CHAPTER III

NARRATING THE SELF
This chapter shall concentrate upon Winterson’s position in terms especially of the notions of queer identity that she deploys, so as to reinforce the aspects that lie behind the writing of the self. Winterson’s work touches upon lesbianism and gender stereotypes and makes use of postmodern traits such as intertextuality and genre mixing. For Winterson, “the reality of art is the reality of imagination” and the fashionable approach to the arts is through the narrow gate of “subjective experience.” ¹ In her fiction, Winterson seeks to challenge conventional thinking, in order to transgress gender boundaries; thus, all her narrators are androgynous and are usually involved in turbulent lesbian love affairs. Sexual politics and sexual passion, in all its dilemmas and even vindictiveness remains integral for her. In her introduction to the published script of the television version of her novel, Winterson said that Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit “challenges the virtues of the home, the power of the church and the supposed normality of heterosexuality.”²

The screening of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit drama in 1990 by the BBC during peak viewing hours, and in the winter season, constituted a significant feminist/lesbian intervention in the sexual politics of popular culture. Reading, or watching, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit as simply autobiographical would be, then, to disregard the complexity of layers that lie behind Jeanette’s story. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is a literary novel which is rich with allusions, myth and thought-provoking meditations on truth and life. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit depends for its aesthetic appeal on formal and linguistic aspects rather than narrative and description. H. A. Harris comments:
By equating the Bible with fiction and fable, the novel directly challenges religious fundamentalist’s central tenet: ‘the [factual] authority of scripture.’

It also acquired the status of a cult novel among women-identified women in Britain because of its funny and sensitive portrayal of a lesbian protagonist. The novel highlights that Winterson leavened her keen satire of legalistic faith with deep insight and empathy. Even as she rejected dogmatic religion, she displayed an acute understanding of the human need for God. In the novel, an orphan named Jeanette is raised in a devout Evangelical household in the English Midlands. The novel is interwoven with numerous literary and Biblical intertexts, which underpin the religious themes and allows Jeanette, as young protagonist and adult narrator, to explore creatively, a world that is apart from the Biblical doctrine. The opening of the novel itself immediately switches the ordinary traditional gender division of labor with Jeanette’s adopted parents. Her father is rather passive, and nearly absent throughout the narrative and remains inconsequential while her mother is active and domineering. She is a woman who imposes a philosophy of life with frightening clarity. She divides the world into enemies and friends. Laura Doan notes:

Jeanette learns at an early age that such oppositions (mentioned in the novel’s first section Genesis: light/dark, good/evil, believer/heathen, order/disorder, lost/found, saved/fallen) provide the faithful and vigilant with the strategies and the weapons that are necessary to wage battle; thus slugs pellets destroy slugs and the dog attacks the Next door. The devil and sex are singled out as especially pernicious for either can appear in ‘many forms’.
The novel relates the story of Jeanette who comes out of the closet, in her quest for self and subjectivity as well as (homo)sexuality but rejects the traditional appropriation of the theory of the subject by the masculine and emphasizes instead the mother-daughter bonding as a counter-narrative of conventional masculine bondage that highlights upon female specificity and gender difference. These feelings are manifested through the perceived boundaries around sexual identity categories and the specific rules and expectations about how sexual identities should be performed in particular communities. The aspect of the self, especially in terms of the sexual identity underpins the deepest sentiments of the protagonists and this has been clearly illustrated in the character of Jeanette who is the narrator in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. The story immediately reminds the reader of Jeanette, who is the writer in real life. The key central relationship in the novel is that of Jeanette’s relationship with her mother and this reflects one of the major concerns of feminism in terms of the mother-daughter relationship. The relationship between Jeanette and her mother is constantly strained and filled with denial. This has been reflected in the truth behind the “Jane Eyre story” that her mother used to tell Jeanette. It also portrays Jeanette’s lesbianism and betrayal with regards to her biological mother, her adoption papers and the desperation in terms of Jeanette’s desire to be loved. Jeanette in the narrative discovers that her biological mother had come to visit her one day but had been dismissed by her mother. Jeanette recounts: “I’m your real mother,” she [Jeanette’s mother] said very quietly.” The natural mother is never spoken of again. The dynamics of the relationship between Jeanette and the mother is worked through in terms of their filial bond but her mother is so busy with God all the time that she forgets about the feelings of her own daughter. Jeanette’s idea of love, especially for
God, is very intense. She denotes, “I want someone who is fierce and will love me to death and know that love is as strong as death.” 6 Betrayal, as mentioned previously, becomes a strong and continuing theme within the text, especially as the only one she appears to trust is God who could perhaps exist only in her imagination, or within the realms of fantasy. According to her, to accept God was to accept Otherness, even though this did not make the life of the artist any easier. Jeanette points out that there were different sorts of treachery “but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it.” 7

Jeanette recounts that her mother betrayed her by confessing about her unnatural passion to the church: “In her [Jeanette’s mother] she was still queen, but not my queen anymore, not the White Queen any more.” 8 She refers to her mother as a servant of God and as such, “the servants of God ... by their very nature betray.” 9 Perhaps most importantly, the “real” world is hidden from her and denied of her. It is replaced with a world of obsession, self-sacrifice, violation and human selfishness. In other words, Jeanette’s search for love appears hopeless and it may be an indication that the real world is a complex and harsh place, one in which fairy tales and fantasy flourish. 10 This unyielding, dualistic and dogmatic view of the world is at the root of the conflictive relationship between mother and daughter, especially as the latter develops her subjectivity and begins to assert her own world-view. According to Gemma López:

Indications throughout the novel, and more specifically over Jeanette’s adolescence, point to the fact that the mother had a past of sensuality that she wishes to silence, and thus her religious fanaticism is represented as a means of sublimating the ‘Unnatural passions’ she felt at a young age. 11
Winterson states that “love is reciprocity and so is art. Either you abandon yourself to another world that you say you seek or you find ways to resist it.” For the young lesbian, Jeanette, her first socialization situates her as heterosexual, even while her first desire and her first love is for another woman. It is the mother who teaches her how to fabricate for social acceptance, in order to fit the culturally negated gender stereotypes of femininity in being “a woman”, and hence she lies to her daughter and teaches her how to dissemble. Jeanette and her mother articulate exactly this complex relationship of desire and oppression that feminism was concerned with. This has been done within an evangelical context and precisely mirrors lesbian feminism’s exploration of the childhood development of the young lesbians. Jeanette’s mother confirms Jeanette’s position as a Christ figure by convincing Jeanette that her destiny lies in changing the world. Due to her mother’s propaganda, Jeanette herself reports that from a very young age she always knew that she was special. Ironically, this characteristic would most obviously relate to her future as a lesbian (who belonged to a group often categorized as “special”), rather than as a Christ-like figure. Elsie Norris, Jeanette’s much older friend is a woman-identified woman. She has been a suffragette, who is militant enough to have been imprisoned. Elsie forcefully begs her to listen to her internal self, even as she focuses upon seeing the external world. Jeanette does not yet understand at this stage, but later her imagination continues to flourish even as she discovers her own nature, and the precepts of pleasure. Her emotions and her internal self changes and unravels as she grows. Her views and that of her mother’s, contradict, as Jeanette narrates: “I lay in it, unable to forgive myself, unable to forgive her [her mother].” As Jeanette grows
increasingly detached from her mother she comes closer to fully accepting and celebrating her lesbian identity.

The injuries and sufferings along with love and passion in Winterson’s novels lead to a knowledge and understanding that the power to transform oneself is always within that person. In the novel, Winterson advocates alternative ways to understand the sexual, emotional, and intellectual self through the protagonist, Jeanette. It merges the experience of discovering one’s sexuality with the struggle to construct a personal identity. Jeanette declares, “I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special.” Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is based fundamentally upon the philosophical idea that the struggle for self-knowledge and the pursuit of happiness are more worthwhile than self-denial and the dark torments of sexual repression which religious dogmas often impose on people. Within the story, the secular world of the school fails to meet Jeanette’s needs in the same way that her church, family and community fails her as she grows up in an environment in which the pursuit of personal happiness and sexual fulfillment is an extremely difficult endeavour, and one that is constantly thwarted by the obscure pressures of religious morality.

