The story of the world has been told in many ways over the years, and textbooks, scholars, and historians have all weighed in with opinions, perspectives, and insights. In the fifth chapter of her book *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson presents a discourse concerning history and the human story. Using the analogy of a ball of knotted string, she begs readers to take a fresh look at the complicated nature of human life and our accounts of it over time. To do this, it is necessary to put aside any pretenses and listen to the perspectives and viewpoints of others. Winterson’s writing is postmodern in that the writer is comfortable embracing the world’s dissonance and uncertainty. She also aims to hear and learn from perspectives other than her own.

As mentioned, one of the distinctive features of postmodernism is the celebration of dissonance. In her discussion about the way people write history, Winterson remarks: “Of course [the story being told] is not the whole story, but 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; it’s a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time” (93). As the chapter goes on, Winterson develops this idea of not boxing history into a certain narrative, time, perspective, person, or even memento. She is open—in fact hoping for—a fluid, living interpretation of history.

Her thoughts fit well with Dr. Stephen Dilks’ writing on the ideas behind postmodernism. He explains that the “essential” oppositions (such as good and bad,
positive and negative, order and chaos, or true and false) were questioned by many people after the despair of the Holocaust, the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the downfall of the British Empire. As he says, “After World War Two, dissonance became a source of celebration, part of an active, deliberate strategy to challenge established ways of thinking and doing.” Winterson displays this celebration of dissonance. She believes that:

Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don’t believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like a string full of knots. It’s all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end. The best you can do is admire the cat’s cradle, and maybe knot it up a bit more. (93)

Here, Winterson is not concerned with identifying what is objectively good or bad, or what is true and what is false. It is enough for her to wrestle with the mess of history. People themselves are chaotic; therefore, history is chaotic. In her analogy with the string full of knots, the point is not to unravel the knots. The goal is to play with them the way a cat would, and to then add one’s own knotted perspective (in other words, to admire it and “knot it up a bit more”). Winterson is postmodern in her desire to not gloss over the negative or difficult parts of history.

Later in the chapter, Winterson calls out the folly in ignoring parts of the past that make us uncomfortable. She says, “Denying the past is to refuse to recognize its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should. We are all historians in our small way” (93-94). Every person tells their own story differently, and there may be truth in what each person has to say. In his
writing on postmodernism, Dr. Dilks quotes French philosopher Jacques Derrida, explaining it this way: “The only attitude... I would absolutely condemn is one which, directly or indirectly, cuts off the possibility of an essentially interminable questioning, that is, an effective and thus transforming questioning.” Derrida encourages “interminable questioning” here, and interminable essentially means endless. This endless questioning of morals and ideals is a postmodern way of interpreting the world. According to Derrida, each person’s questions are transformative. Asking questions keeps us from sucking the life out of history and trying to force it to reflect what we think it should, which is what Winterson calls “denying the past.” Instead, asking questions recognizes history for what it truly is: a narrative of people’s stories, backgrounds, viewpoints, and actions that is intertwined. Her string of knots analogy from above reflects this cultural ideal of playing with the questions and not worrying about finding any answers. As she says, “The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is” (Winterson 93). When we try to dig deep enough to uncover the truth in a clear-cut way that is inconsistent with the messy nature of human decisions and relationships, we start becoming uncomfortable with the past. We each turn into little historians, painting a depiction of the past that we can feel proud of or look at without feeling regret, disappointment, or shame. Winterson and the postmodernist mindset in general are afraid of the danger that this approach to history carries with it.

It is worth asking what makes people comfortable with ignoring certain parts of history and championing other parts. We should agree with postmodernist philosophers such as Derrida that it is dangerous to miss diverse points of view surrounding an opinion in a rush to clearly pinpoint the truth of what happened. Winterson writes:
People have never had a problem disposing of the past when it gets too difficult. Flesh will burn, photos will burn, and memory, what is that? The imperfect ramblings of fools who will not see the need to forget. And if we can’t dispose of it, we can alter it. The dead don’t shout. There is a certain seductiveness about what is dead. It will retain all those admirable qualities of life with none of that tiresome messiness associated with live things. Crap and complaints and the need for affection. You can auction it, museum it, collect it. It’s much safer to be a collector of curios... (94)

