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GENDER, SEXUALITY AND TEXTUALITY

in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a reading of Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body*. There are three major areas regarding to which the text is analysed: the textual ambiguity of the rhetorical voice, the linguistic characteristics of the work and the reliability of its narrator. The first chapter discusses the theoretical framework used in reference to the novel. The main theory applied into the subject of sexual ambiguity is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Since the novel deals with a narrator of unspecified gender, the second chapter examines the ambiguous gendered identity of the narrative persona. The third chapter discusses the extraordinary linguistic characteristics of the novel and analyses how the narrator in the novel can remain of sexually unidentifiable nature. As there is a great deal of ambiguity, which makes the reader question the credibility of the narrative voice, the issue of reliability is discussed in the fourth chapter of the essay.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* is a romance story about a non-gendered narrator who falls in love with a married woman called Louise. The aim of this essay is to examine the relationship between sex, gender, sexuality and narrative in the novel. I would also like to analyse the ambiguous gendered identity of the narrative voice in the novel and the textual clues readers use to determine his or her gender identity.

In *Written on the Body* Winterson has created a narrative where every reference to the gender of the narrator is carefully omitted and the clues to whether the main character is a man or a woman gainsay each other. Not even a close analysis of the text can establish referential security as to the narrator's biological sex, only assumptions. For this reason, I would like to argue that this deliberate play on gender ambiguity not only places the reader in a situation where he or she is induced to deconstruct preconceptions about gender, but that by refusing to reveal the gender of the narrator as well as constructing a narrator who is bisexual, Winterson undermines and challenges the very notion of gender and sexuality as the foundation of identity. In this sense, I would argue that Winterson's narrator can be read as a realisation of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.¹ Following Butler, the narrator's identity is not established upon a particular construct of gender; he/she is not labelled as woman or man because of particular gendered traits, but evades labels and is judged upon other aspects. By choosing to be different, he or she prefers to obliterate the distinctions of sex, and instead be regarded as an individual human being, with his/her individual identity.

As the novel clearly includes homosexual references, the text's construction of sexual object choice as liberated from gender constraints can be seen as an affirmation of bisexuality. In "Queering Narratology", Susan S. Lanser notes that "*Written on the Body*, whatever the sex of its narrator, is a queer novel with a queer plot".² In this sense, the term queer can be used to designate "another discursive horizon, another way of thinking about the sexual"³ whose main

¹ Butler, Judith P. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990)

² Lanser, Susan S. "Queering Narratology". Ed Kathy Mezey, *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology & British Women Writers* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 255.

³ de Lauretis, Teresa. "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An introduction" (differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, Vol 3, No 2, 1991) iv.

objective is to “stir up rather than solidify sexual and textual differences”⁴. It could, in fact, be argued that queer is the most fitting term for the novel as it both transgresses and transcends the established norms of sex, gender and sexuality by including alternative sexualities such as bisexuality, androgyny, homosexuality and transsexuality. By deconstructing gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity, as well as finding an alternative way of thinking about sexuality, Winterson not only manages to successfully challenge the reader’s perceptions about sexuality and gender, but expands the conception of identity to include difference as well.

⁴ Farwell, Marilyn R. *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) 12.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Written on the Body is a unique text, from narratological point of view, since it deals with an unnamed first-person narrator whose sex is variable. This highly original device allows Winterson to defy the assumptions about traditional literary realism. In her article “Queering Narratology”, Susan S. Lanser states that studies of sex and gender together with sexuality have been marginalized in the sphere of narratological analysis, and argues for their inclusion as “important, intersecting elements of narrative poetics”.⁵ Winterson’s novel, however, with its narrator’s ambiguous gendered identity, induces the subject of sex, gender and sexuality as an inevitable issue into the domain of narratology.

The distinction between sex and gender is an issue that has been under continual dispute. During the 1970s, however, the traditional view of male and female identity as polarized binary system was re-evaluated as feminists began to distinguish between anatomical or sex-based male and female differences and the gendered, socially established meanings attributed to these biological categories. These feminist theorists asserted that masculinity and femininity are socially invented, constructed categories which have particular meanings that vary across different cultures and different time periods. Also Susan S. Lanser uses the term gender, a definition that I will use in my future reference to gender, as a means of identifying “a male or female identity by drawing on cultural codes that conventionally signify masculinity or femininity”⁶.

