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**Fluid Identities and Gendered Intimacies: the
Indeterminate Narrator in Jeanette Winterson's
*Written on the Body***

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Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes, never unfold too much, or tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book.

Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*

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Abstract

Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) deals with a brief but passionate relationship between its narrator and a beautiful, married woman called Louise. The novel tackles romantic relationships, love, loss and sexuality from an experimental point of view and presents an interesting, challenging feature: a genderless narrator. Winterson has created a narrative where every reference to the gender of the narrative voice has been carefully omitted, thus engaging the reader to participate in the construction of both the novel and the narrator's identity. For this reason, I would like to argue that this deliberate play on gender ambiguity places the reader in a situation where he or she is induced to deconstruct perceptions about sexuality. By refusing to reveal any information about the protagonist, Winterson undermines and challenges the very notion of gender and sexuality as the foundation of identity. In this case, I would argue that Winterson's narrator can be read as a realisation of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. One of the aims of the novel is to deconstruct clichés about gender, love and society-institutionalized masculine or feminine codes of behaviour that should go hand in hand with the deconstruction of the language of love, which is written on the body, hence the importance of the body and its absence. Ultimately, what is interesting is not Winterson's success or failure to deconstruct binaries, but the reader's response to this attempt and what it represents as a revelatory comment on contemporary society.

1. Introduction: Object of Study and Objectives

Jeanette Winterson's work is regarded as highly experimental, as she subverts the rules of language and narrative in order to create fluid, elusive characters which express a particular view on topics such as love, loss, the body, gender and identity. *Written on the Body* (1992) is one of her most famous works, together with *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). After dealing with lesbian sexual identities in her previous novels and receiving the Lambda Literary Award as the best lesbian novel in 1994, *Written on the Body* has often been presented as a lesbian fiction, though neither the author nor the narrator make such a statement. In fact this novel presents a most interesting, challenging feature: a genderless narrator. Winterson has weaved a narrative where every reference to the narrator's sexual identity has been carefully omitted and not even a close analysis can establish referential security as to the narrator's biological sex, only assumptions.

The aim of this paper is to review these assumptions in an attempt to illustrate Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1999), as well as to stress that the constant play on female/male identities predisposes the reader to a certain reading.

The thesis statement around which this paper turns is that, while gender fluidity might allow the narrator to explore and perform different identities beyond the confinement of a socially inscribed body, she/he cannot escape binarism. The narrative

voice fails to build a coherent and credible narrative and succumbs to the very clichés and stereotypes about love, gender and language that she/he avoids.

The recurrent deconstruction of language and topics such as clichés, gender roles, sexuality and identity is meant to make the reader question and reconsider his/her own beliefs, but as this paper will show, gender binaries are still pervasive and impossible to escape. The reach of the patriarchal society with its heteronormative codes is wide, affecting bodies in general and women's bodies in particular, as it will be discussed in the last part of my dissertation. The paper does not place much importance on the plot and the love triangle comprised by the narrator, the narrator's lover, Louise, and Louise's husband Elgin, but rather on the representation of this relationship and what it reveals in terms of power dynamics and heteronormative discourses. The absence of Louise's body as well as the narrator's lack of one are also addressed in order to discuss how this condition affects the narrative and in which ways it is related with the topic of gender fluidity and identity.

Relevant quotations from the primary source have been selected in order to show the narrator's different impersonations of both female and male identities, as well as to comment on the revelatory and frequent absences and silences in the text. Furthermore, books and articles on gender and its correlation with language and identity have been used and cited to consolidate the claims of this paper from a more accurate and documented perspective.

2. Ambiguous narrator and textual ambiguity

Reading a text which constantly eludes references to the narrator's identity does not only rise great expectations in the reader's mind, but it is also prone to frustrating those expectations by not fulfilling them. *Written on the Body* requires, apart from the reader's suspension in disbelief, his or her participation, exposing the reader to an array of choices in finding a specific meaning which would fill in the gap. It involves constructing a remarkable amount of information about its narrator and during this process the reader often finds him or herself questioning their own assumptions and beliefs.

The narrator makes no reference to his/her signs of identity, such as name, sex, interests, though he/she often invokes past and present experiences, feelings and memories, implying that these instances of human experience are more important and relevant to one's identity rather than institutionalized markers of gender and identity. The narrative starts in an *in media res* fashion, with the narrator's musings on love: "Why is the measure of love loss?" (WB 9). The narrator mixes "I" and "you" leaving the reader at a loss about whether it is the reader s/he addresses or a potential, imaginary lover. It is not until not until page 20 that the narrator uses the name Louise to refer to the lover which is cause and effect of all of the reflexions about love and loss s/he has made.

