CHAPTER IV

NARRATIONAL LAYERS
This chapter shall reflect upon the narrative aspects that lie between content and form in Winterson’s novels. Winterson denotes that none of her novels are autobiographical even though she consistently maintains that there is so much of her life reflected in every one of her books. Winterson denotes that the seven books written by her within a span of fifteen years have made an entire cycle. These texts include *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1987), *Written on the Body* (1992), *Art and Lies* (1994), *Gut Symmetries* (1997), and *The PowerBook* (2000). In all her fictions she works both intertextually and stylistically with James Joyce in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, with T.S. Eliot in *Sexing the Cherry*, with Virginia Woolf in *Written on the Body*, and with H.D. Joanna Dehler in *Art and Lies*. She not only references these writers in her work, but consciously undertakes to work collaboratively with them in creating her own body of work. She has resurrected their notions of humanity and their vision of literature as an art form as well.

Lyn Pykett has denoted:

Winterson’s postmodernism is post-Modernist not in the sense of constituting a break with Modernism or superseding it, but rather as a collaborative dialogue with Modernism which continues what Winterson sees as the Modernist project.¹

Winterson herself has denoted a tremendous amount of intimation to guide readers of her fiction in this direction:

When we read a modern writer who is true, part of the excitement we get from her style is the excitement of other styles that have passed that way ... The alert reader, especially the reader/writer, is ready for clues, clues
that unravel the past as well as the modern writer we are enjoying. The chase to the bookshelf, to test this theory, that idea, is a hunt we can expect from writers who bring multitudes with them.²

In all her novels, Winterson conducts a textual exploration of the corporeality of love by employing alternative discourses such as those of anatomy, travel and the Bible. Winterson has consistently drawn upon Biblical language and religious experience in order to produce her own exalted discourse of passion. In drawing upon Biblical language so as to express erotic passion, Winterson resists the popular cultural image of perfect rapprochement, the merging of self and other characteristics which are typically ascribed to the lesbian couple. Rather, she emphasizes upon the challenge of union in love, by using the language of faith to indicate the elusive qualities of passionate connection. The language she borrows from her Pentecostal childhood allows her to describe a kind of charismatic experience of meeting between self and lover while recognizing the essential difference between partners, and the foreignness of the beloved. Her texts are highly fractioned, and are packed with re-mythologizing, undercurrents of critique directed at phallocentrism while sometimes resulting in “ex-gendered” protagonists. She creates dense eroticism and plays with text-sorts sometimes to an extent of willful plot-negligence. She is fascinated by the nature of time love, journeys and quests, outsiders and strangers. In her texts one finds all kinds of emotions and insistent poetic passages that are interrupted by encyclopedic quotations, newly molded fairy tales/myths, time travel and meta-narratives, parody and the grotesque. Thus she explains the interconnection between different aspects of her worldview in terms of the religious, feminist, scientific, political, technological and poetical.
While Winterson’s novels have progressively de-emphasized plot and character, they continue to examine the nature of love, time, art, sexuality, self-discovery and the evocative power of language and storytelling:

Storytelling is a way of establishing connections, imaginative connections for ourselves, a way of joining up disparate material and making sense of the world. Human beings love patterns; they love to see shapes and symmetries. We seem to have a need to impose order on our surroundings, which are generally chaotic and often in themselves seem to lack any continuity, any storyline.³

Her main characters are inherently forceful and larger than life and they often personify concepts or qualities. Winterson’s characters can be seen as models with an almost emblematic internal coherence. They are easily divided in terms of heroes and their foes. In her introduction to Great Moments in Aviation (1994), one of the few occasions where she openly discusses her literary strategies, Winterson herself claims that she wanted to follow the fairytale convention, comprising a heroine, a hero, a villain and a fairy godmother. The ultimate effect of Winterson’s efforts is a narrative that might appear slightly confusing to some. Her story is not always told chronologically and she frequently jumps to inserted tales that appear to have nothing to do with the life of the main character. The fragmented style helps the reader to see the novel as “meta-fiction” and additionally demonstrates Winterson’s desire to explore the relationship between the reader and the text. This states that Winterson’s articulation of the lesbian self is actually inseparable from her re-visionary engagement of the Bible. By repeatedly turning and returning several types of narrative about the origins of identity and story-making,
Winterson reconstructs certain Biblical texts and several concepts that are related to the hallmark of the gay and lesbian literary tradition as precursors for the prophetic voice of the main character. Thus, lesbian feminist critics and theorists have everything to gain from acknowledging the potential of a political postmodern. Critics such as Linda Hutcheon contend that the metafictional writing practices along with instances such as Winterson’s rapturous style are, by definition, increasingly qualified to pose challenging questions to patriarchal discourses and consequently execute the first critical step toward disruption. Winterson’s style is elaborate and her narration splinters now and then in order to enable reception at meta-levels. Although hardly ever directly using the term ‘culture’, she amasses huge and various representations thereof and twirls them in a laconic-seeming textual kaleidoscope. She also uses locality namely Venice, Paris, London and Capri, in order to problematize otherness and the human reactions towards it. She builds up a lively dialogue with Biblical and fantastic corpora and mythmaking, even as she demands her own right to re-mythologize. She does that in a postmodern manner, by applying techniques that make the reader aware of the textuality and the subjectivity of what she examines.