Gender is an important element of our identity, but since gender has a constructed status which is fashioned through culture, also according to Lanser’s definition, the difference between masculinity and femininity is not founded on nature. This conventional view, however, is challenged by Judith Butler, who insists on a new way of looking at sex and gender. According to her, gender should be regarded as a flexible and fluid variable, rather than a fixed binary system constituted by male and female opposites. Butler maintains that “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”⁷ By this she means that gender is not a central part of people’s identity, but a performance that varies according to different times and different situations. It is, in other words, what a person does on certain

⁵ Lanser (1996) 250.

⁶ Lanser (1996) 252.

⁷ Butler (1990) 25.

occasions rather than who he or she essentially is. This innovative approach, where identity is seen as free-floating and regulating, allows a person to shape and construct his or her own individual identity.⁸

Butler deals also with the problematical relationship between sex, gender and desire. According to traditional, Freudian or psychoanalytical, theory, our gender is a product of our sex, which in turn influences our desire for the opposite sex. This highly simplistic outlook on sexuality creates only two possible connections where one can identify with a particular sex and feel attracted towards the opposite. Butler's ambition, however, is to dismantle this rigid link between sex, gender and desire so that people can be regarded as individual human beings rather than representatives of their sex.⁹

⁸ Butler (1990)

⁹ Butler (1990)

3. TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY

Reading a text normally gives rise to expectations in the reader's mind. For the most part these expectations are fulfilled; however that is not always the case. *Written on the Body* is an example of what Wolfgang Iser would call a 'literary' text, in which the reader's expectations are unfulfilled or frustrated. This is a kind of text that contains omissions in its coherence and exposes the reader to an array of choices in finding a specific meaning which would fill in the gaps.¹⁰ Reading Winterson's text involves constructing a remarkable amount of information about its narrator since throughout the entire novel there are no gender references provided about its first-person narrator.

The lack of information about the narrator's sex opens up the question about the connection readers create between the narrator and the implied author of the text. A reader unfamiliar with Winterson or her previous work would probably assume that *Written on the Body* is a text about a male heterosexual individual since it features a non-gendered narrator who falls in love with a married woman. However, for a reader more familiar with Winterson and her texts, especially her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, expectations would be slightly different. Aware of Winterson's sexuality, and having read *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* as an autobiographical text of a young lesbian woman, this reader will not take heterosexuality for granted. Instead, he or she will be tempted to presume that since the author is female and lesbian then the narrator must be female and lesbian.

Nevertheless, all these assumptions about whether or not the main character in *Written on the Body* is a male heterosexual or a female homosexual are put into question when a former boyfriend is suddenly introduced, about halfway through the novel, and the reader is faced with the undeniable fact that the narrator is bisexual. In this sense, I think, the narrative raises the issue about the associations between sex, gender and sexuality which force the reader to frequently examine his or her assumptions.

Even though the narrator's sex is never revealed in *Written on the Body* the reader still tries to search for gender markers through which to establish his or her sex and in some way secure the text. In her article "The Genderization of Narrative" Monika Fludernik states that there are two ways of constructing biological sex in narrative texts; in explicit or implicit manner:

¹⁰ Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

explicitly by graphic physical description and masculine/feminine gender (pro)nominal expressions (he vs. she; gendered first nouns); implicitly by the paraphernalia of our heavily gendered culture (handsome vs. beautiful; shirt vs. blouse) and by the heterosexual default structure (if A loves B, and A is a man, then B must be a woman).¹¹

Although there are no explicit gender markers in *Written on the Body* implicit gender markers emerge regularly throughout the novel. So, what is it that makes a reader presume that the narrator in *Written on the Body* is of a certain gender since throughout the entire text there is no explicitly marked gender? “I shall call myself Alice and play croquet with the flamingos. In Wonderland everyone cheats and love is Wonderland isn’t it?”¹² A spontaneous assumption after this quotation, where the very first potential gender marker in the text is provided, would be that the narrator is a female since he/she chooses to refer to him/herself as Alice in Wonderland. However, shortly after this instant, the reader is immediately forced to re-evaluate his/her rush conclusion when there is a mention of the intimate words “I love you” carelessly given away by the narrator “as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better” (11). Hence forward the continuous references to previous love affairs with women lead the reader to the inevitable belief that the narrator is a male. This is a rather natural assumption deriving from our heteronormativity, which predisposes the majority of readers to the foregone conclusion that an unmarked sexuality is the natural mark of heterosexuality.

