from school and working at a funeral parlor, which pays well and allows Jeanette to wash the hearses if she needs extra money. Jeanette still drives the ice cream van, and sometimes does both jobs in one day. One day, making her rounds in the van, Jeanette turns onto Elsie's street. She doles out some ice creams and then parks the truck. She goes into Elsie's house, where she finds her mother, Mrs. White, and the pastor gathered in the parlor. Elsie is nowhere to be found. Jeanette asks what's going on, but no one will answer her directly. Jeanette, distraught, begs her mother to tell her what's going on, but the pastor tells Jeanette to go home. Jeanette replies that she doesn't have a home.

The pastor brings Jeanette into the hall and the two begin arguing. The pastor accuses Jeanette of using her "powers" over Melanie, but Jeanette protests that Melanie loved her, and told her so—but is wounded when she realizes that this is a lie, and that the pastor has trapped her in a clever kind of violence that "leaves no visible mark."

At the feast, the sorcerer ambushes Winnet and her boyfriend, just as Melanie and Jeanette were ambushed in front of their entire congregation. The boyfriend doubles as a stand-in for Katy as the story progresses—Winnet offers to take the fall for her new friend, just as Jeanette volunteered to take the fall for Katy to keep her from being subjected to pain and violence by the pastors and church elders.



Winnet's decision to leave lest she be "destroyed by grief" mirrors Jeanette's decision to leave both the church and her mother's home. The raven is a stand-in for Jeanette's demon, who guides her through a difficult decision and promises her that anything is better than staying and having one's life torn apart. The raven could also be seen as a stand-in for Elsie, or even Miss Jewsbury, both women who have become shadows of who they could have been because of the strangling influence of the evangelical church.



What Winnet does not see—and what Jeanette perhaps does not yet see—is the invisible "thread" that will always tie both girls, forever, to their painful pasts and their scheming parent figures.



Elsie's death is doubly painful for Jeanette because she is being excluded even from mourning and celebrating Elsie's life. She is not even allowed to know any of the details of her only true friend's death. On top of everything, Jeanette's mother is outright ignoring her, despite the fact that she has cast her only daughter out into the street and forced her to fend for herself at a painfully early age. Jeanette has no physical home, no spiritual home, and is both fed up with the people from her past and desperate to maintain a connection to them.



The pastor may not have even known what he was doing by demanding that Jeanette lie about Melanie's love for her—but it's more likely that he did. Jeanette is forced to confront the fact that she has dismantled her life and left people who supposedly "love" her as the result of a failed and naïve love affair.



The story switches back to the tale of **Winnet**, who has wandered into a different part of the forest and become lost. A woman roaming the woods finds Winnet and helps her. Winnet returns to the woman's village, where she is welcomed warmly. The people there have heard of the sorcerer and believe him to be dangerous. Winnet attempts to learn the language spoken in the new village, but has trouble gaining fluency. One day, Winnet hears of a beautiful, faraway city, with buildings that stretch to the sky. None of the villagers have ever been there, but they all "h[o]ld it in awe." Winnet lies awake each night dreaming of the big city, sure that if she can get there, she'll finally feel safe.

The next day at the funeral parlor, Jeanette's bosses tell her that Elsie's funeral is to be held there the following day at noon. Jeanette volunteers to clean out the hearse, because she wants Elsie to "have the best." By the time Jeanette is done cleaning the car out, everyone has gone home, and Jeanette is able to see Elsie's open coffin lying in the parlor. Jeanette talks to Elsie for a long time, and it is dawn before she goes home to her teacher's house.

In the morning, Jeanette is awakened by the telephone. Her boss at the funeral parlor has called to ask her if she will come in and serve the meal—his partner has suffered an injury and won't be able to help him with the wake. Jeanette attempts to explain that she is an outcast in her congregation, and that there will be chaos if she shows up to Elsie's funeral. Jeanette's boss tells her that he doesn't care, and Jeanette agrees.

Jeanette manages to lay the food out surreptitiously without being noticed while Elsie's service is going on in the next room, but when it is time for ice cream, another mishap means Jeanette has to serve it directly to all of the mourners. As she walks around the parlor serving vanilla ice cream to the pastor, Mrs. White, her mother, and her mother's friends, the members of the congregation become enraged. Mrs. White tells Jeanette's mother that her daughter is a demon, and Jeanette's mother replies that Jeanette is "no daughter of [hers]" before leading the congregation out of the parlor.