Like various twentieth century women writers Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, chooses to render her life story in a narrative mode which straddles the generic divide between fiction and autobiography, in the production of an accompanying alter ego, “Jeanette”. As Shari Benstock, suggests, the biographical impetus arises out of the desire to “know the self”, in order to “recapture the self.” Benstock further notes that it necessarily assumes that there is a locatable self and that this “self” is knowable. It renders beliefs which are rather at odds with the slippery subjectivities that are evident
elsewhere in Winterson’s work. Winterson’s own answer to the question of the autobiographical mode in the novel: “Is Oranges an autobiographical novel?” remains. “Not at all and yes of course.” Winterson wishes to separate the autobiography of a writer from the activity of writing: “Forcing the work back into autobiography is a way of trying to contain it, of making what has become unlike anything else into what is just like anything else.” Moreover, Winterson appears to regard the strangeness of language as a disruption of the phenomenological world as it renders the “I” of the personal experience problematic and uncertain and that strangeness or queerness becomes a borderline position that deconstructs the representation of identity. As Winterson herself states, “complexity leads to perplexity.” Hence, Winterson’s fiction forces the reader to work at reading; to reconsider the relationships of things and people in the world, and to recognize multiplicities in things rather than their singularities. Although Winterson acknowledges that art is about communication, her writing is a frontal assault on the straightforward exchange of communication and the easy assimilation of the self.

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit involves an intertextual rewriting of the Bible. In keeping with other Bildungsromane, Winterson sets out to write her novel of “coming out” by following the pattern of the hero’s quest for individuation of the self, while simultaneously attempting to rewrite the most totalitarian, patriarchal but also the most unquestionable history of all. This involved sacred history which was written, according to Jewish and Christian doctrines, by God himself and containing both history and revelation, the recording of the past and God’s plan for the future. Hence, Jeanette’s life-story in the novel is narrated by the mature heroine in the retrospect, by following a simple chronological layout, from Jeanette’s childhood initiation into the mysteries of
dissenting secularism, through her puberty and climatic discovery of her sexual “difference”, to her defiant acceptance of this “difference” in early adulthood. The linearity of this retrospective narration is undermined, however, by its division into eight chapters, which are named after the first eight books of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Ruth. In other words, the story moves, interestingly enough, from the monologic and totalizing history of the creation of the world by God to the “individual” story of redemption of a woman while enduring a threefold marginalization, as a woman, as a poor widow and as a stranger.

In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* the realist narrative which is set in Northern England in the early 1960s and the 1970s. It is clearly more than just a realist autobiographical text, and its fragment and multiple narratives, echo and pastiche a variety of different narrative styles from the Bible to fairy tales. It also incorporates fantasy in terms of the usage of the orange demon, which constitutes a complex postmodern text. The novel is a largely traditional developmental narrative in the vein of the bildungsromane, starting with the author’s early trials and tribulations, and culminating in her triumph in the face of adversity. The Bible is present in the novel as subject matter, and as the ground of belief and source of language and imagery for the members of Jeanette’s community. At the same time the chapters of the novel are given the titles of books from the Old Testament, which, on one level, makes it a comic parody. For instance “Genesis” recounts the heroine’s family background and her adoption by her mother while “Exodus” contains her escape to school. “Joshua” narrates instances which are related to her blowing her own trumpet and standing up against the community in defense of her lesbian sexuality. The stories of the creation of the world, and a nation’s
survival, are applied to the events of an individual life. Winterson in this light narrates the community’s habit of seeing their mundane lives in these cosmic terms. Also at the same time, she is claiming for herself the language of her adversaries. School, according to her mother, is a “Breeding Ground” and not liberation from captivity and Jeanette’s refusal to give up her lesbianism is demonic possession. Hence, the titles in each chapter are both parodic send-up, and deeply serious appropriation.

The novel’s “Deuteronomy” chapter is central to the understanding of the novel. It is a two page-long reflexive commentary wherein the voice of the adult narrator theorizing on the true nature of reality, of story-telling and of history is truly reflected. “Deuteronomy”, reflects that story-telling is a muddled, fanciful and contradictory way of recording the past, where “Everyone who tells story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently.”

In this chapter, Winterson questions the claims to objectivity, in terms narrating of traditional history, while denying its capacity to pin down reality. She insists that history has very often been a means of denying the past, of telling people “what to believe” and of building “an empire and [keeping] people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet ....” In Winterson’s own words, she denotes that history also becomes a verbal structure in narrative prose discourse. In her own words:

And when I look at a history book and think of the imaginative effort is has taken to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset, I am astonished. Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it, God knows. But I am not God. And so when someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friends who also saw, but
not in the same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own. 12