Lesbianism is often seen in relation to other issues like religion, family, society, or simply “growing up.” Sedgwick discovers a number of pairs of opposing terms (binarisms) which she then shows to be inconsistent with and dependent upon each other. Among the pairings that she assembles and dissects for consideration are secrecy/disclosure, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, health/illness, same/different, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntarily/
addiction. She asserts that a true understanding of the force of the opposition of these
terms must be grounded in the realization and acceptance that the content of all of these
terms was determined around the turn of the century amid and through anxious
questioning over who and what was homosexual. These opposing terms, all of which
operate today, therefore have a residue of the homo/hetero definitional crisis. Lesbianism
is also often identified with oddness and textual reading could even suggest that
Jeanette’s lesbianism was caused by her peculiar upbringing. For instance, when gay
people in a homophobic society come out, perhaps especially to parents or spouses, it is
within the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both
directions. The pathogenic secret itself, even, can circulate contagiously as a secret: and a
mother would denote that her adult child’s coming out of the closet with her has plunged
her, in turn into the closet in her conservative community. 

This has been reflected in
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit with Jeanette’s mother and one of Jeanette's alter egos,
namely Winnet Stonejar. In the case of Winnet Stonejar, the sorcerer who adopts her
teaches her the magic arts so that she can “take the message to other places, where they
hardly know how to draw a chalk circle”, just as Jeanette's mother wanted her daughter
to carry God’s message to the heathen. Similar to Jeanette’s fate, Winnet is forced to
leave the castle when she falls in love with a person that the sorcerer does not accept.
This mirrors a turning point in the protagonist’s self-understanding: the raven Abednego
tells Winnet that she would not lose her power, she will “just use it differently”, before
vomiting “a rough brown pebble.” Jeanette’s message, embodied in the novel amounts
to a reflection on the issues of lesbian identity and “coming out” accompanied by several
ideas that are developed by lesbian cultural criticism.
As the substitution of the phrase “woman-identified woman” for “lesbian” suggests, as indeed does the concept of the continuum of male or female homosocial desire, this trope tends to re-assimilate to one another a sense of identification and desire, where inversion models, by contrast, depend upon their distinctness. Gender separatist models would thus place the man-loving woman and the man-loving man each at the “natural” defining center of their own gender, again in contrast to inversion models that locate gay people whether biologically or culturally - at the threshold between genders.  

As in the novel, when Jeanette refuses to repent in front of the church community about her lesbian affair with Melanie, Jeanette’s rebellion offers a clear sign of her willingness to accept the fears, tensions and complexities of her difference with other people. Jeanette's struggle to accept her sexual orientation in spite of the reactionary religious education that she has received, and the determination to become strong enough to remain unaffected from external aggression when she reasserts her lesbian identity become a real tale of a heroine's quest for self. The Church community subjects her to an exorcism, and deprives her of food and light for a period of thirty six hours. The exorcism causes Jeanette to hallucinate, and conjure up an “orange demon” which acts as Jeanette’s defense against the community’s attempt to subjugate her. This demon helps her to protect those aspects of the self, such as that of her creative imagination and her homosexuality which are proscribed by the Church. Jeanette recounts that her lesbianism had become by “accident”: “that accident had forced me to think more carefully about my own instincts and attitudes of others. After the exorcism I had tried to replace my world with another just like it, but I couldn’t. I loved God and I loved the Church, but I began to see that as more and more complicated.”  

After Melanie, Jeanette finds a satisfactory
love relationship with Katy: “She was my most uncomplicated love affair, [Jeanette explains] and I loved her because of it.” This closing also contains a new fable, that of the pilgrim whose arrival and departure from an Edenic garden symbolizes Jeanette’s acceptance of her homosexuality and her determination to live according to her own dictates. The death of Elsie finally breaks Jeanette’s ties with her town. Elsie Norris is Jeanette’s sensitive, kind, and intelligent friend who makes up for the maternal neglect of her mother and provides Jeanette the attention and love that she requires. Griffin argued that “both essentialist views (you are born one) and social constructionist views (you are made one) on lesbianism are offered”. The title of the novel “Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit” is symbolic. In Jago Morrison’s reading, the orange demon is Jeanette’s acceptance and internalization of lesbian sexuality as evil and deviant, and hence it is part of the reason as to why she initially reverts to a masquerade of normalcy instead of being excluded. Winterson denotes that there are different ways of living life and different forms of sexual desire and expression. It is not only heterosexuality that exists in the world, but also homosexuality. She declares of the novel that the novel exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham as it illustrates by example that what the Church calls love is actually psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people’s. In Winterson’s view, the homosexual is not an imitation of a heterosexual; the lesbian is not an inferior version of a man. Contrary to Jeanette’s mother’s belief, Jeanette perceives that oranges which were once soothing, comforting and sufficient were no longer the only fruit. There is more to fruit than just oranges. Oranges were thus, not the only fruit. The oranges symbolized the dominant rhetoric that Winterson’s mother embraces, and they also
become a means of avoiding the truth. For example, her mother would avoid talking to Jeanette by giving her an orange to eat. 27 This is also evident in the case of Melanie who tried to conform Jeanette to the accepted standards of sexuality by offering her an orange. 28 Lauren Rusk contends that both offerings turn out to be “sanctioned but insufficient fare”. 29 The “half each” fruit that Jeanette shares with Elsie 30 is associated with the orange demon, and is linked to an “equal sharing of lovers or close friends”. Hence, oranges proved to be more nourishing. Oranges also proved to be a device for Jeanette to back her mother and the pastor: “They started arguing between themselves about whether I was an unfortunate victim or a wicked person. ... ‘Have an orange,’ I offered, by way of conversation. They both started at me like I was mad.” 31

Instances in the novel about a prince who was looking for perfection is also symbolic, because at the end of the tale the prince’s ongoing quest for perfection is ridiculed, suggesting that such totalitarian views of the world only lead to grotesque error. This fairy tale functions within the story as a representation of Jeanette’s newfound awareness of human frailty and the contradictory nature of personal freedom, a painful but necessary process by which she starts to question both the Church’s and her mother’s authority. In this way the importance of fantasy in the construction of the self and of Jeanette’s adolescent psyche, as well as the complex task for a writer who tries to represent subjectivity and the achievement of a sense of identity is reflected in the novel. With Katie, Jeanette finds a new and more satisfactory love relationship. Jeanette can truly accept the nature of her own self and she explained that theirs had been the most uncomplicated love affair. Jeanette’s quest for self is also equated to that of Sir Perceval and the Holy Grail. As Susana Onega accurately points out: “The interpolation of the
Perceval story adds a mythical and archetypal dimension to Jeanette’s autobiographical life story, providing the unitarian quest pattern into which the other subsidiary texts can be integrated.” 32 Similarly like Sir Perceval, Jeanette has to give up the security of the round table (namely the church) and the love of King Arthur (namely her mother) and set out on her quest for the Grail (the fulfillment of her desires). However as the Grail is a metaphor of her subjectivity, this endeavour will never be completely fulfilled. In the final book of the novel, entitled “Ruth” there is a narrative about a girl named Winnet (a condensing of Jeanette and Winterson), who dwells in a kingdom, “long ago”:

In those days, magic was very important, and territory, to start with, just an extension of the chalk circles you drew around yourself to protect yourself from elements and the like. It’s gone out of fashion now, which is a shame, because sitting in a chalk circle when you feel threatened is a lot better than sitting in the gas oven. 33

Winterson denoted that circles like walls could protect as well as limit, and, the important thing was to draw one’s own circle and not get drawn into someone else’s. Winnet in the novel was trying to get out of a forest but was consistently persuaded by a wizard who eventually entraps her by drawing a circle into which she steps. There is a struggle ensuing between Winnet and the wizard, who must guess her name in order to possess her. When the wizard said that he knows her name, Winnet stopped, afraid because if this were true she would be trapped. Naming meant power. Adam in the Bible had named the animals and the animals came at his call. “I don’t believe you,” 34 she shouted back. But unfortunately the wizard denotes her name correctly, “Winnet Stonejar,” her patronym itself was a round stone object with a lid to block out the sky and
as a result, Winnet must enter the stone walls of the wizard’s castle. Judith Butler in Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’, examines the power of naming and the struggle to control the deployment of a name, for instance, in terms of the name queer. She states that being named by another can be a form of violence, and therefore, there are attempts that are made on parts of persons and groups in order to own their own names.35

Winterson explains that Jeanette’s homosexuality places her outside of the binary by denoting that she is neither wholly good nor wholly evil. At the same time, Jeanette’s lesbianism defies the binary gender roles that traditionally dominate society. Jeanette is a woman who does not act as a traditional woman because she does not love men. Winterson exposes the damage that has been done to women who love women, as well as the silencing of this damage, in terms of the violence of sex. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit demonstrates the multiplicity of selves within the postmodern fragmented identity, through Jeanette’s imaginative fantasy identifications with various fairytales. These include Malory’s story of Sir Perceval’s search for the Holy Grail, in order to place Jeanette’s story in the mythic realm. There are also protagonists, illustrating both the fluidity of identity and gender positions. The young Jeanette’s fabulation can be linked to her personal formation of the self, a self-creation of a feminine voice that, through its variety and its crossing of genre boundaries, refuses to limit its potential. The self, via the differing narratives, is always shifting and always in process. Jeanette was forced to abandon her mother’s house and the religious congregation, and she then begins her quest for adulthood and autonomy through a series of odd jobs: first in a funeral parlour and then selling ice cream until she finishes school and is offered a full-time job in a mental
hospital, a position she accepts mainly because (echoing Virginia Woolf) it offers her: “A room of my own, at least.” 36 In the city Jeanette has time to reflect on what she has lost and gained. She has no intention of going back to the equivocal safety of home and church; and given the choice between priest and prophet she opts for the latter despite the many perils.

