

*The Limitless Self: Desire and
Transgression in Jeanette Winterson's
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit
and
Written on the Body*

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PRELIMINARIES: “Only by imagining what we might be can we become more than we are”

The writer is an instrument of transformation.

- Jeanette Winterson. *Art Objects* (1997: 25)

Reading Jeanette Winterson’s works gives one the delightful feeling of listening to the secret wisdom of ancient storytellers re-imagined. Her dazzling writing is full of energy and humour; her prose has the texture of permanence, the harmony and effervescence of a passionate lover. In her writing Winterson metamorphoses a variety of literary forms such as romance, the gothic mode, and fairytales while raising questions about life, love, boundaries, desire, identity, and individual responsibility. Winterson’s main concern as a writer is the exploration of the limitless possibilities of the self: “I believe that storytelling is a way of navigating our lives” (Winterson 2005: 20),¹ she tells us, adding: “... stories are a way of making sense differently, of enlarging upon what we are and not being afraid of the unruly elements within it” (Winterson 2005: 5).² Once engaged in her storytelling, the reader cannot resist the lure of her recurring themes: the indissolubility of the inner and the outer self; the quest for love and self-knowledge; the nature and spirit of sexual love, even the pointlessness of separating fact from fiction, and the exploration of the complexities of the human heart.

1 “Endless possibilities” is Winterson’s appendix essay to *Lighthousekeeping*. (2005: 20)

2 “From Innocence to Experience” Louise Tucker talks to Jeanette Winterson. Appendix interview to *Lighthousekeeping*. (2005: 5)

Her novels are kaleidoscopic interpolations of narrative (meta)fiction, intertwined with the romantic and fairytale tradition, the myth-making tradition and biblical references that ultimately become a subversive re-vision of the foundational texts of Western culture from a new critical perspective.

Jeanette Winterson's literary art opens a door to a new consciousness through which to examine the vulnerable, self-doubting, intricacies of the self. In her writing there is a constant subversion of the patriarchal binary regulation of sexuality that unveils and lays bare the constructedness of a gendered conception of the self, and the restrictiveness of the concept of love within the compulsory heterosexual economics. Moreover, Winterson's style of writing rejects both mawkishness and moralizing, awarding the reader the complete authority to choose the multiple ways her texts can be read and interpreted.

This study analyzes the ways in which Winterson's novels *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Written on the Body* (1992) address the boundaries of patriarchal ideology, the exploration of sexual desire and the self. These works disrupt the models that define the patriarchal order such as our sense of self in a binary/gendered constructed system and its restrictive heterosexual model of love, thus defying the discursive concepts of fixity within the totalizing binary patterns of Western thought. Winterson advocates alternative ways to understand the sexual, emotional, and intellectual self. Through the use of characters who endeavour to discover and explore their sexual identity (like the Jeanette of *Oranges*, a young woman in the process to ascertain her lesbian identity) or of characters who have an ambiguous sexual identity (as in *Written on the Body*, where the nameless narrator's gender identity is never disclosed), Winterson deconstructs narrative conventions and shows how storytelling

need not be subordinated to the constraints of the patriarchal grand narratives. Her work demonstrates that it is possible to subvert the constructed binary oppositions between masculine and feminine through innovative and challenging ways of writing. These two novels have in common the 'experiential'- in the sense that they are narratives which show the process of maturation and existential evolution of the protagonists; and the 'experimental'- in the sense that the author consciously subverts the conventions of fiction by adding a great variety of intertextual elements to her stories. In this way, these novels go beyond the 'autobiographical' to become metafiction, that is, they take their fictionality as part of their own subject matter.

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit merges the experience of discovering one's sexuality with the struggle to construct a personal identity. Using a very personal version of the Bildungsroman, the novel perpetrates a ferociously satirical criticism of religious fundamentalist discourses and their cruel methods of manipulation. Raised to be a preacher and missionary of the Pentecostal evangelical Church, the first-person narrator and central character of the novel rebels against the religious/patriarchal doctrines that seek to curtail her subjectivity and repress her sexuality. The fact that the main character of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* shares not only the author's name but also many of the personal experiences of the author seems an invitation to an autobiographical reading of the story that, nevertheless, is later called into question by the narrative itself through the interweaving of non-realistic literary genres that, ultimately, leads the reader to understand that there is no such thing as 'truth'. As Winterson says: "How each artist learns to translate autobiography into art is a problem that each artist solves for themselves." (*Art Objects* 1997: 106)

Written on the Body, on the other hand, explores the boundaries of gender

construction and desire. By creating a protagonist who escapes any gender identification, the novel subverts the traditional patriarchal binary discourse on gender identity. *Written on the Body* is a novel about desire, loss, and the struggle between incompleteness and wholeness. It is a narrative that explores both the psychic and bodily space of the self, as well as the relationship between literature, language and desire. At the same time the text examines how disease changes one's perspective of corporeality, how it fragments us into healthy/sickly parts, somehow leaving us not whole; and the way in which (sexual)love can, simultaneously, heal and destroy. Regarding its literary form, *Written on the Body* is a novel that makes use of the K stlerroman in a text in which the gender and the physical aspect of the narrator is never made explicit, while freely employing the romance genre in order to deconstruct it.³ As an instance, the relationship between the unnamed narrator and Louise becomes either heterosexual or lesbian depending on whether readers identify the nameless /genderless narrator⁴ as a male or as a female. Moreover, the performative ideology upon which the social construction of gender in romance is based (and which presupposes the dominance of the masculine over the feminine) is subverted by Winterson's text which, nevertheless, retains the archetypal ideal of the romance quest for love. As Winterson asserts: "What you risk reveals what you value. In the presence of love, hearth and quest become one." (*Written* 1994: 81)

To analyze how identity is constructed in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not*

3 A genre which Susana Onega describes as one that: "...specifically takes sexuality as the focal element in her/his creative process of self construction" (Onega 2006:116)

4 Nevertheless, whatever the projection one may cast over the ambiguous narrator, it is bound to fail. The greatness of *Written on the Body* and its nameless/genderless narrator is, precisely, that it establishes a narrative game which playfully upsets any expectations and categorization. With this, Winterson is making a point about our very human tendency to categorize and how ludicrous such a tendency ultimately proves.

the Only Fruit and *Written on the Body*, I will provide a close reading of the novels and examine the two works by resorting to a number of scholars and their theoretical contributions. Thus, I will focus on Julia Kristeva's distinctions between the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic'; the former of these terms is related to Jacques Lacan's theories of child development, according to which the move from the pre-linguistic stage into language involves the entrance into the realm dominated by the 'Law of the Father'. For Kristeva, however, there are residues of a pre-linguistic stage that involves 'pulsions', emotions and perceptions which are directly associated with the maternal. These 'pulsions' can be accessed through music, rhythms of any kind, and linguistic playfulness. Kristeva's concept of the 'semiotic', on the other hand, refers to a stage of existence during which the socially constructed distinctions of gender are not yet perceived or internalized. Kristeva also defines identity in terms of a 'subject-in-process', that is, subjects are never finished and complete but always in the process of becoming. Reference will also be made in my work to Catherine Belsey's poststructuralist theories which are largely based on her interpretation of Lacan and Derrida. I will concentrate my discussion on the importance Belsey attributes to desire in the construction of Western Culture. I will also resort to Queer Theory and particularly the ideas developed, among others, by Judith Butler in order to examine the ways in which gender roles are socially constructed independently of any biological basis, thus becoming artificial and essentialist categories which ultimately serve to reinforce the patriarchal/ heterosexual social order. I will borrow from the literary criticism and social theories of Roland Barthes who, along with Michel Foucault, questioned the liberal humanist god-like dimension of the 'Author', proclaiming instead the 'Death of the Author' and thus reinforcing the notion of the reader as a co-

writer of the text every time a reading is effected. Finally, I will refer to Jean-François Lyotard's theoretical work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) which posits the end of the modern era (in the aftermath of the modern industrial age), and the collapse of the 'grand récits' such as the Enlightenment or the idea of History as a unifying social force. In his analysis Lyotard argues that history is a narrativisation, and not a 'truth', and thus there are competing narratives and none of them may claim greater veracity than any other. Within this context other 'petit récits' or little narratives begin to emerge (particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War) which cast suspicion on the validity of the grand totalizing narratives. The 'Postmodern Condition' is thus one that involves separate 'language games' (a term that Lyotard borrows from Wittgenstein), with little narratives playing their own games and refusing to legitimate one another. While there may no longer be any grand narratives there are, however, forms of writing that help to represent the ever-changing 'reality' of the world.

The aim of this study is to analyse the ways in which Winterson's narrative in general, and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Written on the Body* in particular, explore the importance of language and storytelling in providing alternative forms of understanding the complexities of human nature. Winterson's narrative art develops a literary and intellectual project in which the main objective is not to realistically 'represent' subjectivity, but rather to 'create' new ways to describe its multiple manifestations, and thereby show the power of stories to shape and change one's perception of the self.

My reading of these two texts will focus on Winterson's exploration of desire as an agent of self-discovery. I will organise my argument around four blocks. The first, called "Only by imagining what we might be can we become more than we

are” (Winterson, *Fit for the Future* 1986:6), will serve as a general introduction to my analysis of Winterson’s work, and as an explanation of my method of research.

The second part, “God owns heaven but He craves the earth: The Quest for the Self in Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are not The Only Fruit*” provides a close reading of the novel and a discussion of the ways in which Winterson challenges dominant binary patriarchal and religious views related to gender roles and sexual politics. I will also examine the importance of fantasy in the construction of the self, and the difficulties of attempting to represent the multiple aspects of subjectivity in narrative.

The third part, “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble: Love and loss in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*”, traces the connections between *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* and *Written on the Body* in light of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the “subject in process”. This theory argues against the Western patriarchal belief in the monolithic nature of language and subjectivity, and contends that both the subject and language are by nature in constant evolution and therefore not fixed. In this novel Winterson creates a first-person narrator who does not have a name and whose gender is never disclosed. As such, this narrative becomes a textual game in which Winterson envisions the body as a text that can be written and read. The gender ambiguity of the novel’s narrator makes the reader aware of her/his own gender prejudices in an attempt to deconstruct what Judith Butler calls: “the compulsory order of sex /gender/ desire” (*Gender Trouble* 2006:8)

The final part, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me”, concludes my analysis of the two novels by considering Winterson’s bold attempt to challenge stereotypes and disrupt hegemonic discourses on gender identity. In her subversion of the conventional limits of narrative, Winterson rejects oppressive definitions of subject identity, and

views the self as an unstable entity that relies on the power of stories to construct subjectivity. In her literary art, Winterson fosters a strong bond between the reader and the text; the story and the storytelling are vital elements of a process that seeks to tempt and seduce the reader. However, the novel's lack of closure implies the impossibility of totally fulfilling the reader's desire for textual satisfaction. Reading Jeanette Winterson's oeuvre requires a conscious effort to navigate the slippery boundaries between reality and fiction; it invites the reader to become actively engaged in the very process by which a narrative creates multiple identities. Thus, reading is an act that requires fortitude and courage because, as Winterson writes:

The Word terrifies. The seducing word, the insinuating word, the word that leads the trembling hand to the forbidden key. The word beyond the door. The word that waits to be unlocked, the word springing out of censure, the word that cracks the font. The word that does not bring peace but a sword. The word whose solace is salt from the rock. The word that does not repent. (*Art & Lies* 1996: 55-56).

