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Revealing the Myths : Jeanette Winterson's New Space of Body, Love and Narrative in Written on the Body

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REVEALING THE MYTHS: JEANETTE WINTERTON’S NEW SPACE OF BODY, LOVE AND NARRATIVE IN *WRITTEN ON THE BODY*

by

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Abstract

This thesis derives from my interest in the way in which we read and understand novels. We may not consciously realize that we are socially conditioned to read and translate texts in certain ways. Until I started writing this paper, I did not realize the influence that social conditioning had on me when I read. Now that I am more aware of this influence, I am more careful about how I read. I realize that I should not read certain issues within texts as natural, but to think of them as constructions created to serve a specific purpose.

The focus of this thesis is to reveal the myths of certain social constructions about the body, love, and the narrative conventions that relay these stories in Jeanette Winterson’s novel Written on the Body. Highlighting the myths about social constructions of body, love, and storytelling is how we can move beyond our reliance on binaries as exemplified by categories, hierarchies, and hegemonic norms.

Chapter One ("Understanding the Narrator: Body, Sex and Gender") examines how we rely on signs of sex and gender within narrative to construct meaning about bodies. Through the characterization of the narrator, Winterson attempts to create a space where identity is not limited by categories of sex and gender. Chapter Two ("Expressions of Love and Desire") examines how Winterson creates a new space and language where love and desire are not limited to hierarchies but are expansive. Through this expansive space and language of love, the bodies of the lovers fuse to form a stronger body that radiates with strength and intensity. Chapter Three ("Challenging Structural Conventions: Body Knowledges/Languages, Metafiction and First Person Narration")
examines Winterson’s disruption of the hierarchies of knowledge and narrative conventions.

I argue throughout this paper that Winterson’s goal is to create a third linguistic and social space that is not confined by hegemonic norms.
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**Introduction**

Jeanette Winterson’s oeuvre reveals oppressive social structures like race, class, sex, gender, and sexuality that appear to be natural within society. Winterson believes that recognizing these structures as social constructions is the first step in moving beyond the reliance of what we, as society, view as natural. Brought up by Pentecostal Evangelists, Winterson claims that her need for speaking out began at a young age when she would write sermons because she “was driven by a need to preach to people and convert them which possibly I still am, except that now I do it for art’s sake” (Reynolds par. 2). Her novels are an attempt at a large scale transformation project whose aim is to demythologize social myths and challenge social boundaries like race, class, sex, gender and sexuality. Through invoking these repressive social structures and then deconstructing them, Winterson illustrates that these structures are, in fact, not natural or transparent. Winterson’s texts are not just reflections of society; they simultaneously reflect society’s naturalized views while also challenging the oppressive patriarchal and heteronormative structures of society.

*Written on the Body* is one of Winterson’s most powerful narratives in her transformation project. In *Written on the Body* Winterson challenges patriarchal notions of the body and heteronormative expressions of love. By doing this she disrupts how stories about the body and love are constructed and told. Winterson pushes the boundaries of conventional narrative in hopes of transcending patriarchal views, and redefines issues of the body, love and the narrative constructions that relay these stories. Winterson reveals that sex, gender, and sexuality are not static elements of the body. In fact, sex, gender, and sexuality can be seen as fluid, unfixed, and dynamic once the
barriers of patriarchal social myths are deconstructed. Winterson also reveals that the language and expressions of love do not have to be limited to heteronormative and patriarchal ideas of love. She creates an expansive love, based on intensity between lovers. New possibilities for the body and love emerge as a result of the deconstruction of social myths.

I will further argue that the redefinitions of the body and love destabilize the reader's familiarity with traditional narrative forms in hopes of producing the transformation Winterson discusses and longs for in *Art Objects*, her collection of essays. By challenging stylistic boundaries, Winterson’s writing creates a space where new narrative conventions are produced. Winterson’s goal is to create a narrative approach that refuses to abide by the system of binary oppositions that controls language as well as social and cultural structures. Winterson’s text writes a space located between binaries; she displaces binaries such as I/you, he/she, active/passive, self/other, science/art, reality/fantasy, and fact/fiction. Once the displacement of these binaries occurs, new languages proliferate to produce a third space where new ideas about body, love and narrative reside.

In three of Winterson’s earlier novels, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, *The Passion*, and *Sexing the Cherry*, her interests rest in deconstructing the politics of gender, sex, sexuality, and the body while also questioning the functions of texts and subverting narrative structure. She interrogates the structures behind these issues and always tries to challenge and transcend the boundaries that are created and maintained by society. Winterson claims that her seven short novels beginning with *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* and ending with *The PowerBook* “make a cycle or series” and they “speak to each
other...they interact and themes do occur and return, disappear, come back amplified or modified, changed in some way” (Reynolds par. 51). Thinking of her novels as a series is crucial to the idea of her oeuvre as a transformation project. She continually reinvents her ideas in each novel hoping to reveal that the world and its structures are constructed and multi-faceted, and not to be accepted as natural or taken at face value. In many of her novels Winterson continually investigates social structures like race, gender, and sexuality while also examining issues like love, time, history, and writing.

In her first book *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, Winterson explores young love and sexuality. The narrator Jeanette discovers her lesbian sexuality while living in a strict Pentecostal Evangelical household. Jeanette’s family and church refuse to accept her sexuality, and since Jeanette refuses to conform to their lifestyle, she leaves them. Jeanette challenges the authority of these two social structures, church and family, and leaves her family to live a life free of strict rules. Structurally, the novel is divided into eight chapters; the first five chapters are named after the five books of the Old Testament and the last three chapters are named after other biblical books titled *Judges*, *Joshua*, and *Ruth*. Inserted in the story are mythic fables and quests of the protagonist, Jeanette, and these fables and quests indicate the beginning of Winterson’s interest in fantasy and disrupting objectivity in stories.

*The Passion* also deals with love, but issues of desire, trust, and storytelling all intersect with love in this novel. The two protagonists, Henri and Villanelle, struggle with love, and illustrate that love, like playing cards, is a gamble because people cannot control who they love and who will love them back. Winterson begins to challenge gender roles and furthers her ideas on sexuality through the characterizations of Henri
and Villanelle. Henri is in love with Napoleon, and later Villanelle, but both loves are unrequited. He is a cook in Napoleon’s army because he is too weak to be a soldier, and later deserts the army with Villanelle after becoming resentful towards Napoleon. He later kills Villanelle’s husband and is sent to an insane asylum, which is where he narrates the story. Villanelle, with webbed feet, is a cross-dressing card dealer and prostitute for Napoleon’s army who exhibits traits from both genders and has affairs with both men and women. One of Villanelle’s lovers, the Queen of Spades, affects Villanelle more than the others, by literally and metaphorically stealing her heart, but the Queen cannot commit to Villanelle.

In *The Passion* Winterson uses Henri to challenge objective narration since Henri narrates the whole story from an insane asylum. Henri could be viewed as an unreliable narrator only if the reader believes he is crazy. The instability of Henri’s story demonstrates that *The Passion* demands reader participation. Winterson does not grant the reader a singular truth in this novel. Instead she permits the reader to decide about Henri’s reliability and this allows for multiple truths and stories to emerge.

In *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson again destabilizes characters’ gendered traits, utilizes gender role reversal, and explores sexuality. Dog Woman and her son Jordan both display different gendered traits. Dog Woman exhibits feminine nurturing motherly traits towards Jordan while also demonstrating masculine rage and murderous inclinations towards others, at a time (17th century England) when women should be concerned with propriety. Because of her size, Dog Woman cannot consummate a relationship with either a man or woman, and through the metaphor of grafting the cherry, Dog Woman comes to symbolize a third sex that is neither male nor female but
occupies a space between the two. Jordan’s narrative can be viewed as feminine because it is comprised of an inward journey to find one’s true self and a romantic adventure searching for Fortunata. Jordan believes that if he finds Fortunata his life will be complete; this echoes an essentializing view of women whereby a woman is complete if she finds a man.

Structurally, Winterson utilizes alternating narrative voices, between Dog Woman, Jordan, 20th century Dog Woman, and Nicholas Jordan. To indicate the change of narrative voice, Winterson places the picture of either a banana or pineapple preceding each chapter to symbolize the narrator. But Winterson challenges language and signifiers because she uses the banana, a traditionally phallic symbol, to represent Dog Woman and 20th Century Dog Woman. She utilizes gender role reversal with signs and characteristics with all four characters. Similar to Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, in this text Winterson inserts a mythic tale, this time of the twelve dancing princesses. The stories of the twelve princesses upset the idea that heterosexual desire is natural, and instead privileges lesbianism as an alternative to heterosexuality.