The novel may be read as a fairy tale which is creative. It could also be interpreted as psychic stories that the young Jeanette tells to herself in order to navigate the construction of her own identity. This aspect is also a self-creation which is singular and it also becomes a psychoanalytic conception of the self. Winterson portrays a view of human identity as diffused and disintegrating, as rendered explicitly in the following passage:

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. [...] I might be anywhere at one time, influencing a number of different things [...]. 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. Perhaps for a while these two selves have become confused. I have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something I might have been, playing itself out. 37

In keeping with this contention, Winterson adopts women’s sexuality and writing in women’s terms beyond phallocentric dictatorship and influence. These aspects are
reflected as the solid foundations for the construction of a new sense of identity which is free from patriarchal definitions in binary terms. In *Art Objects* (1995) she wrote:

> Close the shutters and turn up the lamp. The room is full of voices…
> Intimate illuminations when the reader and what is read are both unaware of the hands of the clock. The clock is ticking. Let it. In your hands, a book that was in their hands, passed to you across the negligible years of time. Art is indifferent to time, and if you want proof, you have it. Pick up the book. It is still warm.\(^38\)

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that standard binary oppositions limit freedom and understanding, especially as related to sexuality, and that according to her, limiting sexuality to homosexual or heterosexuality, in structured binary opposition, is just too simplistic. *Epistemology of the Closet* proves that modern sexual contradictions lead to modern misunderstandings, that language is a deeply relevant force behind sexuality, and that labeled speech acts are ultimately the proof of the nature of one’s sexuality. Sedgwick’s use of queer theory exposes the underlying meanings behind the oppositions and distinctions in modern culture at large. This device is also employed by Winterson, for instance in *Written on the Body*, where the novel begins with the monologue of a nameless narrator struggling to come to terms with the utter pain and sorrow of having lost Louise, and the person s/he loves. Throughout the narrative Winterson depicts the narrator’s progression from a promiscuous Lothario to a faithful and deeply passionate lover who tries to escape from the platitudes of romantic love: “Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love. … It’s the clichés that cause the trouble.” \(^39\) Winterson uses tropes of travel
and anatomy in order to pursue her textual exploration of the corporeality of love. The usual love story is eclipsed by Winterson’s deft juggling of the English language. The narrator often warns denotes her/his own unreliability as a story teller by directly addressing the reader in a self-conscious manner: “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator.” This way of addressing the reader brings to mind previous Winterson protagonists, like the Jeanette of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* or the Henri of *The Passion*, who recount the stories of their lives while at the same time warning the reader of the slippery margins between the real and the unreal, or between fact and fiction: “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” repeats Henri constantly, his line being, a literary device which seeks to emphasize the postmodern condition of Winterson’s writing.

Even though it is a largely plot less narrative, *Written on the Body* explores the subject of gender and sexual identity, while tackling the problem of conveying a love story without falling prey to cliché. Her main concern in the novel, among other things, is metafictional exploration of the concept of self and the idea of crossing boundaries. In Winterson’s hands, love, is pummeled, dissected, and flipped upside-down, until the word itself rings new and unfamiliar. *Written on the Body* focuses upon the power of language to create both subjectivity and sexuality, and it is exclusively vested upon the politics of the lesbian self. It explores the space between love and death, and rejected essentialist sex roles wherein masculinity is the other of femininity. In this way, Winterson appears to suggest the idea that narrators are also “in process” thus illustrating the narrator’s ability to subvert the equivocal status of an objective reality since the narrator is ungendered with unspecified age. In her analysis of Monique Wittig’s work
Judith Butler argues that “one can, if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man, [and that] the linguistic discrimination of ‘sex’ secures the political and cultural operation of compulsory heterosexuality.” In the process of asserting her lesbian sexual identity, Jeanette in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* refuses to conform to the constructed norms and taboos of the phallocentric ethos. Similarly, the narrator of *Written on the Body* also refuses to be either male or female in his/her journey towards self-consciousness, in his/her quest of self and an understanding of the ethics of love, thus disrupting “the easy flow of meaning and making us aware of the inherent ambiguity and mediating influence of language.”

The novel reflects a highly controversial writer and by adding a creative spark the novel withholds the gender of the narrator from the reader. The dynamics of marriage and adultery have been cut open. The narrator repeatedly ridicules the clichés that are attached to married love: “Settle down, feet under the table. She’s a nice girl, he’s a nice boy. It’s the clichés that cause the trouble.” The narrator contemptuously dismisses the safe confines of marriage: “Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire. You may as well take a pop-gun to a python.” Louise, the protagonist, also makes her married life seem like a sham when she said: “I’m going to leave him because my love for you makes any other life a lie.” In *Written on the Body*, Winterson explores the roguish narrator’s quest for sexual love and highlights upon power relations as an integral part of sexual relationships. The novel focuses upon the love between the narrator and a married woman called Louise. The opening sentence of the novel offers the key: “Why is the measure of love loss?” Winterson’s unusual word order ensures that love and loss are directly juxtaposed. Love, the novel implies, necessitates, and is constituted by loss. When Louise
contracts cancer, the narrator is persuaded by Louise’s husband, Elgin, an Orthodox Jew, to give her up, so that Elgin who is an eminent doctor can provide her with the treatment she requires, in order to survive. Louise’s husband, Elgin, with a proclivity for masochistic sex, is so deranged that Louise ceases to engage in sexual acts with him, and at this point he turns to prostitutes. Similarly in The Passion, the Queen of Spades is married to an adventurer who leaves her alone for months, and even years, at a time. In each case, the woman is left without the children, friendship, and respect which supposedly characterize the sanctified union of marriage. Both women consequentially turn to relationships outside of their marriages for emotional as well as sexual fulfillment. The beauty and intensity of their love affairs is described by Winterson in the Biblical marital terms of “one flesh.” These terms become a foil to their empty marriages. Rather than being defiled and ashamed, Louise and the Queen of Spades experience freedom, pleasure and joy. Winterson highlights the fallibility of simply believing that marriage is good and pure, and that sexual acts outside of marriage are evil and sinful; her configuration of erotic love resists these hierarchical binaries. She does not, however, assert that all sexual encounters are sacred; she asserts that only those that occur in a relationship characterized by true love remain sacred.

Written on the Body is a novel about love that remains irrespective of gender. In the second section of the novel the narrator, nursing his/her pain, enters into an extended series of prose poems while meditating upon the various parts of Louise’s cancer-ridden body. S/he cannot let of Louise because s/he feels that Louise might still be on the other end of the rope. His/her mournful soliloquy brings to mind Judith Butler’s analysis of Freud’s 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia”. In the experience of losing another
human being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and “sustaining” the other through magical acts of initiation. The loss of the other which one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbour that other within the very structure of the self: “So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation.”

There are sections that open with a quotation from an anatomical textbook and such sections are The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body; The Skin; The Skeleton; The Special Senses. With the aid of the anatomical book the narrator realizes that the world is a world of decay and disease: “Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved.”

This love story is one which is written on the body and not of the body as s/he narrates: “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there.”

The narrator’s explorations of Louise’s body at times combine anatomical definitions with tropes of travel: “I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find the way out.”

This entire section refers to topics such as the validity of diagnosis and medical intervention. It denotes medical ethics and constitutes an extended conceit, that centers upon the paradox that love is so frequently thought of as a disease; namely lovesickness. For the narrator, love has usually lasted for around six months but with Louise, his/her lifestyle had altered. The narrator cannot help seeing analogies between visions of love by which the definition is dependent for its power on its potential undoing of a terminal disease like cancer. Both love and cancer end in sorrow, loneliness and death. Winterson uses an anatomical theme
in order to render poetic expression to the underlying duality of love and of the language
of love. As the narrator acknowledges, Louise “opened up the dark places as well as the
light.”  

