1. **Introduction**

In this paper I will discuss the relationship between the characters Jeanette and her mother in J. Winterson’s novel *Oranges are not the only fruit.* The focal point of this discussion will be the influence that religion and sexuality have on this relationship. When thinking about the topic of “mother-daughter-relationships” these two aspects do not seem to be the most obvious ones to discuss in respect to it. But I think that they have the most influence on the relationship and without them, or at least without religion, there would not be a relationship at all. If she had not been that religious, the mother would most probably not have adopted Jeanette. But more about this later on.

A further topic of this paper is the character of Elsie Norris and her appearance as a mother figure in the novel.

2. **Religion and Sexuality and their influence on the mother-daughter-relationship**

Religion and sexuality are the two main influences that define the relationship between Jeanette and her mother. Jeanette grows up in a highly religious environment. Her parents are members of the Pentecostal Church and especially her mother is working actively for the church community.

Jeanette grows up with the knowledge that she is specially chosen. She is a foster child. Her (foster) mother had a dream one night and went to the orphanage the next day to choose a child that she would form into “a missionary child, a servant of God, a blessing” (p.10). She chose Jeanette and raised her with the aim of forming her to become a missionary one day. Jeanette knows about this and grows up with the belief that she is chosen be her mother as well as by God for serving the Lord (Bollinger, p. 374). This knowledge is very important for her self-definition during childhood, but more about that later on.

Her mother teaches her all about the Bible, the lives of the Saints and about church. Jeanette grows up in the church community that she considers to be her family. Most of the church members are women about the age of her mother or even older. Most of them treat her much more like an adult than a child is usually treated. All her life is centered around this church and its community, she has hardly any contact to other people than church members. Therefore their way of life is the only
one Jeanette knows and she adopts it. Jeanette`s life is dominated by her mother and by her mother`s commitment to the church. When she has to go to school she gets to know a completely different way of life and people that are much different from those she is used to.

At school Jeanette is an outcast. Her classmates and even her teachers are bewildered by her continuous religious remarks. Even her school-life is dominated by religion. Most of her projects in school have religious themes – and they never win a prize. Even if her project is much prettier that the others it does not win. Jeanette wants to win, too and so she tries to give her projects more popular themes like “Streetcar Named Desire” (p. 46) but they do not win either and also enrage her mother because they are not religious. Her mothers does not help much with this problem but only gives her oranges for comfort. She remains uninvolved in Jeanette`s problems and does not seem to notice what is going on in Jeanette`s life outside the house or the church. She does not even try to change anything about her way of life to help Jeanette – she is too involved in her church work to see what kind of problems this might bring for her daughter.

But the permanent rejections by her classmates and teachers do not matter too much to Jeanette because she is convinced that she is leading the right way of life. She knows that she is specially selected and will become a missionary one day. All her self-definition is based on that knowledge and aim. She knows that her mother chose her to become a missionary and so she expects to become a missionary. She willingly adapts to her mother`s plan and is safe in the knowledge that her way of life is right because it leads to her future as a missionary.

I think that it is also this knowledge that helps her to stand the fact that she is only second priority in her mother`s life. That she is not the most important factor in her mother`s life can be seen very well in the passage where Jeanette describes how she went deaf for three months. She could not hear anything at all, but that did not bother her mother or the other church members. They are so fanatic in their religious beliefs that they all assumed her to be in a state of rapture and that she should not be spoken to and not be disturbed ( p. 23). It is only by coincidence that they discover that Jeanette is sick and has to be taken to hospital. She has to stay in hospital for quite a whole but that is no reason for her mother to stand by her and visit her a lot. Her mother is too much occupied by her building of a bathroom or too busy with church to come and visit her often. She only sends her
husband with a letter and oranges to Jeanette but does not come on her own very much.