Written on the Body is the story of a love affair between a narrator, whose sex and gender are ambiguous, and Louise, a married woman. Louise is diagnosed with cancer and the narrator, in wanting to help save her, leaves Louise in the hands of Elgin, Louise’s oncologist husband. The narrator hopes that Elgin can save Louise by providing her with the best treatment. After leaving Louise, the narrator moves to Yorkshire and becomes obsessed with Louise’s diseased body; she/he studies anatomy to better understand Louise’s illness and how the cancerous body functions. The narrator’s obsession with Louise’s body produces a poetic discourse on anatomy focusing on the
sick body of Louise. After the anatomical meditation on Louise’s body, the narrator realizes that she/he made a mistake by leaving Louise and goes in search of her. Louise, refusing to be cared for by Elgin, has left him and her own family, leaving no trace for the narrator to follow. Those familiar with Winterson’s work will not be surprised by the ambiguous conclusion to the novel. The narrator returns to Yorkshire and still obsesses over Louise until one day the narrator claims that Louise appears at the narrator’s Yorkshire retreat. But there is also a lingering doubt for the reader as to whether Louise really has appeared at all or if the narrator is going mad and imagines Louise is in Yorkshire. The lack of a definitive conclusion to the novel illustrates how Winterson subverts the reader’s desire for closure.

In *Written on the Body* Winterson upsets traditional notions of sex, gender, and sexuality through the representation of the narrator. Since Winterson refuses her readers knowledge about the narrator’s sex and gender, she hopes to transform their thinking so readers can ponder sex and gender in different ways. Winterson suggests that sex and gender and the ideologies derived by both should not be used to judge bodies. Stylistically, the novel is comprised of techniques that destabilize the reader’s understanding of the story. These techniques include subversions of point of view, plot and language. Winterson’s subversive use of a narrator is an important aspect in challenging conventional narrative form. First, she does not grant the narrator a sex or gender; she leaves them ambiguous which makes it difficult for the reader to infer meaning since readers are conditioned to rely on signs of sex and gender to construct meaning. Winterson wants her readers to move beyond the reliance on sex and gender to produce meaning. Second, Winterson challenges the plot of a traditional love story
through invoking clichés that are typical to romance novels. She foregrounds our reliance on a language that is void of the meaning of love, while at the same time demonstrating that we cannot let go of clichés. Winterson further challenges the plot of the traditional love story by displacing the dichotomies of active/lover/man and passive/beloved/woman. Instead, Winterson creates lovers that are equal in subject position, who can write and translate love and desire onto each other’s bodies. Winterson’s subversive use of language is illustrated through the intense expressions of the language of love and desire. The intensity derives from the combination of scientific and artistic discourses that produce a new language of love. By doing all of this Winterson produces a novel that transforms our ideas about bodies, love, desire, language, and narrative.
Chapter One: Understanding the Narrator: Body, Sex and Gender

In society the body is silenced because it is a surface where various social and cultural laws are inscribed. Feminist theorist Judith Butler states, “the ‘body’ often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body” (Gender Trouble 164). Moreover, the body can never be independent because, as feminist critic Moira Gatens states, the body “is always a signified body and as such cannot be understood as a ‘neutral object’” (230). In the postmodern realm of activity individuals do not and cannot function outside of social and cultural codes. There are always codes and hierarchies inscribed onto bodies that individuals are forced to adhere to. In The Postmodern Condition, Jean Francois Lyotard describes this condition:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. (15)

Lyotard suggests that a body cannot exist individually, but is only known through the “fabric of relations,” of the things and people, that occur around it. The body is always a host where messages that pass between individuals and society meet. The messages/codes that intersect and continuously write over the body are never in a state of rest, but are continually moving and changing. Even though the body is linked to a network of relations, the body occupies a decentered space in society that is repeatedly written over with various discourses. Decentering of the body refers to a space where
there is no fixed center because there are multiple centers. Over time, when social and cultural discourses change, the network of relations that comprise the body also change and shift. As a result of this shift, new relations proliferate and there are multiple understandings of the body. An example of decentering of the body could be the ever-changing views of the female body throughout the latter half of the 20th century. In the 1950’s Marilyn Monroe was the epitome of female beauty with blonde hair and a curvaceous figure, which, at that time, was extremely attractive. The 1980’s brought the health and fitness craze with stars like Jane Fonda working out in videos and plastic surgery becoming more accessible. These visions of the body culminate in the early 1990’s with the waif look, a sickly thin body to which women aspired. Now in the early 21st century, with new media discourses taking center stage, women still long to be thin, but society is more accepting of different body shapes. And with figures like Oprah guiding women, healthy and athletic have become the new “thin.” Through this brief synopsis of the changing views of the female body, it is evident that as relations within society change, the epitome of beauty changes and there are multiple centers for the meaning of beauty. Even though the essence of beauty may change for every generation, older forms of beauty like Marilyn Monroe’s curvy figure and the waif look still exist and are still admired by many, thus providing multiple and simultaneous readings of the female body.

In Written on the Body, the body, particularly the image and understanding of the body, is a central focus of this text. Winterson seeks to disrupt essentialist notions of the body which state that one’s gender is fixed based on the biological sex of the body. Essentialism is a type of coding that situates the body in specific ways. From birth, the
body is inscribed with predetermined codes based on socially constructed views of sex and gender. Individuals are forced to obey them and because of this the body is read in certain ways. Winterson's text reveals the myths surrounding the predetermined codes of sex and gender, and provides the potential to understand the body in a new light.

**Sex and Gender**

Traditionally, feminists would define sex as the biological interpretation of the body and gender as the socially constructed meaning of the sexed body, but Judith Butler challenges these views. In her introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that sexual difference does not necessarily originate from nature and the materiality of bodies (1). Instead, sex is a result of "regulatory practice[s]" that produce power over bodies to "demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls" (1). She feels that bodily sexual difference is not natural, but is affected by social myths just as much as gender is produced through cultural meaning. Butler asserts that sex is not "a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but...a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (2-3). In other words, gender is not imposed on the body by sex, but sex itself is a mark made by culture. Furthermore sex "is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not simply a fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (2).

In *Written on the Body*, Winterson reiterates regulatory norms of sex through the characterization of the narrator, calling attention to our reliance on those norms to construct meaning of bodies. Butler further argues that sex is not a fixed biological fact of our corporeality, but rather a process that the body goes through to embody
corporeality so that “it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (2). In Written on the Body, Winterson creates a narrator whose sex is unknown and the narrator lives and functions in culture just fine. The narrator attracts people from both sexes, and Louise even claims that regardless of the narrator’s sex, she/he is still beautiful, “When I saw you two years ago I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen” (84). The narrator acknowledges that she/he is not beautiful, “I’m not beautiful, that is a word reserved for very few people” (85). But Louise insists that the narrator is beautiful, “You can’t see what I see...You are a pool of clear water where the light plays” (85). Therefore, what makes the narrator beautiful for Louise is not exclusively linked to sex or gender. The narrator’s beauty and existence do not depend on regulatory laws that many women adhere to. Regulatory practices so that women look attractive and “guarantee [their] man-made place in culture” include “weight control, skin and hair care, attention to fashion, and, above all, resistance to aging” (Conboy et al. 3). But the narrator does not need to abide by these rules because there are no linguistic or social signs that have been placed upon this body that require it to follow regulatory laws. In her argument on sex, Butler contends that as a society we have a tendency to essentialize sex and in doing that we start to essentialize sexual identity. The idea that sexual identity derives from one’s biological sex is disrupted when Winterson removes our reliance on the essential notion of bodies. By removing this reliance she forces her readers to de-essentialize sex and opens up the possibility for readers to think about bodies in an unrestricted way.
When Winterson de-essentializes sex, it impacts the discourse of gender. If we no longer attribute certain identities and actions to certain sexes, then gender identities will no longer be categorized but can be expansive and fluid. Gender fluidity is another goal of the novel, and the narrator’s gender is also masked from the reader. Gender is the social and cultural constructed meaning given to a sexed body. Social and cultural laws establish that sex determines gender; society views that a female should be constituted by feminine traits and a male constituted by masculine traits, thus a dichotomy is created between the two. In this sense, individuals have no say as to how they are categorized in society. Teresa de Lauretis, a film and gender theorist, states that “gender represents not an individual but a relation, and a social relation; in other words, it represents an individual for a class” (716). When it comes to gender individuals do not and cannot mark their own gender because society has already done it for them; gender “pre-exists the individual” (de Lauretis 716). Butler supports this point and also argues that acts are created by the individual for gender to exist, “because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (“Performative” 273). The “acts” that Butler mentions refer to the performance of certain gender traits and for Butler the acts and their corresponding performances (i.e. women as domestic; men as public) are what constitute gender. Individuals perform and reinforce pre-existing gender roles because they think these are natural roles within society which they must obey.

Gender labeling is somewhat detrimental to men, but more oppressive for women. Women are only understood in relation to men; so whatever masculine characteristics are, feminine ones are the opposite. Conventionally in Euro-American white culture,
masculine characteristics consist of strength (in mind and body), working outside the home, and affinity for working in the sciences. While feminine characteristics state the opposite: women are weak (in mind and body), women work inside the home, and women have an attraction for working in subjects such as the arts and humanities. Regulatory practices assist in creating this binary space where the relations between men and women are always already in opposition. The regulatory fictions, such as those concerning women’s bodies, aid in keeping women in the subordinate position, both linguistically and culturally.