The story of “Winnet Stonejar and the Wizard” plays a very significant role in Jeanette’s own life story, even though other tales also similarly make a counterpoint to different episodes of Jeanette’s story as well. Jeanette’s theological disagreement over the “sermon on perfection” 13 is extended and further nuanced by the “Tale of the Perfect Woman”, where she denotes the tale of a king in search of a “woman, without blemish inside or out, flawless in every respect ... a woman who is perfect.” 14 Another instance occurs when her nightmares about marriage 15 are mirrored by fragments from the tales of “Beauty and the Beast” 16 and of “Little Red Riding Hood.” 17 The turning point in Jeanette’s life is the discovery of her mother’s shameless rewriting of Jane Eyre. 18 This event brings about Jeanette’s realization of the true nature of her mother and how she was blinded by bad faith, just before she finds her adoption papers while searching for a pack of playing cards. She had ever since never played cards, and had never since read Jane Eyre 19, and later on, Jeanette’s mother becomes the “Queen” who wanted her to move out while accusing her of bringing evil elements into the church. Jeanette says thus: “Once, trying to reach a huge icicle, I fell down to a quarry ledge and couldn’t climb back again; the earth kept crumbling away”. 20 Finally, in the chapter entitled “Joshua”, Jeanette’s loss of innocence is articulated in her dream of “the City of Lost Chances and the Room of Final Disappointment”, while the entire relation to her mother and to their religious congregation is allegorically expressed through the tale of the “Walled Garden with the Orange Tree”. 21
Elsie Norris, or rather “Testifying Elsie” as she was better known in their religious community, was an expert in Numerology and an admirer of the most romantic and metaphysical poets. 22 With Yeats, she believed in “the great effects of the imagination on the world” 23 and was always ready to accept competing interpretations of facts. One day, for instance, she showed Jeanette a wooden box with three white mice inside and told her that they were “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace”. However, when Jeanette retorted that the “angry orange paint shaped into the tongues of flame” reminded her of Pentecost, Elsie immediately accepted the suggestion by agreeing, “Oh yes, it’s very versatile”. 24 One of the most important issues pertaining to her novels is the struggle with literary clichés about womanhood and her stand against the devaluation of females. This relates to her own lesbianism and feminism. 25 She declares that the writer is an instrument of transformation. 26 Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is a novel which is based upon the belief that love shouldn’t be “gender-bound.” Winterson herself explains, “It’s probably one of the few things in life that rises above all those kinds of oppositions - black and white, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual.” 27

In the novel, Jeanette has inherently viewed her lesbianism as essentially natural, but also at the same time she recognizes that whoever holds the power to categorize can establish a claim for the label “natural.” After Jeanette eventually comes to realize that there is no space for her in the church, she has a final confrontation with Pastor Spratt during which she reveals an innate confidence in the rightness of her passion for women and dismisses as arbitrary and unfounded the rejection of her choice according to God’s law. When Spratt asks, “Have you no shame?” she replies “Not really”. 28 Hence, for
Jeanette (as well as for Winterson the author, herself), lesbianism cannot be regulated, contained, or controlled by heterosexual hegemony because the lesbian, in refusing to acknowledge its power, nullifies and renders it impotent, and thereby positions the lesbian at the center. In a *Village Voice* interview, Winterson emphasized her interest in such characters that move in marginalized and liminal spaces: “‘I always write about outsiders. All my characters are exiles, people on the margins…who are in fact interesting and special and have their own way of looking at the world.” 29 This outsider status, which seems paradoxically both predetermined and willingly adopted, initiates Jeanette and Perceval into a period of journey and errantry. In this respect, as stories of formative and spiritual development, Perceval and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* share in the tradition of the Bildungsromane. When Jeanette’s mother turns on the narrator, she affirms the Church’s patriarchal belief regarding the fact that, “the message belonged to the men.” 30 By assuming to turn preacher, the girl narrator had “taken on a man’s world,” not just in a social but a sexual form. 31 Her adoption of the male role of a preacher led (in their opinion) to her adoption of the equally “unnatural” role of a lesbian lover. The elders of the Church accordingly attempt to alter her sexual orientation by depriving her of the Word, and forbidding her to preach.

Winterson’s meta-narrative and self-reflexive texts challenge divisions between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy and femininity and masculinity which all point towards her status as a postmodern writer. These objects are real and invented, within the world of objects and the human imagination, as well as science and literature, and Winterson weaves these apparent oppositions together in an oeuvre that celebrates the power of love, beauty and language. Her fiction combines elements of history, religion,
myth, and magic realism in order to form a sort of quicksilver anti-reality, while creating fiction that is designed to revive and reclaim language, in order to challenge stereotypes about gender and lesbianism. It also explores the intricate relationship between fact and fiction. In all her works Winterson ascribed political efficacy to narratives by denoting that the invention of stories remained a political act and that she hopes that it will challenge people, both into looking more closely at these things they thought were cut and dried and also, perhaps, into inventing their own stories.