However, the one element that really sets *Written on the Body* apart from any
other well-written story about love is that it leaves the gender of the main character
unknown while recounting a relationship that cannot be categorized as either homosexual
or heterosexual. Thereby, love is stripped down to nothing more and nothing less, than an
emotion. To Winterson, the narrator’s gender really does not matter. Patricia Duncker in
“Jeanette Winterson and the Aftermath of Feminism” (1998) has denoted that gender is
“the first thing we have to know about someone…Can you imagine a world where it
wasn’t?” Winterson proposes to denote this aspect inherently in her texts by denoting that
the narrator’s gender does not matter, and that it can be both. It could also radically
change Winterson herself as she is very clear about where she stands on this issue.
“When I read Adrienne Rich or Oscar Wilde […] I am not reading their work to get at
their private lives, I am reading their work because I need the depth-charge it carries.”  

In “The Laugh of Medusa”, whether the central relationship is homosexual or
heterosexual, its power lies in the fact that it is based on what Cixous sees as a
specifically female principle, called the “economy of the gift”, rather than on an economy
of exchange. Cixous has often been accused of essentialism, because by urging women to
“write the body” she seems to imply that female identity is determined by their bodies.
Winterson creates this sense of indeterminacy around the question of the narrator’s
gender and she disrupts that link between body and voice. The novel, with its sexually
indeterminate narrator, is a deliberate attempt to dispense with distinctions of gender and
it meditates on the nature of love which remains stripped of its specifically hetero- and homosexual features. Winterson’s use of the first person narrative forces one to consider what gender stereotypes are being carried in order to measure what is “male” or “female”. Winterson has stated that she does not “think people’s sexuality is really that fixed.” She observes that it does not matter which sex the narrator is, because “the gender of the character is both, throughout the book, and changes; sometimes it’s female, sometimes it’s male.” Winterson disturbs fixed boundaries and rigidly gendered identities that objectify the body in order to build up a concept of the body that is fluid. It also leaves room for changes and merger with other bodies, where bodies are held together, not by a stable body image and a gendered identity, but by forces of connection and interaction between parts of the body. Winterson criticizes the equation of the female body with a penetrable surface. The androcentric concept of sexuality that associates penetration with the exploration of hidden depths and the achievement of power and knowledge are unmasked as necrophilia. This brings up the recurring passage from the book, which mentions how both Renoir and Henry Miller create their art with their penises. In a conversation between the narrator and a former girlfriend, Catherine, Catherine asks, “‘Do you know why Henry Miller said “I write with my prick”?’ ‘Because he did. When he died they found nothing between his legs but a ball-point pen.’ ‘You’re making it up,’ she said. Am I?’ Here, the narrator’s final question immediately speaks to the playfulness of the text. The narrator leads to an interesting section in which s/he becomes obsessed with human anatomy textbooks and uses them to write intense, lyrical descants on Louise’s body which is by turns beautiful, moving, and disturbing and
this is where the narrator explains how he/she knows Louise: “That is how I know you. You are what I know.”

The conclusion of the novel celebrates the transformative effects of art by itself because it is neither factual nor explainable simply as a character’s fantasy. The text celebrates the triumph of a purely textual and artistic recreation of a lover who is already dead. As the narrator denotes “I had been reading books that dealt with death partly because my separation from Louise was final and partly because I knew she would die.”

It is but a love which is revived in terms of a renewed use of language. The structure that Winterson has bonded by language is one of love that is brought into focus through loss. Textual love necessarily sacrifices sexual love with language as the only consolation that is left behind.

Louise’s cancer permeates the second half of the novel, filling her body and the text as the narrator wants to; and in a sense, the disease can be said to translate the novel’s style. Leukemia is cancer of the blood and it is a disease as well as a kind of self-consumption that spreads to every hollow of the body, thus making the entire body a potential enemy, a mystery, unknowable—uncontextualizable. The novel becomes primarily a collection and recreation of the narrator’s memories, meditations and lamentations upon love and loss. Much of these aspects are intimately and erotically bound to the body and the cancer is brutal and toxic: “she [Louise] would be badly anemic, suffering from deep bruising and bleeding, tired and in pain most of the time. She would be constipated. She would be vomiting and nauseous. [...] She would be very thin, my beautiful girl, thin and weary and lost. There is no cure for chronic lymphocytic leukemia.”
The novel does not denote any detail upon what Louise’s cancer does to her health. It only illustrates how news of her imminent suffering affects her lover and the text. The very word “cancer” introduces mystery into the novel. “Cancer” also reveals the origins of lyricism which lie in the sense of loss, and not of love. It is thus narratively appropriate that the narrator forces Louise to disappear once s/he learns of the diagnosis. If Louise’s body is a blank slate, what has been definitively written on it is disease and not love. Disease at first seems to defeat the impulse toward lyricism, while setting a different scene for language entirely. With Louise gone, poetry leaves the text and the lover moves into an ugly cold hovel in Yorkshire and works in a wine-and-fish bar. After leaving Louise with her husband, a doctor who is comfortable with the language of science, as well as with numbers, formulas, computers, and other technical equipment, but who is without both passion and compassion, the narrator tries once again, to read Louise.

Louise, in the novel, suffers tenfold from this problem: she is a vessel of tedious perfection and is always seen in a flattering light. Winterson describes her in foamy lyricism in such a way that her flesh has the moonlit shade of a silver birch, she muses that the creamy apart from your hair your red hair that flanks you either side and in blank generalizations. The relationship with the narrator and Louise is flawless, un-sexy in its total fulfillment and nothing mattered to them. It was as if a treasure had fallen into their hands and the treasure was each other.

Like Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Written on the Body focuses upon the power of language to create both subjectivity and sexuality. It stands for a life that can revivify the love and the loss of which it is brooding on, to concentrate exclusively upon
the politics of the lesbian self. In her collection of essays, *Art Objects*, she asserts, “I realized that [...] plot was meaningless to me. [...] I had to accept that my love-affair was with language, and only incidentally with narrative.” Winterson confronts the linguistic problems of narrating a romance, starting with her admission that the entire subject of love has been verbalized so extensively and repeatedly that it is almost impossible to write anything new about the experience. She employs a variety of specialist languages drawn from such discourses as those of the Bible and travelogues and anatomy. She also employs such divergent narrative modes as dramatic dialogue and epistolary fiction, in order to overcome the over-worn status of romance fiction. Winterson’s negotiation between the unavoidable use of cliché and the breakthrough into a new language of love reflects an ambiguity which is lying at the center of the phenomenon of love itself.

Michel Foucault has diagnosed a similar duality while underlying the discourse of love in his three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. For Foucault, sexuality itself is a function of ideology and it is the name that can be given to a historical construct which is not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp. It becomes a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.

If *Written on the Body* is a eulogy to the body, even in its sickness and decay, then *Art and Lies* is a cry of pain. The novel is concerned with how to live life and what path to take. Each character in *Art and Lies* is associated with a different art-form: music, painting and poetry. As the title suggests, the text is more of a philosophical digression about art as artifice and invention than a story in the traditional sense of the term. It
criticizes the Platonic notion of art as mimesis and reverences the power of the word. Winterson said:

When I wrote *Art and Lies*, I said it was a question and a quest. The protagonists, Handel, Picasso and Sappho, are each fleeing a dead city, and a life they can no longer bear. The dead city is a London of the future, a potential place without values. ... I did not put my life into *Art and Lies*, as people commonly understand the artist at work, but I have put *Art and Lies* into my life. The question ‘How shall I live?’ had to be addressed to myself. 64

Handel along with the other two narrators, Picasso and Sappho, are on a train, trying to flee from the past. They want to flee from their family and from the all-pervasive death of the heart which made them so miserable. These characters appear to be constructs of identity, even as they represent elements of consciousness. Their identities are dissolved and they constitute the reality of imagination which, according to Winterson, is the only reality of art. Each character strives to reconstruct his/her autobiography. One of them, namely Handel, imagines and even writes his life story on the remaining blank pages of the book he is reading. The other, a painter, namely Picasso, uses painting in her healing process, which implies that art is the artist’s autobiography. The third character, Sappho, denotes the story of how her biography and poems were transformed by literary critics. The relationship between these characters is multi-dimensional and it appears that the boundaries between these three are not clearly drawn. Winterson considers art to be a superior form of knowledge which is filled with inconsistencies. According to Winterson, these complexities make a work of art an
“Other”, which she believes is a bringer of realities beyond the commonplace. Thus, the experience of art is a travel through time, space and place. The train journey that they embark upon allows Handel to move back and forth between the past and the present of his existence. The descriptions of the city are mentioned in the first chapter through Handel. He mentions three cities but he actually makes a reference to only one and although the name London is not mentioned in any of the three descriptions, it is London that he has in mind. The book is set in the City 2000 After Death, which explains that the time and the space coordinates are indefinite. Yet the City is not really any city, and the time is not an unreal, end of millennium future. It can be identified as the present age, especially since the problems that Handel is faced with such as, breast cancer (which his patients are afflicted with), lack of feeling, lack of compassion, hollowness, and despair and of understanding between people, are issues of contemporary concern. Handel distinguishes between three types of cities that coexist within the boundaries of the same official administrative form of organization: the ceremonial, the political and the invisible city, within the novel.