Butler claims that no gender identity exists before its performance so there can be no essential gender identity (Gender Trouble 13). If there is no essential gender identity, gender is arbitrary and can fluctuate. Butler views gender as “the variable cultural construction of sex, the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body” (GT 142). Gender leaves open the possibility for individuals to perform different acts and it is only in how we perform that identity that gender is ascribed to us. She also claims that when gender is performed it can be seen as a type of acting, but a subconscious type of acting where the “essence or identity” the actor asserts is “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (GT 173; emphasis in original). And yet, as Butler further argues, individuals do not realize that the acts they perform are feeding into the notion that there is a stable gender identity. In fact “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (GT 181). Here Butler suggests that it is through our actions that we are given a gendered identity. Therefore gender is performed only to produce an “illusion of [a] gender core” which is “discursively maintained” to
control sexuality and more specifically "reproductive heterosexuality" (GT 173). Regulatory practices are discursively used to preserve and reproduce the binary of social relations.

In the novel Winterson invokes a space that could be available if we did not discursively obstruct what gender could look like. Winterson accomplishes this space through the exemplification of the narrator. From the beginning of the novel, Winterson invokes conventional views of masculinity and femininity. We, as readers, start to rely on these views to make sense of the narrator because we want to position the narrator in a gendered category. At the beginning of the novel it is difficult to tell whether the narrator is a woman or man because there are many competing conventions. When discussing the urinal bombing episodes with Inge, the narrator's radical feminist girlfriend, the narrator claims prior knowledge of male bathrooms, "men's toilets are fairly liberal places," thus indicating a male perspective (22). But having claimed knowledge of male bathrooms, the narrator expresses confusion about men; "Why do men like doing everything together" thus situating the narrator's point of view as female (22). Winterson puts the reader on edge by continuously teasing the reader through constant deferral of the narrator's gender. Moreover, Winterson's narrator disrupts Butler's contention that the doer is constructed through the deed (GT 181). The narrator performs in ways that do not always reiterate the socially guarded views of gender.

Throughout the novel, Winterson invokes other gender conventions to highlight our reliance on them to infer meaning. When discussing love and relationships, the narrator is positioned as a man citing traditional masculine views on relationships. The narrator refers to her/himself as a Lothario and reveals the many different relationships
she/he’s had with women (20). Furthermore, the narrator is not really interested in a committed relationship; all the relationships the narrator has had last six months or less (79). Instead of a relationship the narrator is interested in passion and sex: “I was looking for the perfect coupling; the never-sleep non-stop mighty orgasm” (21). And the narrator’s views on marriage are negative, thinking marriage begs to be shattered, “I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick” (13). And yet Winterson also provides clues for the reader to think that the narrator is a woman. When recalling a dream about an ex-girlfriend who sets up a mouse trap to cut off the postman’s penis, the narrator describes a vagina dentata. In the dream the ex-girlfriend tells the narrator that “it won’t hurt you...You’ve got nothing to be frightened of” indicating that the narrator is a woman and her genitals won’t get caught in the trap (41-2). The critic Andrea Harris asserts in her analysis of the text that the narrator aligns her/himself with more feminine tendencies of “doubt” and “vulnerability” towards the end of the novel (147). The narrator has become more sensitive and has different ideas about love and relationships. Even though there might be pain in love and relationships, the narrator claims that “Love is worth it” indicating a feminine sensibility towards relationships (156).

Through invoking gendered conventions and then refusing to name the narrator’s gender, Winterson destabilizes the reader’s ability to read gender. The narrative does not give us any one place to rest our gendered interpretive lens. Winterson continuously refuses to give us knowledge to posit a gendered identity for the narrator. In an interview Winterson reveals why she uses a gender ambiguous narrator: “I didn’t want to pin it down. I thought there was no need to do so, so I won’t do so. If I put in a gender then it
weights my story in a way that I don’t want it to be weighted. So I didn’t” (qtd. in Martindale par. 1). The idea that the narrator’s gendered identity is constantly deferred echoes Butler’s idea that no gender identity exists before its performance so there is no essential gender identity (GT 13). Thus the narrator is represented as double-voiced and double-gendered; she/he displays traits that correspond with both gender positions. Winterson fashions a narrator who is not weighted down by social and cultural associations with masculinity and femininity, for the narrator is represented as both masculine and feminine. Winterson’s representational strategies create a new space for readers to relax their dependency on gender identities. As a result, readers can read beyond narrow categories of gender to construct meaning.

Winterson’s ideas about the flexibility of gender roles and expectations can also be seen with other characters in the text. Winterson illustrates that the performance of femininity is fluid; there are various ideas of femininity and they do not all fit into the traditional socially constructed ideas of femininity. She illustrates this through the various characterizations of the narrator’s female lovers. Inge is a “committed romantic and an anarcha-femininst” who likes to blow up men’s urinals (21); Bathsheba is a married dentist who gives the narrator the clap (44-47); Catherine is a writer who claims, “It’s only a matter of time... before I become an alcoholic and forget how to cook” (60); and Estelle has a “scrap metal business” (77). Like the narrator, these women also perform various gender traits which defy notions of traditional femininity. Femininity can no longer be restricted to traditional roles because the formation of gender is subject to time, culture, and locale. As time passes, discourses change and new ideas proliferate.
Winterson embodies a new vision of women and femininity though the narrator’s female lovers.

Winterson also exemplifies a new vision when it comes to the matter of subject position. This issue, which is linked to sex and gender, is an important element in *Written on the Body* since the narrator’s sex and gender are masked from the reader.

What subject position does this narrator occupy: subordinate or powerful? Traditionally, women are automatically given a subordinate subject position and men assume a powerful and privileged subject position. Subjects, according to communications critic Daniel Chandler, are not individuals but are “roles constructed by dominant culture and ideological values. Ideology turns individuals into subjects...[and subjects] exist only in relation to interpretative practices and are constructed through the use of the sign” (180).

For example, women occupy many different subject positions: daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and lovers. These positions come with corresponding ideologies, and women’s identities are combinations of these positions and ideologies. In *Written on the Body* the subject position of the narrator is ambiguous because there is an absence of signified pronouns that would indicate the sex or gender of the narrator. Traditionally in narrative, pronouns like ‘she’ and ‘he’ are used to indicate the sex and gender of characters. When seeing the word ‘she’ or ‘he’ readers automatically associate certain ideologies and subject positions; pronouns involuntarily mark characters with certain expectations. Thus by excluding pronouns, Winterson challenges the idea that subject positions must correspond to constructed ideologies set forth by sex and gender.

In *Gender Trouble* Butler claims that those who do not occupy certain gender roles fall into the realm of the abject. She writes, “Those bodily figures who do not fit
into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the
dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted” (142).
Therefore according to Butler’s theory, because Winterson’s narrator does not go through
the process of assuming a sex or gender, the narrator’s body is abject and lives within the
abject space. But the narrator is not abject because she/he is unmarked linguistically and
culturally. Also the narrator does not abide by regulatory laws that govern other bodies,
so there is nothing for the narrator to expel. As I address the narrator throughout my
paper as she/he and her/him, Stevens, a critic of Written on the Body, also claims she is
forced to utilize these combinatory pronouns to discuss the narrator. Stevens further
claims that using the combinatory pronouns are necessary since “calling the narrator ‘it’
reinforces the idea that such a person could not exist as a subject but only as an abject,
unlivable body” (par. 3). Even though the narrative excludes these pronouns, as readers
we still try to hold on to them. Stevens also asserts that using such pronouns as she/he to
name the narrator is detrimental since the words only highlight “the binary understanding
of gender” (par. 3). But I disagree with Stevens and do not think that using the pronouns
she/he and her/him are damaging since one of the novel’s goals is to emphasize our
reliance on the binary language to speak about gender. The novel promotes recognizing
the reliance as a first step to seeing beyond that reliance.

Another reason why the narrator is not abject is because the narrator is not
dehumanized. The narrator is a subject, what Butler calls a “speaking I,” and we rely on
this narrator to tell the story (Bodies 3). Butler argues that the abject demands our
reliance on the binary, but the narrator could not be abject because the novel, through the
narrator, refuses the binary. Winterson creates a narrator, who although unmarked by sex
and gender, carries and produces meaning for us; thus the narrator is a subject. The meaning the narrator produces constitutes a third space so the narrator is not "part ‘she,’ part ‘he,’ but is rather something other. Perhaps this "other" could be described as the slash between ‘‘she’ and ‘he’ rather than the words on either side” as Stevens suggests (par. 3). In this way, Winterson tries to displace the sex and gender dichotomy within language as well as suggesting that a body could occupy a space between female/male and feminine/masculine. Thus, Winterson points out that one’s gender can exceed the system of binary opposition that comprises language. Language that exceeds gender categories displaces the binary in language. This displacement reframes regulatory fictions that write our bodies into gendered and sexed categories. Regulatory fictions derive from binaries, and if the binaries that produce these fictions are displaced, then regulatory laws will also be displaced. Bodies will no longer be positioned in rigid gender categories, and this will allow for more fluid gender identities.