Winterson quite deliberately teases the reader by alternately pointing him or her in different directions. Every now and then she suggests that the narrator is male; for example, when the narrator and Elgin start a fight over Louise, the narrator hits Elgin and Elgin kicks the narrator in the stomach (170-72). Had the narrator been a female it seems likely that the fight would have not been as serious since Elgin probably would have avoided hitting a woman. Another example is when the narrator’s beloved, Louise, calls him/her ‘Christopher Robin’ (61) or when the narrator repeatedly identifies with the renowned womanizer, the ‘Lothario’ (e.g. 20).

Yet, such masculine associations are counteracted by the implicit use of more feminine terminology, as when the narrator says, “I’m not beautiful” (85), rather than “I’m not handsome” or when he/she compares him/herself to a “convent virgin” (94) or a “schoolgirl”

¹¹ Fludernik, Monika. “The Genderization of Narrative” (Graat, 21, 1999) 154.

¹² Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the body* (London: Vintage, 2001) 10. Further reference will be in the text.

(82). Another good example of implicit female marker in the text is when the narrator compares him/herself to 'Lauren Bacall' in the movie with Humphrey Bogart (41).

Even the clues we are provided with concerning the narrator's clothes are inconclusive. Given the time period that we live in, men and women of today are almost impossible to tell apart by the way they dress. Therefore, the numerous references to shorts, t-shirts, shirts and business suits offered in the novel do not provide a compelling clue to the narrator's gender. Neither does an episode in the novel where the narrator looks into a mirror, confirming his/her internal thoughts and feelings, but evading comments on his/her physical appearance: "When I look in the mirror it's not my own face I see. Your body is twice. Once you once me. Can I be sure which is which?" (99). Likewise, references to the gender of the narrator are rendered deficient in the discourses with the other characters as well as in the sex scenes depicted in the text.

Furthermore, there are episodes in the narrative where the author plays with the gender symbols in a more distinct fashion, as when Louise tells the narrator about the very first time she saw her/him: "When I saw you two years ago I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen" (84). Or when the narrator lists the clichéd expressions related with love: "Still waiting for Mr Right? Miss Right? and maybe all the little Rights?" (10). The use of the phrases "male or female" and "Mr Right? Miss Right?" is an expedient deliberately exploited by Winterson in order to emphasise the fact that the reader has to deal with a narrator whose gender is unspecified. Indeed, in this way she manages to keep attention on the issue of gender throughout the entire novel.

There is an undeniable discord created by the ambiguous gender markers in Winterson's novel, as the text does not allow easy conclusions about its narrator's identity. As I have pointed out above, whenever the reader feels tempted to make assumptions about the narrator's sex, he or she is immediately forced to take a closer look at the heart of those assumptions. The reader is forced to reflect on the gender stereotypes he or she carries within in order to determine what is male or female.

As a matter of fact, I would argue that the narrator's gender really does not matter since the novel wants to move beyond that difference. For many people gender is the foremost important thing they have to know about someone, and they cannot imagine a world where it is not. Nevertheless, this is exactly what Winterson asks the reader to do. Winterson herself states that it does not matter which sex the narrator is, because "the gender of the character is

both, throughout the book, and changes; sometimes it's female, sometimes it's male".¹³ It seems as though, through the text, she wants to show the reader how insignificant the aspect of gender really is in the actual context of love, trying to emphasize on the quality of love instead. In this sense, I believe, *Written on the Body* is an endeavour to dispose of distinctions of gender and to contemplate on the nature of love separated from its sexual characteristics, be they hetero- or homosexual.

The issue that the narrator finds most problematic is the stereotypes associated with sexuality and the strictly defined gender roles in society. I believe that Winterson intentionally disregards the social status of categories such as gender and sexuality in order to expose the stereotypes associated with them. The narrator, refusing to renounce parts of himself/herself, resolves to eradicate the sex differences and pursue a self that is very intricate and diverse.

The fluidity of gender reveals that Winterson has tried to create an alternative way of constructing identity, where masculinity and femininity are not designed in an either/or relationship. Instead, the categories of gender are constructed in a more open and less restricted and rigid manner, allowing for substantial slippage between the two realms. The narrator, with his/her identity of fluid interweaving of masculine and feminine traits is, thus, a new kind of individual who refutes the binary understanding of gender. Through this subversive construction of different gender possibilities, Winterson undermines gender norms and the binary restriction on the relation between the sexes.

The refusal to designate the gender of the narrator emphasises the idea of sexuality as another crucial aspect of the novel. While the gender clues provided by the narrative are rendered pointless, the reader is compelled to use the narrator's sexual preference as a source from which to conjecture information regarding his/her gendered identity. However, as demonstrated earlier, such an enterprise proves useless since the narrator is a person who is involved in relationships with both men and women and can therefore be defined as bisexual.