In her sixth novel Written on the Body the ungendered narrator denotes (towards the end of the novel), “I couldn’t find her. I couldn’t even get near finding her. It’s as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?” 32 By means of intertextuality, Winterson exposes linguistic and narrative conventions and provides alternative versions of history that focus upon groups of people who have been marginalized by official history. Winterson’s fame had by then confirmed with the publication of her third novel, and it had been concluded that The Passion was a good example of “full-bloom magic realism”. 33 The Passion is divided into four chapters with the stories of the two protagonists being at first parallel, later connected and continuously driven by their tales of the past and of each other. In the first chapter, “The Emperor”, Henri narrates from a first-person point of view his life story up till the age of twenty. These instances include his endeavors in the Napoleonic Wars ending with New Year’s Day, 1805. Then, by a similar narration in chapter two, “The Queen of Spades”, Winterson denotes Villanelle and her work at a casino and her cross-dressing (as with Henri) until New Year’s Day, 1805. Hereafter, their stories are intertwined as they meet and become involved in chapter three which is entitled, “The Zero Winter”, continuing
into chapter four entitled, “The Rock.” The novel as already denoted, follows two main storylines: one, the life of a young man, Henri, who is employed as a cook in Napoleon’s army (Henri’s job is limited to wringing chicken necks), and the other, the story of a web-footed young woman, Villanelle, who is a daughter of a boatman. The readers meet Villanelle, who as a character was impatient when she was born and had thus, forced her head out, while the midwife was downstairs heating some milk. She had “A fine head with a crop of red hair and a pair of eyes that made up for the sun’s eclipse.”  

Inherently the colour red is associated with fire, warmth and blood, and it creates a dramatic effect. Combined with femininity, it also seems that in Winterson’s work this colour symbolizes an intense passion. This overall sense of the timelessness of Winterson’s story seems to be also enhanced by the spiral narrative which is multiplied by the two narrative voices. On analyzing the two narrators, Henri and Villanelle, through their descriptions or representations convey a clear image of the city. Villanelle lives in the deeply mysterious labyrinthine world of the Venetian subculture, and it is a world of gambling, chance and androgyny. The city of Venice has been described, for Villanelle thus:

> Venice is a “city of chances, where everything is possible but where everything has a price. ... Some who come on foot leave on horseback and others who trumpeted their estate beg on the Rialto.”

These descriptions of Venice do not aim at pictorial, realistic representations but at psychological characterization. Throughout the novel Winterson negotiates between two types of realities, namely, the imaginative reality and the daily one. The pervasive images of Venice are reflections in the distorting looking glass of her characters and are under the spell of emotion and imagination. As such, Venice as a symbol is not set in a
one-tenor-one vehicle relationship, rather Venice is constructed as a paradigm of meaning while revolving around the nature of passion and has been given such descriptions as “the city of “mazes” 36, “disguises”, 37 “uncertainty” 38 “littered with ghosts” 39 and as “the city of chances”. 40 The notion of time in The Passion is threefold, that is, there is a chronological story, there is historical time and there is fabular time, but they merge seamlessly within a sense of timelessness. The chronological time of the story more or less observes the rules of linearity, and is broken by occasional, clearly discernible flashbacks or anticipation and only temporal ambiguity. The historical time has been marked both by dates and well known events from Napoleon’s rule in France. The figure of Henri, as Napoleon’s chicken chef cannot be but fictional, and the manner in which it is anchored in a historical setting gives it a certain reality and substance. This makes it harder to tell fact from fiction and underlines the futility of trying to do so, because Winterson is not just questioning male history; rather she is questioning all of history. She also uses tropes of travel and anatomy in order to pursue her textual exploration of the corporeality of love. She has narrated that she wrote The Passion with its Venetian locale much before she even visited Venice. “I do travel in my head.” 41 She depicted that travel is a simple trope for conveying “an inner journey and an outer journey at the same time.” 42 There is also fabular time, which is mostly connected with Venice, and it is a time which is unstated and only related to Napoleon’s time through the figures of the narrators. She narrates:

Our ancestors. Our belonging. The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past. Without past and future, the
present is partial. All time is eternally present and so all time is ours...

Thus the present is made whole. 43

Henri and Villanelle are never presented as opposing figures. In fact, both the characters relate, explain, and complement one another by indistinctly occupying the positions of the self and the other. Like Winterson, these characters offer themselves as stories that are codified as textual signs which have to be de-codified. From his rustic home on the farm, Henri goes to join Napoleon’s army, even as he is unquestioning in his hero-worship of him. He travels widely, suffers much and eventually as fate would have it, and he ends up in Venice with Villanelle. Villanelle herself, having worked the casinos and the dark gambling underworld of Venice, found herself, married, separated and obsessed with a mysterious woman who steals her heart. Together, they become embroiled in a bizarre chain of events that leads ultimately to their own internal battle and destinies. The two main stories and all their attendant characters and dimensions become inexorably and masterfully entwined. As Jan Rosemergy suggests that in The Passion, the varying narrators are also of importance to the interpretation of Winterson’s relation with the sense of a mixing of history and story and the notion of “truth”.

In The Passion, Winterson knots the “cat’s cradle” of history with fiction so that it is impossible to unknot the two. One of the novel’s refrains is “I’m telling you stories. Trust me”. Together, the stories of Henri and Villanelle, because they intertwine history and fable, are ultimately more trustworthy in their representation of the human condition. Writing such as Winterson’s “takes for granted that the process of representation can never be the reconstitution of presence ... it variously celebrates or struggles with the opacity of the signifier ... The subject is what speaks, writes, reads, signifies, and it is no
more than that. Silence is death. Desire lives, then, in its inscription.”