In Winterson’s writing her objective is to provide alternative possibilities to social structures; and the creation of a narrator whose sex and gender are ambiguous provides such a possibility. This subversive characterization simultaneously highlights and disrupts many preconceived notions about sex and gender while also providing new possibilities to theorize about the body. The realm of Written on the Body consists of a world where regulatory fictions and firm categories are not the norm. This is a world that exists and thrives on instability and deferral; this is the space of possibility. The narrator embodies instability and deferral, thus the narrator’s unconventional body and world is possibility. Christy Stevens concurs that the narrator can be read in the context of possibility:
The narrator is *made possible* through the absence of the contemporary hegemonic norms...s/he is not merely a combination of existing identities, but rather a construction that might come to exist in a world where the formation of the subject is not based on avowing and disavowing identifications. In other words, the narrator is possibility; s/he is the potential of a discursive domain in which heterosexuality is not compulsory, and gender is fluid and multiple. (par. 6; emphasis in original)

Stevens succinctly summarizes one of Winterson’s goals in *Written on the Body*: to create a textual world where social structures and regulatory laws are not relevant in creating identities for bodies. Winterson provides an alternative identity for the narrator, one that is not reliant on hegemonic social structures. The potential within the text to craft a space of possibility for bodies also produces a possibility for readers. This space allows readers to consider issues that might produce transformations within themselves. Readers might recognize that sex, gender, and sexuality should not be essentialized. This recognition is the first step in moving beyond hegemonic norms regulating and constructing limited gender and sexual identity categories.
Chapter Two: Expressions of Love and Desire

Winterson deconstructs the social categories of sex and gender to produce a new linguistic space that is not reliant on the binary. She also does this when writing about love in the novel. Winterson destabilizes our reliance on the language of love to construct meaning in relationships. By doing this, the language of love is recreated in the novel to be expansive rather than controlling. Winterson links language and love in the novel by illustrating the paradox inherent in both: the language of love is troubling in the sense that it is a necessary language, but the words to represent the emotions of love are never enough. Furthermore Written on the Body creates a new way of speaking about love and lovers through a language that is intense with desire. This language used to express the intensity causes a displacement of self/other and causes the narrator and Louise to fuse. The fusion creates a space where Louise and the narrator become something more only when they are together.

Clichés

Winterson constructs this love story by invoking clichés to emphasize our reliance on these familiar phrases only to show that these phrases are void of meaning. Anton C. Zijderveld, who conducted a study on the sociological function of clichés, provides a definition of cliché:

A cliché is a traditional form of human expression (in words, thoughts, emotions, gestures, acts) which – due to repetitive use in social life – has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it thus fails positively to contribute meaning, social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behaviour... while it avoids reflection on meaning. (10)
Here Zijderveld asserts that clichés function as a way of life through our thoughts, gestures, and acts. But because these thoughts, gestures, and acts are continually repeated, they often lose their meaning within social interactions. Because we do not realize this, we keep on reiterating the same behavior and therefore avoid any “moral responsibility” in our behavior (Zijderveld 47).

Before meeting Louise, the narrator would live life and have relationships without taking responsibility for her/his actions. At the beginning of the novel the narrator conveys her/his past relationships and her/his lack of commitment to any of them. The narrator admits that she/he likes the comfortable armchair of clichés (10) when it comes to relationships because the narrator is afraid of love and wishes to avoid moral responsibility in relationships. Clichés also aid in controlling perceptions because when we refuse to take responsibilities for our actions, as Zijderveld claims, we begin to live life like clichés. This is exactly what happens to the narrator getting her/him into trouble. Throughout the course of the novel, the narrator realizes the damage clichés cause: “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble” (10). The narrator reiterates similar phrases five more times throughout the novel to demonstrate the trouble with clichés (21, 26, 71, 155, 180).1 Invoking clichés and then using them throughout the text to describe the inevitable problem of expressing love, the narrator assists readers in becoming aware of the paradox of love and the language used to represent it. The phrase “I love you” is problematic because it does have some meaning for lovers. Society and the narrator do not want to let go of this phrase. On the one hand, we value this statement because we need to hear it from our partner. On the other hand, we detest it for its lack of value

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1 The repetition of phrases is common in Winterson’s work: see The Passion “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (5, 13, 40, 69); “You play, you win. You play, you lose. You play” (66, 73, 133); “Somewhere between fear and sex passion is” (55, 62, 76).
because we recognize that the phrase is used too often and loses meaning. We know the phrase is clichéd.

According to Marianne Børch, Winterson plays with the idea of cliché, which is "the very essence of repetition, yet spontaneously used to enunciate uniqueness [and also used on] the road to clarifying love's ontology" (45). The textual play that Winterson uses with clichés continuously reminds the reader of the inherent problem with language: words can never display what they aim to represent. Language only defers understanding because language is an arbitrary system that produces its own meanings. Clichés seem to be helpful since they appear to be definitive and not arbitrary. However, Winterson illustrates through the narrator that clichés are not definitive because they are so overused and thus void of meaning.

After the narrator's relationship with Louise, the narrator learns that she/he was living life through clichés and trying to appropriate a limiting language for the love between the narrator and Louise. On the first page of the novel, the narrator has already lost Louise and is looking back to see what went wrong. The narrator is trying to figure out her/his mistakes and is recalling them for us. The narrator discusses the most clichéd phrase within the language of love, "I love you," and how relying on this phrase is destructive:

You said 'I love you.' Why is that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? 'I love you' is always a quotation. You did not say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them. I did worship them but now I am alone on a rock hewn out of my own body.
CALIBAN You taught me language and my profit on't is I know how to curse.

The red plague rid you For learning me your language. (9)

Here the narrator points out that clichés, like gender categories, are illusions, constructed phrases we rely on that have no real meaning. The narrator suggests the difficulty in relying on the familiar words “I love you” whose meaning is never quite present.

In an article on postmodern love, feminist critic Catherine Belsey states “Love is thus at once endlessly pursued and ceaselessly suspected...postmodern love is both silent and garrulous. It cannot speak, and yet it seems that it never ceases to speak in late twentieth-century Western culture” (par. 9). The emotion of love itself cannot speak yet we still try to express it in language. Roland Barthes claims in *A Lover’s Discourse* that these words are void of meaning, “*I love you* has no meaning whatever...*I love you* is without nuance. It suppresses explanation, adjustments, degrees, scruples” (147-8; emphasis in original). The narrator realizes that these words fail us in expressing an encompassing, responsible love and at the same time the narrator cannot let go of them. Critic Celia Shiffer asserts that the narrator worships the phrase “I love you” and realizes, like Caliban, that she/he was praying to an “empty phrase” and “placed his or her faith in a system meant to obscure rather than to speak truth” (37). Love is an esoteric system and, according to Barthes, “I love you” can only be understood in the moment in which it is uttered; there is no other meaning present within the phrase (148). Winterson’s narrator’s vision of love is stuck in a language whose foundation is void of meaning, and she/he cannot get out of this system because all “the rules [of love] keep changing” (10). The narrator refuses to take the risk of engaging with love in a new way.
Again Winterson brings our attention to how words are used to construct meaning. Winterson suggests words and their meanings constantly fluctuate and, like Barthes, she feels that we cannot understand words outside of their contexts. The meanings of words are constantly deferred and are only understood through signifiers, the form the sign takes, and signifieds, the idea it symbolizes (Chandler 19). Words and their meanings should be taken seriously, for the words that the narrator uses towards Jacqueline should not have the same meaning towards Louise. But the narrator has trouble distinguishing that words and the actions words purport must be different for each person. The narrator relies on normative contexts by not seeing the newness that Louise embodies. The narrator has never met a person like Louise before, so in the narrator's attempt to know Louise, the narrator communicates with her in a safe, familiar, and clichéd language. According to Zijderveld, clichéd phrases and gestures have lost their value but the narrator still uses them because they produce comfortable and established meanings and emotions within the narrator's various relationships.

Patriarchal and heteronormative views of love and desire also assist in controlling the meaning of love. Marriage is a patriarchal idea that is used to contain desire and seemingly protect women. But as the narrator points out, through a clichéd male perspective, marriage and desire cannot possibly coexist because “Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire. You may as well take a pop-gun to a python...You'll lie awake at night twisting your wedding ring round and round” (78-9). Catherine Belsey also indicates that society’s wish to keep desire confined to marriage does not always work out for the best, and marriage produces “at best a lifetime of surveillance and self surveillance for the couple in question, and at worst the perfect opportunity for domestic
violence and child abuse, concealed within the privacy of the nuclear family” (par. 8).

According to Belsey, heterosexual marriage confines love and only exists for the purpose of reproduction. In the novel Winterson changes the context in which we view love and desire. She suggests that desire does not have to be tamed through marriage. The narrator claims that love can exist without heterosexual reproduction, “I have no desire to reproduce but I still seek out love” (108). Winterson creates the possibility of a relationship that is not based on traditional heteronormative ideals of marriage and reproduction.

