

Unseen extract 3: *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*

Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson which was first published in 1985. The novel tells the story of a girl named Jeanette, who is bought up by her adoptive parents in northern England. Jeanette's dominant mother is a fundamentalist Christian who educates Jeanette through study of the Bible. In this scene Jeanette is trying to find out about relationships by listening in on the conversation of the older women.

Sample question

Explore the significance of gender stereotypes in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Winterson shapes meanings.

Extract

When it was washday I hid in the dustbin to hear what the women said. Nellie came out with her bit of rope and strung it up nail to nail across the back alley. She waved to Doreen who was struggling up the hill with her shopping, offering her a cup of tea and a talk. Each Wednesday Doreen queued up at the butcher's for the special offer mince. It always put her in a bad mood because she was a member of the Labour party and believed in equal shares and equal rights. She started to tell Nellie about the woman in front buying steak. Nellie shook her head which was small and tufted, and said it had been hard for her too since Bert died.

'Bert,' spat Doreen, 'he were dead ten years before they laid him out.' Then she offered Nellie a wine gum.

'Well I don't like to speak ill of the dead,' said Nellie uneasily, 'you never know.'

Doreen snorted and squatted painfully on the back step. Her skirt was too tight, but she always pretended it had shrunk.

'What about speaking ill of the living? My Frank's up to no good.'

Nellie took a deep breath and another wine gum. She asked if it was the woman who served pie and peas in the pub; Doreen didn't know, but now that she thought of it that would explain why he always smelled of gravy when he came home late.

'You should never have married him,' scolded Nellie.

'I didn't know what he was when I married him did I?' And she told Nellie about the war and how her dad had liked him, and how it seemed sensible. 'I should have guessed though, what kind of man comes round to court you and ends up drinking with your dad instead? I used to sit all done up playing whist with his mother and one of her friends.'

'Did he not take you anywhere then?'

'Oh yes,' said Doreen, 'we used to go down the dog track every Saturday afternoon.'

The two of them sat in silence for a while then Doreen went on, 'Course the children helped. I ignored him for fifteen years.'

'Still,' Nellie reassured her, 'you're not as bad as Hilda across the road, her one drinks every penny, and she daren't go to the police.'

'If mine touched me I'd have him put away,' said Doreen grimly.

'Would you?'

Doreen paused and scratched in the dirt with her shoe.

'Let's have a smoke,' offered Nellie, 'and you tell me about Jane.'

Jane was Doreen's daughter, just turned seventeen and very studious.

'If she don't get a boyfriend folks will talk. She spends all her time at that Susan's doing her homework, or so she tells me.'

Nellie thought that Jane might be seeing a boy on the quiet, pretending to be at Susan's. Doreen shook her head. 'She's there all right, I check with Susan's mother. If they're not careful folk will think they're like them two at the paper shop.'

'I like them two,' said Nellie firmly, 'and who's to say they do anything?'

'Mrs Ferguson across saw them getting a new bed, a double bed.'

'Well what does that prove? Me and Bert had one bed but we did nothing in it.'

Doreen said that was all very well, but two women were different.

Different from what? I wondered from inside the dustbin.

'Well your Jane can go to university and move away, she's clever.'

'Frank won't put up with that, he wants grandchildren, and if I don't get a move on there'll be no dinner for him and he'll be back with pie and peas in the pub. I don't want to give him an excuse.'

She struggled to her feet as Nellie started to peg out the washing. When it was safe, I crept out of the dustbin, as confused as ever and covered in soot.

It was a good thing I was destined to become a missionary. For some time after this I put aside the problem of men and concentrated on reading the Bible. Eventually, I thought, I'll fall in love like everybody else.

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