In the essay entitled “Art & Life” in Art Objects, Winterson reflects her resistance to postmodernism. She associates postmodernism with the mass media and with a loss of authorial control and aesthetic value, both of which are highly prized by modernism. She denotes, “You are a slave to advertising, to fashion, to habit and to the media. You like to call yourself a free man but you are bound by rules of which you know nothing.” 65 The only way out of such miserable slavery of this century, for Winterson, is to return to real ideas which are to be found in books. As in modernism, Winterson insists upon the discreteness and integrity of the artistic realm.
When Picasso first agonizes over her family life, Winterson does not convey to the reader that she has been incestuously abused. Her excessive use of figuration and artful sentence structure is designed both to hint at a secret and to retain an aura of mysterious excitement. In this text, Winterson denotes famous names: Handel, Picasso and Sappho. She transforms their identities to her own ends even as they step out from history and into the realms of fiction. The unsettling effect of Winterson’s narrative time commences here with the reader’s expectations being not just unfulfilled but shattered by the deception of the protagonists’ names: Handel is not the eighteenth century German composer but an English Catholic priest cum gynecologist and cancer specialist. Picasso is not the French painter but a young English girl whose real name is Sophia. Sappho is similarly not the Greek woman poet of Lesbos. Therefore, with the exception of Doll Sneerpiece the Bawd, who does not have a voice of her own and appears on the scene as a character from an old book, there are only contemporary figures within the text. The text denotes Winterson’s critical comment upon the social ills that are attached to the fragments of their life stories. Yet, a sense of the past permeates and defines the entire narrative. This novel is a polemical book as well as an angry book where queer is a gender game and depicts the best of queer emotions that is pure, undiluted rage which is not delicate, playful or self-indulgently vain. All the three characters are alienated, restless, dissatisfied and seeking. Handel, Picasso and Sappho find themselves on the same train and are drawn to one another through the curious agency of a book. They are linked in their struggle against a toxic society and they end up together in a train which is speeding towards freedom. Sappho is searching for the woman that she had seen as attempting to fly from the window ledge of family values. Picasso is inherently escaping
from an abusive family as well as repeated molestation from her incestuous brother even as she explains: “Until I was fifteen, my brother used me, night after night, as a cesspit for his bloated adolescence. That place is sealed now. My own narrow stair stops outside the door and begins in a new direction.” Sappho, the “sexualist” and whose poetic fragments have been poked about in for 2,500 years, is associated with the figure of a hermaphrodite which was once a common classification for the lesbian. Sappho describes herself saying that in the olden days she was a great poet but a bad girl and that Ovid came along in the first century AD and tried to clean up her reputation with a proper tragic romance. She further denotes that if one says her name and one would simply imply the term “sex” and that if one said her name and it would also imply white sand, under a white sky and white trammel of her thighs. These two narrators, namely Sappho and Picasso, are lesbians and hence not quite women. Handel is a failed priest but an abiding Catholic with elitist tendencies, whose work as a doctor forces him to consider social questions that he would probably rather avoid. As a youth, he was raped by a Cardinal in Rome. He too is trying to escape from his past and his sinking sense of self-worth. He suffers from guilt over a blotched mastectomy in which he had cut off the wrong breast of his patient. The callousness and misery he encounters in the disintegrating city present him, with unbearable moral dilemmas. He is not quite a man; he is, in fact, a castrato, or eunuch. Art and Lies thus is both a question and a quest. According to Winterson, the difference between the two is that art is the true means of not telling the truth. She denotes that the protagonists are setting out to find an ultimate reality and that lies are just lies. Winterson denotes that what art tries to do is cut through all that and come up with something that really is objective.
Art and life, Winterson feels, are completely intertwined. To her, stories are a way to re-envision the world and appropriate it for oneself. Each of the characters has been removed from the social fabric. This has been done through violence for Picasso and Handel, and from sexual preference for Sappho. Each of them have the same aim, that is, to stay alive in a heartless, fatally confused society. It is not physical survival that they are struggling for, however, but the survival of their hearts and souls. Pritchard explains that the novel argues that art transcends time, which he links to modernism, and that the three narrators speak in some way for three aesthetic genres. The novel is a hymn to lesbian eroticism. While Handel lives in a disconnected society, Sappho, in contrast, embraces desire and sex as the real, sensate connection and links language to the physical experience, since language itself, when uttered, becomes a part of the sensate world: “For Sappho, the word and sex are one in their mutual linkage of imagination and embodiment. ... Language and sex are brought together through an eroticization of speaking.” Doll Sneepiece, the eighteenth century heroine, who is in love with Ruggerio, reads Sappho’s poetry and these articulations are interleaved with Winterson’s own lesbian poetry and that if Doll’s passages in *Art and Lies* parody eighteenth-century pornography, Sappho is an erotic of eye and ear, mining both the sensual and sentimental side of romantic imagination. Her poems of love between women have been burnt and her story has been retold by heterosexual men. Picasso is sexually abused by her half-brother and this repeated rape by her half-brother thus replays her father’s rape of the maid, with the added dependence on familial as well as economic bonds beyond critiquing the inequities and the abuses of protection that the family might otherwise provide, Winterson raises the stakes of social complicity with the abuse of women by
turning it into an incest case. Burns finds this as a crucial critique and in many ways this aspect becomes the powerful center of the novel. Burns states that this abuse also functions as the negative “other” to eroticism as the enactment of lust forced upon a girl who resisted. In a phallocentric society, women are denigrated and are viewed only as sexual objects and “Picasso is thus repeatedly figured as a witness who is denied, suppressed, and silenced.” 69 Picasso wrestles with a question, while wildly painting her way out of a leadenly respectable family in which her brother entertains himself by raping her, and where her parents are automatons who are propelled by greed and fear and commented thus, “My past, my house, is linked by two staircases: the one I use, and the one other people use. My private staircase leads me from the low basement of my infancy, through small bare rooms...” 70 Picasso’s struggle to escape from her family structure which is like a prison invokes feminine anger which she transforms into a work of art by painting herself. Her own body that becomes an act of rebellion which is inspired by Sappho and Picasso paints herself and in the process paints the family. In doing so, she frees herself from the social collusion that claimed her physically and emotionally. Through the process of painting, Picasso retains her self as well as the importance of her being. Sappho’s words to Picasso at the end of the novel evoke best the damage of domestic rape. Sappho speaks to the pleasure and the “healing” of finding a staircase through language which reaches the room, the body and where it happened. She states:

Lie beside me. Let me see the division of your pores. Let me see the web of scars made by your family’s claw and you their furniture. Let me see the wounds they denied. The battleground of family life that has been your
body. Let me see the bruised red lines that signal their encampment. Let me see the rooted place where they are gone. Lie beside me and let the seeing be the healing. 71

Art and Lies has the courage of its convictions. It is a queer text that asserts a lesbian self with the presence of heterosexual women. Burns suggests: “Thus, the differences between genders are neither crystallized nor ignored; Winterson’s androgyny works to open up possible variations in personality and act. Sexing the Cherry makes sex central to its historic revision and strives for a similar sexualization of the spirit and condemnation of hypocrites who both exploit” 72 (and denounce prostitutes). The crime of Puritan Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace meet a grisly end in a brothel at the hands of Dog-Woman. Palmer highlights that Winterson focuses attention upon the Dog Woman’s heroic qualities and describes her as presenting the rebellious, transgressive aspect of femininity which patriarchy attempts to suppress. 73

Dog-Woman’s stories describe many instances in detail. These include the rise of the Puritans, the Civil War, the execution of Charles, the rule of Cromwell and the Restoration of the monarchy. Dog-Woman’s story encompasses death as a natural component of life and meaning. Despite all these characteristics, some traits define the Dog-Woman as being a sensitive, love-longing person. For instance, her motherly love for Jordan while protecting him from harm comes especially from the heart as Winterson narrates:

When Jordan is older I will tell him what I know about the human body and urge him to be careful of his member. And yet it is not part of him I fear for; it is his heart. His heart. 74
She witnesses the deaths of her beloved King Charles I, and of Tradescant; and significantly she is present when the bodies of the Puritans are hung out:

Tradescant is dead. Cromwell is dead. Ireton and Bradshaw, the King’s prosecutors, frequently found together beneath soiled sheets, are dead. Cromwell, Ireton and Bradshaw, who had thought to lie peacefully in Westminster Abbey, that place of sanctity they had denied their rightful king, were dug out on 30th January and hung up for all to see on the gallows at Tyburn. . . . Thousands of us flocked to watch them swinging in the wind, what was left of them, decay having made no exception for their eminence. ... A gypsy with a crown of stars offered to tell fortunes, but when she looked at my hand she look away. I was not discouraged; I am enough to make my own fortune in this pock-marked world. 75

The Dog-Woman needs to be loved like every other person. Love is what defines the Dog Woman as being a woman. According to Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex the word “love” has different meanings for the two sexes. As Byron denotes, love is just an occupation for the man, while for the woman, love is life itself. So, the Dog Woman’s desire to be loved is easily understandable. However, she is well aware that society only rewards those who conform to expectations as she admits saying:

I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains. 76

Winterson’s female characters are exactly the opposite of what is expected in a woman. She narrates aspects which do not usually belong to a woman’s sphere of topics. For instance:
As far as I know,… the King had been forced to call a Parliament to grant him money for his war against the kilted beasts and their savage ways…The King, turning to his own people, found himself with a Parliament full of Puritans who wouldn’t grant him money until he had granted them reform. Not content with the Church of England that good King Henry had bequeathed to us all, they wanted what they called ‘A church of God’. 77

Dog-Woman in this instance is a complex figure who brings dark echoes of woman as “otherness”: the threatening, distanced, isolated individual. Jana L. French denotes that Dog Woman […] defies sex and gender stereotyping not only because of her size and physical appearance, but also because of her independence from men. Besides, the Dog Woman is always reminding herself that the boy she has adopted, Jordan, will one day leave her, as if reinforcing the idea of separation from the mother. The Dog Woman shatters to pieces, the traditional Freudian image of the woman whose development is defined by the lack of the male sexual organ. It happens when she takes Jordan to see the first banana brought to London (the action takes place in the seventeenth century), and she mocks it, “‘Where is this wonder?’”, 78 and feels repulsion before what she thinks it is “the private parts of an Oriental”. Later on, the Dog Woman bites off the private parts of a man, and she was disgusted by the leathery thing filling up her mouth. She spat out what she had not eaten and gave it to one of her dogs.

Dog-Woman thus, is another powerful woman, defying gender expectations while fighting for her convictions. She is no longer the innocent, narrow-minded housewife like the female characters that are usually depicted, but a strong-willed woman, who sees
through this hypocritical world and cannot take it anymore: “The truth is I lost patience with this hypocritical stinking world… I can’t flatter, lie, cajole, or even smile very much. What is there to smile about?” Winterson denotes that the world needs to be changed and that the existing order and norms do not please her anymore. In the novel, men are no more to her liking because they all want to become heroes. She declares that all men “want to be heroes and all we want for them is to stay at home and help us with the housework and the kids. That’s not the kind of heroism they enjoy.” Her comments reflect everything about the existing norms and expectations in the society. For instance, the ecologist woman would like to do something to change the existing order, norms and expectations in the society, in order to change the existing order saying “I force all the fat ones to go on a diet and all the men line up for compulsory training in feminism and ecology.” And she does make a difference with her continuous effort. Things are already beginning to change towards the end of the text: “…space films. They’re happy and they have women in them who are sometimes scientists rather than singers or waitresses. Sometimes the women get to be heroes too, though this is still not as popular”. 

All the male characters present in the novel are mere caricatures. They are weak, and small, and they are victims of their vices. Jordan is gentle and romantic and several times in the novel he speaks about love. He also admits his fear of confined places, which is inherently something a man would never reveal. He uses hedges in his speech, modals, questions and similar instances. His ideal is a very common one and says, “I want to be brave and admired and have a beautiful wife and a fine horse. I want to be a hero…I want to be like other men.” All he wants to do is to conform to the norm, and to be like other
men. In regard to a meditation on the self in Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, Jordan talks about the multiplicity of life. He asserts that, “The inward life tells us we are multiple not single, and that our existence is really countless existences holding hands like those cut-out paper dolls. But unlike the dolls never coming to an end. ... ‘I’m here now,’ but in another life, another time, doing something else.” 84 In one episode in the text, Jordan having spent the night at a house with no floors, but only ceilings, seeks the dancing woman he met there. It is a town whose inhabitants “knock down their houses in a single night and rebuild them elsewhere. So the number of buildings in the city is always constant but they are never in the same place from one day to the next.” 85 Jordan is directed to the house of The Twelve Dancing Princesses, whose story he has heard, and who may know the dancer he seeks. The eldest sister retells their story, in terms of how the sisters flew every night from their beds to a “silver city” where the “occupation of the people was to dance.” 86 The account of the incidents denoted the reconfigured power structures, where the women would violently reclaim their right to freedom and to self-narrative, and their narratives in turn questioned mythical norms. The various narratives assigned to them highlight the social and economic power which men wield, as well as the brutal punishments which they inflict upon women, should they dare to transgress the conventional role of the object of exchange by forming sexual relationships with one another. 87 Jordan takes on the role of the hero of the novel as he is entrusted to complete a quest. His mission is to find Fortunata, an ethereal dancer who teaches dancers how to become “points of lights” and thus subvert matter. His journeys involve simultaneous physical journeys through space and time (for instance, sea voyages and discoveries with the royal gardener), as well as spiritual journeys through various co-existing worlds (the
world of the twelve dancing princesses, juxtaposed to Dog-Woman’s concept of a documented England of the Revolution). Eventually, with Fortunata’s help, Jordan’s quests bring the desired result, and he unites the two worlds in becoming “light” as denoted in the novel.

In *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson challenges the notion of a singular, self-determining individual. She insists that the characters are multiple and not single, and by depicting modern incarnations of Dog-Woman and Jordan, she refuses to fix their location in space and time. But as Winterson mystifies Jordan’s pursuit of Fortunata, she makes clear that what he really seeks is access to an inner, ideal self. He explains thus, “The Buddhists say there are 149 ways to God. I’m not looking for God, only for myself.” He further claims, “I’m not looking for God, only for myself, and that is far more complicated. God has had a great deal written about Him; nothing has been written about me. God is bigger like my mother, easier to find, even in the dark. I could be anywhere, and since I can’t describe myself I can’t ask for help. We are alone in this quest, and Fortunata is right not to disguise it, though she may be wrong about love. I met a great many pilgrims on their way towards God and I wonder why they have chosen to look for him rather than themselves.” Unable to understand why spiritual seekers would look for God, Jordan explains his opinion in this passage. “But it is not difficult to lose oneself, or is it the ego they are talking about, the hollow screaming cadaver that has no spirit within it.” Jordan has undertaken the arduous attempt to find and not to lose his essential self. This is essentially a self which is again clearly distinct from his body. By making this ideal self the object of a religious quest, the novel reinforces an essentially
romantic drive to locate a ground of being outside time, space, as well as material existence.