The chivalric hero is another cliché that illustrates patriarchal views of love. The narrator attempts to place both her/himself and Louise as characters in a romance novel. The narrator acts as the chivalric hero while Louise is given the subordinate role of the damsel in distress a “Victorian heroine... A heroine from a Gothic novel” (49). The narrator views Louise as “My child. My baby. The tender thing I wanted to protect” (159). The narrator infantilizes Louise and views her as a child that must be protected from itself. The narrator realizes that she/he uses Elgin’s patriarchal language by trying to protect Louise. Furthermore, the narrator recognizes that she/he takes on the role of chivalric hero trying to save the damsel in distress, “Who do I think I am? Sir Launcelot? Louise is a Pre-Raphaelite beauty but that doesn’t make me a mediaeval knight” (159). The narrator is aware of the patriarchal framework this cliché invokes, yet she/he cannot seem to extricate her/himself from it.

The idea of the narrator taking on the role of the chivalric hero in order to save the damsel in distress emphasizes the cliché of male protection over a female body; a woman cannot survive without a man. The narrator leaves Louise to Elgin in order to protect her
from her own body which is turning on itself. Elgin, an oncologist, represents the invasive penetration and protection of the female body by science, a patriarchal position as well. Critic Kym Martindale contends that by the narrator casting her/himself and Louise as clichéd characters in a romance novel, “the narrator mistakes cowardice for heroic sacrifice and elides romance and sensuality with illness” (par. 12). The patriarchal and heteronormative views on love are codified and become the foundation in these types of clichés. The narrator cannot delineate real emotions from her/his clichéd responses because the narrator thinks the two are closely related. The narrator is aware of the clichés, but cannot avoid falling into them.

Translation

When thinking about the idea of translation, we are typically prone to the cliché that something is always “lost in translation.” This idea only works if one believes that translations must mirror the original. Winterson points this out because the narrator is trying to translate Louise into a preexisting context and this is where the narrator falls short. The narrator tries to accept Louise’s new idea of love when Louise states “I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them...Come to me new. Never say you love me until that day when you have proved it” (54). But the narrator is not experienced with this sort of translation. Because of the narrator’s previous experiences with other women, the narrator thinks that she/he could translate those experiences and feelings into a similar language and apply it towards the relationship with Louise. However the narrator finds that trying to understand Louise through a language of the past does not work, and the one-to-one correspondence of past to present desire fails because the narrator cannot translate Louise’s new idea of love.
Louise’s inscriptions of love are lost in translation because the narrator does not understand who Louise is and what she has tried to change within the narrator.

Since the narrator is a translator, the narrator is used to controlling her/his translations. There is the active participant – the narrator as translator, versus the passive object – Louise as text. But when the narrator tries to control the text, we see the problem: the narrator cannot control her/his understanding of Louise. When this happens the narrator immediately tries to put Louise into a familiar position where she is passive and the narrator attempts to control her, by envisioning her as “a character in a book. Did I invent her” (189). Gail Right, the narrator’s employer in Yorkshire, answers: “No, but you tried to. She wasn’t yours for the making” (189). Because the narrator uses pre-existing clichéd methods to translate Louise’s inscriptions of love, the narrator overlooks “the true text written by Louise, which is a story of difference, and, so, difficulty” (Børch 51). Here Winterson attempts to overturn the active/passive binary of narrator/lover as translator versus Louise/beloved as translated.

The disturbance of the active/passive binary produces a new space where the narrator is not only a translator but is also being translated and changed by Louise. The narrator finally recognizes that their relationship is different from the narrator’s past relationships. The narrator’s past relationships have lasted for six months or less due to the narrator’s “circadian clock” (79). They have been affairs which might have had passion but lacked commitment. With Louise, the narrator finally thinks she/he has found both, “With Louise I want to do something different. I want the holiday and homecoming together” (79), while the narrator used to think that passion “is for the holidays, not homecoming” (27). Here the narrator’s ideas on passion, which can be
thought of as equivalent to love and desire, are changing. The narrator used to think that passion did not last very long in a relationship, maybe a week or two, the time span of a vacation. Now, the narrator realizes that passion with Louise can exist beyond a short time. The narrator’s shifting ideas of passion and love are important because change must occur within the lives of both partners in the relationship in order to maintain love and for the love to be successful. This is something that the narrator has never understood until after losing Louise.

The narrator also alters her/his view on love by recognizing the wrong she/he had done towards Louise and tries to take responsibility for her/his actions: “I had failed Louise and it was too late. What right had I to decide how she should live? What right had I to decide how she should die” (157). Now the narrator realizes that love is not protecting the beloved from harm, illness, or death, but rather taking responsibility to embrace and support the beloved so that they can deal with problems together. Louise is willing to let their love reconstruct her life, but the narrator, at the beginning of the text, fears change. When the narrator realizes that her/his love for Louise consists of supporting Louise and watching her die, the narrator feels this change of heart has come too late. Louise challenges the narrator’s conception of love; she wants something more than the clichés the narrator has offered her/his past lovers. She wants the narrator’s words to correspond to her/his actions. Now the quest for the narrator is to produce something new. What this means for the narrator is to think about love in ways the narrator has not thought of before.

Through the patriarchal and heteronormative views on love as well as the notion of translation we can see that Winterson provides us with formulated versions and ideas
of love and desire. She forces us to confront the limitations of the language of love through the use of clichés; in doing so we start to recognize, as we did with the language of gender, that these limited categories do not hold. Just as Winterson uses language to create a new space where gender is unrestrained, she does the same with the language of love.

**A New Space of Language and Love**

In *Written on the Body* Winterson views love as a combination of the metaphorical and physical, and these two levels must work together in order to create a new space of love. When discussing love, writers\(^2\) have a tendency to move to the metaphorical and lyrical and abandon the material, the physical acts of love. But Winterson writes about love to illustrate that the metaphorical cannot substitute for the physical. Both are needed to create the intensity that is required for crafting a new language and space of love. This intensity is not just about the romantic language of love, but is also about our thoughts and actions towards the beloved. After a night of lovemaking, the narrator meditates and is in awe of the intensity Louise creates by reading and writing the narrator's body:

Articulacy of fingers...signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your morse code interfered with my heart beat. I had a steady heart before I met you, I relied upon it, it had seen active service and grown strong. Now you alter its pace with your own rhythm, you play

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\(^2\) I am particularly thinking about metaphysical poets such as John Donne.
upon me, drumming me taut. Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there...I like to keep my body rolled away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn’t know Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book. (89)

In this passage, we can see the combination of metaphorical and physical language used to express love. The love between the narrator and Louise is visceral and experienced through both body and mind. Louise captures the narrator’s flesh and transforms it into a book to write her desires onto the narrator’s body. The goal of writing is to disrupt, challenge, and move beyond the boundaries that have been created by culture. It is being able to write what has been forbidden in culture, thus what has been forbidden for the body to experience. As succinctly summarized by critic Michael Hardin, when one writes the body, one writes a forbidden text (par. 10).

In The Newly Born Woman Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement argue this point in relation to women’s bodies: “Woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserve” (94-5). Here Cixous and Clement use a language that emphasizes pushing against barriers, confinement, and borders; it is a language of going beyond, a language of excess. The only way to go beyond the barriers to get to the space of excess is to write, to lose control over the text and write about sexuality and the body in ways that will “inundate” and “run through” the patriarchal “partitions” and “codes” that have been created by culture and society. The “partitions” and “codes” Cixous and Clement challenge refer to the hegemonic norms of
body, sex and gender that women are forced to adhere to. Women must exceed these boundaries and Winterson uses Cixous’s and Clement’s model by having Louise read, write, and translate the body of the narrator. But when Louise “scored,” “referenced,” “interferes” and “alters” the narrator’s body, she wants something more of the narrator (89). When Louise says “Come to me new,” she wants the narrator to exceed the patriarchal and heteronormative language that she/he has used in the past (54). The space that Louise speaks of when she says “Come to me new” is a space of excess which does not correspond to either the narrator or Louise individually. Only when they are together breaking the codes and boundaries, that Cixous and Clement discuss, are they something more than individuals. Just as the metaphorical and material levels must combine to create a new space and language of love, Louise and the narrator’s bodies must also collaborate to develop into something more that exceeds individuality.

By writing on the body of the narrator, Louise shows the narrator that poetic and material aspects of love must be combinatory for their love to work. The narrator changes because of Louise and becomes something more when she/he realizes that love is not “lodged in the body more than held in the mind” as the narrator used to think (82). Louise also changes because the possibility of Louise becoming something more than the socially constructed heterosexual woman exists only in the relationship with the narrator. Louise and the narrator now have equal abilities to write on each other’s bodies so there is no power struggle between them, “Neither of us had the upper hand, we wore matching wounds” (163). Now the active/passive binary is deflated between Louise and the narrator for a more fluid relationship in an expansive space that does not confine love or desire but exceeds it with the body and language.
This new space of love between the narrator and Louise also has its own new type of language. The narrator speaks a new language of love through the intense focus on the physicality of the body. The type of intense evocation of physicality is something we do not find in many love stories; and if we do find it, it is rarely as powerfully evoked as what Winterson is doing throughout her novel. Winterson pushes the boundaries of narrative by suggesting that desire and sexuality are just as important to write about as love. But the problem is that desire and sexuality are taboo subjects consistently unspoken in society because they are intimately connected with the body and almost anything related to the body is silenced.\textsuperscript{3} Winterson privileges the body as a medium to tell stories and again demands that these taboo subjects be given a loud voice in her text. By juxtaposing the realism of scientific medical language with aesthetic language, the narrator attempts to escape the clichés of the language of love as well as combining the discourses as a new medium to tell stories about the body. This idea is part of the narrator’s new way of expressing desire for Louise.