In this quote, Winterson highlights two main points. First, we can look back at past events, observe all that was admirable about them, and forget about the ugly because we are not experiencing it in the here and now. History does not literally confront us with the “messiness associated with living things” unless we actively seek to understand what happened and approach it with an open mind. Even then, the perspective we come away with will always be different concerning historical events (such as the Holocaust) when compared to the understanding of actual people who lived through the events. (Of course, amongst the people who lived through the Holocaust, there are still more differing perspectives depending on personal situations and life experiences.) Second, this quote maintains the fact that what we absolutely cannot dispose of in history can still be significantly altered. In Winterson’s words, “The dead don’t shout.” However, how storytellers decide to frame a story is how readers perceive it. For example, did the American colonies bravely fight for independence from tyrannical Britain, or did they rebel against the king? Did American settlers colonize the “New World” for the first time and create a place of independence, or did they suppress native inhabitants? It all
depends on which history book is consulted. Winterson—and more generally, postmodernism—wrestles with this tension concerning the interpretation of history.

As with any philosophy of thinking, the postmodern perspective engages philosophers and scholars who support it and those who critique it. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon describes a main critique of postmodernism: “One of the few common denominators among the detractors of postmodernism is the surprising, but general, agreement that the postmodern is ahistorical” (87). This perspective argues that postmodernism goes too far in rejecting history and does not allow history to have any accuracy or value. It challenges the “implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation” (Hutcheon 92). In postmodernism, these qualities which were considered to be a part of historical accounts can no longer be trusted. However, Winterson does not appear to call for a complete rejection of history. She is not ahistorical in the sense of being against it. She simply hopes to wake people up to the reality that history is a complicated knot of string because the human life is a complex mix of decisions, emotions, conflict, and error. In short, life is complicated. Therefore, the accounts of people’s past lives are complicated. Realizing this complexity shifts the perspective of history from something that is dead to something that still exists. It involves “crap and complaints and the need for affection,” just like any real person (94). According to Winterson, taking the route of neatly categorizing the world into good and bad, order and chaos, or positive and negative is traditional and safe. Dead things can be auctioned, put in museums, and collected (Winterson 94). Pamphlets, plaques, articles, trinkets, and photographs can be controlled. Shallow curiosity can easily be satisfied with these shadows of the past. However,
postmodernism curiosity reaches deeper. It “puts you in the path of the elements” (Winterson 94). You get your hands dirty, which prompts you to ask questions that may not have clear answers. The world’s deepest experiences and trials may never be fully understood. Instead of demanding that history deliver answers that are impossible to attain, postmodernism ascertains that the story of the world is too complicated for one person to comprehend.

As seen above, postmodernism reflects a shift in people’s views of the world. Jeanette Winterson displays this shift in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. In her book A Poetics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon calls this a “new literary history” (91). It doesn’t focus on preserving a canon or traditional way of thinking. A quote Hutcheon takes from Stanford professor Herbert Lindenberger states that this new history “has little in common with the old” and that “history began to seem discontinuous.” Lindenberger continues: “It is no wonder that the scholarship we now pursue cannot take the form or speak the language of the older literary history” (91). Indeed, Winterson calls for readers to recognize the complexity of history and shift their perspectives away from the older way of thinking about the world. “The salt beef of civilization,” as she calls society’s narrative, is too refined for a daily diet when consumed in excess (Winterson 95). “If you always eat out you can never be sure what’s going in” (95). In other words, a single viewpoint presented to you from society is dangerous. Consuming that perspective alone is unhealthy for a person. To be balanced, Winterson proposes taking the perspectives of different people at face value. She says, “Put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder, but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own” (Winterson 95). This is the postmodern way of looking at the story of the world: no single perspective can answer all questions. However, if we listen to another
person’s stories before adding personal observations, Winterson believes we can learn to appreciate the differences that make us more complete when we come together. Combined ideas and perspectives give us a more balanced diet to feed our curiosities with. Although we may not have all the answers to the world’s triumphs and heartbreaks, the postmodern worldview in Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* hopes to broaden our mental horizons and help us realize the messiness and complexity of the human condition.

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Works Cited