44 Winterson’s works shows and evinces a commitment to revivify language and transform them, and reveals evidence of an “other” language, one that expresses desire by keeping language in motion, rather than simply preserving language as a prison house of reputation that maintains the status quo. Winterson depicts that when we “[t]urn down the daily noise ... at first there is the relief of silence. And then, very quietly, as quiet as light, meaning returns. Words are part of silence that can be spoken.”

45 Winterson writes, “the cities of the interior do not lie on any map”.

46 Winterson also expresses that, “People have an enormous need ... to separate history, which is fact, from storytelling, which is not fact ... and the whole push of my work has been to say, you cannot know which is which.”

47 Winterson’s telling refrain throughout The Passion – “I’m Telling You Stories. Trust me” fits her fiction squarely within historiographic meta-fiction’s assertion “that is world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical and that what both realms share is their constitution in and as discourse.”

48 It is this paradoxical assertion that fiction embodies and connects and lies as well as truths, stories and trust, becomes a relationship upon which Winterson preys. The character of Henri, for instance, accounts for the reason that he has been willing to follow Napoleon for so long, through so many hardships by expressing his strong emotions for his leader: “He stretched his hand towards the Channel and made England sound as though she already belonged to us. To each of us. That was his gift. He became the focus of our lives. ... He made sense out of dullness.”

49 Later he denoted, “I should admit that I wept when I heard him speak. Even when I hated him, he could still make me cry. And not through fear. He was great. Greatness like his is hard to be sensible about.”
Winterson emphasizes the intentionally illogical state of this type of history by repeating four times in the course of the novel, including in its last line of the text, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me.” Though history becomes a story of the past, it claims not to be fiction. By stating that this narrator is “telling stories,” however, Winterson makes the reader suspect him or her as a historian, so that even though the “trust me” statement, tries to establish reliability, the reader is sent into an endless oscillation between faith in and distrust of the narrator. She establishes that the reader can no longer merely take what history depicts as the truth, but it must be treated as if it was memory and this could be sifted through its convolutions for traces of the real past. This element thus, must be acknowledged in the relativity of that past. Winterson’s Villanelle, too, consistently maintains autonomy through her manipulation of gender, whether through mere costume change or real transformation. In The Passion, Winterson uses fantasy to destabilize any notion of the transparency of language. For instance when Villanelle asks Henri to help her rescue the heart that she has lost, Henri believes that she had been talking figuratively and replied “‘Villanelle, you’d be dead if you had no heart’.”51 Even as Henri finds her heart and gives it back to her, Villanelle swallows it again. When Henri feels her heart beating he comments that it was “[n]ot possible.”52 But the postmodern text replies, “I tell you her heart was beating.”53

The “passion” as an idea variously refers to the point between fear and sex as well as religion, love and hate. “Passion” in this novel is as multifarious and ambiguous as the world inhabited by these characters: “The hardship is a man-made device because man cannot exist without passion. Religion is somewhere between fear and sex. And God? Truly? In his own right, without our voices speaking for him? Obsessed I think, but not
passionate... In between freezing and melting. In between love and despair. In between fear and sex, passion is.” 

Napoleon’s idiosyncratic passion for chicken, the gamblers’ and their passion for throwing the die, Henri’s passion for Napoleon himself and Villanelle’s passion for an enigmatic gambling woman are all fundamentally different and yet ultimately connected. “Passion” encompasses the mad passion of the rapist as well as the gentle passion of old love. This depicts that time is connected with language at the same time that it is rendered arbitrary to divide it up into past, present and future. If the past is the same as the present, it must also imply a reduction in the status of history, since history becomes stories of the past, and it is a past in the context of the text which supposedly did not exist.

*Sexing the Cherry* is set in an alternate history and includes a lot of elements within magical realism. While Winterson does recreate a historical period, she does not allow herself to be confined to one storyline, or one set of characters or one setting. Intertwined with Jordan’s story of traveling the world by sea is a retelling of the fairy tale of the Twelve Dancing Princesses and various fantasy lands. The novel attempts its own larger-than-life mythmaking in its narration of Jordan’s quest. Like *Ulysses*, Jordan has left his homeland to sail the seas in search of the rarest fruit. He has left his mother and his people for a life of ceaseless wandering in which his adventures include falling in love with a princess. It alternates between the first person narratives of the enormous woman and her son, Jordan. As Winterson in an interview says:

The central relationship is between Jordan and the Dog Woman. It is a savage love, an unorthodox love, it is family life carried to the grotesque, but it is not a parody or a negative. The narrative moves through time, but
also operates outside it. At the centre of the book are the stories of the Twelve Dancing Princess, each only a page long, written as a kind of fugue. The stories aren’t just parachuted in there; they are integral to the whole, in just the same way that the Percival stories are integral to Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. That is, they tell us something we need to know to interpret the book.  

The Dog Woman’s style of speech is matter-of-fact and the only figurative language that she indulges in consists of comparisons of herself to either animals or mountains. When she narrates her story, or conveys her opinion or questions something, it is usually laconically said, as if with a shrug. An example is her catapulting an elephant up into the sky with her weight and then stating: “What it says of my weight I cannot tell, for an elephant looks big, but how am I to know what it weighs? A balloon looks big and weighs nothing.”  