Through describing the intense physicality of the body, Winterson is interested in how the “word [is] made flesh” (33). In trying to express a new love for Louise, the narrator recalls her body parts first in medical language and then reconfigures them through aesthetic language which results in erotic images. The reconfiguring occurs in the middle of the novel in the four sections entitled “The Cells, Tissues, Systems, and Cavities of the Body”; “The Skin”; “The Skeleton”; and “The Special Senses.”\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3} If time permitted I would go into more detail on this subject. This is a vast subject matter; for more information on how sexuality, especially the female sexuality, is repressed linguistically, see works by Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva.

\textsuperscript{4} This section is very similar to Monique Wittig’s\textit{ The Lesbian Body}, where Wittig also reconfigures the female body using scientific and aesthetic language. For more on the similarity between the two texts see Burns 297.
Winterson pushes the boundaries of traditional narrative by combining and challenging stylistic as well as social conventions to describe the body. In these sections Louise’s body is no longer invaded by disease but is invaded by the narrator’s desire (Burns 296). It is only through putting Louise’s body into different languages that the narrator finally writes “a love poem to Louise” (111). She/he comes to know and understand Louise as a subject and not an object to protect and possess. The narrator has changed her/his view about Louise and knows her through her agency. The narrator recognizes that Louise actively writes her own desire onto the narrator’s body. This is an important concept when thinking about how we know the beloved, and the issue of agency refuses the active/passive binary. It is possible to view this section of the novel as one in which the narrator attempts to contain Louise through the use of “doctor-think” medical language (175). However, according to Winterson critic Antje Lindenmeyer, the narrator never gains a powerful position using medical language because the narrator is also “destroyed in the process” (56). The narrator states, “You must be rid of life as I am rid of life. We shall sink together, you and I, down, down into the dark voids where once the vital organs were” (119). The narrator’s individuality is destroyed because the narrator and Louise are equals, and their bodies and minds united.

At the beginning of each section, the narrator gives us a clinical definition of the body part being described and then provides her/his own lyrical definition. Here, the skin is described in medical terms, “THE SKIN IS COMPOSED OF TWO MAIN PARTS: THE DERMIS AND THE EPIDERMIS” (133). The capitalization of letters and short definition suggests an impersonal and technical meaning of the word skin. But the
narrator is loquacious in describing the poetic qualities of Louise’s skin and mentions the physical sensations evoked from her skin, especially the smell and taste of skin:

   Your smell smoothes me to sleep, I can bury myself in the warm goosedown of your body. Your skin tastes salty and lightly 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. (123)

This alliterative passage invokes erotic images and reads almost like short a poem.

According to Burns, Winterson’s writing “heightens her readers’ awareness of the ‘body’ of the word--its sensate properties--through repetition of sounds and elaborate incorporation of rhythm” (280). In the above mentioned passage we can see Winterson’s attempt to transform the word into flesh. The narrator remembers Louise’s body through language, and through this new love language, the narrator renews how she/he knows Louise.

   The narrator still loves and desires Louise’s skin even though the skin is the one part of the body that continually dies. Because of the illness, Louise’s skin color and texture changes, “yellow like limestone, like limestone worn by time, shows up the marbling of veins. The pale translucency hardens and grows cold” (132). The skin is no longer a poetic vehicle used to praise and heighten the beloved to a goddess, instead Louise is a “knight in shining armour” (123). The powerful description of Louise’s skin as limestone, which is rough, and marble, which is smooth, demonstrates the narrator’s desire to recall Louise’s body in ways that differ from traditional narratives.

Conventional love stories do not meditate on and desire the sick body of the beloved but remember the beloved as healthy and vibrant. But the narrator breaks the meditation to
tell reader that using these poetic words to describe Louise may betray her, “I’m living on my memories like a cheap has-been...talking aloud, fool-ramblings” and these memories create a “poor reproduction” of Louise (124-5). Here, the narrator calls attention to the fact that although she/he remembers Louise’s body, she/he is also constructing and imagining Louise’s body according to her/his fantasies and imagining what happens to Louise’s body as she gets sicker. The narrator also calls attention to the fact that metaphorical poetic language cannot fully translate the beloved because the physical material language of the body is also needed. The narrator finally realizes that love is both material and poetic; love is not only of body, but of the imagination as well.

The intensity of desire and flesh is also displayed through the merging of the narrator’s and Louise’s bodies. The narrator experiences a joining between self and other where the narrator cannot distinguish her/himself from Louise and the desire for Louise and her body intensifies. This occurs many times throughout the text (99, 120, 129, 132, 163). There are two examples using mirror images where the narrator looks at her/himself and sees Louise. “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). In this example, the narrator is unsure who she/he is looking at, her/himself or Louise. In the other instance concerning a mirror image the narrator states, “Your face under the moon, silvered with cool reflection, your face in its mystery, revealing me” (132). When the narrator looks at Louise’s face she/he sees both Louise and her/himself revealed through Louise. The narrator’s perception of her/himself changes because the narrator now feels united with Louise’s body. In the above mentioned quotes, it is evident that Winterson uses the mirror as a way to link ideas concerning perception and translation; the narrator
sees and translates what she/he sees in the images. But, the narrator does not simply translate what she/he sees, it is more than that. There is intensity between the bodies of the narrator and Louise as the narrator’s body becomes something different, something more with Louise’s body.

The intensity of becoming between the bodies of the narrator and Louise can be explained as a rhizomatic becoming as theorized by Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. A rhizome is something that has no fixed point of origin but can and must be connected to other structures like social, political, and economic arenas; it is not limited to linguistics. Rhizomes do not search for the root of structure; they aim at establishing non-stop connections between such structures as semiotics, power, arts, and sciences (7). Furthermore, rhizomes function by masses of heterogeneous lines; and there are no genealogies (7). By using the analogy of wasp and orchid, this theory claims that two heterogeneous objects link to form a rhizome.5 The rhizome is significant when discussing intensity because, when together, the concentration of power exerted by both Louise and the narrator is so great that it creates a strong force that unites them. Their fusing together makes them stronger than individuals, creating a rhizomatic line.

The narrator and Louise become a rhizome, two independent beings that link to form one being that is continuous and never ending. Since a rhizome “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle,” it avoids setting up a binary (Deleuze and Guattari 25). This process occurs through actions of the body and through the language of love and desire. This becoming takes the narrator beyond the space of the self as the intensity is experienced viscerally. The binaries of self/other and I/you are displaced for a union of

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5 For the full example of the orchid/wasp scenario see page 10 in *A Thousand Plateaus.*
two beings where there is no hierarchy; a more powerful language emerges with strong attention paid to the flesh. There are three instances in the novel where the narrator and Louise are one flesh: “I turn a corner and recognize myself again. Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones...That is how I know you. You are what I know” (120); “She was my twin and I lost her...my skin was not waterproof against Louise. She flooded me and she has not drained away” (163); “To remember you it’s my own body I touch” (129-30). In these three passages we can see that the narrator’s and Louise’s bodies have become one; they are linked like the wasp and the orchid. The narrator and Louise “deterritorialize” one body and “reterritorialize” the other (Deleuze and Guattari 10). Louise and the narrator lose their individuality so that they can unite their bodies and become something more with each other to form a new rhizomatic line. This becoming between Louise and the narrator, a new form of translation, is not about changing places with each other. It is not about just being, since being indicates a stable position that does not move. In contrast to being, becoming, especially rhizomatic becoming, is a state of constant movement. It is a never ending process, a powerful and “exploding” intensity that continues forever (10). The narrator’s and Louise’s desire for each other cause a powerful force which unites their bodies, and their love and strength will never cease.

The rhizomatic becoming between Louise and the narrator constitutes the space of excess that Cixous and Clement call for. Only when their bodies are united in this space are they something more than individuals, and together they can break the patriarchal and hegemonic codes and boundaries of language and love. This idea is important in
Winterson’s transformation project because Winterson must create a non-hierarchical language to complement the equality in the relationship.
Chapter Three: Challenging Structural Conventions: Body Knowledges/Languages, Metafiction, and First Person Narration

Winterson creates a new space to write about love where there is no hierarchy between lovers and the language of desire displaces the space between self/other. But the way in which she writes this new non-hierarchical space challenges traditional narrative form. Winterson writes a space that disputes forms and hierarchies of knowledge, combines discourses and upsets the dichotomies of reality/fantasy and fact/fiction. Winterson reveals that we should not rely on these conventions as natural. She illustrates that literary conventions are constructions that are influenced by social structures. These conventions simultaneously reflect upon social views while solidifying them as well, and this is why Winterson challenges these views. Her goal is to illustrate the control that constructions have over us. She hopes that her readers might recognize this control and attempt to transform their thinking about so-called natural structures like hierarchies.