1. "God owns heaven but He craves the earth"*: The Quest for the Self in
Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit*

I am the wall at the lip of the water
I am the rock that refused to be battered
I am the dyke in the matter, the other
I am the wall with the womanly swagger
And I have been many a wicked grandmother
and I shall be many a wicked daughter

- Judy Grahn. "She Who"⁵

Only the impossible is worth the effort.

-Jeanette Winterson. *The PowerBook* (2001: 222)

In Jeanette Winterson's novels there is love and there is passion, but there are injuries and suffering too. However, the impulse which urges her to write seems to be the ambition to articulate something more important than merely 'love' or 'pain'; it is a knowledge that says: the power to transform ourselves is always within us. A scrap of Jeanette's thought (the main character and potential alter ego of Winterson herself) in *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* testifies to this opinion: "I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special" (*Oranges* 1985: 3). Indeed, for all its humour, wit and playfulness *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* is based upon a fundamentally 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

* Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*. New York: Mariner Books, 1999. p. 431.

⁵ Judy Grahn, *She Who: A Graphic Book of Poems with 54 Images of Women*. Oakland, California: Diana Press, 1997.

religious dogmas often impose on people.

Although *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* was first published in 1985, the action of the story takes place between the 1950s and 1970s, a period in which England, formerly one of the most powerful countries in the world, witnessed the collapse of its great imperial power in the aftermath of the Suez Canal conflict of 1956. At the same time, this was the period in which a profound transformation took place in the consciousness of people in Britain and throughout the West. The retreat from Empire contributed to a growing anxiety about the massive arrival of immigrant populations from the former colonies. These events brought a great change in Britain's social structure, transforming it from an almost all-white society into a multicultural one. In addition to the unstable mood of this transitional moment, this was also a period which saw the emergence of and enthusiasm for the social and sexual revolution taking place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The rise of the women's liberation movement, together with the civil rights and the gay and lesbian movements produced a political force that gave great impetus to broad social change, thus contributing to a new configuration of the social fabric as a whole. Not everyone, however, was pleased with the new direction of events. The conservative reaction to these changes culminated in the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, bringing an end to successive Labour governments⁶.

The cultural consequences of this social transformation as well as the socio-political and economic atmosphere of the period must be kept in mind if we are to gain a deeper understanding of the characters in Winterson's novel. Not only does the author

⁶ See Tony Judt. Chapter IX "Lost Illusions" in *Post War: A History of Europe Since 1945*. London: William Heinemann, 2005 pp 278-323.

offer abundant and ironic insights into human behaviour, she also exposes the sociological and psychological categorizing that seek to pigeonhole people according to gender, class, sexual orientation, religious adscription or any other aspect of the human condition.

In *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* Winterson draws on poetic, romance- mythical and biblical imagery as well as on unabashed wordplay to describe the personal quest for identity of Jeanette, the novel's central character. Comprised of eight chapters, each bearing the title of one of the eight books of the Old Testament or 'Octateuchus', the novel articulates archetypal themes related to family, sexual love, the construction of identity, and the conflicts between the individual and the community. Linked to these issues, Winterson challenges dominant binary patriarchal and religious views associated with concepts of gender roles and sexual politics; she vindicates and celebrates the existence of the same-sex desire, and clearly rejects heterosexuality as 'the only fruit'.

1.1 “*Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father*” (Oranges 3)

Constantly blurring the lines between realism and fantasy, *Oranges*⁷ charts the existential evolution of a girl who is adopted by a Pentecostal evangelist family and raised to preach the Gospel in a working-class industrial town in the north of England. From the first chapter of the book, called “Genesis”, the wise, iridescent first person narrator seems to be making a parodic comparison between her own story and the

⁷ Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. New York: Grove Press, 1987. Hereafter I will use this abbreviation to refer to the novel.

Biblical story of the creation of the world. With acute irony and biting humour Jeanette relates the events of her life and mixes realistic narrative with distinctive fairy tale elements. The unusual environment in which the solitary girl grows up is sharply conveyed by the language with which Jeanette describes her mother's Manichean view of things: "She never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies" (Oranges 3). According to Jeanette's mother, Louie, one is either 'saved' by Christ, or one is 'heathen'. 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.

The father, Jack, on the other hand, is an almost ghostly if not invisible figure in the lives of his wife and daughter and, not surprisingly, in the pages of the novel. The rare occasions in which he is mentioned are just to state the following facts: that he works in a factory and leaves the house very early in the morning; that he and his wife have no sexual life; and that his only relevance to the household is that he cleans all the shoes, an activity which reflects the man's philosophy of life: "You can tell someone by their shoes" (Oranges 5). In short, we learn that he plays a peripheral and certainly weak role in his daughter's upbringing. The discovery, later on, that the mother was disowned for marrying this working-class 'gambler' who she aimed to 'reform', together with the man's general ineptitude and subservience seem to justify Jeanette's judgment of him: "Poor Dad, he was never quite good enough" (Oranges 11). With this description of the sexually passive, compliant, and domesticated father, Winterson clearly subverts and problematizes the archetypal representation of the dominant/powerful male, thus undermining the logic of power constructed by patriarchal ideology.

From the first pages of the novel, this rather forlorn and emasculated father figure is firmly contrasted with the harsh, competitive, and overbearing mother figure. As the young Jeanette perceives it, this severe, peremptory and querulous woman, unwilling to yield an inch from the natural acerbity of her temper, holds herself up as the one example to be followed, not only by her own daughter, but by the whole evangelical community. The events narrated in the first chapter testify to the extraordinary power that Jeanette's mother wields over her young charge. Thus, we find out that Jeanette's adoption was not due to her parents' inability to conceive children but rather to her mother's abhorrence of sex. With the sharp irony and the mocking humour that sets the tone of the novel from the very first sentence, we are told of Louie's bitterness towards the Virgin Mary for "getting there first" (Oranges 3) in the conceiving of a child without sexual intercourse. And so, unable to equal such a miraculous feat, "... she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. That was me" (Oranges 3).

Immersed in the life of the church and her mother's religious obsessions, the first years of Jeanette's existence are marked by the study of the Bible –she is taught to read from the Book of Deuteronomy- and the rigorous training to become a missionary. In her evocation of childhood we are also given humorous details of the methodical monotony and the routines of her mother's 'holy' lifestyle: "She always prayed standing up, because of her knees, just as Bonaparte always gave orders from his horse, because of his size" (Oranges 4). Jeanette's memories of important incidents of her past are recalled when walking her dog around the town. In this way we learn about her encounter with a gypsy woman who predicts: "you'll never marry,...not you, and you'll never be still" (Oranges 7). Such a prophesy puzzles the little girl mainly because getting married is a thought that has never crossed her mind. This recollection is

followed by Jeanette's account of the two unmarried women, always generous and kind to her, who own the local paper shop which her mother forbids her to go to because: "She said they dealt in unnatural passions" (Oranges 7). Here it seems relevant to underline the ironic fact that, for all her repressive attitude towards sex, it is Jeanette's mother who, unwittingly, gives her daughter a first glimpse into the existence of lesbian relationships and "nameless desires" (Oranges 15). As Catherine Belsey accurately points out: "the 'unnatural' defines by its difference what is acceptable, and in the process either brings into line or outlaws sexual subjects" (*Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* 1994: 4).

Although, for the most part, Jeanette's mother is harsh and unaffectionate towards her daughter, there are nevertheless moments in which she takes great pleasure in having the smart little girl there to listen to her stories: "Now and again my mother liked to tell me her own conversion story; it was very romantic" (Oranges 8). In any case, Louie's religious conversion seems to have been motivated by mundane rather than spiritual considerations. The appearance in town of Pastor Spratt, the charismatic leader of the Glory Crusade and relentless lash of the Heathen, spurs Louie's desire to belong to the sect led by this attractive man who resembles Hollywood actor Errol Flynn... "But holy" (Oranges 8), and who accomplished the great feat of making "a lot of women [find] the Lord that week" (Oranges 8). 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. (2007:195)

Jeanette's caustic foray into her mother's life story describes how it was through great admiration for Pastor Spratt that: "my mother discovered her abiding interest in missionary work" (Oranges 8) and how she kept a picture of the pastor by her bed. Here Winterson seems to emphasize the fact that, however repressed, dogmatic or religiously obsessed she might be, a woman still needs love, and desire stirs her voluptuousness even if she ends up sublimating her desires through church work and biblical doctrine.

Focalizing past events from the perspective of her childhood-self, with all the loyalty and admiration for an adult typical of one who has little experience of the intricacies of the human heart, the narrator still views her mother with a certain tenderness; thus Jeanette compares Louie's "visions and dreams" (Oranges 8-9) to those of William Blake; and in talking about the fruits of her mother's middle-class upbringing she points to the woman's ability to play the piano and speak French; nevertheless, she immediately adds the sadly humorous remark: "but what do these things mean?" (Oranges 9). And indeed, what did Louie's bourgeois education mean in relation to her current occupations and the narrow-mindedness of the evangelist discourses she is so devoted to?

It is at this point in the story that Jeanette's realistic narrative begins to combine distinctive fairytale elements with fantastic ones to underscore the impossibility of separating fact from fiction. Following the path of subversive and re-visionary writers like Anne Sexton, Angela Carter or Margaret Atwood, Winterson manages to preserve and yet transform the archetypes of the fairy tale, imprinting them with a distinctive postmodern interpretation of the genre. Hence, the first fairy tale interwoven in Jeanette's story starts with the traditional, timeless, and ahistorical beginning "Once upon a time" (Oranges 9) and is followed by the perennial cast of handsome and

aristocratic characters: “there was a brilliant and beautiful princess, so sensitive that the death of a moth could distress her for weeks on end” (Oranges 9). As Jeanette’s story unfolds it will also be filled with fantastical interludes in which either a wicked or a benevolent supernatural being intrudes on human affairs. In this way, in her ramblings through the forest the princess comes upon “an old hunchback who knew the secrets of magic” (Oranges 9). This enigmatic character will tell her perhaps the first truth she’s ever been told: “‘My dear’, she said, ‘you are in danger of being burned by your own flame’” (Oranges 9). In brief, the princess’s courage will be tested; to master the art of living she must take on the guise of a peasant, live in seclusion and contemplation, and take over the hunchback’s responsibilities so that the old woman can finally die in peace. “The princess agreed to stay and forgot all about the palace and the moths. The old woman thanked her, and died at once” (Oranges 10). Gemma López argues that: “As this particular fable continues, the reader realizes that the ‘brilliant and beautiful princess’ Jeanette forges as a heroine is no other than a fairy-tale version of her own mother, and the parable narrates the process by which Jeanette was adopted” (2007: 173).

Thus, the princess/mother of the tale/story sets out on a journey that will enable her to achieve the knowledge and wisdom needed to escape from the mediocrity of her trivial existence and become ready to save the world. In short, the fairy tale becomes an allegory of Louie’s need to adopt both a religious faith and a daughter: the former, as a means to gain relevance within the claustrophobic margins of working-class provincial life; and the latter as the very material from which she will try to mold: “a missionary child, a servant of God, a blessing”(Oranges 10). In this way, she shapes her religious/intellectual ‘visionary’ project, and motivated by this egotistical and imposing

undertaking she carries it out with unbending determination.