I think that this kind of behavior is not the behavior one expects from a mother whose young child is lying in hospital. For me this is a proof that her mother is not too much interested in the person Jeanette, but mainly in the plans she has for her. These plans are not endangered by the illness, so there is no need to make some more efforts to make Jeanette healthy again. She hardly ever comes to comfort and encourage her child and I think that can very well be called neglecting Jeanette. Jeanette does not really suffer from this neglect because of her only friend Elsie Norris, but she notices that her mother is too busy to stay with her for long. I think at that age and that point of life she does not see it as neglect yet but she grows up with these kinds of things and so realizes from early on that there is something more important in her mother`s life than she is. Later in her development she may well see her mother`s behavior as what it is.

The religious fanaticism that I mentioned in the last paragraphs is something that covers and protects Jeanette when she is a young child and rejected at school. But she has to get to know the darker sides of that fanaticism, of the church and of her mother, too.

During puberty Jeanette falls in love for the first time – with Melanie. Melanie is a newish convert to the church and Jeanette teachers her in the Bible. It is the first time that she experiences feelings like that and she is very excited about them. She wants to share her feelings and tells her mother a lot about them. She speaks about Melanie all the time but her mother never responds to that. One day she humiliates Jeanette and Melanie openly during a church service. Jeanette and her mother battle publically about her lesbianism and Jeanette is hurt a lot by her mother`s behavior. She calls this event her mother`s first betrayal and this betrayal leads to the first break in their relationship. When Jeanette was a child she was willing to adopt her mother`s dreams and live her mother`s way of life. Now she has her doubts about it. The pastor performs an exorcism to free Jeanette from her demons. Her mother and all the other church members support him and stand on his side. Jeanette is locked in a room for two days, without food, until she renounces her love for Melanie. Her mother does not help her in this situation but is on the pastor`s side, too. I think it needs a lot of persuasion to make a mother behave like that but her strong belief
allows her to do so and I think that she is not only worried about her daughter. She is also worried that her dream of Jeanette’s becoming a missionary is in danger. This fear enables her to lock her daughter in for two days without food instead of protecting her from this kind of fanatic encroachments.

Jeanette repents her love (but just to get the whole procedure over with) and her gets back to normal. She continues working for the church and nobody mentions the incident any more. But Jeanette has changed. She now is much more careful and does not show her feelings any more. She even tries to avoid speaking to her mother too much. I think she realizes that her mother abused her confidence. Jeanette told her about her feelings but her mother used that knowledge against her and even fought against her by telling it to all the church members. She experiences pain over the growing estrangement but she knows that she has to find her own identity and hide this from her mother. She realizes that she has to break down the limiting walls of her home and blow her own trumpet, which means she has to lead her own life. But she is not able to live on her own yet and she is not able to leave church either.

But she does not want this anyway because her mother, as well as the church, still are her family. She hides her own personality more than she used to, but still feels that she belongs to her mother and the church.

I think the influence religion has on Jeanette becomes very obvious by the choice of her lovers. Melanie and Katy are both newish converts that came to the Pentecostal Church due to Jeanette’s preaching abilities. Jeanette covers her love relationships under the pretext of teaching her lovers the Bible or doctrine. At one point she says

We did have a genuinely spiritual dimension. I taught her a lot, and she put all her efforts into the church, quite apart from me. It was a good time. To the pure all things are pure… (p. 120)

I think to teach them is on the one hand a good excuse for spending a lot of time with them and on the other hand also eases Jeanette’s conscience a bit. She now knows that, in the eyes of her mother and the church, it is a sin to love another woman and by not only loving but also teaching them the Bible it is easier for Jeanette to commit this “sin”.
Sexuality and religion mingle a lot and have a huge impact on the relationship, which can be seen in the paragraph above. Now I want to give some examples in which the influence of sexuality and the attitude towards sexuality can be seen.

Her mother never explains the facts of life to Jeanette and I doubt that she gets to know anything about sexuality in school. She does not really know anything about it but has an idea that it is something bad. When she is a child she learns that her neighbors are “fomicating” (p. 52) and her mother tells her she would not know what the noises, that come from the neighbors, are “… but whatever it is, it’s not holy” (p. 51). Her mother and all the church members do not talk about sex, it is a taboo and a sin. Thus, Jeanette is very innocent and naïve considering love and sex.