By utilizing multiple discourses Winterson demonstrates that there is no singular language in which stories of love and the body can be told. Gregory Rubinson provides a list of the many languages and forms Winterson employs: “literary, scientific, political, mythic, romantic, culinary, cliché, women’s magazine, screenplay, topographical and even chronobiological” (228). In using these different discourses and forms of writing, stories of the body and love can be explored in ways beyond the patriarchal discourses of the body and traditional language of romance. In particular, women’s bodies and their stories have traditionally been caught up in oppressive patriarchal discourses. Winterson comments on this point in an interview, “It has been very damaging for women who have had to passively receive all kinds of stories about
themselves which they only in the past 100 years, or even in the last 30 years, beginning to unravel” (Barr 31). Because Winterson does not give authority to any one discourse in the novel, she provides new possibilities to express the body.

Winterson also challenges conventions about knowledge in the novel. She confronts the hierarchy of knowledge by suggesting that scientific and aesthetic knowledge can coexist, and when they are used together, they produce a new knowledge that is not limiting in authority. Traditionally science is a knowledge that is based on fact and truth, whereas art, particularly literature, is a knowledge based on subjectivity and seemingly rejects fact and truth. Postmodernist critic Jane Flax explains that society’s trust in science stems from Enlightenment ideas where “‘science’…can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for knowledge….science, as the exemplar or the right use of reason, is also the paradigm for all true knowledge. Science is neutral in its methods and contents but socially beneficial in its results” (41-2). Flax later argues that science is not natural but is the result of the human work. “[N]atural ceases to exist as the opposite of the cultural or social. Nature becomes the object and product of human action” (50). In other words, Flax claims that scientific knowledge does not always provide objective knowledge. Rubinson agrees with Flax’s point and further claims that science and its language are “constructive and ideologically informed” (228).

While physicality demands the poetic as well as the scientific to create a new language of desire, the way in which Winterson uses scientific language disrupts our preconceived notions that science provides concrete knowledge about the body. In fact she proves, in more than one way, how unstable scientific knowledge really is. Winterson does this by combining scientific discourse with more artistic discourses.
Here is a description of the clavicle in medical terms, “THE CLAVICLE PROVIDES THE ONLY BONY LINK BETWEEN THE UPPER EXTREMITY AND THE AXIAL SKELETON” (129). This scientific language is highly impersonal. According to Rubinson medical language takes on an air of authority over the subject matter “while obscuring any sense of speaker” (224). But Rubinson also asserts that discourses of science are challenged when they are faced with human emotion and feeling (224). This is why the narrator goes on to describe Louise’s clavicle in another way. The following illustrates the coexistence of scientific and poetic language in the narrator’s desire for Louise’s clavicle:

I think of it as the musical instrument that bears the same root. Clavis. Key. Clavichord. The first stringed instrument with a keyboard. Your clavicle is both keyboard and key. If I push my fingers into the recesses behind the bone I find you like a soft shell crab. I find the openings between the springs of muscle where I can press myself into the cords of your neck. (129)

When describing the clavicle in these lyrical terms the language is personal and poetic; it illustrates the narrator’s desire for Louise. By using both scientific and aesthetic language to express the narrator’s desire, Winterson illustrates that there are infinite poetic possibilities to represent desire when the hierarchies of knowledge about the body are displaced. As a result, the language used to tell stories about the body and desire are more fluid and no longer limiting. In this sense, science, when combined with art, is no longer “ideologically informed,” as Rubinson claims, but is free of oppressive rules.

The fact that scientific and aesthetic languages are not separated in different realms is vital to the understanding of the novel. The meditation on Louise’s body can
only exist because we have two different discourses that function together. The coupling of the two languages produces a third space where there is no one controlling story of the body. In recounting Louise’s face, the narrator claims that scientific words like “Frontal bone, palatine bones, nasal bones, lacrimal bones, cheek bones, maxilla, vomer, inferior conchae, mandible...those words don’t remind me of your face” (132; my emphasis). For the narrator, these technical terms do not do justice in describing Louise’s face because the words are impersonal and can be used to describe any face. Like Lyotard, Winterson rejects master narratives, a set of universal truths, which privilege some narratives and marginalize others. She adopts both scientific and artistic narratives as mediums to tell stories. The narrator wants to depict Louise in a new light and only using medical terminology is not sufficient for the narrator’s job. Instead the narrator knows Louise through other ways, “I know how your hair tumbles from its chignon and washes your shoulders in light. I know the calcium of your cheekbones. I know the weapon of your jaw. I have held your head in my hands but I have never held you. Not you in your spaces, spirit, electrons of life” (120). The narrator reclaims the body from a singular knowledge and instead looks to both science and art in order to tell an innovative story about the loved one’s body.

This story and its descriptions of the female body are not restricted to Western culture’s myths about the body which stem from the Enlightenment; this story about the body and love is “enlightened” through the use of both scientific and artistic language. Winterson tries to disrupt our thinking so that we can view the world in a different light. By not privileging science over art, she aims to demonstrate that the intensity of the

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6 In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard defines postmodernism “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv).
language between the two is what creates this new space that I theorize throughout this paper. Only through the combination of science and art in a singular realm does this language about the body become something more than what we usually imagine it to be. The section on Louise’s body is not a way for the narrator to appropriate and take control of her body as some critics argue, but is a way to set the body free through language.

Another way Winterson disrupts the authority of science is through mocking those in the medical profession and their ability to treat illness. Elgin, Louise’s husband, is a doctor although he does not treat patients. The narrator tells us of a time when Elgin plays a computer game called “HOSPITAL” and performs surgery on a virtual patient (29). Louise claims that money has corrupted Elgin and he “doesn’t care about people. He never sees any people. He hasn’t been on a terminal care ward for ten years. He sits in a multi-million pound laboratory in Switzerland for half the year and stares at a computer” (67). Moreover, Elgin and another doctor the narrator meets when visiting cancer patients both represent the “limits of scientific knowledge and the relative primitivism of medical technology” (Rubinson 225). Elgin represents the former and the other doctor represents the latter. In describing Louise’s illness Elgin states, “Cancer is an unpredictable condition. It is the body turning upon itself. We don’t understand that yet. We know what happens but not why it happens or how to stop it” (105). Elgin’s lack of knowledge about the disease demonstrates that cancer cannot be controlled and doctors do not have the knowledge or ability to prevent it. Therefore, scientific knowledge is not an all knowing or “reliable” wisdom, as Flax states. The other doctor in the novel claims that when newly diagnosed cancer patients try to discover information about treatments all they realize is “How little [doctors] know. It’s the late twentieth
century and what are the tools of our trade? Knives, saws, needles, and chemicals. I've no time for alternative medicine but I can see why it's attractive" (150). Winterson removes the prestige that doctors are experts and assert certainty when it comes to science, medical technology, and healing. These episodes underscore Lyotard's claims that “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative” (7). Like Lyotard, Winterson believes that scientific knowledge should not be privileged but should co-exist with narrative or literature. For Winterson, the amalgamation of both discourses obliterates the hierarchy of knowledge.

**Reality vs. Fantasy**

The de-authorizing of scientific knowledge as all knowing and conclusive assists in crafting a space where Winterson can disrupt traditional narrative conventions. Interrogating the lines between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, is necessary in order to understand the new space that refuses to abide by the system of binary oppositions created in *Written on the Body*. Winterson utilizes aspects of the fantastic in the novel as a way to view the body as an alternative space, transcend oppressive discourses that have contained the body, and challenge traditional narrative structure. In *Metafiction*, Patricia Waugh discusses Tzvetan Todorov's views on the fantastic:

The essence of the fantastic in his view is that it ‘hesitates’ both understanding and definition of the ‘reality’ outside fiction. All metafictional texts question precisely this ‘existence of an irreducible opposition between real and unreal.’ Many of them pursue their questioning through self-conscious construction of
alternative worlds which contest the ‘reality’ of the everyday world, or of each other. (109)

Oppressive patriarchal discourses might exist in the alternative world of fantasy. However the strength of fantasy’s realm rests in the fact that it is a world comprised without rules. The world of the novel questions the “reality of the everyday world” and Winterson reveals that reality itself is as much of a construction as the books we read. The narrator also calls attention to constructed reality because she/he is a fictive character who continually point outs that she/he is not restricted to giving real accounts of her/himself or situations.