She said, “I know that people are afraid of me, either for the yapping of my dogs or because I stand taller than any of them.” It is with this frankness that Dog Woman talks about herself throughout the novel. There is no glossing over in her narrative and she does not try to find excuses. The first person narrative provides first-hand insight into Dog Woman’s motivations for every murder or violent act that she commits. One part of her violent acts is a result of Dog Woman not getting heard or of her being afraid of not getting heard. Dog Woman always narrates a “prequel” which does not always justify but at least explains her reasons for attempting or carrying out each individual murder. She does not accept any authority except that of the King and God. She hates the Puritans for misinterpreting the words of God, especially for overthrowing and beheading the king and for being outrageously hypocritical. The other
part of her violent acts results from her tendency to take what is being said at face value. This corresponds with her way of expressing herself and she uses the same direct manner that she obviously expects from others.

The novel also indicates why the story is not fixedly set at a time and why the author brings back Greek homosexual mythologies to her narrative in terms of Britain as the setting. Throughout *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson approaches aspects that are related to the reality of the world. She denotes that the things we may have considered to be real are proven not to be so because “‘[E]very journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time. I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books.’”

One of Winterson’s techniques include self-quotes or cross-references. The ecologist in *Sexing the Cherry* recur the previous novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, “I developed a passion for personal evangelism.” Comparing the notion of “the cities of the interior [that] are vast and do not lie on any map” with “the Third City [that] is invisible, the city of the vanished, home to those who no longer exist.” Winterson also re-moulds contexts for the other figure as young, kind, overworked, patient, and neglected by her husband in *Art and Lies*. It is noteworthy to mention that the banana is the icon that indicates passages representing the Dog-Woman in *Sexing the Cherry*. The Dog Woman gives an account on how a banana was a present from god Queen Henrietta to a favourite of hers who had made a wondrous garden full of continental devices. Winterson is obsessed with reality and in her (meta)fictional realm, she broadens it and
erases what outline it might have had. Winterson’s novels are intertwined and connected with each other in such a way that her characters do not necessarily cease to exist on the last page of one of her books. The Dancing Princesses, for instance, only really fully come to life in *Sexing the Cherry*, but one of them seems to already appear briefly in the earlier novel *The Passion*: “One day he saw a young woman flying past, her clothes flying out behind her.” Although many women in Winterson’s novels are able to float, only the Dancing Princesses are actually able to fly and this anonymous single flying female might be one of them. *The Passion* also introduces Villanelle, the daughter of a boatman. In *Art and Lies*, she and her linguistic alter ego, the poetic form, briefly return: “There is a quatrain at my chin and a sonnet on each breast, Villanelle is the poise of my hands.” Likewise, Louise, an adult in *Written on the Body*, spends her childhood in *The Passion* and is thus reflected in the novel in this manner: “One little girl who always followed me around pulled at my hand, her eyebrows close together with worries. ‘Will you kill people, Henri?’”

Louise, who is the female protagonist in *Written on the Body*, appears in *The Passion* as well. In *Written on the Body*, Winterson depicts Louise as the wife of Elgin. She is depicted as having an extramarital affair with the anonymous narrator, whose sex is undeclared. Elgin is aware of his wife’s adulterous relationship and when she appears to be ill, Elgin who is a cancer specialist believes that she has cancer of the blood. Indeed, the test results he comes up with, back him up upon this issue. The text in *Written on the Body*, however, contains passages that raise doubts concerning Elgin’s trustworthiness. It is in fact not at all clear if Louise really is ill, or if she is only declared ill. Winterson denotes that Elgin’s diagnosis might just amount to blackmail. It is no coincidence, then,
that in *The Passion* this theme of “knowing the enemy” is also tied up with the character of Louise when she asked whether Henri will kill people. Henri replied “‘Not people, Louise, just the enemy’”. Problems such as existentialism and uncertainty arises in her characters. For instance in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette feels uncertain, about her self, “I wasn’t quite certain what was happening myself, it was the second time in my life I had experienced uncertainty. ... Uncertainty was what the Heathen felt, and I was chose by God.” However, as the novel ends she chooses a life that embraces that feeling, and she leaves behind the certainties of the black-and-white binary structured world that has been created by her mother by depicting that she has “not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something [she] might have been, playing itself out.”

Another central aspect remains in terms of Winterson’s own evangelism which remains geared toward the importance of love. In her novels namely *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, she uses history as a means of creating a world in which to explore a world free of the conventional assumptions of time and in terms of narratorial identity. It is a world in which language flourishes and words become living things. *The Passion* is a bawdy historical fantasy that centers upon Henri, a French peasant who worships Napoleon, and becomes his chicken chef, and consequently falls in love with a bisexual Venetian girl with webbed feet. It is a beautiful meditation upon the unfulfillable condition of humanity, and it possesses a genuine feeling for magic and mystery.