After the commotion, as Jeanette returns to the kitchen, she feels someone standing behind her. It is Miss Jewsbury, who asks Jeanette how she's faring. After the two catch up briefly, Miss Jewsbury asks if Jeanette will come visit her—Jeanette declines, and Miss Jewsbury leaves. Elsie's funeral is the last time that Jeanette works in the funeral parlor—she takes a new job at a mental hospital, where she is able to live in the facility and have a room of her own.

Winnet leaves the sorcerer but becomes lost in the woods—Jeanette has left her mother's control but is now lost and alone. As Winnet is offered comfort and friendship by the few good new people in her life—the funeral parlor owners, the teacher sheltering her—she begins setting her sights on places beyond her small, insular, and suffocating town.



Jeanette's devotion to Elsie, even in death, remains strong. She wants to repay Elsie for bringing her shelter, comfort, and solidarity in life. She misses her friend, and without someone like Elsie in her life, Jeanette fears being alone in a town that has grown to hate her.



Jeanette is nervous to see all of the members of her congregation, especially when she has effectively been banned from knowing anything about Elsie's funeral, let alone participating in the services. Jeanette's boss, though, doesn't care about the tensions between Jeanette and her church, reflecting how small and strange the insular community is to anyone on the outside.



Jeanette clashes with the members of her congregation at Elsie's wake. As she somewhat contemptuously and provocatively serves them ice cream, she forces them to realize that expelling her does not erase her. Her mother publicly disowns her, which surely wounds Jeanette, but at the same time she is now so far removed from the realm of her former life that it almost doesn't even matter.



As Jeanette realizes there is nothing else left in town for her, she says goodbye to the one person from her past with whom she never had any closure—Miss Jewsbury, who still seems to harbor a longing for Jeanette. Jeanette, however, knows that it is time for her to move on, and to leave her past and everything in it behind.



Winnet continues dreaming of the faraway city, though many villagers tell her that it doesn't even exist, or insist she'll be unhappy even if she finds it. Nevertheless, Winnet's determination grows. She finds a map and realizes she must venture out into the sea if she wishes to find the city, and she is afraid, but decides to build her own boat anyway. On her last night in the village, Winnet has a dream in which her eyebrows become two bridges leading to a hole between her eyes. In the dream Winnet must drop down the hole and follow the spiral staircase inside, encountering horrible things on her way down. When Winnet wakes up it is raining, and she is crying. She gets into her boat and rows out to sea, more determined than ever to find the city.

Jeanette has left her hometown and is living in a city. One of her new friends asks her when she last saw her mother, but Jeanette does not want to think of her past. Her friend asks her if she ever thinks of going back, which Jeanette sees as a "silly question." She's always thinking of going back, but more out of shame and pain than longing. Jeanette's friend asks her what would have happened if she had stayed, and Jeanette muses that she could have been a priest instead of a prophet, following prescribed words from an ancient book rather than being a "voice in the wilderness." Still, Jeanette acquiesces, admitting that the **demons** that lie within her have traveled with her.

Jeanette travels by train to her hometown through heavy snow. The journey is uncomfortable, and it seems as if many mad people are on Jeanette's train. At last, Jeanette arrives home and disembarks the train. As she walks through her town, she sees a tall Christmas tree out front of the town hall.

Jeanette arrives at her front door, and she peeks through the window into the parlor. Her mother is playing a Christmas carol on an electric organ. Jeanette lets herself in and greets her mother, who is excited to show off her new keyboard. Jeanette asks her mother if she got the organ from the Society for the Lost, and Jeanette's mother, embarrassed, admits that the society has been disbanded after corruption was discovered at the Morecambe guest house. The place has fallen into disrepair despite Jeanette's mother's fundraising efforts to save it, and now a medium who offers séances has set up shop there. Jeanette and her mother catch up for a while, and then Jeanette, tired from her trip, heads to bed.

Winnet's leaving the village in which she has found shelter, comfort, and community mirrors Jeanette's decision to leave her town for good. Though Jeanette and Winnet are both afraid, uncertain, and haunted by their troubled pasts, they set out anyway. Winnet's dream of falling down a spiral staircase mirrors Jeanette's earlier dream in which she ascended a spiral staircase but could never reach the top no matter how hard she tried. Both dreams reveal the women's anxieties about their inadequacies.