In the world of Written on the Body, “fictive biography of the self is much more important than what actually took place...the insistence on the importance of the act of remembering be it real or fictitious, over what ‘really’ happened, denies the power of facts” (Kauer 43). The narrator consistently doubles back on what she/he says or does and sometimes even does it in the same paragraph. The narrator describes a time when she/he fed Louise “plums the color of bruises,” but then five sentences later states “There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology...[but] Nevertheless I will push on” claiming that “There were plums and I broke them over you” (118). In this example, the narrator questions her/himself about the chronology and facts of this event. But this does not seem to concern the narrator, for the desire to feed Louise plums or the desire to remember feeding her plums is stronger than whether the events actually took place. Furthermore Winterson suggests that desire obscures perception. The human condition is such that people will see only what they want to see. Reality is not an absolute “truth,” reality is about individual perception – a construction
of facts. These facts are produced through a combination of the reality that faces us and the desire and fantasy of what we want in our minds; this is reality for Winterson.

**Metafiction**

The reconfiguration of narrative power through fantasy and reality is not the only way Winterson subverts narrative structure. Winterson also disrupts narrative structure when she grants power to the reader to make decisions about the text. Reader participation as well as self-conscious narrative structure are two central characteristics of metafiction (Hutcheon 6). Metafiction is a type of writing which consciously questions the problems of writing fiction in order to draw attention to the fact that one is reading fiction and thus questions the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh 2). While reading metafiction, the reader is forced to acknowledge that she is living in a world of fictions, but is also asked to partake in the “co-creation” of fiction (Hutcheon 7).

In *Written on the Body*, Winterson demands that the reader participate in the construction of the text. The narrator speaks directly to the reader as if the narrator could hear the reader’s thoughts and questions, “You think I’m trying to wriggle out of my responsibilities” (16); “Did I say this has happened to me again and again? You will think I have been constantly in and out of married women’s lumber rooms” (17). Furthermore, it is up to the reader to decide if the narrator’s stories are objective since the narrator goes out of her/his way to question her/his own objectivity. Phrases such as “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator” (24); “I don’t know if this will be a happy ending” (190), and the repetition of “Am I?” (22, 60) weakens the

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7 The first time this phrase occurs is when the narrator tells Inge when Renoir died “they found nothing between his balls but an old brush.” Inge asks “You’re making it up” and the narrator asks “Am I” (22); the second instance is similar to the first in that the narrator tells Louise when Henry Miller died “they found
narrator's credibility and forces the reader to question the narrator's reliability (Kauer 42). By doing this, Winterson gives authority to the reader to create and make decisions about the text. She cites in an interview that reader participation is an important part of her books, "What I try and do in all of my books is offer up many possibilities, many points of view, put them side by side because I want the reader also to tell their own story...They're there for the reader to think about, to make up their own minds" (Barr 31). Through granting the reader responsibility to "co-create" fiction, Winterson forces the reader to question the lines between reality/fantasy and fact/fiction not just in the novel, but in their own lives as well.

**Authority and First Person Narration**

The metafictional qualities of the novel impact narration because as metafiction questions writing fiction, Winterson questions the conventions of writing the narrative voice. Winterson utilizes the narrator in this novel as way to upset our reliance on conventional narration. The narrator's authority to tell stories is something that Winterson grapples with in *The Passion*, and this issue resurfaces in *Written on the Body* indicating the importance of this subject in her overall transformation project. To disrupt her narrator's authority, Winterson challenges the narrator's objectivity by utilizing two narrative voices: "I" and "you." In this novel, the narrator cannot be relied upon as an omniscient, all knowing storyteller, but rather one whose subjectivity and dual narrative voice interferes with traditional objective narration. This change from traditional single-voiced narration to dual-voiced narration is difficult for the reader because when the narrator uses the first person "I," the narrator is clearly speaking to the reader. But the

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nothing between his legs but a ball point pen;" Louise asks "You're making it up," and the narrator asks "Am I" (60).
narrator also utilizes second person “you,” and in these instances the narratee changes; the narrator could be speaking to Louise or the reader.

The I/you narrative voice also creates a dialogue format within the narrative. The narrator does not only tell the story to the reader, but is having a dialogue with the reader, the absent Louise, and one could even argue, with her/himself. Furthermore, by using the dialogue format Winterson resists the reader’s need for a monovocal omniscient narrative truth. Because of the dialogue format in the novel between the narrator/Louise and narrator/reader, the stories in the narrative continuously change for each reader. The I/you narrative voice helps change the story for readers because there is no longer one authoritative voice telling one story since the reader actively participates in creating the story as well.

An example of this is when, at the end of the novel, the narrator tells us that Louise appears in Yorkshire. But the narrator doubts if this is the truth, “Am I stark mad? She’s warm” (190). The narrator claims that the end of this novel is actually “where the story starts...I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world” (190). Two possibilities for this situation could be that Louise is actually in Yorkshire and they live happily ever after, or the narrator could be going mad and fantasizes Louise is there. By providing two potential conclusions, it seems as though Winterson sets up a dichotomy. But these conclusions become something more through Winterson’s reiteration of the power of desire and fantasy. With the latter conclusion, the narrator’s desire for Louise’s presence obscures her/his sense of reality and fantasy takes over. The world of Written on the Body is not required to abide by conventional narrative forms so the influence of desire and fantasy is stronger than reality. Because of this fantastic spin,
there can be endless meaning ascribed to the novel because this text is active, constantly changes (as with the conclusion) and every reader brings different experiences to a text.

“[W]ords are living things,” Winterson writes, that “can form and re-form into new wholes” (*Art Objects* 169). If the words of *Written on the Body* are living things that constantly change to “form and re-form,” then words can continuously alter in meaning to form new stories and new bodies. Winterson displaces oppressive one-sided stories, for a more interactive storytelling experience that includes the reader.
Conclusion

As readers we are implicated as co-creators or co-translators in Winterson’s transformation project. The idea of reader participation is imperative when thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality. Winterson’s narrator is sexually and gender ambiguous; and she leaves it up to the reader to translate how this lack of information impacts the story. Winterson invokes gendered conventions to make the reader think the narrator is male and then female, but then refuses to name the narrator’s gender. She wants the reader to recognize that we overly rely on gender to construct meaning about bodies. It is up to the reader to identify that the gender conventions Winterson appeals to are not natural within society. These so-called natural traits of men and woman are socially constructed and have been automatically placed according to biological sex and maintained by society in order to keep individuals under control. Winterson feels that biological sex should not determine gender identity, and masks the narrator’s sex so it does not impact the narrator’s gender identity. Furthermore, through the characterizations of the narrator’s various female lovers, Winterson illustrates that femininity is fluid and should not be fixed. There are various ideas of femininity and they all do not have to fit into the traditional socially constructed ideas of femininity.

Through the subversive characterization of the narrator, Winterson reveals oppressive structures of sex, gender and sexuality. She also creates alternative possibilities to theorize about the body. She provides readers with different options to think about, challenge, and dispute the traditional patriarchal and heteronormative ideas concerning the body. This is the way in which Winterson hopes to transform her reader’s thinking and let them co-create the novel as well.
Winterson also creates a new space of possibility when writing about love and again lets the reader be a co-translator in her transformation project. Winterson destabilizes our reliance on the language of love to construct meaning in relationships. She reveals that the language of love is necessary, but the problems rest in the fact that the words used to express the emotion of love are never enough. Winterson uses clichés of love to illustrate the problems of expressing love and how we rely on this language that is void of meaning to express an emotion that can never be present in itself. She illustrates that a new form is needed to express love.

Winterson uses desire and the body as an innovative way to convey love, but the way she writes about it is different from other love stories. The language of love within the novel is infused with desire to illustrate that desire is an essential component to love and the telling of a love story. Desire of the body and mind are a necessary combination for love. The languages used to express desire must also combine metaphorical and material language; one cannot be substituted for the other. Both are needed in order to take the lovers into a space that goes beyond the self, a space where they become something more together: a rhizomatic becoming. With language and love, Winterson reestablishes that physicality of the body is just as important to write about as the emotional component of relationships. Winterson conveys that there should be no hierarchies when it comes to love.

Winterson also includes the reader as co-creator in her transformation project when hierarchical myths concerning knowledge, language, and narrative conventions are revealed. Winterson forces the reader to question Enlightenment ideals of science as a primary form of knowledge when juxtaposed against cancer, a disease that eludes
scientific researchers like Elgin. She also disrupts dichotomies like reality/fantasy and fact/fiction to illustrate that we should not rely on these conventions as natural occurrences, rather they are constructions created by society. Moreover the dual narrative voice provides Winterson a way to subvert narrative authority. The novel challenges the idea that we can rely on facts within the novel as truths. The reader then, participates as co-creator of the text by evaluating the narrator’s reliability.

Winterson does not posit a definitive story for us. She leaves the story ambiguous, fragmented and multiple, all postmodern characteristics. Giving the reader the responsibility to co-create and co-translate *Written on the Body* is an important responsibility in Winterson’s transformation project, and she demands active participation of her readers. The question is how does the average reader negotiate the responsibility of seeing beyond the myths of social constructions that create categories and hierarchies? Moreover, how do readers really transform their thinking about the so-called natural structures in society? As I have argued throughout this paper, emphasizing the myths is the first step in moving beyond our reliance on them. For Winterson, emphasis is the only way to begin deconstructing the social structures that control our lives and produce some form of change that will disrupt the oppressive structures.
Works Cited


--. “Written on the Body.”