Through describing the narrator as bisexual, the text disrupts traditional ways of thinking about sexuality. Sexuality is no longer constituted in terms of man or woman and heterosexual or homosexual, instead it is constructed as true diversity; the uniting of distinctive bodies possessing distinctive desires. To link desire with any particular gender and sexual orientation inhibits the human experience and emasculates the ability of the human mind to transcend physical boundaries. *Written on the Body* can, thus, be viewed as an attempt to emancipate desire, dislodging it from the mandatory binary system of gender and

¹³ <http://www.csulb.edu/~bhfinney/Winterson.html>

sexuality. Through this intricate play on gender and sexuality, the text does not only serve to deconstruct categorisations according to gender and sexuality, but is challenging the very notion of gender and sexuality as the basis of identity.

4. LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

Written on the Body is a novel about love, and the way that love is experienced. However, one problem associated with describing love is that the whole theme has been used so extensively and repeatedly that it is virtually impossible to create something novel about the phenomenon. This is also a problem that Winterson draws frequent attention to in the novel, as the narrator repeatedly comments “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble” (e. g. 10), to show how much people, when in love, find themselves falling victims to the clichés associated with love and that the words they most long to hear are also the most common ones – ‘I love you’.

Already in the beginning of her narrative Winterson makes an extensive list of the clichéd expressions associated with love and love relationships:

“Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love. Nobody ever died of a broken heart. You’ll get over it. It’ll be different when we’re married. Think of the children. Time’s a great healer. Still waiting for Mr Right? Miss Right? and may be all the little Rights?”
(10)

The whole narrative is permeated with sarcasm connected with such clichés of love. This becomes evident in the way the narrator describes them as safe and comforting like a “saggy armchair” where “millions of bottoms have sat here before me” with springs “well worn” and “fabric smelly and familiar” (10).

The narrator, who realizes that the false comfort of the clichés will eventually lead him/her to unhappiness, does not want to live “in their world” of “good manners and good sense” (71). “To choose sensibly” for him/her “is to set a time-bomb under yourself” (71) since “The logical paths the proper steps led nowhere.” (92). He/she does not wish to “Settle down” (71) and live “happily ever after” (10). “The diluted version, the sloppy language and the insignificant gestures” (10) of the clichés are second-rate and demeaning him/her, who, instead, wants to go beyond boundaries with his/her love. They are poor and insufficient when it comes to describing the narrator’s true emotions, seeing as all they do is reduce and label: “She’s a nice girl, he’s a nice boy” (71). Instead, the narrator wants to be able to articulate his/her feelings in a very personal and unique way, convinced that “A precise emotion seeks a precise expression.” (10). Clichés are imprecise as they have been exploited by numerous previous love affairs.

I would, in fact, argue that the text itself transcends boundaries, so that its form mirrors its theme. Stylistically the novel successfully employs an unusual combination of humour and irony, lyricism, and clinical, anatomical language. After the narrator finds out about Louise's severe illness and decides to abandon her in order to save her life, he/she turns to the language of anatomy for a way to achieve a greater level of intimacy with her. Therefore, in the central section of the novel about The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body, the use of medical terminology is very intense. The clinical language, where the narrator describes the beloved's body in precise anatomical detail, lacks any emotion and is a stark contrast to the narrator's emotional descriptions of intense longing for the lover. Nevertheless, even with the lack of emotion in the medical terminology, the previous experiences and sensations are rekindled. This is accomplished through the addition of personal embellishing images such as, "I know how your hair tumbles from its chignon and washes your shoulders in light." (120). In particular, the contrast between the preciseness of the technical language and that of desire is accentuated by the lack of satire previously found in the narrative. This becomes evident in the elaborate use of lyrical prose rich in metaphors and similes, "The sun is in your mouth. The burst of an olive is breaking of a bright sky." (137).

In this particular section the narrator has created a brand new, distinctive style of writing in the attempt to write about love in an innovative and unique way. This desire to be unique and original is explicitly articulated in the passage: "I don't want a model, I want a full scale original, I don't want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new. Fighting words but the fight's gone out of me." (108).

What is more, this part is an immediate and anguished response to the fear of loss, as the narrator states,

"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. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognise her even when her body had long since fallen away" (111).