Henri’s alternative to Napoleon in The Passion is Villanelle. She is the primary object of desire, but she is also a desiring subject. For her, eroticism is “a sweet and precise torture’ in which the subjective are dismantled and re-defined”. For Villanelle, passion is, somewhere between fear and absolute non-knowledge. The Passion can be considered a romantic love story in which love is given impossible conditions. It depicts Henri’s love for Napoleon, Villanelle’s love for the Queen of Spades and Henri’s love for Villanelle, none of which are equally reciprocated. In her essay entitled “‘Self” and “Other” in Jeanette Winterson’s The Passion”, Susana Onega, observes that this tendency towards romance, aids in the destabilization of historical facts. Winterson renders the historical events the unrealistic, ontologically unstable and generically uncertain characteristics of romance. This is symbolized in terms of the city of Venice, which is the city of romance. This city defies all forms of logic in its labyrinth-like structure. Winterson’s account of the labyrinthine structure of Venice, “with its alleys and canals encircling the city within the city that is the knowledge of the few”, assumes a remarkable significance. It serves as an image of the pleasures and ambiguities of love between women. The city is projected as a utopian realm where: “In this enchanted city all things seem possible. Time stops. Hearts beat. The laws of the real world are suspended.” In The Passion, Winterson’s heroine, Villanelle, has webbed feet and finds destructive love with the Queen of Spades. Winterson does not divorce aesthetic experience from bodily sensation. Judith Seaboyer has denoted that when Winterson resuscitates a metaphor she “reminds us of the corporeality of the resulting pleasure and
pain in language.” Villanelle literally loses her heart to her married lover and just as literally eats it up again. Villanelle has a fabulous body in many senses of the word. It resembles a Christ figure yet it also looks like that of a prostitute, as well as a paid worker in a gambling casino in Venice. She is a mother and a lesbian but in a Christ-like fashion, she can walk on water. Winterson’s representation of Villanelle’s body exemplifies aspects of feminist Biblical revisionism. Winterson troubles the traditional dominant reading of Biblical narrative by inscribing difference upon Villanelle’s body as it projects a shameless sexuality, which is an insistence on sensual immediacy. It is flesh which is seen as holy, and it establishes compatibility between this flesh and intellect. Most importantly, this body of Villanelle forces the reader to imagine faith and spirituality as extending beyond the Bible and religious institutions and into areas that are eschewed by traditional interpretations of the Bible. Though her body was extremely attractive and attributed with female beauty, she also has hermaphroditic and animalistic attributes. She worked in a casino and she cross-dressed occasionally, and she could perform miracles. Villanelle says that she:

…dressed as a boy because that’s what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste. ... I made up my lips with vermilion and overlaid my face with white powder. I had no need to add beauty spot, having one of my own in just the right place. I wore my yellow Casino breeches with the stripe down each side of the leg and a pirate’s shirt that concealed my breasts. This was required, but the moustache I added was for my own amusement. And perhaps for my own protection. 
Doan reads Villanelle, then, as a postmodern trope, with her problematic gender and her search for her “real self”, as seeking not a unified self, but a multiple questioning of gender binaries. This, she asserts, allows for an interesting opening for lesbian space. Villanelle cross-dresses not just for her own pleasure but also for economic profit and for her own protection because “there are too many dark alleys and too many drunken hands”. 96 For instance, Winterson denotes that a man comes to play Chance with Villanelle on various nights at the casino because he was fascinated with her sexually ambiguous body. In the realm of queer politics, Villanelle’s body clearly explained that because of economic and potential physical difference, women held a very different status as compared to men. In the story, Villanelle rejects the advances that were made by the casino patron. In anger, the man raped Villanelle, but later she marries him because of money even though she despised and cursed him. She says “He clasped me with his terrible hands, with fingertips that feel of boils bursting, and asked me if I’d changed my mind about his offer. We could travel the world he said. Just the three of us. Him, me and my codpiece”. 97 Not only is the woman’s sexual capacity viewed as inferior to that of a man, but the woman’s sexuality carries the stigma of shame and sin in Western religious tradition. Even in the realms of queer culture Winterson declares that women and men have been categorized and positioned differently. This is evident in the character of Villanelle. When she leaves the casino patron, the man takes his revenge by selling her to the French army as a whore. Villanelle’s sexually ambiguous body is put to test when the passion between Villanelle and the woman leads to physical intimacy. When the woman asks Villanelle to take off her shirt Villanelle was terrified: “Not my shirt, if I raised my shirt she’d find my breasts” and as Villanelle did as she was told she saw “her eyes stray
lower. Did she expect my desire to be obvious? ... She buried my head in her hair and I became her creature”. It is evident that Villanelle is willing to expose herself as a cross-dresser, but not as a hermaphrodite, and from her actions she had indicated that a cross-dresser and a hermaphrodite have very different options open to them. Villanelle chooses to present her body to the woman she loves as a cross-dressed lesbian body, a normal female body, rather than a hermaphroditic body, the body of a freak, or a queer body. However having a hermaphroditic body is not the same thing as being transsexual. It simply meant suppressing the truth of one’s body, and “passing” as a gender that is not ambiguous, and it entails the denial of mixture as well as the erasure of difference, and the obliteration of bodily complexity.

Henri was one of the first within the narrative to write his diary so that he would not forget. He started to record events, even the most mundane, in terms of longing, memories, hopes and fears. He believed in love and as the title of the novel suggests, it is about experience, and about taking the experience of the novel into account. Henri continually reviews and re-writes his archive. History, the future and the past, is arranged and understood according to a feeling in the present which is gradually established in relation to an absence. It is measured according to “an absorption in the imaginary register” in which a lost love haunts the familiar notebook, rending it foreign, yet wordlessly reflecting back an image of its own identity. The gap sustained by the mirror sends Henri mad. Yet it is madness that was always implied in his notebooks, in the will to produce a comprehensive archive; for madness implied the very desire to record every fleeting fleeing and changing perception. It is a madness that manifests itself in Henri hearing “under that stone, on the windowsill ... voices (that) must be heard”. The
concept of the archive is crucial, and in the theory it provides the possibility for universal recognition; inscribed in the archive or in its significant gaps it remains an imperative that everyone has a history to tell, and a promise that there are infinite numbers of histories to be had, that are arranged in an eternal concurrence. It is the impossibility of the archive that drives Henri mad. He cannot take account of the past when each year, each flickering moment, is unique in its identity and difference, like so many snowflakes. Henri cannot “recover from the wonder of it”, but neither, in spite of his good advice, can he forget it.\textsuperscript{101} By “passion” Henri signifies the subject’s obsessive involvement with the Other, namely the object of desire. When Villanelle later meets Henri who is a soldier in the French army, Henri falls in love with her. It is Villanelle to whom Henri wordlessly tells the truth about himself in the words of notebooks, yet the visage whose contours Henri is endlessly retracing in the mirror of his text is still that of Napoleon, his first love. Winterson writes that passion is “somewhere between the swamp and the mountains, somewhere between fear and sex,” and “somewhere between God and the devil”.\textsuperscript{102}

Passion, in essence, is an elsewhere which is not ruled by society’s laws. There are no clear demarcations in this land of loving, and this lack of marked borders lends an element of danger to love and pleasure as the novel unravels. Henri makes an insightful comment about Villanelle towards the close of the novel, which illuminates one aspect of the passion of love: “A person who is not me. ... My passion for her, even though she could never return it, showed me the difference between inventing a lover and falling in love. The one is about you, the other about someone else”.\textsuperscript{109} In the text the lesbian affair between Villanelle and the Queen of Spades appears to have a sinister dimension. A significant scene in which the issue of female identity is topical is the one which is set in
the house of Villanelle’s female lover. Henri is present on an errand to retrieve Villanelle’s heart. The rooms through which the French narrator wanders are akin to a smaller maze within the larger maze of Venice and they have a sexualized appearance. There is a stuffed horned beast in one room which is an indicator of the fact that the phallus is powerless there, just like the woman’s husband who is always away. In an adjoining room there is an unfinished tapestry representing Villanelle. Just like Venice, once again, the female body and the female identity are never complete, determined or final.

**The Passion** can be interpreted as an attempt to describe or make a comment upon the female self. Villanelle transcends the patriarchal framework of society first by being born with webbed feet, which was a typically male physical feature of male fishers in Venice. All through the novel she resorts to cross-dressing as a means to gain power, in order to control who she is, as well as her identity, and the manner in which the others perceive her. By dressing up as a young man in the casino, or as a soldier when she flees from Russia, she challenges preconceived images of female beauty, frailty and weakness as defined by men. Her gender is always on the make and is fluid, and in constant metamorphosis. This indefinite portrayal of the self and especially of a woman echoes Luce Irigaray’s emphasis upon the dynamic quality of being a woman: “Woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, infinite; form is never complete in her. This incompleteness in her form, allows her continually to become something else, though this is not to say she is univocally nothing.” Cixous on the other hand denotes that, it is otherness and difference that must be distinguished, because for Irigaray otherness conceals sameness. Thus, the woman’s difference must be written into culture and into
the “Symbolic Order” in order to challenge what is, in effect, a woman’s absence as woman. In The Passion also, Villanelle is always in control of her outward appearance and she defies univocal definitions of womanhood and her identity is thereby sexually dual, if not multiple. Her transgression of the definitions of femininity is achieved, on the one hand, by the fact that physically, she is both female, (through her sex), and male, (through her webbed feet, and by her dress in terms of her garters, breeches, boots and false moustache). Winterson explores an extreme version of this type of sexual interaction in The Passion. The most important part of Villanelle’s transgendered body is her heart, and it is the journey of her heart that takes her towards self-discovery. An understanding of her own lesbian passion which begins in the casino remains inherently in her passion as she watches the gamblers: “I like to smell the urgency on them. Even the calmest, the richest, have the smell. It’s somewhere between fear and sex. Passion I suppose”. Villanelle sees herself as exempt from a gambler’s passion and not affected by the passion of love. Hence, when she gambles with the masked woman at the casino, she realizes that she has lost, “It was a game of chance I entered into and my heart was the wager. Such games can only be played once. Such games are better not played at all.”