I think that is also the reason why she tells her mother so much about it when she falls in love with Melanie and why she does not realize that her mother does not respond to that. She is very surprised when her mother makes the announcement that she, the mother, had realized that there was a boy at church Jeanette was keen on. Because of this alleged interest of Jeanette to the boy her mother starts telling her about her time in Paris and about her old flame Pierre. She tries to “warn” Jeanette that love is something bad – the feelings one experiences may lead to a sin and can appear to be something very different from love in the end. She allowed Pierre to have sex with her and had to realize afterwards that the giddiness she had explained to herself as being in love, was just caused by a stomach ulcer. SO she gave away something very precious for not love but a sickness.

This story is supposed to ensure that Jeanette is careful and does not make the same mistake her mother made. The message she wants to send Jeanette is that men are evil and cause evil and that it is better to stay away from men and love. Jeanette is supposed to stay a virgin and dedicate all her love to the Lord, I think. I think it is rather unusual for a mother to talk with her daughter about her old flames and about love as being something deceiving and bad.

The mother has a very strange attitude towards love. She made a bad experience and I think she just excluded love from her life after that experience. Her relationship with her husband is something rather loveless, too. They are hardly ever together and do not seem to have anything to talk about. They do not go to bed together – when he has to get up she goes to bed so that they share the bed at the
same time for only maximum an hour. There is never a sign of love between the two of them. Whenever she talks about her husband it is with mild sympathy or leniency and always a bit condescending. Her husband is completely henpecked by her and has no influence on the raising of Jeanette.

So Jeanette has never experienced or learnt what it means to have a relationship full of love. She stumbles into the relationship with Melanie and discovers love. She is so excited about it that she does not even think about the reaction it might evoke in her mother. She just wants to share her happiness and does not imagine that this relationship might be something bad or sinful. But then she has to learn that there is another side of her mother and the church when they perform the exorcism.

And her mother goes even further than that. That exorcism was not enough. She cannot forgive and forget what happened and one night burns all of Jeanette’s private letters, cards, and jottings in the garden. And this is what hurts Jeanette the most. She says: “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, not the White Queen any more.” (p. 110)

At this point Jeanette realizes that she cannot go on like her mother wishes any longer. Her mother is not her role model any longer and she, Jeanette, has to start blowing her own trumpet (p. 110) and tear down the limiting walls of her home and the church community. The process of severing from home and from her dominating mother is at its beginning.

The second and most severe break in the mother- daughter- relationships is caused when her mother finds out about Jeanette’s love relationship with Katy and throws Jeanette out of the house. Jeanette refuses to renounce Katy and their relationship. Jeanette’s mother believes tat “you ma[k]e people and yourself what you want(ed)” (p. 126) and so sees Jeanette’s lesbianism as a deliberate act. Jeanette herself at first perceives her homosexuality as an accident which forced her to think about her own instincts and others’ attitudes (p. 126) She has changed her plans for the future and has started to think for herself. Her mother’s plan and dream, which had once been Jeanette’s plan too, has failed to materialize: Jeanette does not want to become a missionary any more.
I think this is what hurts her mother the most and really makes her furious and bitter. She had such wonderful plans for her daughter and prepared and trained her all her life to make her a missionary one day. And now this child chooses to be a lesbian and not to become a missionary. All her work was of no use and just became senseless. She cannot stand this defeat and forces Jeanette to leave home, no matter whether she has a place to go to or not.

The pastor offers Jeanette to perform a more powerful exorcism and then she could stay within the community. But she would have to give up all preaching and the classes she used to give. He says that it were these influential and powerful duties that led her to lesbianism. No women should have power in the church because that would lead them to aping men and that might confuse their sexual orientation.

This does not make much sense to Jeanette because in their church women definitely were the organizers and had a lot of power. Why should this be wrong? But what really hurts her is that her mother all of a sudden agrees with the pastor and by doing so rejects Jeanette`s role in public ministry. She once again takes the church`s side and opposes Jeanette. This hurts Jeanette much and she calls it the second betrayal.

Her mother had trained Jeanette to reach a powerful position in church to become a missionary, but now that Jeanette uses her power at home and does not aim at becoming a missionary she condemns her position in church. Jeanette blames her mother for betraying her by always being on the side of the church and not supporting her, her daughter.