That is why the irony present in the other two sections of the novel is non-existent here, as it is clear that the narrator is really emphasizing the importance and gravity of his/her love and longing for Louise. With the experimentation of combining a medical discourse with lyrical style, he/she invents the sincere and original form of expression that is sought after throughout

the entire novel. Therefore there is no room for clichés and banalities and no need to ridicule and satirize.

Another important linguistic element utilized in the novel is the subject of sex, emphasised by the author's refusal to specify the sex of the narrator. According to Lanser the category of sex is an essential and vital element of narrative and is closely related to the concept of narrative 'person'.¹⁴ There is a distinction made by Gerard Genette between a narrative 'person', or a narrator, who is part of the story world, and a narrator who is not. He uses the term heterodiegetic to designate narrators who are not part of the story and the world and homodiegetic for narrators who are characters in the fictional world. A further distinction made by Genette, among homodiegetic narrators, is the autodiegetic narrator, that is, a narrator who also functions as the central protagonist in the story that he or she is narrating.¹⁵

Written on the Body is told by a first-person narrator, who not only takes part in the story but is also the main character in it, in other words, he or she is the autodiegetic narrator of the narrative. There is a basic narrative convention that states that "a narrator's sex is normatively unmarked in heterodiegetic narratives and normatively marked in autodiegetic texts".¹⁶ It is possible for a person to construct a short autodiegetic text without designating the narrator's sex, but it is highly unusual for a comprehensive autodiegetic text to elude all signs of both sex and gender.¹⁷ How is it then possible for an autodiegetic narrator in an extended narrative, such as *Written on the Body*, to escape the marking of sex?

One explanation lies in the particular structure of the English language, which allows sexual ambiguity. According to Lanser, "European languages permit considerably greater sexual ambiguity in the construction of narrators than of represented characters because the first person is less sex-specific than the third."¹⁸ The first and second-person pronouns in English, namely 'I' and 'you', allow for the omission of gender designations.

However, there are various languages which would not permit such liberty; a case in point is my native language Bulgarian. It would, for instance, be impossible to translate *Written on the Body* into Bulgarian, because of the special structure of the language. In

¹⁴ Lanser (1996)

¹⁵ <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm#N3.1>

¹⁶ Lanser (1996) 253.

¹⁷ Lanser (1996)

¹⁸ Lanser (1996) 257.

Bulgarian there is an obligatory agreement between the adjectives and participles and the subjects and nouns they describe. The most obvious example, in the narrative, would be the sentence in the second page of the novel where the narrator declares, “But I am not engaged I am deeply distracted.” (10). In Bulgarian, this sentence would demand masculine or feminine adjectives, as the following clauses would in turn necessitate further sex explicit adjectives.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, if we were to write a first person narration in Bulgarian, it would demand the omission of sex-specific adjectives and participles all together for the upholding of the absence of the narrator’s sex.

Nevertheless, there are certain languages, such as Turkish, which permit even greater freedom, compared to English, in the construction of an autodiegetic narrator who does not explicitly specify his or her biological sex. The grammar of gender in Turkish is quite simple, since the language does not employ specific gender pronouns, but uses the neuter form to designate all kinds of gender. Such a linguistic freedom allows for a character to be signified within the language without the particular mark of gender.

¹⁹ A direct translation reads phonetically: “No az ne sim sgoden (m) / sgodena (f) az sim dilboko dstahiran (m) / distrahirana (f)”.

5. RELIABILITY

Written on the Body is a novel that employs a single narrative voice. A narrator who also is the protagonist of the narrated story is, however, subjected to certain limitations. Unlike the third-person narrator whose point of view is omniscient, the first-person narrator normally occupies a restricted field of vision, which is also reflected in the narration. Hence, the narrator is free to share his or her thoughts but is unable to render the thoughts and the feelings of the other characters. Neither can the narrator refer to future events, as only the present and the past experiences can be related.²⁰

An additional limitation associated with first-person narration is that the narrator is incapable of giving a description of his/her outward look. The only way an external picture can be conveyed in such case is through comments from the other characters in the narrative, or if there is an actual act of mirroring, with the narrator making remarks on his/her appearance, taking place. Nevertheless, despite of all these restrictions, the first person narrator has a considerable power over the narrative discourse, since he/she is the narrative 'voice' and the one who determines what is to be told, how it is to be told, and what is to be left out.²¹ In view of that, it is surprising how little factual information we are provided with concerning the narrating 'I', as the narrator goes to great lengths in trying to conceal his/her identity both in dialogues with other characters and in his/her own private meditations and reflections. For instance, we never learn the narrator's name, sex, age, physical appearance or specific values and views.

"Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story." (89)

Considering the above passage, which highlights the narrator's attitude towards unravelling one's true identity, we can actually see that he/she does not like to reveal too much about him/herself by telling the entire story, that he/she feels uncomfortable exposing him/herself in that manner.

²⁰ Lanser, Susan S. *The Narrative Act* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981)

²¹ <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm#N3.1>

Nonetheless, I would argue that the narrator deliberately chooses to withhold significant facts about the narrative persona, with the intention to conceal his/her identity. As, indeed, a significant amount of information has to be excluded from the text in order for the sex and gender of the narrator to remain undeclared.

The most important evidence in support for this argument is that, unlike the narrator, the other characters of the story are described in great detail. We know the names and sexes of the previous lovers, how they look and how they are as lovers. Besides, we are provided with small and intriguing details about their peculiarities. For example, we are told of an old girlfriend who “thought beds belonged in hospitals. Anywhere she could do it that wasn’t pre-sprung was sexy” (19); another girlfriend, Judith, “could only achieve orgasm between the hours of two and five o’clock.” (75). Bathsheba, a dentist, was married and insisted on using their marital bed, with the narrator sleeping on her husband’s side. Inge, a Dutch ex-girlfriend, was “a committed romantic and an anarchy-feminist” (21) who fought against patriarchal society by blowing up men’s urinals. Crazy Frank, one of the narrator’s ex-boyfriends, “brought up by midgets although he himself was over six feet tall” (93), used to take his parents everywhere with him, carrying them one on each shoulder, because they helped him to make friends. He also had a passion for miniatures and an ambition “to find a hole in every port. He wasn’t fussy about the precise location” (93). Carlo, another of the narrator’s previous lovers, “a dark exciting thing”, made the narrator shave off all body hair, because it increased sensation, and eventually left him/her for another man called “Robert who was taller, broader and thinner than” the narrator (143).

Furthermore, Elgin, Louise’s husband, who is a character that occupies a minor role in the novel, is portrayed in a very exhaustive manner, as the narrator relates Elgin’s, and his parents’, life story beginning from his early childhood up to his adulthood years. Thus, it seems extremely odd to acquire as detailed picture about someone as insignificant as Elgin whilst the narrator, who also is the main character of the story, remains shrouded in mystery. Not even Louise, to whom this elegy of love is dedicated, gets the same kind of treatment when it comes to recounting her life.

In *The Narrative Act*, Susan S. Lanser states that “Identity includes such aspects of social status as profession, gender, nationality, marital situation, sexual preference, education, race and economic class.”²² According to her, in Western culture, gender is the utmost important category from a linguistic point of view, since Indo-European languages are

²² Lanser (1981) 166.

recognized for signifying gender distinctions. She claims that gender is essential to cultural communications as well, due to the fact that gender distinctions play such a crucial part in our daily lives. Furthermore, Lanser argues that gender together with the other categories of social identity can influence presuppositions of narrative authority and reliability. She maintains that any kind of information that the narrator decides to relate or withhold is of major importance, since any kind of knowledge in relation to the narrator's personal history provides the reader with clues for the image, or the voice, that he or she constructs for the narrative discourse.²³

As we can see the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality open up the question about narrative reliability as well. The issue of reliability is a very complex and delicate matter as different people have different criteria for the reliability of a narrator. Depending on these criteria, certain narrators can be perceived as more or less reliable. For instance, opinions regarding the reliability of a narrator may vary depending on the reader's own values, background, experience and knowledge.

I do not find the categories of sex, gender and sexuality as crucial for a narrator's reliability as I would assume many people would. Since *Written on the Body* frustrates any attempt to answer the questions about its narrator's gendered and sexual identity it might be perceived by many as artificial and bland. Many readers might question the narrator's motives to keep his/her gender a secret, arguing that every love relationship is unique and special in its own way, and one does not need to hide one's true identity in order to express the uniqueness of one's love. These readers might decide that the inconclusiveness of the narrating 'I's gendered and sexual identity poses a clear indication of his/her unreliability. They may perceive the fluidity of the narrating persona as impudent and threatening, stirring up and challenging the very notion of identity as a conception constituted by a specific sex, gender and sexuality. Moreover, readers with more conservative values might even judge the narrator untrustworthy and unreliable on grounds of promiscuity, dismissing the subversive status of the character as decadent and immoral.