Her married lover does not reciprocate her love in kind and Villanelle realizes that gambling on love can be disastrous: “The gambler is led on in the hope of a win, thrilled with the fear of losing, and when he wins, he believes his luck is there, that he will win again. If nine nights were possible why not ten? So it goes and the weeks pass waiting for the tenth night, waiting to win again and all the time losing bit by bit that valuable fabulous thing that cannot be replaced”. The loss of her heart to her married lover
makes Villanelle’s body weak and exhausted saying “I lost weight. I found myself staring into space, forgetting where I was going. I was cold”. 113 Her lover physically possesses her heart and even plans to weave it into tapestry where she could imprison it forever. She would keep Villanelle’s heart as a trophy and as a remembrance of past pleasure. Villanelle finds out that her heart is no longer a reliable organ for her “If you should leave me, my heart will turn to water and flood away”. 114 The loss and recovery of her heart brings Villanelle to respect both her transgendered body and her love for a woman, even as she realizes that her passion deserves better than her married female lover can give her. Henri’s perception of Villanelle taking off her boots as she walks on the water is actually the performance of a political act. When Villanelle reveals her Venetian origins, she told Henri and Patrick that the boatmen have webbed feet which made them laugh, Henri denotes “the Poles grew wide-eyed and one even risked excommunication by suggesting that perhaps Christ had been able to walk on the water thanks to the same accident of birth.” 115 This quote is connected with the more serious alignment of Villanelle and Christ which have been made throughout the text. Winterson denotes that she has been born with webbed feet, which is an anomaly that is usually reserved for the male gondoliers. This physical characteristic actually enables her to walk on water. In other words, she is endowed with the ability to do what Christ did as the figure of the Messiah. There are many casual references to the New Testament, 116 and they all connect characters with Christ. Written against the grain of the traditional heterosexual romance plot, Villanelle’s story denotes that there can be more tragedy in following traditional socially accepted practices. She had married for convenience once, but has denoted that she will never repeat that disastrous experience. Winterson’s narratives
attack the idea of the tradition of marriage as being a holy institution which offers women the only appropriate sphere for their sexual activity, while relegating extra-marital sex to the arena of inner defilement.

While employing tactics of narrative disruption and ironic appropriation, however, Winterson is not content simply to challenge an older model of historiography or to destabilize traditional categories of the portrayal of the self. In fact, in her revisionist account of the Puritan Revolution, Winterson ultimately develops a counter-historical framework that naturalizes lesbian desire. The “theme” that is repeatedly identified in her works as central to Winterson’s writing is undoubtedly lesbianism. As in the lesbian romance, Winterson’s work enacts the characteristic separation from patriarchal ties and heterosexual marriage, by which lesbian desire is accorded a privilege narrative space. Her protagonists, whatever their gender, appear to be “always already” lovers of women: from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* to *Lighthousekeeping*, the narrator’s sexuality is presented as “naturally” woman-oriented. In some of her novels, Winterson conveys that the love objects in the narrative, from Melanie in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* to Louise in *Written on the Body*, denote that the beloved is seduced from the path of normative heterosexuality by the narrator’s passionate overtures. In her work the emphasis upon independence from men has been echoed and her texts invariably eschew any straight-forward “happy-ever-after” resolution even as her endings are ambiguous. Cath Stowers and Paulina Palmer, argue that *Written on the Body* and *The Passion*, are, “the trajectory of [Winterson’s] work. ... They exceed a gendered logic towards a specifically lesbian reconceptualization of female desire”. 117 They feel that Winterson’s creation of a lesbian self or lesbian narrative space disrupts “conventional
heterosexual narrative structures and scripts, resulting in a re-figuration of female desire.”Whilst these readings portray Winterson’s writings as transgressing boundaries, for example, in terms of the boundaries of gendered logic and/or conventional heterosexual narrative structures as they simultaneously re-inscribe the texts in accordance with the logic of regionalism by representing them as refiguring female desire while naming this reconfiguration as lesbian.

Winterson also denotes that “art must resist autobiography”, and it must avoid making “what is unlike anything else into what is just like everything else.” In opposition to the foreclosure of heterogeneity (which constitutes both a forgetting and an act of violence) integral to the regionalizing approach to texts discussed earlier, Winterson posits the possibility of reading/writing as an encounter with a text in its own right, separate and particular. She denotes that it must be a form of reading/writing that would allow the text to “speak in its own voice, not in a ventriloquism of yours” that would acknowledge that “the love between you is not a mutual suicide.” This means that reading/writing is not “the nymph Echo falling for the sound of her own voice nor is it the boy Narcissus falling for his own reflection.” Winterson’s claims have been bolstered by the late twentieth century vogue for literary biography, tying the writer’s life with the writer’s work so that the work becomes a diary and thus “save us from the attack of Otherness.” In this manner her work is deeply creative and she is constantly moving between territories which seem to be uncharted and new. Postmodernist techniques, along with modernist tradition, meta-fiction, and magical realism are instruments that Winterson deftly combines with a strong political commitment which is aimed at subverting socio-cultural power structures and, ultimately, at appropriating traditionally
male-defined concepts for her lesbian politics. Her work is characterized by a strategy of simultaneous universalizing and particularization wherein her representation of love and desire oscillate between non-specific universals which could apply regardless of sex and sexuality.

Winterson’s novels reveal elements of fantasy and the grotesque, while foregrounding a complex intertextual lineage. She creates a fictional world which is dominated by gigantic women, and floating dancers who teach how to transform one’s body into points of light, men and women who cross-dress to conceal their sexual identities and easily move from one world into another. She also denotes characters who undertake imaginative journeys with their own bodies and characters that physically inhabit a timeless dimension. In telling her stories, she historicizes the larger patriarchal forces that shaped the lives of their characters, and exposes the contingency of supposedly universal values, including the naturalness of heterosexuality and the father’s authority in a patrilineal culture. Winterson has ultimately developed distinct feminist approaches to history while she also premises her celebration of lesbian desire on the complete rejection of patriarchal history and its linear temporality. She dismantles the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy by suggesting alternative ways of imagining the self. She is not content simply to challenge an older model of historiography or to destabilize traditional categories of gender identity but she also ultimately develops a counter-historical framework that naturalizes lesbian desire.

In her works, the participating first person narrator has been ascribed a certain set of values and opinions. She focuses upon particular modes of expressions together with preferred vocabulary and a defined intellectual and experiential capacity. She has
invented a specific pair of spectacles through which the first person narrator perceives and then relates the fictional world around her. She narrates only a valid subjective account of events and, thus, is highly dependent upon her restricted capacity. Her novels are a testament to the self-reflexive experience that the best writing provides, with reference to the self, even as she poses towards her reader the inherent questions in terms of identity and sexuality within the entire social order.
NOTES


2Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit: The Script*, (London: Pandora, 1990) vii


4Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 3

5Ibid. 101

6Ibid. 170

7Ibid. 112

8Ibid. 112

9Ibid. 171


13As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 30

14As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 77, 89

15Ibid. 131

16Ibid. 3


19 Ibid. 139

20 Ibid. 143

21 Ibid. 144


23 Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 128

24 Ibid. 123

25 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 150


27 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 26, 29, 113, and 172

28 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 122


30 As elucidated in by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 29
31 Ibid. 131

32 Susana Onega, Jeanette Winterson, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006) 26

33 Ibid. 141

34 Ibid. 142


36 Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 158

37 Ibid. 169


39 Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 10

40 Ibid. 24


42 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, (London: Routledge, 2006) 153-54


44 Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 71

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46 Ibid. 98

47 Ibid. 28-9

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83Ibid. 114
84Ibid. 100
85Ibid. 43
86Ibid. 48
88Ibid. 115-6
89Ibid. 116
90Ibid. 154
92Ibid. 76
96Ibid. 55
97Ibid. 96
98Ibid. 70


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As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson, The Passion, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987) 120-1

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As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson, The Passion, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987) 18, 25, 38, 44, 64, 70 and 73

118 Paulina Palmer, Introduction, Contemporary Lesbian Writing, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993) 105


120 Ibid. 111

121 Ibid. 25-26

122 Ibid. 27