In this postmodern parody of biblical events Winterson not only ridicules Louie's religious fundamentalism, she also equates the institutionalized authority of the Holy Book with fairy tale and fiction. Louie's visit to the orphanage is similar to that of God's creation of the universe in seven days. If the mother bears comparison with God, Jeanette resembles Christ in the sense that she is found in a crib, which recalls the biblical account of the birth of Jesus. This parallel is also to be found in the mother's messianic design for her daughter, the future missionary and prophet.

As the story goes on, we find numerous examples of the controlling discourses and perverse ideology of the evangelical doctrine; thus we come across Pastor Finch: "an expert in demons" (Oranges 11) who delivers terrifying sermons "on how easy it is to become demon-possessed" (Oranges 11). Here, Jeanette -who at the time was only seven years old- describes with straightforward crudity the traumatic overtones of Pastor Finch's sermon in which he sets her as a public example of how: "This little lily could herself be a house of demons" (Oranges 12); this episode anticipates Jeanette's future exorcism of the 'demons' that supposedly led her to her first lesbian relationship. When Jeanette escapes from the psychotic outbursts of the Pastor to find shelter in the Sunday School Room, he follows her there and, after trying to correct the girl's subversive reworking of the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den, the histrionic Pastor ends up entertaining himself with the "Fuzzy Felt" (Oranges 12) she had been playing with. This passage in Jeanette's story draws attention once again to the false virtue and callousness behind church rhetoric as well as the sheer buffoonery displayed by some of God's fanatical officers. As Kathryn Simpson points out: "Both Pastor Finch and Pastor Spratt are treated with derision, their authority and views comically undercut [...]"

Although within the church they have great power, they are named after a small bird and a small fish, which suggests that outside such a rigidly patriarchal institution their real importance would be minimal” (2001:56).

When the church reunion ends and Jeanette walks back home with her mother, ‘Auntie Alice’ and ‘Auntie May’ (two of the church members), she muses on Pastor Finch’s hideous looks: “Poor Mrs. Finch. How did she live with him?” (Oranges 13). This causes Jeanette to remember the gypsy’s prophesy about her never getting married, and to reflect that, after all, to remain single might just be a blessing.

1.2 “*Why do you want me to go to? I asked the night before*” (Oranges 21)

In the second chapter of the novel, called *Exodus*, Jeanette is forced to go to school by the Council authorities. This unexpected turn of events disrupts Louie’s grand plan and angers her not a little since she considers that nobody can teach her daughter better than herself. Here the narrative turns to Jeanette’s remembrance of the time in which she had a temporal hearing loss, and how her mother and the congregation misjudged her illness as a state of divine rapture. In another narrative digression, we find out about two important women in young Jeanette’s life: Miss Jewsbury, who is the only member of the community able to see that the girl is in no state of ‘rapture’ but rather in need of medical care; and Elsie Norris, an eccentric and intelligent old woman who acts as a friend and surrogate mother for Jeanette, providing support and comfort when the young girl needs it.

The old woman is also an alternative role model who teaches the girl the value of friendship and acts as a counterbalance to Louie’s intolerant views. In short, Elsie becomes Jeanette’s first intellectual and philosophical guide, revealing to her the great

value of poetry and literature, and teaching her the importance of cultivating the mind. When Jeanette is lonesome in hospital, waiting to be operated on, only Elsie comes to comfort her. “My mother couldn’t come till the weekend, I knew that, because she was waiting for the plumber to check her fittings” (Oranges 29).

In this way, it is the sensitive, kind, and intelligent Elsie Norris who makes up for the maternal neglect and provides Jeanette the attention and love she needs: “Elsie came every day, and told me jokes to make me smile and stories to make me feel better. She said stories helped you to understand the world” (Oranges 29). As Kathryn Simpson points out: “ [Elsie’s] prominence in *Exodus* also suggests that she is a Moses figure, leading the Israelite Jeanette to the Promised Land of imagination and a more balanced, informed and tolerant view of the world” (2001: 55).

On the rare occasions in which Louie visits her daughter at the hospital she brings her oranges, “‘The only fruit’, she always said” (Oranges 29). This statement seems to symbolize the all-pervasive repression Louie represents in her daughter’s life, and to epitomize the restrictiveness of the concept of love within the compulsory heterosexual model dictated by patriarchal and religious ideology. Hence, Jeanette’s time in the hospital, together with the influence of Elsie’s liberating philosophy, and her immersion in the secular world of school mark the onset of the young girl’s distancing from her mother’s domineering influence, or what in psychoanalytic terms would be termed the beginning of the “abject” maternal body. According to Julia Kristeva’s theory, abjection is:

...An extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has

the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so... (in Oliver 1993:55).

It is impossible for Jeanette not to see that her mother and the church have been wrong all along about the supposedly miraculous reasons for her deafness, a fact that unconsciously begins to undermine their authority in the girl's heart and mind.

Although the fierce control Jeanette's mother exerts on her daughter's life will continue well into her adolescence, it nevertheless becomes apparent that the young girl's exposure to the influence of other people and the secular world of the school is beginning to reconfigure her world view and to strengthen her resistance to authority. After so many years of home education, Jeanette's first contact with the world of school is painful and problematic.

At first she tries very hard to fit into the new environment, but her evangelical beliefs turn her into an outcast both amongst the other children and the teachers who ignore or ridicule her for her extravagant compositions on missionary work. As in the first chapter, Jeanette's account of events is interwoven with the adult narrator's voice which criticizes the unfair treatment and hypocrisy of the institutional authorities who constantly disdain the child's effort to adapt. Thus we have teachers like Mrs. Virtue who is permanently afraid that Jeanette's religious view of the world might "upset the others" (Oranges 39), or Mrs. Sparrow and Mrs. Spencer who witness with total indifference how the other children bully and hit Jeanette; they intervene only to grab her by the hair and take her to Mrs. Vole, the school's director, who finally writes to Jeanette's mother complaining about her daughter's immoderate religious inclinations.

Nevertheless, Jeanette's feisty determination together with her acute intelligence and resourceful imagination help her to rebel against the unfairness of the situation and to assert her point of view: "After that day, everyone at school avoided me. If it had not been for the conviction that I was right, I might have been very sad" (Oranges 43). Eventually, Jeanette stops basing her school projects on biblical subjects; "I did *Street Car Named Desire* out of pipe-cleaners, an embroidered cushion cover of Bette Davis in *Now Voyager* [...] Whatever I did made no impression at all, except to enrage my mother because I had abandoned biblical themes" (Oranges 48). Hence, we see how the secular world of school fails to meet Jeanette's needs in the same way her 'church family' will fail her as the story wears on.

1.3 "The heathen were a daily household preoccupation" (Oranges 53)

In the chapter called *Leviticus* Jeanette describes with satiric humour her mother's permanent fight with their 'Next Door' (Oranges 53) neighbours: Louie's hymn singing and piano playing infuriate her neighbours and they in turn torment her with their noisy love-making. When the young girl asks her mother about "the strange noises, like cries for help" (Oranges 53), the horrified woman responds: "I don't know, [...] but whatever it is, it's not holy" (Oranges 53). As soon as Louie realizes that the neighbours are in fact "fornicating" (Oranges 54), she tries to protect Jeanette from the sexual racket of the "Heathen" by first covering up her ears, and later sending her to buy ice cream. Once again in the young girl's life the devil and sex are equated as the same wretched entity, and sexual love and desire are singled out as especially ghastly temptations for one who is to be 'holy.' Thus we see Jeanette growing up in an environment in which the pursuit of personal happiness and sexual fulfilment is an

extremely difficult enterprise, and one that is constantly thwarted by the obscure pressures of religious morality.

Jeanette's mother is a woman who delights in the exercise of her own powers. She is inclined to business rather than domestic chores and has created a role for herself as treasurer for the Society of the Lost, a job which allows her to prove her astute business talents and spend a lot of time travelling around. It is during one of the Society's special conferences that Jeanette experiences her first doubts about church doctrines: "The sermon was on perfection, and it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement" (Oranges 60). Again, we find the realistic narrative is disrupted by the intertextual inclusion of a fairy tale that allows Jeanette to articulate her unease over and her rejection of the pastor's sermon. Thus the fairy tale begins: "Once upon a time, in the forest, lived a woman who was so beautiful that the mere sight of her healed the sick and gave a good omen to the crops" (Oranges 61). As the story unfolds, we find another artful re-visioning of the fairy tale in which the woman of the story is not only beautiful, but also intelligent, wise and independent. She agrees to spend three days and three nights with a prince who is looking for a perfect wife, but when the prince proposes she refuses, telling him that marriage is not something which interests her. What the woman of the tale wants is to make the prince understand that what he seeks does not exist, and moreover that perfection does not resemble flawlessness -as Pastor Spratt asserts- but is, instead, a matter of achieving "balance and harmony" (Oranges 64). Due to his impenetrable stubbornness, however, the prince is unable to understand the wisdom of the woman's message and orders her execution. 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. Hence,

this fairy tale functions within the story as a representation of Jeanette's new-found 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. As Paulina Palmer argues:

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit, while rejecting a unitary model of subjectivity in favour of a delineation of fantasy identities and multiple selves, also, in true postmodern spirit, envisages and depicts subjectivity itself in terms of narrativity. Jeanette, instead of uncovering a single, static identity, constructs for herself a series of shifting, fluid selves by means of the acts of storytelling and fabulation in which she engages. Storytelling enables her to acknowledge, in the words of Cixous, the existence of her 'monsters...jackals...fellow-creatures...fears'. (Palmer 1993: 101)⁸.

In this way, we can see 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.

1.4 “It was spring, the ground still had traces of snow, and I was about to be married” (Oranges 71)

In the chapter called *Numbers* the adolescent Jeanette tries to understand the real nature of the relations between men and women. The disturbing conversations she overhears between some of the women of the community regarding their relationships

⁸ “In invoking the French feminist Hélène Cixous, Palmer is clearly establishing a parallel between the created self and the feminine female self”. Cixous's quote comes from her essay ‘Sorties’, in *New French Feminisms*, ed- Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1981: 97).

with their husbands, together with the recurring nightmare in which she is marrying either a blind man, a pig, or even her own mother, make her feel extremely puzzled and confused. Seeking some peace of mind, Jeanette goes to the library in search of answers to her queries: “In the library I felt better, words you could trust and look at till you understood them, they couldn’t change half way through a sentence like people, so it was easier to spot a lie” (Oranges 72). In the library, Jeanette finds a book of fairy tales and reads “Beauty and the Beast” and “Little Red Riding Hood” to conclude that the world seems to be conspiring to mystify her more and more, because if a beast can be turned into a handsome prince with just one kiss how can it be that her uncle Bill is so horrible? And what about the poor neighbour who stated that her husband was a pig? “I wondered if the woman [...] had read this story. She must have been awfully disappointed if she had ” (Oranges 72). Convinced that the kissing could not help to turn a beast into a prince, Jeanette is left to believe that: “There are women in the world. There are men in the world. And there are beasts.” [But] “What do you do if you marry a beast?”(Oranges 72). Despite all her musing, the young girl is unable to find an answer to this enigmatic problem, and ends up concluding that marriage must be quite a dangerous experience.