However, social identity is not the only factor for judging a narrator's reliability. Lanser cautions the reader for relying too heavily on the narrator's social identity, by suggesting that "Social identity and textual behaviour combine to provide the reader with a basis for determining the narrator's mimetic authority."²⁴ By mimetic authority she means first of all that "the narrator is honest and sincere; that is, that he or she will not dissimulate and will

²³ Lanser (1981)

²⁴ Lanser (1981) 169.

speak the truth as far as he or she perceives it; that the narrator will mean what he or she says; and that the narrator will not omit any information that is crucial to the meaning of the story.” Secondly “that the narrator is intellectually and morally trustworthy”, in other words, that his or her intellectual capacity and perceptions are no less than satisfactory, adequate and correct. And thirdly “that he or she has sufficient competence as a storyteller”, that is, that he or she will render the narrative in a consistent, comprehensive, and competent manner.²⁵

In this regard, it is fair to state that the narrator of *Written on the Body* is intellectually and morally trustworthy, as he/she has the sufficient mental capacity and perception to present the story adequately and correctly. In like fashion, what he/she says can be considered tellable, given that he/she tells the story with the ample skill to maintain the interest of the audience. However, as it will be discussed later in the article, the narrator does not demonstrate complete sincerity and honesty since he/she does not at all times speak the truth and mean what he/she says. There are many instances where he/she distorts facts and doubts his/her own truthfulness, which influences the reader.

What we indeed can question here is the narrator’s credibility. In this sense Lanser makes a distinction between ‘mimetic (un)reliability’ and ‘normative (un)reliability’. These two kinds of (un)reliability vary in degree and kind, mimetic (un)reliability refers to narrators who are truthful in the recounting of different occurrences but not capable of understanding them. Normative (un)reliability, on the other hand, refers to narrators who are likely to confuse some factual information but are fully aware of the implications related to them.²⁶

As mentioned earlier, a lot of information about the narrator is omitted, and has to be so, in order for the narrator to remain non-gendered. What is more, there are incidents in the text that clearly reveal the narrator’s normative unreliability, where he/she distorts and confuses different facts, but has a very good understanding of the implications associated with them.

Let us start from the very beginning of the narrative, which opens with the rhetorical question: “Why is the measure of love loss?” (9), continues with the narrator’s comments on the drought, “It hasn’t rained for three months. The trees are prospecting underground, sending reserves of roots into the dry ground“ (9), which immediately evokes the memories “of a certain September” (9). From this moment on the narrative continues to be told in retrospect, with the narrator’s reminiscence of the love of his/her life. In this sense, the

²⁵ Lanser (1981) 170-171.

²⁶ <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm#N7.6>

commencement of the novel stands out for its lack of information regarding a concrete time and location, as well as its reciting “I”.

In fact, throughout the course of the novel, the reader is continuously made aware of the fact that the accuracy in the novel does not by any means imply correct historical accounts nor precise details of past events. Instead, the narrator makes evident that the memories in connection with certain events, and the moods and the emotions they evoke, are much more important than the actual events that took place. The novel exemplifies this idea in the following statement: “Now here am I making up my own memories of good times. When we were together the weather was better, the days were longer. Even the rain was warm. That’s right, isn’t it?” (161). This quotation constitutes a good illustration of how the narrator actually creates his/her own version of the past, his/her own memories, since they give more accurate expression to the narrator’s emotions than the tangible facts.

The questioning of traditional distinctions between reality and the imaginary is a recurrent theme throughout Winterson’s fiction. Winterson herself addresses this issue in her essay “Imagination and Reality” as she emphasises that: “The reality of the imagination leaves out nothing. It is the most complete reality that we can know. Imagination takes in the world of sense experience, and rather than trading it for a words of symbols, delights in it for what it is.”²⁷ In her view what separates reality from the imaginary is the power of the imagination to expand the experience beyond what is actually there.

There is, furthermore, a scene in the novel where the narrator remembers feeding Louise “plums the colour of bruises” immediately after which he/she tries to correct him/herself by admitting that “There are no ripe plums in August.” “Have I got it wrong this hesitant chronology?” (17), the narrator asks him/herself spontaneously. Yet, resolved not to be discouraged by such trifles as facts, he/she resumes: “Nevertheless I will push on. There were plums and I broke them over you.” (18). This case in point, where the narrator makes a statement and rectifies it at the same instant, is not only an example of how unimportant the factual accuracy is for the narrator but of his/her unreliability as well.