Winterson confronts the linguistic problems of narrating a romance in *Written on the Body*, 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. 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 lesbian subjects. Written on the Body, use the female body as a text and, more specifically, as a palimpsest thereby demonstrating that the novel’s genderless narrator uses the beloved’s body as a palimpsest. This has been done because, in trying to celebrate it, s/he is unable to depict it as it is and merely inscribes a set of meanings onto it. The female body has been described through two major sets of images: as a landscape, via a colonial language, and as a diseased body, via an anatomical language. The female body has been used in a traditional way within the text and it is confirmed by the novel’s wide use of literary references from canonical texts. The novel, then, appears to be positioned outside a feminist or lesbian tradition, since it is not able to represent the female body in a new and fertile way and draws too much upon an all-male literary tradition, while configuring itself as a palimpsest, and is just like the body that is trying to describe. The book is a highly individual expression of a universal emotion that reassesses power relations between the sexes and dissects the clichés that too often cloud in Written on the Body. It is intense and erotic, and it depicts the extent to which Winterson is capable of delivering prose which is deceptively simple and sparingly truthful. It is a prose which strips love and passion down to the bare bones and it has an inclusive humanity about it. That directness is evident, too, in Art and Lies, but here it blends with Winterson at her excessive worst. Three separate voices, Handel, Picasso, and Sappho, separately flee a London of the near future and find themselves on the same train, and are drawn to one another through the curious agency of a book. Stories within stories take the reader into a world of lyrical beauty that is marred by frequently impenetrable prose, including
paragraphs of Latin, German, and French as well as fragments of opera, and linguistic twists that feel uncharacteristically contrived.

Winterson has continually stated that she is not interested in constructing an objective history but provides instead a “cat’s cradle” of entangled narrative threads or a “string full of knots.” 69 This metaphor has been developed in Written on the Body in order to include the narrator’s relationship to Louise:

    The interesting thing about a knot is its formal complexity. ... For the religious, King Solomon’s knot is said to embody the essence of all knowledge. For carpet makers and cloth weavers all over the world, the challenge of the knot lies in the rules of its surprises. ... Louise and I were held by a single loop of love’. 70

What this serves to do is to strip love down to nothing more (and nothing less) than an emotion. When the narrator falls in love with Louise, passages of tender lyricism evoke the emotions of love and loss aroused by her body:

    You were milk-white and fresh to drink. Will your skin discolour, its brightness blurring? Will your neck and spleen distend? Will the rigorous contours of your stomach swell under an infertile load? ... It may be so but if you are broken then so am I. 71

The use of an ungendered narrator is an innovative move that has significant implications in terms of reading the novel in its entirety. The ungendered narrator is only one strategy that she employs among many to denote whether she cannot revivify the jaded language of love. It occurs first on the second page of the novel saying that it’s the clichés that cause the trouble. This aspect is reiterated like a refrain five more times in the
course of the book. Michel Foucault has diagnosed a similar duality in terms of underlying the discourse of love in his three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. For Foucault sexuality itself is an ideological-function:

> It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but 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.

It is interesting that Foucault throws together “stimulation of bodies” and “the incitement to discourse,” that is, sexuality and textuality (about sexuality). Whichever of the two is invoked, there appears to be an internal contradiction that resists any attempt to achieve stability of meaning or effect. Winterson uses these variations on an anatomical theme in order to render poetic expression to the underlying duality of love and of the language of love that is the obsessive theme of this narration. As the narrator acknowledges, Louise “opened up the dark places as well as the light.” Winterson also denoted that disease is “one of those useful metaphors that everyone understands.” She continues: “Even the dimmest people can see that this is not only to do with their own bodies but a kind of metaphor for the state crumbling away.” The narrator’s failures in love can be seen as part of a wider failure in the narrator’s society as a whole. Characters such as Elgin, Gail Right and her pretentious wine bar, Louise’s mother and her fear of what the neighbors think, even the degeneration of the local railway station are aspects that indicate a criticism of contemporary Britain. In *Art and Lies* Pritchard find
Winterson “either too clever or too perverse for words” and he claims that in all of Winterson’s books “there is a general contempt for hearth and home, the family, for ‘our broken society’ and especially for men.” 76 As Christy Burns suggests in a discussion of Winterson’s postmodernism: “Art, and for Winterson especially literature, provides the link between both the real and the imaginary through its medium: the Word.” 77 In a counterpoint to the movement in Written on the Body, figurative and rhythmic expressions have a very direct negative impact on the body in Art and Lies. When Picasso first agonizes over her family life, the reader does not know that she has been incestuously abused. Her excessive use of figuration and artful sentence structure has been designed both to hint at a secret and to retain an aura of mysterious excitement. As Picasso narrates:

When my brother lay over me like a winding sheet and me his corpse, it was a patch of red I remembered on a Leonardo robe. While my brother embalmed me with his fluid I clung to life through a patch of red. When I had to look at his empty eyes over me, it was the red that speeded my own blood from clotting. It was the red that pushed life through veins I had thought to slit. Warm red light in it. Gold decorated red that gave me a robe of dignity to put over my own torn dress. 78

In the words of Winterson:

It is a strange time; the writer is expected to be able to explain his or her work as though it were a perplexing machine supplied without an instruction manual. The question ‘What is your book about?’ has always
puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did."