Thus, for someone like Jeanette, so firmly rooted in her relationship with her mother and a larger close-knit female community, the disfunctionality of the heterosexual relationships around her serve only to reassure her in rejecting the phallogocentric ethos. Later on she keeps trying to find someone to help her to resolve the anxieties she feels about marriage, but to no avail. Jeanette knows that she can not entirely trust her mother; the astonishing discovery that Louie made up her own ending of *Jane Eyre* - telling her that Jane marries St. John Rivers instead of Mr. Rochester-

together with the silence she has maintained about Jeanette's adoption, make the adolescent girl aware that her mother is constantly forcing things to conform to her own views and is therefore not a very trustworthy person. Hence, one day she hides in a dustbin in order to listen to the washday conversation between Nellie and Doreen about the facts of life. However, the only thing she learns is that their husbands are drunken, violent and unfaithful men who make them very unhappy. Finally, believing that marriage is a very dangerous and disappointing experience, Jeanette comforts herself by thinking that: "It was a good thing I was destined to become a missionary" (Oranges 77). This is something that obviously will allow her to escape the perils of marriage all together. Listening to these women's conversation, Jeannette learns that marriage and autonomy are not compatible, and she refuses to conceive of a life without autonomy. Here we see the young girl feeling the first contradictions between the desire to love and be loved and her natural antipathy for the men who seem to cause so much grief in the lives of the women she knows.

Following these events, the narrative jumps to the day when Jeanette is fourteen years old and meets Melanie with whom she falls in love for the first time in her life. What from the beginning is a charming friendship -something Jeanette is not used to except with Elsie Norris- ends up becoming Jeanette's first lesbian relationship. Although the girls sometimes fear their sexual affair might be the "Unnatural Passions" the pastor so often talks about, they reckon that the wonderful feeling they have for each other cannot have anything to do with the abomination Pastor Finch describes in his sermons. The chapter ends with the inset of a brief tale that seems an allegorical warning of the threat that Jeanette's mother and the religious congregation might pose to their lesbian relationship. And indeed, the safety and security they feel as members of

their ‘church family’ will soon prove to be unfounded when the two girls discover the inability of the church to accept diversity of sexual preferences.

1.5 “Time is a great deadener. People forget, get bored, grow old, go away” (Oranges 93)

In the short non-narrative chapter called “Deuteronomy, the Last Book of the Law”, set more or less at the centre of the book, we find a philosophical reflection about the nature of stories, history and storytelling.⁹ Here, instead of Jeanette’s voice we have an adult narrator who possesses ample knowledge and experience of the world. As if anticipating the great changes Jeanette is beginning to face in her own life, this adult voice makes clear the ideological construct that lies behind the creation of binary oppositions. Thus, the adult narrator deliberately challenges the distinction between fact and fiction as well as between history and story:

People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe [...] Knowing what to believe had its advantages. It built an empire and kept people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet...(Oranges 93).

In her paradoxical asseveration that fiction blurs the boundaries between truths and lies, or history and storytelling, Winterson’s inspired narrative demonstrates what Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition* (1986): that societies can no longer be thought of as structured according to certain grand totalizing narratives or ‘grand récits’

⁹ By ‘non-narrative’ I mean that the narrative flow in this chapter is suddenly interrupted, giving way to a philosophical reflection on history and storytelling.

such as the Patriarchal Power Structures, or the idea of History as a unifying social force. Instead, these ‘grand récits’ have been replaced by what Lyotard calls ‘pétit récits’ or little narratives which have a smaller span of influence and effect, but which break down all the certainties and assumptions on which conventional notions of narrative and history are based. Hence, the narrator of “Deuteronomy” identifies Western history as an imperial construction that seeks to deny and silence alternative ways of describing reality. The narrator argues that History is nothing more than a fictional construction and, often, a way of denying the past. For this reason we must re-evaluate the notion of History and question the legitimacy of official versions of past events. The narrator in “Deuteronomy” advocates an attitude of wariness with respect to “this reducing of stories called history” (Oranges 93). This narrative strategy is what Linda Hutcheon describes as ‘postmodern fiction’; that is, a fiction that is concerned with its own status of being fiction; a self-conscious mode that problematizes both the writing of fiction and the limits of history’s fictionality, subverting established conventions through the use of parody and irony so that fiction is no longer mimetic but rather constructive, in the sense that it is through narratives that societies exist and humans construct a sense of the self¹⁰.

1.6 “*That walls should fall is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet*” (Oranges 112)

In the chapter called “Joshua” we find Jeannette haunted by ‘uncertainty’, a sentiment that troubles her deeply because as she has been told: “Uncertainty was what

¹⁰ Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1989.

the Heathen felt, and I was chosen by God” (Oranges 100). The unaccustomed feeling of doubt brings to the adolescent girl’s mind the painful memory of the unexpected visit of her biological mother to Louie’s house. The brutality with which Louie dispatches Jeanette’s questions about her natural mother, “...I felt a blow that wrapped round my head like a bandage” (Oranges 101), is a premonition of what is going to be Louie’s and the Pastor’s reaction when they find out about Jeanette and Melanie’s sexual relationship. Although the adolescent Jeanette tries to explain to her mother the nature of her feelings for Melanie, something in Louie’s intolerant attitude makes her shrink back. The unspoken undercurrent of Louie’s discomfort brings Jeanette to understand that the love she feels for her girlfriend is unacceptable, and so better kept secret. Even in the happy moments in which Jeanette can fully enjoy Melanie’s company, she has the aching feeling that their love is not going to flourish: “What is it about intimacy that makes it so very disturbing? (Oranges 103) Jeanette wonders.

As the tale of the Winter Palace anticipated in the previous chapter, the girls’ blissful relationship will be condemned and repudiated by family and church. Driven by Louie’s intolerance and the church’s homophobia, the love affair between the two girls is publicly brought before the whole congregation. With the purpose of demonizing their lesbian relationship and burdening them with guilt the pastor accuses the two young women of: “[having] fallen under Satan’s spell [and of being] full of demons” (Oranges 104). In a natural gesture of self-defence Jeanette firmly denies the pastor’s grotesque accusations by reminding him with biblical authority that: “To the pure all things are pure” (Oranges 105). But to no avail. Although Melanie repents immediately, Jeanette refuses to do so; her rebellion offers a clear sign of her willingness to accept the fears, tensions and complexities of her ‘difference’.

Nevertheless, to free Jeanette from the fierce clutches of Satan, the church community must subject her to an exorcism, and deprive her of food and light for a period of thirty-six hours. Borrowing from Foucault's theories on *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Gemma López argues that: "As an autonomous organization, which keeps its doors locked from mainstream society at large, the Evangelical group has absolute power to exert power, thus becoming an isolated dictatorship where abuse is not only possible but strongly recommended under certain circumstances"(2007: 194). The exorcism causes Jeanette to hallucinate, and conjure up an 'orange demon' which acts as the girl's defence against the community's attempt to subjugate her. The therapeutic value of this vision is that the 'demon' gives her "a rough round pebble" to "help [her] to decide what [she] wants" (Oranges 108). In this way, Jeanette subverts evangelical demonism by equating her own 'demon' to a Blakean kind of poetic manifestation which will help her to protect those aspects of the self - such as her creative imagination and her homosexuality- which are proscribed by the Church. According to Susana Onega: "[...] if she is to mature, Jeanette has to overcome the fragmentation of herself into 'Jeanette' (her conscious, or ego) and 'the orange demon' (her unconscious, or id), brought about by the exorcism" (Onega 2006: 25).

After the ominous experience of the exorcism, Jeanette becomes ill, and while she is in bed her mother burns all the written proof of her relationship with Melanie. This inquisitorial aggression will mark the ultimate fracture in the relation between mother and daughter: "She burnt a lot more than letters that night in the backyard. I don't think she knew. In her head she was still queen, but not my queen anymore..." (Oranges 112). Thus, as Jeanette grows increasingly detached from her mother she comes closer to fully accepting and celebrating her lesbian identity. The two dream fables inserted into this

chapter “The City of Lost Chances” (Oranges 111) and “The Forbidden City” (Oranges 112) work as an allegorical manifestation of the endeavour of Jeanette’s unconscious to escape from the self-imposed limitations of her ego, and the necessity to renounce the secure but oppressive confines of the religious community. The chapter closes with Jeanette finding a new and more satisfactory love relationship with Katy: “She was my most uncomplicated love affair, [Jeanette explains] and I loved her because of it” (Oranges 123); 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.

1.7 “*It all seemed to hinge around the fact that I loved the wrong sort of people*” (Oranges 127)

The chapter called “Judges” starts with an epigraph from *Alice in Wonderland* in which the Queen of Spades threatens Alice in terms not unlike the ones Jeanette’s religious community will use against her: “*Either you or your head must be off*” (Oranges 127, italics in original). The social repercussions of Jeanette’s private life become apparent when her relationship with Katy is discovered. Once again Jeanette’s lesbianism will be publicly exposed and declared a dreadful sin. In this way, the teenage girl is judged and expelled from church and home. However, Jeanette is beginning to learn to reject the culturally constructed norms and taboos of the Pentecostal sect according to which all manifestations of the sexual body are perverse and more or less illicit. When her mother accuses her of “Aping men” (Oranges 127) Jeanette expresses amusement, muttering to herself: “Now if I was aping men she would have every reason to be disgusted. As far as I was concerned men were something you had around the

place, not particularly interesting, but quite harmless” (Oranges 127). Hence, Jeanette challenges not only what is expected of her by the norms of the religious congregation but also society’s heterosexual and androcentric framework.

Jeanette’s bewilderment is explored in another intertextual insertion of the Arthurian myth, which enables the author to provide a more multifaceted account of her protagonist’s quest for the self. The telling of stories helps both Jeanette and the reader to better understand the many layered nature of human life and so to refuse totalizing categories of good and evil. In this way, Jeanette’s quest for identity is 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” (Onega 2006: 26).

Despite the immense pain and sadness that Louie’s betrayal and the congregation’s desertion cause her after their last and futile attempt to exorcise her lesbianism, Jeanette decides to take in hand the reins of her own life and explore the endless possibilities that an alien environment can offer in constructing her subjectivity. Thus, like Sir Perceval, Jeanette has to give up the security of the round table (the church) and the love of King Arthur (her mother) and set out on her quest for the Grail (the fulfilment of her desires). However as the Grail is a metaphor of her subjectivity, this endeavour will never be completely fulfilled.

1-8 “It is not possible to change anything until you understand the substance you wish to change” (Oranges 141)

In the last chapter of *Oranges*, called “Ruth”, the intertextual episodes interwoven in the narrative help the reader to situate the existential moment of trouble and self-doubt in which Jeanette is immersed. The chapter opens with the story of Winnet Stonejar who, like her alter ego Jeannette, struggles against the loneliness of exile while trying to find her self. The fact that the name Winnet Stonejar is an anagram of Jeanette Winterson seems to strengthen the connections, albeit slippery, between Jeanette and Winterson.

Echoing the ideas of Bruno Bettelheim (1903-90) in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1978), Winterson makes use of fairy and folk tales to reflect Jeanette’s inner conflicts and to illustrate the psychological development of the self, thus providing a space where she can “[achieve] a secure understanding of what the meaning of [her] life ought to be” (Bettelheim 3). These multiple narratives ultimately help to explain the fluidity of the subject as well as to reverse fixed gender roles.