Indeed, further into the novel, the narrator actually acknowledges his/her questionable role as a narrator by doubting his/her credibility: “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator.” (24). However, this gesture of sincerity only reinforces the already tarnished authority of the narrator, by all the more undermining it.

²⁷ Winterson, Jeanette. “Imagination and Reality”, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1995) 150.

As a result of the doubtful nature of the narrator, the reader becomes particularly sensitive to the slightest details which pinpoint the narrator's unreliability. Significant in this respect is the way the narrator tells us of a prior interaction with his/her former Dutch girlfriend, Inge, where he/she made jokes about Renoir's penis:

She said, "Don't you know that Renoir claimed he painted with his penis?"

"Don't worry," I said. "He did. When he died they found nothing between his balls but an old brush."

"You are making it up."

Am I? (22)

With the use of the rhetorical question "Am I?" the narrator opens the door to doubt. The established doubt in the narrator continues further into the novel as a similar interaction takes place, only this time with another girlfriend, Catherine, and a slightly modified story about Henry Miller and a ball-point pen (60). After examining both scenarios, the narrator's credibility continues to falter, in particular with regards to the tense usage. In both the incidents the rhetorical question of "Am I?" in the present tense arises rather than the past tense of "Did I?", which is the response one would come to expect. This delicate altering of tenses indicates that nothing in the text can be taken for granted. It is, indeed, an ingenious way of alerting the audience about the playfulness and unpredictability of its narrator, cautioning them to be aware of his/her tiny ploys and the fact that he/she is capable of fabricating all kinds of stories, not only about Renoir and Henry Miller, hence adding all the more to the distrust they already have in him/her.

Nevertheless, there are episodes in the narrative where the narrator's unreliability is exposed in a more obvious way. For example, at the end of the novel, we are provided with the significant information that the narrator is in fact a vegetarian: "As a vegetarian I can't even contemplate revenge" (185). A close examination of the narrator's previous eating behaviour, however, proves that this statement is, indeed, incorrect, as by going back into the narrative we can actually find a number of occasions where he/she has been eating meat. There is, for instance, a past episode where the narrator found a stray cat that he/she named "Hopeful because on the first day he brought" the narrator a rabbit, which they ate "with lentils." (111). Furthermore, we are told of another occasion where the narrator, persuaded by a friend's request to go out for a meal after work, "ended up in front of a Spaghetti Carbonara

at Magic Pete's" (158). As we all know, Spaghetti Carbonara is a pasta dish whose main ingredient is bacon or ham.

An additional episode designed to raise doubts about the narrator's reliability is a scene at the very end of the novel, where the two lovers reunite. However, in this scene, we never actually find out if it is the real Louise that returns or only a figment of the narrator's imagination. The lovers are perhaps reunited, but just as the gender of the narrator remains a mystery, so does the ending of the novel. This sense of uncertainty is reinforced by the narrator's last statement in the narrative: "I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields" (190) intended to expose the reader to the same kind of confusion and bewilderment as he or she has been subjected to throughout the entire course of the novel.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay, I have been focusing on the relationship between sex, gender, sexuality and narrative in Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body*. The novel is a romance story whose main protagonist and narrator is non-gendered.

This reading suggests that the author uses the unspecified gender of the narrator as a stratagem to problematize the very notion of gender and sexuality as the keystones of identity. The non-gendered identity of the narrator is, thus, utilized in the novel as a step forward in loosening gender and sexual boundaries, facilitating the development of an identity freed from these rigid restrictions. Hence, the narrator is able to pursue a self that is not perceived as being caged within clear and defined gender boundaries, but as being diverse, multiple and not easy to determine.

Furthermore, the study suggests that the narrator, feeling frustrated with the clichéd expressions in the language of love, tries to find an innovative and original way of expressing his/her individual emotions by creating his/her very own lyrical style in the narrative. A rather unconventional and quite significant linguistic feature from narratological point of view is, also, the author's choice to use an autodiegetic narrator.

An additional conclusion made in this essay is that the narrator intentionally withholds important specifics about the narrative persona, with the purpose of concealing his/her identity. Besides, there are occasions in the text that unequivocally make known the narrator's normative unreliability, where he/she alters and confuses different facts, but has a rather good awareness of the consequences related to them.

Finally, I would like to point out that *Written on the Body* is an extraordinary piece of work both from narratological and textual point of view. Its subversive status transgresses and expands the boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality by challenging and emasculating the preconceptions of its audience, inducing them to envision a whole new universe of possibilities.

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