Jeanette has made a new life for herself, but questions about her past haunt her constantly. She herself admits that the past is never far from her mind, no matter how hard she tries to bury it. Jeanette knows that if she had stayed, she would be only a shadow of the person she has instead become, and though her demons have traveled with her she is grateful for the freedom they have ultimately given her.



Jeanette's journey home for Christmas is full of difficulty and encounters with the strange, the uncanny, and the frightening, perhaps reflecting Jeanette's anxiety about returning home.



Jeanette returns home to find that things are different only in small ways. Her mother is more or less the same, though it's evident that her faith has been tested as the church has fallen victim to corruption. The church's guest house, once a haven for congregants, has been taken over by a "heathen" medium who represents the public abandonment of devout Christianity, and instead an enchantment with mysticism and the answers it provides.



Sir Perceval comes to a glorious castle on a hill. As he approaches, the drawbridge lowers to let him in. Two dwarves welcome the weary Sir Perceval to the castle and show him a room where he can rest. Perceval laments having ever left Camelot, knowing that he has traveled too far to turn back. Perceval falls asleep and dreams of the moment the Grail first appeared to the Knights of the Round Table, and they each saw themselves and each other anew. When Perceval wakes, it is time for dinner, and he plans to greet his host warmly and tell them, whoever they are, of his quest, but not his reason for seeking it—his desire to become the perfect hero.

Jeanette's mother wakes her up with a cup of hot chocolate and a shopping list, and bids her to go run some errands. Jeanette picks up a pair of snow boots and then decides to visit Mrs. Arkwright at the pest shop. Jeanette asks Mrs. Arkwright how business is, and Mrs. Arkwright reveals that things are terrible ever since everyone in town has stopped using outhouses and gotten indoor plumbing. Jeanette asks Mrs. Arkwright what she's going to do, and Mrs. Arkwright excitedly confides in Jeanette: she is planning to use all her savings and emigrate to Spain, but first, she is going to burn down her shop for the insurance money. She offers to send Jeanette a newspaper clipping after the incident occurs.

After Jeanette finishes running her errands, she stops at a restaurant to eat and think. She puzzles at how her mother is treating her as she always has and doesn't even seem to remember why Jeanette left. Jeanette wonders if, in making the choice to leave, she somehow left a part of herself behind, and that she is, in some universe, still an evangelist living in her hometown.

After leaving the restaurant, Jeanette doesn't go straight home. She walks up the hill, and stands at the top, thinking about God and her abandoned faith. Jeanette misses God, and doesn't see Him as her betrayer, but has come to realize that "if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it." Jeanette has had trouble in her own relationships for this reason, and as per the "gypsy" woman's prediction, has never been able to settle. She wants a powerful and deep love, but is afraid of being betrayed, and considers how she can reconcile her wild dreams of passion with the realities of romantic love.

Jeanette's return home is reflected in Perceval's uneasy stay at a foreign castle. Though not much has changed at home, Jeanette is still feeling like a stranger there. Perceval and Jeanette have both been seeking perfection and glory all their lives, and now it appears as if perhaps neither will achieve their goals. Jeanette worries she will become bogged down by her regret and trauma, and the weary and disturbed Perceval longs for home.



Jeanette encounters a figure from her past, Mrs. Arkwright, who represented the less desirable things in life—Jeanette's mother looked down on the woman, who lived in a poor neighborhood and ran a vermin shop. Mrs. Arkwright, like Jeanette, has decided to burn her life to the ground and start over, but Mrs. Arkwright has decided to go about doing so a little more literally. Nonetheless, she is excited, just as Jeanette was once so excited to get out of town and move on.



Jeanette's guilt over leaving and the residual pain of all that happened to her in her youth loom so large in her life that it is impossible for her to comprehend how her mother has seemingly forgotten or moved on completely. Jeanette wonders about fact and fiction, and whether multiple lives are possible.



As Jeanette reflects on the void religion has left in her life, she considers the impossibility of finding a relationship as fulfilling—or demanding—as the relationship she once had with God and her church. Jeanette is both unsettled and motivated by the fact that the gypsy woman's prediction has, after all, come true as she meditates on the nature of faith and what it means to be faithful to an idea, a path, or a person.



Looking down the hill, Jeanette can see the house where Melanie used to live. She reveals that she once ran into Melanie in the city—Melanie was pushing a stroller and had appeared almost vegetable-like. Jeanette wondered at how the two of them had ever had a relationship. She repeats her theory that “time is a great deadener.” As Jeanette walks down the hill it is getting dark outside. She misses her dog, who has died, and her old self, who she feels has died as well.