Winnet’s apprenticeship with the sorcerer in the magic arts allegorizes Jeanette’s necessity to complete her own development in order to become an adult: “It is not possible to control the outside of yourself until you have mastered your breathing space” (Oranges 141). Just as Jeanette has been expelled from home and the church so Winnet is also expelled from the sorcerer’s kingdom; she wanders around like a vagrant freezing and starving (echoing Jane Eyre’s experience after leaving Thornfield Hall) until she is found by a woman who “[...] understood the different kinds of sorrow and their effects” (Oranges 153). Winnet will have to learn the new language spoken

outside the sorcerer's realm, which brings to mind Lacan's psychoanalytic theories according to which: "women within a patriarchal culture have no access to the symbolic order, to cultural signification or to language" (in Makinen 2005: 44). Nevertheless, this view is challenged by Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo in her essay, *Subversive Storytelling: The Construction of Lesbian Girlhood through Fantasy and Fairy Tale in Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, where she argues that:

Winterson's novel [...] exemplifies the ongoing process of female appropriation of the symbolic realm that we are witnessing in contemporary women's literature. In her literary construction of lesbian girlhood, Winterson's storytelling engages in a literary project of self-creation and self-explanation that boldly rewrites the position of the female heroine in the patriarchal realm of language (Gamallo 1998: 120).

Gamallo's argument demonstrates what contemporary women writers like Winterson have achieved: to break free of the restrictive boundaries of the Law by using a language which articulates the multiple voices of women and ultimately repositions their place in the symbolic order.

Forced to abandon her mother's house and the religious congregation, Jeanette will begin 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" (Oranges 158). 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; given the choice between priest and prophet she opts for the latter despite the many perils: "The priest has a book with the words set

out. [...] The prophet has no book” (Oranges 161).

By the end of the novel Jeanette feels compelled to return home to visit her family for Christmas. Now an adult, Jeanette feels a melancholic sorrow when she considers the entrapments of her past life. But the quest has not been futile, her mother’s influence has definitely lost its power, and even The Society of the Lost has come apart due to scandal and corruption. However, with her increasing maturity, Jeanette now understands that although her family is anything but perfect, she cannot completely detach herself from it. As in Winnet’s story, there’s an invisible thread linking her to her mother that will always impel her to go back, because as Winterson says: “I don’t think it’s possible to forgive unless you can understand...”(In Reynolds 2003: 13).

Although the ending of *Oranges* remains open and ambiguous, there’s a peculiar sensation of having come full circle, to return to the beginning of the story when Jeanette starts her autobiographical account. Indeed, there are many elements in the narrative which closely resemble Jeanette Winterson’s life, and which seem deliberately to keep the reader guessing as to how much is fiction and how much autobiography in Jeanette’s bizarre childhood and her unusual personal story. A question which substantiates Onega’s appraisal of the novel as:

[...] a truly innovative and self-conscious experiment in *écriture lesbienne* giving shape *both*, to the fictional Jeanette’s maturation process and to Jeanette Winterson’s own development as a poet/prophet with the power to create selves and worlds by means of her visionary imagination.

(Onega 2006: 34, italics in original).

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit is a book that opens up possibilities of change regarding our limited and self-limiting categories of gender identity. Jeanette’s personal

journey is marked by her struggle for self-knowledge and freedom and her refusal to be a victim of oppression. As such, it symbolizes the ways in which we as individuals can achieve an awareness of our inner selves that will help us along the road to feeling and thinking differently about ourselves.

Through the use of wit and irony the writer speaks directly to the reader as by word of mouth, but not without the medium of great art; an art which fluctuates in the slender margin between the real and the unreal. In Winterson's fiction there are so many passages of pure poetry that one might cut them out and just read them as separate texts. In reading Jeanette's story we can never doubt that in the book there is embedded the writer herself and her commitment to intellectual adventure, for as Virginia Woolf says: "beyond the difficulty of communicating oneself, there's the supreme difficulty of being oneself" (V. Woolf. *The Common Reader vol.1* 2003:59). And this brave meditation on the personal, on the self, is another of the reasons why one reads Winterson's narrative with such unrelenting pleasure and intensity.

2. "It's the clichés that cause the trouble"*: Love and Loss in Jeanette
Winterson's *Written on The Body*

We dream - it is good we are dreaming -
It would hurt us - were we awake -
But since it is playing - kill us,
And we are playing - shriek -

What harm? Men die -externally -
It is a truth - of Blood -
But we - are dying in Drama -
And Drama - is never dead -

- Emily Dickinson (531, c. 1862) ¹¹

The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.

- Pascal, *Pensées*.¹²

If in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985) the reader finds an exploration of the self and the quest for identity of Jeanette, the novel's narrator, together with the idea of an open-ended literature that questions the notion of a rigidly fixed meaning, in *Written On the Body* (1992) we encounter a genderless narrator who, though un-named might be interpreted as an adult and mature version of the protagonist of *Oranges*, this time exploring the space between love and death, and rejecting 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. This idea echoes Julia Kristeva's notion of

* Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. New York: Vintage International, 1994, p.10.

11 Dickinson, Emily. *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson*. Ed & Trans, Thomas H. Johnson. Canada: Little, Brown & Company, 1964, p. 132.

12 Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées and Other Writings*. Trans, Honor Levi. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.179.

“the Subject in Process”, which revises Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in order to relate the evolution of the subject to the evolution of language.¹³

Written on the Body is a profound meditation on love, loss, language and identity which tries to defamiliarize or ‘make strange’ the constructed ideas of gender categorization. If in *Oranges* Winterson uses playful intertextual references to mythical material like fairy tales, the Bible or Arthurian legend, in *Written on the Body* both Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, and Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* serve as Modernist intertextual references to emphasize the fluidity of gender identification. In *Written on the Body* the gender of the narrator is never specified in the text thus granting gender identity an open-endedness that undermines hegemonic patriarchal/ heterosexual discourses on the body and on the text itself . As Woolf and Barnes did before, Winterson questions the dichotomies set up around gender and desire, casting aside restrictive notions of sexual/gender difference, and proving that the narrator’s sexuality is ultimately irrelevant to a deeper understanding of love and the sexual-corporeal dimension of human life. Regarding this idea Catherine Belsey points out:

“In her novel *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson tells a love story without revealing the gender of the narrator. The object of the narrator’s desire is a woman, but there have been others, some of them men. Winterson’s story is compelling, passionate, lyrical. What matter, it seems to say, who is speaking, when desire is always derivative, conventional, already *written*” (Belsey 1994: 7).

Whereas In *Oranges* we find a narrative organized as a ‘Bildungsroman’ in which

13 Kristeva, Julia. “The Subject in Process”, ed. French & Lack. *The Tel Quel Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp 133-178.

we witness the forces that enable Jeanette, a lesbian girl, to achieve the transformation and self-discovery she seeks, in *Written on the Body* we encounter, seven years later, a narrator who consciously deconstructs gender binary signifiers, refusing to align herself/himself with either the masculine or the feminine and highlighting the arbitrary division constructed between the two sexes. 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" (*Gender Trouble* 1990: 153-154 quotation marks in text). If in the process of asserting her lesbian sexual identity the Jeanette of *Oranges* refuses to conform to the constructed norms and taboos of the phallogocentric ethos, the narrator of *Written on the Body* refuses to be either male or female in his/her journey towards self-consciousness 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" (Kirby 2006: 5).

By viewing the nameless narrator of *Written on the Body* as a sort of adult version of the narrator of *Oranges*, it would be not unreasonable to suggest that Winterson's main aim in these books is, among other things, the metafictional exploration of the self and the idea of crossing boundaries, themes found in works like *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, and which seek to open up possible variations in conventional notions of gender division. In her works Winterson criticizes the limited conception of love that is drawn from the heterosexual economy and, by contrast, champions a more fluid relationship between one's own sexuality and its relationship with that of others. As Luce Irigaray writes in *This Sex Which Is Not One*: "we put ourselves into watertight compartments, break ourselves up into parts, cut ourselves into two, and more. Whereas

we are always one and the other, at the same time. If we separate ourselves that way, we 'all' stop being born (1985:217).

A further argument for linking *Oranges* and *Written on The Body* as “narratives-in-process” is the fact that both works appear to share some aspects which closely relate to Winterson’s own life. Thus, if in *Oranges* fictional and autobiographical elements are interwoven in the narrative, in *Written on the Body* these issues are, as Winterson admitted in an interview with Michelle Field, also based on the writer’s love affair with her former literary agent, Pat Kavanagh ¹⁴. However, one must be careful about making sweeping comparisons between the author’s life and her work and especially so in the case of Winterson. In *Art Objects* (1995), she writes: “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 everything else” (1997: 106). For this reason any discussion of her work must bear in mind that the line between fact and fiction is a very fine line indeed ¹⁵.

Written on the Body is an enigmatic novel which constantly invites the reader to call into question the accepted order of the heterosexual economy; human duality is a key term in understanding the ambivalent and mysterious nature of the ‘s/he’ narrator. Anything can be split into its self and its opposite, Winterson tells us, advocating plurality of desire as a complex form of consciousness that defies binary antitheses and sexual stereotypes. If, as Catherine Belsey writes: “Desire is what is not said, what

14 Winterson, Jeanette. “I fear insincerity.” With Michelle Field. *Publishers Weekly*. Mar. 20,1995:1 p. *Searchbank*. CD-ROM. Aug. 1997.

15 This idea is also echoed in Winterson’s statements in an interview with Audrey Bilger in the *Paris Review*: “[...] This is not autobiography in the way you understand it. It is simply a way of using raw material...because one always uses raw material from one’s own life. [...] What matters is what writer’s do with the experience. Whatever the experience is. Now whether it took place in my imagination or in my psyche or whether it took place in my physical body, do we really have to split hairs like that?” (1997: 75)

cannot be said” (1994: 76), Winterson’s narratives offer readers the possibility of filling the silence of desire, or even of allowing desire its own inherent elusiveness; in so doing they create a space in which to explore alternative ways of imagining the self.

2.1 “*Why is the measure of love loss?*” (*Written* 9)

Written on the Body begins with the monologue of a nameless narrator struggling to come to terms with the utter pain and sorrow of having lost Louise, the person s/he loves. With the chivalric fascination of an Arthurian Knight, the narrator reflects wistfully on the triteness of the worn-out words related to love and romance: “[...] You said, ‘I love you.’ Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear?” (*Written* 9).¹⁶ This question triggers a recollection of past events by which we learn of the numerous love affairs this impetuous Casanova has had with partners of both sexes.

In the early pages of the novel the reader can find two simultaneous narratives: the evocation of her/his relationship with Louise, and the episodic accounts of the narrator’s many sexual affairs preceding Louise. Taking the form of diary entries, the narrative is chronologically structured around the seasons of the year: “I am thinking of a certain September” (*Written* 9), the narrator says, remembering the past. Regarding this literary device Susana Onega writes: “[...] the evolution of the narrator’s and Louise’s relationship follows the natural rhythm of the seasons through the year, thus suggesting that it has the wholeness of a cosmogonic cycle” (2006:117).

Throughout the narrative we witness the narrator’s progression from a

16 Hereafter I will use the abbreviation ‘Written’ throughout the text.

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” (*Written* 10).