Winterson continues this questioning throughout her essay, “A Work of My Own”. She makes points, and then slips in a one-sentence paragraph: “But I have said these things in Art and Lies.” She emphasizes that her choice of form is sometimes the narrative, and feels bewildered at being asked to express, and essentially to repeat, her ideas in other forms. Winterson’s treatment of man is just as offensive as the abuse that she has depicted against women, and the only man who escapes the diatribe is the castrated Handel, since he lacks the offending phallus. Art and Lies carries a strident certainty and Winterson most explicitly takes up the project of revitalizing language and the imaginary in a disconnected society. While Winterson invests her work in reconnecting these three characters that are adrift in the London of 2000, her chief concern in Art and Lies is with the impact of postmodern banality on language, which is the medium not only of her art but of social communication. Winterson’s use of fantasy and her liturgical style been explicitly fused into a kind of fantastic language. In Art and Lies, Winterson adopts the voice of Sappho to articulate her concern for the flattened state of language: “Delicate words exhausted through overuse. Bawdy words made temperate by repetition. Words of the spirit forced into the flesh. Words of the flesh unlovely in a white gown. Slang in a sling shot hurled and hurled and hurled. That is the legacy of the dead.” Winterson not only attempts to recover the words of the dead as the history of literature that has been brought into the present but more importantly she works to overcome the “death” of language. Fantasy is no longer a vision that fills up the
imagination; it is the inspiration that arises in and through the sensuous and erotic aspects of language.

Winterson also denotes;

The writer is restricted to what she has experienced or to what she knows; she is let loose outside of her own dimensions. This is why art can speak to so many different kinds of people regardless of time and place. It is why it is so foolish to try and reconstruct the writer from the work. 82

Winterson states, “[W]hereas science outdates the past art keeps it present” 83 and that “[A] writer has no use for the clock. A writer lives in an infinity of days, time without end, ploughed under.” 84 Both sport dual narrators namely a “feminine” male narrator alongside a woman narrator who has been singled out by her fantastic or grotesque features, to deconstruct the concepts of gender identity and the fluidity of sexual desire.

Thus, through its narrative technique Winterson’s works can be viewed singularly as texts that seek to situate the self. Her words reveal and unfold layers of unrealized meaning upon every page, until the reader is gently lowered back into his or her own world with a new fascination and awe for what already existed. Winterson’s writing rejects the conventional perception of life as she reveals the shallow fulfillment which is inherent in traditional values. This aspect expands the notion of time and reality, and renders new insight upon existing realities. These elements are not only apparent through the content of Winterson’s stories but also through her use of unusual and varied narrative structures. Winterson’s work is deeply creative, she is constantly moving between territories which seem to be uncharted and new. Thus her characters’ refusal to
accept the conventional means of living has been paralleled by her own refusal to abide by the conventional means of storytelling. Kyle Wilson denotes that Winterson not only writes between the lines of our lives, she writes between the lines of our foundational texts. She makes constant references to the Bible, and to Greek mythology while reinventing and reinterpreting them to mean new things. She also manipulates history like no other writer of her time and Winterson makes clear that while meaning is contextually bound, contexts are boundless and this makes her state that there is no limit to new territory. Reality is continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible. The notion of layered, fragmented and simultaneously continuous time seems to play a significant role in the process of revealing the self. In Winterson’s scheme of things, literature like art, works across time and in this way keeps the aspect of the self inherently dynamic.
NOTES


6Jeanette Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) xiv


8Ibid. 113

9Jeanette Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 16

10Ibid. 93

11Ibid. 93

12Ibid. 95

13Ibid. 60

14Ibid. 61

Ibid. 72

Ibid. 73

Ibid. 74


Ibid. 127

Ibid. 123


Ibid. 30

Ibid. 31

The lesbian feminists believe that by denying male sexual definition, by identifying only with women, women will be able to discover their own true nature, as opposed to the male-defined roles and behaviour patterns imposed on them for centuries.’ Susana González Ábaloz, ‘Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*: Rewriting “Woman” through Fantasy.’ In: D’Arcy / Landa, 290


Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 157
29 Carol Anshaw, “Into the Mystic: Jeanette Winterson’s Fable Manners,” Village Voice Literary Supplement 86 (1990): 17

30 Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 133

31 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 133-4

32 Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 189


34 Jeanette Winterson, Art and Lies, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994) 51

35 Ibid. 90

36 Ibid. 49

37 Ibid. 56

38 Ibid. 58

39 Ibid. 61

40 Ibid. 90


42 Ibid. 101


44 Catherine Belsey, Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 77


Ibid. 3

Ibid. 116

Ibid. 121

Ibid. 121

Ibid. 74-6

As elucidated by Jean Pierre 23 Sept 2008

<http://www.jpderosnay.wordpress.com/.../>sexing-the-cherry-by-jeanette-winterson/>


Ibid. 21

Ibid. 2

Ibid. 140


Winterson (1994) 22

As elucidated in Winterson (1989) 9

64. Ibid. 63

65. Ibid. 8

66. Ibid. 79

67. Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 99-100

68. Ibid. 169 emphasis added

69. Ibid. 91 and 166


71. Ibid. 125

72. Ibid. 10, 21, 26, 71, 155 and 180


78. Ibid. 154

80Ibid. 173

81Jeanette Winterson, Art and Lies, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994) 65


83Ibid. 166

84Ibid. 169