When Jeanette arrives home, she startles her mother, who is listening to the radio. The two eat dinner, and Jeanette’s mother tells her the story of how she built her own CB radio and now speaks regularly to Christians all over England. As Jeanette listens to her mother speak, she begins to wish that when she goes to bed she will “wake up with the past intact.” She feels she has “run a great circle,” and met herself again at the start.

After dinner, Sir Perceval’s host retreats to bed, but Perceval stays at the dinner table, examining his hands. One hand is strong and firm, but the other looks “underfed” and uncomfortable. At dinner, Perceval’s host had asked him why he left Camelot, and Perceval stayed silent, feeling shame in the realization that he had left for his own sake and “nothing more.” That night, when Perceval finally goes up to bed, he dreams that he is a spider hanging on an oak tree. A raven comes and breaks the thread holding him to his web, and he hits the ground and scuttles away.

At Christmas Eve dinner with Mrs. White, Mrs. White becomes so nervous in Jeanette’s presence that she suffers a fit and has to be taken home. Jeanette’s mother faults Jeanette for Mrs. White’s illness. To pass the time before opening presents, Jeanette and her mother play a board game. When Jeanette wins, her mother exclaims that she cheated, and mutters to “never trust a sinner.” At midnight, Jeanette’s mother gleefully opens her presents, one of which is a catapult Jeanette’s father built so that she can launch dried peas at the cats next door.

For the next few days, Jeanette does not see much of her parents, as they are in church. A few days later, Jeanette reads a letter that has come from the Society, which contains “dreadful news” about the guest house in Morecambe: the owner has taken to drink, and has embarked on an affair with a “strange charismatic man who had once been the official exorcist to the Bishop of Bermuda.”

Jeanette feels both deeply connected to and bizarrely removed from the events of her past. Running into Melanie no longer triggers any painful emotions, as time has “deadened” the hurt Jeanette once felt, but she is still in mourning for the parts of herself she lost when she abandoned her religion, her family, and her hometown.



As Jeanette settles back into life at home—even though she’s just visiting—she finds herself mournful and regretful, wishing that she could erase all that has happened and find the past still “intact.” She feels that she has traveled so far to move so little—she has overcome so much but has still ended up, somehow, right back where she started: listening to the radio with her mother.



As Perceval admits to himself that he left Arthur and Camelot only because of self-interest and ambition, he feels himself start to crumble. His dream in which the “thread” of spider’s silk connecting him to his web ties in with the Winnet tale, as the “thread” that connected Winnet to her father—and by proxy Jeanette to her mother—is at last severed. (It also perhaps references an image from Jonathon Edwards’ famous fire-and-brimstone sermon, [Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God](#).) Due to their severance of their pasts, Perceval and Jeanette are both at last free.



Though Jeanette’s mother has been treating her as if nothing is wrong, at Christmas Eve that façade begins to break down. First, Mrs. White is nervous to the point of breakdown in the presence of a “sinner” like Jeanette; later, playing games, Jeanette’s mother—perhaps in jest, but also betraying her true underlying belief—calls Jeanette a “sinner” to her face.



As Jeanette receives more bad news about the guest house in Morecambe, she realizes that her mother’s world is still crumbling. Jeanette has had the opportunity to pick herself up, move on, and create a new life for herself, but her mother has not yet reached bottom—and by the time she does, the chance to change may have passed her by.



Jeanette feels for her mother, whose involvements with the Society for the Lost and the Morecambe house have brought her only pain. Jeanette sits by the fire, waiting for her mother to return home from church, and reflects on how she has no means of joining another family and no means of dismissing her own. After a while, her mother blusters in through the kitchen door, reads the letter, and throws it on the fire. She calls for Jeanette to fetch her her headphones, and she settles in with her radio, calling someone in Manchester.

As the novel comes to a close, Jeanette watches her mother, in the wake of receiving the gutting news about the scandal in Morecambe, struggle frantically to connect with other Christians through the use of her CB radio. Physically, Jeanette and her mother are back at the kitchen table where the novel began, and still listening to the radio together, but emotionally they have traveled uncountable miles. Jeanette at last sees her mother as a woman desperate for connection in a world in which her beliefs, values, and community are becoming increasingly irrelevant; a woman still clinging to the hope of finding someone who will be on “her team.”





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