I think at this point Jeanette might have become aware that her mother never really loved her, the person Jeanette, but always loved the idea of the child she would form into a blessing and a servant of God ( p. 10). Jeanette has always been aware of the fact that her mother deliberately chose her for that aim and defined herself according to that during childhood. Now that her mother`s glorious plans have failed she rejects her daughter. Jeanette knows what her mother expects her to do ( to blame herself for her sexual orientation) but she now sees her wit different eyes and refuses to do what would please her mother. She is disappointed by her mother`s behavior and says bitterly “If there` such a thing as spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore.” ( p. 132) I think she means that her mother gives herself and all other women, and their power and pride, away to obey the pastor. She denies her own position and personality to please the pastor, to do what the church council told him. She does not
oppose their strange and sexist attitude. She sacrifices her own life and identity to the church. I think she has no identity outside the church any more and now she even gives up her identity inside of the community.

Jeanette cannot stand this kind of behavior and therefore can neither stay at home nor at the church. She could not obey the order of giving up all influential positions and deny herself. Therefore she hardly tries to change her mother`s opinion and leaves home. There is a big break in the relationship between her and her mother – there is not much left what they could say to each other and after Jeanette`s leaving home they do not have any contact at all.

Jeanette works a lot and hardly ever thinks about her mother. The only time they have contact is when she has to help out at the funeral parlor at Elsie`s funeral. At that meeting it becomes obvious how deep the break is between mother and daughter. It can be seen when a church member makes a remark about Jeanette`s showing up at the funeral and her mother denies her. She says “She`s no daughter of mine” (p. 153). This might not only be to make clear that their family relationship broke down but also refer to the fact that Jeanette is a foster child – her mother emphasizes that she has nothing to do with her and that not even the same blood is running through their veins. It symbolizes that they have nothing in common any more and the complete break between them. She rejects Jeanette completely.

After their meeting at the funeral Jeanette leaves the town to work in a mental hospital. In the foreign city she regards her other as her past (p. 155) which she does not want to remember. She is afraid of going back because she thinks that people will still treat her like they did before she left, but she nevertheless thinks about going back. She experiences pain because she feels torn between two options – either go home and live in a community that tries to force its convictions on her or not go back and live with the memory of home and her mother. It is difficult for her to decide. She goes to the city to escape but she cannot find peace there either. There is still a part inside of her that wants to go back home and continue the old life. She has to think a lot about her situation and struggles with being different from most of the others. Sometimes she imagines that it would be nice to be like all the others but that is not possible. She is pretty desperate and torn between past and present. She is still haunted by the memories and thoughts of home. Finally she decides to return and comes home for Christmas.
She deliberately chooses to return and renew the relation with her mother – she chooses her mother as her mother once chose her in the orphanage. She gives her mother the chance to become a family again, as her mother once gave her the chance to enter a family when she took Jeanette to her home. I think it is very important that Jeanette now chooses her mother and by this way gives her mother a second chance. Jeanette is eager to find a person that loves her and gives her complete devotion. She does not want to be betrayed again (she defines betrayal as “promising to be on your side, then being on somebody else’s.”, p. 166) but seeks for someone who is on her side for ever (p. 165).

I think by her choice to return to her mother and give her a second chance she decides not to betray her mother. Her mother betrayed her but Jeanette decides to practice what she demands from others – she does not abandon her mother but returns and continues their relationship.

When she comes home the confrontation with her mother is pretty strange. Her mother behaves as if nothing had happened, as if Jeanette had not been away for several years. Jeanette has to realize that she is not the only one who undergoes changes. Her mother has become more open for new and different things and people after her religious group “The Society for the Lord” collapsed. There had been corruption and other things going on in the Society and it finally collapsed. All this upset her mother and forced her to think about her community and also about her own attitude. I think it was a shock for her to realize that there was evil even among the reverends and other high church people. She had to blame them but naturally she would not be too angry with them. But then her behavior towards Jeanette would have been a bit too strict, would it not?!