Reflecting on Umberto Eco’s definition of “postmodernist irony by reference to love”, Susana Onega writes: “According to Eco, then, the only way in which we can still use the well-worn words of love with the purity and intensity of their pristine meaning is by having recourse to irony” (2006:118).¹⁷ Early in the narrative, when the narrator has just begun her/his relationship with Louise, there’s a constant use of clichés to illustrate her/his numerous sexual relations before encountering true love. This bragging of the many women s/he has ‘had’ acquires, according to Onega: “[t]he double irony of Swift’s satire at its best, for, although s/he makes constant use of literary clichés to describe her/his sexual feats, the narrator seems to be candidly unaware that s/he is behaving according to these clichés” (2006:118). In her/his recount of past relationships the narrator’s promiscuous sexual life appears to have followed a traditional patriarchal pattern that indicates a conventional masculine subject position, thus s/he says things like: “[...] I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick”, or “ I have been through a lot of marriages” (*Written* 13). However, Winterson’s relentless exploration of human duality subverts once again essentialist sex roles; thus, in spite of her/his rakish Don Juanesque behaviour with her/his string of married women, s/he invariably seems to assume the position of

17 In the Postscript to the *Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco writes: “I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her ‘I love you madly’ because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, ‘I love you madly’. At this point having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence.” (in Onega, Susana. *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester University Press, 2006: 118).

pleasure-giver and, ultimately, victim. Although on most occasions the narrator's numerous affairs are presented comically, there is nevertheless a kind of yearning about some of them that indicates the narrator's greater commitment to the relationship; for example s/he seems totally shattered when one of the lovers, Bathsheba, decides to return to her husband. With another of her/his girlfriends, Jacqueline, the narrator consciously tries to form a stable if passionless relationship, but it soon becomes apparent that their barren life together has no possibility of prospering. Hence when Jacqueline discovers the narrator's passion for Louise, her possessiveness impels her to exact a grotesque revenge; she vandalizes the flat and spreads excrement on the walls in what Susana Onega describes as "a parodic example of Cixous's 'excessive woman'" (2006: 116); this action profoundly disturbs the narrator.¹⁸

Other lovers mentioned by the narrator attest to the volubility of desire and the elusiveness of gender identification, thus the boyfriend called Crazy Frank, who has been brought up by midgets although he himself is a kind of giant, is a bisexual libertine who "[...] had the body of a bull, an image he intensified by wearing great gold hoops through his nipples. Unfortunately he had joined the hoops with a chain of heavy gold links. The effect should have been deeply butch but in fact it looked rather like the handle of a Channel shopping bag" (*Written* 96). Although the narrator admits to having fallen in love with Crazy Frank despite the latter's warning not to do so because:

18 "Her fit of hysteria points to Jacqueline as a parodic example of Cixous's 'excessive woman' as defined in 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. In this essay the French poet and critic rereads Freud's famous 1905 'Fragments of an Analysis of a case of Hysteria', the case study on 'Dora', the girl who so obsessed Freud in the months before the writing of *The Interpretation of Dreams* that she called forth his most extreme (counter) transference, thereby enticing Lacan, Sartre, and others to retell her story. In Cixous's retelling, Dora becomes a model of the excessive ('monstrous' according to patriarchy) woman who threatens patriarchy because she speaks her body. She is the human equivalent of Medusa, the Serpent-Goddess worshiped by the Libyan amazons, the sight of whose face was sure death for men"(Onega 2006:116).

“He didn’t want to settle down. His ambition was to find a hole in every port. [and] He wasn’t fussy about the location” (*Written* 96), s/he finally comes to understand that “sex can feel like love” (*Written* 94) but that ultimately these are not exactly the same. This consideration brings to mind Catherine Belsey’s reflection according to which:

[...] While sex is a commodity, love becomes the condition of happiness that cannot be bought, the one remaining object of desire that cannot be sure of purchasing fulfilment. Love thus becomes more precious than before because it is beyond price, and in consequence its metaphysical character is intensified. (Belsey 1994: 72)

In *Written on the Body* the narrator’s scrutiny of love and desire illustrates the unstable and shifting nature of sexual desire and the struggle to overcome the culturally constructed meanings attached to gender identification of those whose gender identities, because they are multiple and fluid, resist containment. Moreover, what Winterson seeks to tell us through her narratives is that sexual desire is as fluid and flexible as gender identity, a perspective echoed by Judith Butler who contends that not only is gender a cultural construct but that:

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. (*Gender Trouble* 2006: 9)

As in other works, Winterson here raises metafictional questions about the elusive boundaries between fact and fiction, history and story, reality and imagination, and claims that what really matters in a story is not its truthfulness, but whether the

emotional transcendence of human experience is conveyed or not. As Ute Kauer remarks: “The self creates his or her own biography by finding metaphors for experiences because those metaphors are a more precise expression of emotion than facts”(in Makinen 2005:120). The narrator often warns us about 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” (*Written* 24). This way of addressing the reader brings to mind previous Winterson protagonists, like the Jeanette of *Oranges* 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” (*The Passion* 1987:13) repeats Henri constantly, a literary device which seeks to emphasise the ‘postmodern condition’ of Winterson’s writing. In underscoring the self-reflexivity of the work through the narrator’s intervention, or through the many intertextual allusions that appear in Winterson’s novels, the text highlights the ‘fictionality’ of the narrative act as a crucial element in the character’s process of self-construction. According to Catherine Belsey: “Postmodern writing triumphantly affirms its own capacity to escape the limiting oppositions which once promised to deliver the truth. [...] The subject is what speaks, writes, reads, signifies, and it is no more than that. Silence is death. Desire lives, then, in its inscription” (*Desire* 1994: 77).

Together with love and sexuality, the body and illness are also structural metaphors of the novel. In the ongoing account of her/his passion for Louise the narrator traces her/his profound re-education in all matters of love. Thus we see her/him reject the jaded view of sexual love as represented by her/his previous affairs,

in favour of a greater sensitivity through which s/he hopes to become a more committed and faithful lover. This change awakes in the narrator a heretofore unknown self-consciousness and an ardent if sudden interest in the ethics of human behaviour: “I don’t feel wise. Why is it that human beings are allowed to grow up without the necessary apparatus to make sound ethical decisions?” (*Written* 43) From her/his first encounters with Louise, the narrator becomes aware of the influence this splendid, red-haired, intelligent woman is going to have on her/his understanding of the deeper meaning of love: “Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation” (*Written* 77-78). This again brings to mind Catherine Belsey’s reflection according to which: “...More than ever, [in the postmodern condition] love has come to represent presence, transcendence, immortality, what Derrida calls proximity, living speech, certainty, everything, in short, that the market is unable to provide or fails to guarantee” (*Desire* 1994: 72).

Although when the narrator meets Louise she is still a married woman, her behaviour is utterly different from that of her predecessors. When Louise falls in love with her/him, she refuses to conceal their love affair from her husband, Elgin, a successful cancer researcher who in the novel comes to symbolize the archetype of patriarchal ideology. Louise’s relationship with her husband has long since spent its passion: “Elgin and Louise no longer made love” (*Written* 68), the narrator tells us. And in her desire to make clear her intentions of an honest beginning for their relationship, Louise invites her/his lover to the upstairs bedroom of the house she shares with her husband. However, the personal space Louise inhabits in the conjugal dwelling is described in the novel as a sort of gothic fairytale realm: “[...] an attic in a tower where

birds beat against the windows and the sky was an offering. [...] The floor sheered to one side, one board prised up like a wound. The walls bumpy and distempered, were breathing” (*Written* 51). This description matches that of Louise’s mysterious Pre-Raphaelite beauty; the narrator portrays her strong sensual face with flowing masses of red hair as in an image painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In this lovers’ realm, the small bed has a name: “Lady’s Occasional” (*Written* 63), and the room is warmed by an open fire. It is impossible for the narrator not to see that the kind of love Louise offers her/him is of a different nature than anything s/he has experienced before. The sensuousness and delight they feel for each other is rendered in the narrator’s poetic description of the emotions s/he experiences when Louise touches her/his body: “In the heat of her hands I thought, This is the campfire that mocks the sun. This place will warm me, feed me and care for me. I will hold on to this pulse against other rhythms. The world will come and go in the tide of a day but here is her hand with my future in its palm” (*Written* 51). Susana Onega writes that as the narrator’s relationship with Louise progresses, s/he comes to realize that what Louise “[...] is in fact offering her/him [is] a relationship built on terms of equality and love” (2006: 120). However, this new dimension of love and desire also frightens the narrator: “You said, ‘Why do I frighten you?’ [...] Frighten me? Yes, you do frighten me. You act as though there is infinite pleasure and time without end. How can I know that? My experience has been that time always ends” (*Written* 18). Onega again argues that: “It is this fear of ‘infinite pleasure’ (*jouissance*), then, that the narrator must overcome [...]” (2006: 120) if s/he wants the relationship with Louise to be of a different nature than her/his previous love experiences. Thus, readers are provided the ways in which the narrator’s understanding of love blossoms and matures: “When I say ‘I will be true to you’ I am drawing a quiet

space beyond the reach of desires” (*Written 77*). Or :

Cheating is easy. There’s no swank to infidelity. To borrow against the trust someone has placed in you costs nothing at first. You get away with it, you take a little more and a little more until there’s nomore to draw on. Oddly, your hands should be full with all that taking but when you open them there’s nothing there. (*Written 77*)

In this way the patriarchal/heterosexual model of a sexual relationship that is based on the unequal power relation between the ‘dominant’ male and the ‘passive’ female is rejected by Winterson in favour of one based on equality and mutual respect.

After Louise abandons her husband, the lovers enjoy a blissful period of coexistence in a space governed by their own rule and passion and in which they discover a new consciousness of the profound delights of sexual love: “You affect me in ways I can’t quantify or contain” (*Written 53*). In her/his renewed and more mature awareness of love the narrator articulates the complexity of passion in its multiple manifestations, thus after Louise has been gently kissing her/his lips the narrator reflects: “I put my arms around her, not sure whether I was a lover or a child. I wanted her to hide me beneath her skirts against all menace. Sharp points of desire were still there but there was too a sleepy safe rest like being in a boat I had as a child” (*Written 80*). This brings to mind Kiristeva’s concept of the semiotic which:

[...] expresses that original libidinal multiplicity within the very terms of culture, more precisely within poetic language in which multiple meanings and semantic nonclosure prevails. In effect, poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that

has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal Law. (in Butler 2006: 108)

Nevertheless, it soon becomes apparent that this great happiness is no more than life between two parenthesis. This pleasure of enjoyment or “jouissance” is brought to an unexpected end by the intrusion of Louise’s resentful husband who, jealous of his wife’s bliss, and angry about the social repercussions of her desertion, impassively informs the narrator of the “Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia” (*Written* 101) that Louise suffers: “He had her test results spread out on the table. The prognosis was about 100 months” (*Written* 104). This announcement sets off what Susana Onega describes as:

[...] a battle for possession over Louise in sheer patriarchal terms. While Elgin behaves as the *senex iratus* of Plautinian comedy, the narrator assumes the role of all-enduring and romantic lover, a melancholy Werther, ready to sacrifice himself for the good of his beloved (2006: 124)

Hence, upon learning that she has cancer, the narrator leaves Louise in the hands of her husband on the condition that, as an oncologist, he will provide the best possible care for her. Nevertheless, this agreement between lover and ex-husband, seemingly made on Louise’s behalf though in fact made against her will, renders her the object of a culturally encoded masculine behaviour for it serves ultimately to deny her agency and power of decision. Thus, despite the concern the narrator feels for Louise’s health, s/he fails to respect Louise’s wish to remain with her/him. Even when Louise tells the narrator: “I don’t trust Elgin, I’m having a second opinion” (*Written* 103), the narrator prefers to believe the ex-husband’s medical jargon and discourses on disease than

her/his beloved's intuition about her own physical condition. As Onega points out: "The assumption of these [patriarchal] roles by husband and lover forces Louise into the role of sickly and inert damsel awaiting the prince charming who will 'win' her hand" (Onega 2006: 124). Therefore, instead of taking Louise's wishes into account, the narrator only recognizes her/his own perception of the right thing to do, thus betraying the equalitarian assumptions and mutual respect on which their love was initially founded.

The narrator's farewell letter to Louise is a string of romantic platitudes in the best Barbara Cartland style: "I love you more than myself. [...] I did not know this much happiness was possible. [...] You are safe in my home but not in my arms. Our love was not meant to cost you your life. [...] You have given me everything already. Please go with Elgin. He has promised to tell me how you are [...]" (*Written* 105-106). The letter demonstrates not only that the narrator denies any kind of agency to her/his lover by turning her into the dependent patient of her ex-husband, but also that the conventional language of romance is a poor instrument for capturing the complexities of love and desire. In this way, Winterson's critique is pertinent to the generic clichés of both the heterosexual and the lesbian romance genres; this idea is repeatedly stated throughout the novel: "It's the clichés that cause the trouble" (*Written* 10 and *passim*).

The decision to leave Louise to Elgin's medical care turns the narrator into a spiritual nomad. As her/his life falls apart, the narrator gives up her/his work as a translator of Russian and starts an obsessive search through the medical books of the library. Interrupting the realistic lines along which the novel has been constructed up to this point, the second part of the book finds the narrator writing a sort of scientific treatise on the cells, tissues and cavities of the body. This exploration of the body

becomes an ideally complex form of inwardness: a way of being both passive and active, present and absent in her/his own and in Louise's life.

2.2 “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there” (Written 89)

Although in her/his past relationships the nameless narrator has avoided full attachment and commitment, now s/he aims for a complete immersion in all aspects of her/his lover's being. This desire is fulfilled in the central section of the book, entitled: “*The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body*” (Written 113), in which, through the use of the language of medical text books the narrator attempts to somehow recover the body of the beloved. Gemma López emphasizes the lyrical aspect of this part of the book and argues that: “[...] Far from a lament over the imprint of bodily decay, the mood of these interludes is poetic, even celebratory, of a body which, although diseased, is still desired, and still retains “a secret code” written on it” (2007: 153). By ‘writing’ her/his lover's body the narrator seeks to transform Louise's physical absence into a narrative presence, and thereby restore her body's vitality through the clinical language of anatomy: “FOR DESCRIPTIVE PURPOSES THE HUMAN BODY IS SEPARATED INTO CAVITIES. THE CRANIAL CAVITY CONTAINS THE BRAIN. ITS BOUNDARIES ARE FORMED BY THE BONES OF THE SKULL” (Written 119, all caps in original). Nevertheless, despite her/his desire to “penetrate” (Written 119) the lover's body, the paradox resides in the fact that, in this clinical recreation of Louise's body, the narrator uses the anatomic language of Western medicine to split the body into separate parts, thus apparently forgetting not only that cancer is an illness that, in its expansion, affects the entire system, but that s/he has literally abandoned her sick lover

to Western medical care.¹⁹ However, it is precisely through the power of its poetic language to evoke the lover's body in all its sensuous details that Winterson defamiliarizes and subverts the performative language of medical discourse. For example, the section entitled "*The Skin*" begins with the anatomical epigraph: "THE SKIN IS COMPOSED OF TWO MAIN PARTS: THE DERMIS AND THE EPIDERMIS" (*Written* 123). The nameless narrator then says: "Your skin tastes salty and slightly citrus. When I run my tongue in a long wet line across your breasts I can feel the tiny hairs, the puckering of the aureole, the cone of your nipple. Your breasts are beehives pouring honey" (*Written* 123). Moreover, in employing the jargon of political warfare to describe the effects of illness on Louise, the narrator contrives a counter-discourse that takes the idea of disease as a metaphor for the evils of our times and turns it on its head. As Susan Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), illness has often been used as an analogy to describe political or historical conflicts:

Modern totalitarian movements, whether of the right or the left, have been peculiarly - and revealingly - inclined to use diseased imagery. [...] And the cancer metaphor is ... invariably an encouragement to simplify what is complex and an invitation to self-righteousness, if not to fanaticism. (Sontag 1977: 82-83/85)²⁰

Inverting this idea, the nameless narrator describes the malignant growth of the

19 I emphasize the word "apparently" because by the end of the novel the narrator reflects on the Western medical vision of the body in these terms: "In doctor- think the body is a series of bits to be isolated and treated as necessary, that the body in its very disease may act as a hole is an upsetting concept. Holistic medicine is for faith healers and crackpots, isn't it?" (*Written* 175)

20 Sontag, further writes that: "The Nazis declared that someone of mixed "racial" origin was like a syphilitic. European Jewry was repeatedly analogized to syphilis, and to cancer that must be excised."(Sontag 1977: 82)

cancerous cells as a kind of violent political insurrection within Louise's body in which the "white T-cells have turned bandits [...] overturning the quiet order [...] it used to be their job to keep her body safe from enemies on the outside. [...] now they are enemies on the inside. The security forces have rebelled. Louise is a victim of a coup" (*Written* 115). In this way, by using metaphors of political upheaval to describe Louise's affliction, Winterson deliberately modifies the ways in which disease is used as a metaphor for the ills of a society.

In the interior monologue of the narrator's 'love-poem' there is an imperious desire to share in Louise's suffering, to better understand what the beloved is feeling in order to fulfil her/his dream of total union.²¹ However, the more s/he tries to rationalize the drama in which they are immersed, the more it feels as if the whole ordeal is too high a price to pay for the love and happiness they once enjoyed. Besieged by the anxiety of her/his passion and the pain of loss, the narrator speaks as if possessed by a terrible foreboding that Louise is already dead: "Your sepulchral body, offered to me in the past tense, protects your soft centre from the intrusions of the outside world. I am one such intrusion, stroking you with necrophiliac obsession, loving the shell laid out before me" (*Written* 123). Nevertheless, s/he immediately liberates the lover from that fatal vision by invoking a magnificent image: "You are a knight in shining armour. Rescue me" (*Written* 123). In this parable that leads us from the subject of love to the subject of death, Winterson illustrates the complex tension between the desire for the other and the objectification of the other in a discreet assemblage of bodily parts which expresses a different libidinal economy, an objectification that will allow one to become

21 In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes defines 'to understand' as: "Suddenly perceiving the amorous episode as a knot of inexplicable reasons and impaired solutions, the subject exclaims: 'I want to understand (what is happening to me)!'" (Barthes 1979: 59)

more intimately bound up with the object of love: “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” (*Written* 111).²²

This obsessive journey through the interior of the beloved’s body has become the source of the frequent comparison between *Written on the Body* and Monique Wittig’s novel *Le corps lesbien* (1975), a narrative also written in a fragmented, juxtapositional style that, in a lesbianization of myths and metaphors (portraying female Ulysses and Christ figures), seeks the deconstruction of a compulsory androcentric culture, and in which the characters violently tear each other to pieces. This dismembering is performed with the same passionate precision and powerful eroticism that Winterson deploys in her voyage to physical and emotional intimacy.²³

2.3 “*Love is worth it*” (*Written* 156)

In a circular structure that brings to mind previous Winterson protagonists like the Jeanette of *Oranges* or the Henri of *The Passion*, the last part of the novel provides a retrospective-autobiographical account of the nameless narrator’s life after the separation from Louise. In a metafictional game that mirrors the ones used by Jeanette and Henri, the nameless narrator warns the reader of the fact that: “Now here am I

22 “By positing the libidinal as an ‘economy’, Jean-François Lyotard reads desire as a material rather than simply psychic, process. He is less concerned with what desire ‘is’ than in how it functions. He sees desire as the energy of society, but an unstable energy, unpredictably connecting the psychological to the economical in a type of feeling and desire Lyotard calls an ‘intensity’. **Narrative**, broadly defined as a poem or an advertisement, binds these moments of intensities into an apparently coherent pattern in order to exploit the power residing there. (in Eds. J. Wolfreys, R. Robbins, K. Womack. *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*. 2002:50-51)

23 Other critics who have established this comparison between *Written on the Body* and *Le Corps Lesbien* are: Gemma López, Susana Onega, and Merja Makinen. (See Works Cited)

making up my own memories of good times” (*Written* 161), thus highlighting once again the slender boundary that separates fact from fiction.

Having fled London, the narrator lives in an isolated and forsaken cottage in the Yorkshire countryside (a scene which brings to mind, as in *Oranges*, the heroine of *Jane Eyre* when she flees Thornfield Hall after discovering the existence of Bertha Mason) where s/he tries to find answers to the distressing questions that trouble her/his mind: “Had I been true to her?” (*Written* 161). This question gives her/him second thoughts about leaving Louise to Elgin’s care: “‘You made a mistake,’ said the voice. The voice wasn’t a piping sly voice now it was a strong gentle voice and I heard it quite clearly more and more” (*Written* 153). This self-questioning brings the narrator to the gradual realization of the ways in which s/he has failed Louise by abandoning her against her will. From this point on, the narrator begins to think differently about her/his beloved: “To think of Louise in her own right, not as my lover, not as my grief. It helped me to forget myself and that was a great blessing” (*Written* 153). Here is proof of the distance s/he has travelled in her quest for an understanding of the true meaning of love.

During a conversation with her/his new employer, the aptly named Gail Right, the nameless narrator sees her/his worse doubts confirmed by the woman’s harsh judgement: “‘You made a mistake.’ [...] ‘You shouldn’t have run out on her.’ [...] ‘She wasn’t a child.’ [...] ‘you didn’t give her a chance to say what she wanted. You left’” (*Written* 158-159). In this way, Gail Right plays the same decisive role of wise counsellor that Jeanette’s ‘orange demon’ plays in *Oranges*: “ ‘The trouble with you’ [continues Gail Right] ‘is that you want to live in a novel’ [...] ‘This isn’t War and Peace honey, it’s Yorkshire’ [...] ‘You don’t run out on the woman you love. Especially you don’t when you think it’s for her own good’” (*Written* 160). With uncanny accuracy

the middle-aged tavern keeper ends her insightful observations by adding: “You’d better go and find her” (*Written* 160). This gesture is all the more compelling if one bears in mind that Gail is also in love with the nameless narrator.

Accepting Gail’s advice, the narrator goes back to London in search of Louise. Once back to her/his apartment, s/he feels possessed by disturbing thoughts: “I was strangely elated to be in my home. Why are human beings so contradictory?” (*Written* 163), s/he wonders when entering what s/he calls: “the site of sorrow and separation” (*Written* 163). However, upon detecting the sun coming through the windows and the garden in bloom, s/he also reflects: “We had been happy here too and some of that happiness had soaked the walls and patterned the furniture” (*Written* 163). The memory of their everyday happiness, the enjoyed pleasure at the expense of so much pain, fills the narrator’s mind with a poignant, apprehensive fear for Louise’s well-being.