I think that she might have found a new point of view and that she had to revise her standard of values and accept that there is a life outside the church and that that is not particularly bad. This might have led her to a new and more open attitude to the outer world. I think she realizes that she had been too caught up and fanatic in her attitude and decisions. It does not mean that she gave up all her believes but that she became more liberal.

That she has gone “all electronic” (p. 159) is only the outward sign of the changes she has undergone. She proves her new tolerance when there is the town’s first
mission for colored people where she offers pineapples to the colored people and says “After all… oranges are not the only fruit.” (p. 167).

This is a sign of her new openness – all the years oranges were the only fruit Jeanette was allowed to eat because it was the only “pure” fruit. I think this statement shows clearly that the mother is now willing to accept Jeanette the way she is – she realized that there are not only people in the world that are just like her (the mother), and that all the other people who are different from her have to be tolerated, too. It might still be difficult for her but she is willing to welcome her daughter back and renew their relationship.

Jeanette is overwhelmed by the changed situation and even wishes that everything is like it used to be – she wishes the past to be intact. But she knows that it cannot be and that she will have to leave again because she cannot come back and live again in an environment in which she will most probably still be forced to give up her own life and live according to the rules of a church that does not accept her sexuality. But she also realizes that she cannot really leave her family; even if she goes away from home she does not leave it. I think that this new point of view shows that Jeanette now is a mature woman sees reality as it is. “After Jeanette has experienced the darker side of her mother and her church, she acknowledges that her relationship to her mother is not wholly satisfactory, but it is not one that she can escape (…)” (Bollinger, p.374). She realizes that no matter how much your family disappoints you or how bitter you might be with it – there is still a connection between you and your family.

Families, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own; she had tied a thread around my button, to tug when she pleased. ( p. 171)

I think this expresses very well the invisible connection that exists between family members, no matter whether they are a biological family or a foster family.

Now I come to a character that I think is a mother figure for Jeanette. In the novel the character Elsie Norris appears. She is an elderly church member and she seems to be much more a mother for Jeanette than her foster mother. She is the one who visits Jeanette every day when she is lying in hospital and encourages and comforts her. Jeanette even stays some nights at Elsie’s after she is allowed to leave the hospital because her mother is busy with the church and out of town. Elsie gives
Jeanette mice as a present and tells her exciting stories. She does all the things one expects from a mother.

I think Jeanette sees her as a kind of mother, too. That can be seen when she has to sew a sampler at school. All the other children make theirs for their mothers. But Jeanette makes hers for Elsie and not for her mother.

I think the close relationship between Jeanette and Elsie becomes most evident when Elsie tries to support Jeanette after her relationship with Katy is discovered. She sticks to Jeanette when all the other church members do not dare to – she knows what is going on but that is no reason for her to let Jeanette down. She tells Jeanette that she would have prevented all the horrible things like the exorcism, if she had been around (p. 130) – she proves that she loves her as if she was her own child and that she is a real friend. She demands that the others help Jeanette (p. 132) and tells them straight into the face that their idea about women being confused by their influential positions in church is nonsense. She is the only one who dares to oppose the church – she does not betray Jeanette but proves that she is a real friend by being on her side and not on the church`s. She supports her unlike Jeanette`s mother and again appears and behaves much more like a mother. When Jeanette really needs help she is the only one who is willing to give her that help.

Jeanette is very upset about Elsie`s death and stays at her coffin for a long time and tells her all about her feelings and about her plans. It is a long and painful farewell for Jeanette. I think Elsie always is a kind of substitute of a mother to Jeanette but with the benefit of being a friend as well.

3. Conclusion

I think this is enough to show the difficult relationship between Jeanette and her foster mother. I hope I was able to show the development and the different stages this relationship undergoes from childhood up till Jeanette is a grown-up mature woman. Maybe I have painted too dark a picture of the mother but I hope it is still credible and clear to be seen that she made a lot of mistakes in the up-bringing of Jeanette.

I think it has become clear why I chose this structure for my paper. From what I see, sexuality and religion are the basic and dominating influences on the mother-daughter-relationship and I hope I was able to prove that.
Bibliography