After discovering that Elgin has a new relationship with another woman and that he has lost complete track of Louise’s whereabouts, the narrator sets off on a frantic search for the beloved that increases her/his feeling of loneliness, burden and self-fragmentation, and which finds expression in a series of sombre dreams about Louise’s fate: “In the night, the blackest part of the night [...], I woke up convinced that Louise had gone away alone to die. My hands shook” (*Written* 174). This mental anguish echoes Roland Barthes definition of *Agony* in which: “The amorous subject, according to one contingency or another, feels swept away by the fear of danger, an injury, an abandonment, a revulsion - a sentiment he expresses under the name of *anxiety*” (*A Lover’s Discourse* 1978:29). Nevertheless, the narrator fights against this anguish: “My equilibrium, [...] depended on her happiness. I had to have that story” (*Written* 174),

s/he decides. Once again Winterson insists on the transforming power of language and stories in the process of welding the fragmented self and soothing the qualms of the inner life. Hereafter, the narrator envisions a more optimistic scenario by creating the dream of a new existence for Louise: “I built different houses for her, planted out her gardens. She was in the sun abroad. She was in Italy eating mussels by the sea. She had a white villa that reflected in the lake. She wasn’t sick and deserted in some rented room with curtains. Louise was well” (*Written* 174).

The ethical dimension of love that the nameless narrator finally discovers also has a spiritual quality that is suggested by her/his remarks on the image of the pilgrim, a figure that symbolizes both the pains and pleasures of the love experience. Thus, if early in the novel the narrator describes the Edward Burne-Jones print of *Love and the Pilgrim* that hangs in the bedroom where s/he and Louise have just made love, and comments: “An angel in clean garments leads by the hand a traveller footsore and weary. The traveller is in black and her cloak is still caught by the dense thicket of thorns from which they have both emerged. Would Louise lead me so?” (*Written* 54), at the end of the book the narrator again invokes the image of the pilgrim while referring to the beloved: “Louise, stars in your eyes, my own constellation. I was following you faithfully but I looked down. [...] I should have trusted you but I lost my nerve” (*Written* 187). In his fall from the heavenly presence of love the pilgrim-narrator struggles to recover the physical reality of the idealized love which has brought about as much happiness as despair.

In this complex mixture of ecstasy and abjection that forms the very nucleus of love, Winterson’s narrative explores the psychological effects of melancholy on the experience of loss. Thus, in the trip back to Yorkshire, after giving up her/his frenzied

search for Louise, the narrator feels possessed by a sinister spirit of self-destruction which impels her/him to contemplate suicide: “This is an emergency but I can’t lift my arm high enough to smash my way out” (*Written* 184). However, the narrator resists this fatal lure by reminding her/him self: “That was yesterday, this is today. I want to accept what I have done and let go. I can’t let go because Louise might still be on the other end of the rope” (*Written* 184). This 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 whom 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.’ (in Butler 2006: 78)

In her absence Louise is made present by means of a delicate assemblage of anguish, evocation, and desire through which the narrator, seeking the unification of body and soul, attempts to become one with the beloved.

At the end of the novel, the narrator appears to have successfully gained a better understanding of the true nature of love: “What then kills love? Only this: Neglect. Not to see you when you stand before me. Not to think of you in the little things. [...] To choose you out of habit not desire, to pass the flower seller without a thought. [...] To say your name without hearing it, to assume it is mine to call” (*Written* 186-187). Together with this realization of the true value of love, the narrator also confronts her/his own intimate reality: “What were my heroics and sacrifices about?” (*Written*

187), s/he wonders in a stern act of self-criticism which reveals the narrator's new clarity of vision: now s/he is less egocentric, more modest, and more willing to appreciate the transcendence of what s/he has learned through Louise. Now s/he does not need to possess Louise as before: "There's freedom. We can be kites and hold each other's string. No need to worry the wind will be too strong" (*Written* 181). This metaphor symbolizes a new openness in the narrator's negotiation of her/his abiding passion. In this redefining of the meaning of love, there is both anguish and serenity, despair and consolation, but above all there is a sense of liberation; this is the fully inexhaustible freedom that comes from meeting the Other on equal terms.

In a poetic slide into pathos, the novel's end flickers between the supernatural and the real, the complete and the incomplete, in an ambiguous ending that seeks to deconstruct the delusional aspects of the discourse of romance. In a flimsy mirror game between the real and the fantastic, the narrator opens the door of the cottage to find the material evidence of Louise's presence: "From the kitchen door Louise's face. Paler, thinner, but her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood. [...] Am I stark mad?" (*Written* 190). This rhetorical question brings to mind Catherine Belsey's definition of desire as a: "kind of madness, an enchantment, exaltation, anguish... perhaps the foundation of a lifetime happiness... [...] above all, a project that defies completion" (*Desire* 1994: 3).

Louise's materialization unleashes a formidable eruption of the blood and guts of the hearth: "The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. [...] I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world" (*Written* 190). This fantastic scene provides a dual metaphor of destruction and creation that grants new life to the lovers

while symbolizing a deeper understanding of the exact 'measure of love'.

The open-endedness of the novel clearly emphasizes the importance of the quest in itself rather than the certainty of its completion; the inapprehensible nature of desire rather than the promise of its fulfilment: "This is where the story starts. [...] Hurry now, it's getting late. I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields" (*Written* 190). Whether or not the lovers' extraordinary reunion has really taken place seems ultimately irrelevant. What matters, rather, is the transformative power of a journey that turns the lovers into equals and makes the relationship truly reciprocal, thus subverting the 'clichés' of romantic love, mollifying their trouble.

CONCLUSIONS: “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” *

Facts are partial. Fiction is a more complete truth.

- Jeanette Winterson (2005: 20) ²⁴

Jeanette Winterson’s richly inventive body of work covers a wide range of interests, and one of the recurring themes she deals with is the power of language - and more precisely that of stories - to shape desire, to articulate love, to transform the self, and even to shelter against the pain of loss.

The search for the self, expressed as a personal quest, and the desire to trespass the rigidly fixed boundaries between fact and fiction, together with the ways in which myth lends itself to hi/story are characteristic of Winterson’s narrative art. One of the imperatives of her literature is the need to keep matters open - reserving a place for the enigmatic, the enchanted, the bizarre, the unexpected in order to create a space in which to explore alternative ways of imagining the self. In this metanarrative exploration not only is the line between autobiography and fiction slippery, but also that between history and story. Although the self-conscious, ‘mirror-text’ aspects of Winterson’s prose fiction can be traced throughout the body of her work, it is in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and in *Written on the Body* where the boundaries between fact and fiction or biography and story prove to be especially elusive; perhaps because a first-person narrative casts a certain spell on the reader who, unconsciously, establishes parallels

* Winterson, Jeanette. *The Passion*, 1987: 5

²⁴ Winterson, Jeanette. “Endless possibilities”. Appendix essay to *Lighthousekeeping*. London: Haperperennial, 2005 pp18-23.

between the narrator and the writer. In other words, the very directness of the first-person narrative “sets up an intimacy which is and isn’t true” (Winterson in Reynolds 2003:14). However, as Winterson herself writes: “Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important. The writer must fire herself through the text, be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements. I believe there is always exposure, vulnerability, in the writing process, which is not to say it is either confessional or memoir. Simply, it is real.” (*Weight* 2005: xv). Here again Winterson highlights the impossibility of separating fact from fiction, history from story, even reality from fantasy; moreover, she demonstrates that the fragmentary nature of human experience, the chaotic messiness of it all, is vital to the depiction of subjectivity in narrative.

Both *Oranges* and *Written* are concerned with the mutable nature of reality and the metamorphosis of the subject. Through the initially unexpected shift from the realistic narrative to the fantastic mode Winterson transgresses the ambiguous boundaries of genre categorization as discursively constructed. In the case of *Oranges* this transgression is effected through the constant inset of distinctive biblical, mythical and fairytale elements in the otherwise realist narrative. In *Written*, on the other hand, what at first appears to be a straightforward love story ends up becoming a pastiche of narrative styles that ridicules the platitudes of romance as tear-jerker. Moreover, when the narrator’s lover falls ill, the anatomical description of the body is rendered in such poetic language that the pragmatism of scientific discourse is totally undermined. This is yet another instance of Winterson’s aim at deconstructing ‘grand narratives’.

By viewing the main characters of these two novels as “narrators-in-process”, both *Oranges* and *Written* can be interpreted as metafictional explorations of the construction of identity, an argument somehow reinforced by the confessional tone of

the texts that, nevertheless, is constantly undermined by the mixture of fantasy and reality in a clear subversion of the realist-confessional genre. As Winterson points out: “If we read ourselves as narrative, we can change the story that we are. If we read ourselves as literal and fixed, we find we can change nothing.”²⁵ In this way, both narratives bring to light the endless possibilities of storytelling in the exploration of the self; if in *Oranges* we find fairytale, Arthurian legend and mythical and biblical imagery to describe the personal quest for self-discovery of Jeanette, in *Written* we find the influence of sixteenth-century poetic imagery, together with Modernist and feminist lesbian literature as intertextual elements to describe the quest for self-construction of a nameless narrator immersed in a sensual melodrama with faintly Gothic echoes. Moreover, if in *Oranges* we find a mystical lexicon that subverts binaries of religious and patriarchal ideology, in *Written* it is a scientific lexicon that subverts the constructed binary oppositions between the material and the metaphysical, the rational and the irrational, the sexual and the spiritual in a bold attempt to challenge stereotypes and disrupt hegemonic discourses on gender identity.

The fictional and theoretical discursive domain of Winterson’s work fluctuates between the experimentalism of the Modernist aesthetic tradition and the postmodern criterion in its proclivity to parody, intertextuality, pastiche, self-reflectivity and fragmentation that ultimately defies conventional and oppressive definitions of subject identity, gender identification and sexual subjectivity.²⁶ In this way, most of Winterson’s work is devoted to the exploration of the self in all its multiple and contradictory

25 Winterson, Jeanette. “Endless possibilities”. Appendix essay to *Lighthousekeeping*. London: Harperperennial, 2005. pp18-23.

26 See: Lodge, David. *Modern Criticism and Theory : A Reader*. London and New York: Longman, 1988. pp. 373-382.

manifestations. Her characters are a subtle combination of heroic, delicate, insolent, seductive, ingenious, melancholic, and fervent adventurers who prefer the pleasure of the pursuit to the achievement of the reward, and who believe that “only the impossible is worth the effort” (*The PowerBook* 2001:222).

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit and *Written on the Body* are but two instances of Winterson’s refined, complex and self-conscious literary art. However, this paper does little more than scratch the surface of a larger academic project in which further research might be carried out on this fascinating field. For obvious reasons of space, the present study is nothing more than a tiny stone which might become the first in building a solid structure of research on Jeanette Winterson’s oeuvre and her poetic meditation on the Self.

Viewed in retrospect, the evolution of Winterson’s work now seems logical in its exhaustive exploration of the self as the locus of all possibilities. Hers is a narrative in which the articulation of desire and the pursuit of self-knowledge are the highest goals, an art that warns the reader that it is only by becoming fully conscious of one’s inner complexities that one may be free. Her prolific writing has produced a large and mutating body of work that leaves doors open to further and more extensive research; for within its extraordinary variety of themes, Winterson’s narrative art has finally one great subject: the relationship between reading and writing in the creation of the limitless self.

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