Readers and critics alike have searched through the text for gender markers to unveil the narrator's identity. In her article *The Genderization of Narrative* (1999),

Monika Fludernik states that there are two ways of constructing biological sex in narrative texts:

explicitly by graphic physical description and masculine/feminine gender (pro)nominal expressions (he vs. she; gendered first nouns); implicitly by the paraphernalia of our heavily gendered culture (handsome vs. beautiful; shirt vs. blouse) and by the heterosexual default structure (if A loves B, and A is a man, then B must be a woman). (Fludernik 1999:54)

The narrator avoids explicit gender markers in *Written on the Body*, but readers can gather hints which implicitly point towards one or the other pole of the gender continuum. At one point the narrator identifies with Alice in Wonderland: “I shall call myself Alice and play golf with the flamingos. In Wonderland everyone cheats and love is Wonderland isn’t it?” (WB 10) and Lauren Bacall: “I stared at it [the phone] the way Lauren Bacall does in those films” (WB 41), which leads the reader to the spontaneous premise that the narrator is a female since he/she chooses to refer to him/herself as Alice in Wonderland. The way other women are depicted in the novel is another key point which is addressed when trying to define the narrator’s identity. Apparently the protagonist sympathizes with women rather than with men, especially in scenes like the following: “At the Clap Clinic the following day, I looked at my fellow sufferers. Shifty Jack-the-lads, fat business men in suits to hide the bulge. A few women, tarts yes, and other women too. Women with eyes full of pain and fear” (WB 46). The narrator’s gaze stops at the men’s physical appearance and the comments have a negative, hateful connotation. Meanwhile women are looked at more insightful and seen as victims.

However, the reader is then forced to reevaluate his/her rush conclusion about the narrator’s gender when the narrator mentions the intimate words “I love you” carelessly given away “as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better” (WB 11). Furthermore, the narrative voice confesses his/her preference for married women or

refers to him/herself as Lothario, a character represented in different literary works¹ as a renowned womanizer. This association with a male identity adds to the repeated references about previous love affairs with women, which again induce the reader to the inevitable belief that the narrator is a male.

Pointing the reader to different directions the way Winterson does is not meant to deceive, but rather to display the extent to which we rely on stereotypes and conventional pre-inscribed discourses, as well as the way in which assumptions deriving from our heteronormativity predispose the majority of readers to the foregone conclusion that an unmarked sexuality is the natural mark of heterosexuality.

Although the narrator does not mention any physical change, Jennifer A. Smith (Smith:2011) proposes a trans-reading of the narrator in *Written on the Body*, based on Jeanette Winterson's (quite contradictory) declaration that the voice in the novel is allegedly both genders: "the gender of the character is both, throughout the book, and changes; sometimes it is female, sometimes it is male" (Stewart 1993:74). Smith further argues that a trans-interpretation of the text enables a more complex understanding of the narrative and the questions it poses. Indeed, claiming that the narrator is ungendered is not fully accurate: she/he does not escape either gender simply by occupying each end of the spectrum. Even if the narrator exhibits physical and behavioural characteristics of both the male and female genders, s/he does not definitively align him/herself with either end of the gender binary. What the voice in *Written on the Body* does is deconstruct rather than reconstruct itself on different levels in an attempt to deconstruct

¹ Lothario is a character in one of the subplots of *Don Quixote Part One* (1605) which sets to seduce his friend's wife in order to test her loyalty. Lothario is also a libertine character in Nicholas Rowe's play *The Fair Penitent* (1703) who seduces and betrays the female protagonist.

binaries, not only the male/female dichotomy, but also reader/author, word/meaning, fact/fiction. As Smith states:

Winterson's narrator lends itself to such a transgendered reading because his/her gender is in a ceaseless state of transition and therefore embodies the idea of postmodernism's emphasis on subjectivity's inevitable decentredness and continual fluidity; transgendered becomes an identity in continual transition between the gender poles, not the achievement of a definitively sexed body and the gendered category aligned with it. (Smith 2011:416)

Reading the narrator as transgender enables the reader to identify not only with the narrator, but, according to Hansen (2005: 367), as narrator: the lack of consistent information about the narrative voice makes it impossible for the readers to distinguish between the object and the source of their empathy, and as a consequence, through this mirrored empathy, the reader occupies the position of the protagonist.

The narrator enacts different gender roles, his/her behaviour leading us to attempt and classify him/her as either male or female. This reinforces Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity and gender as a construct with its inherent gender roles. In her work, Butler argues that gender is a cultural construct that is performed and inscribed upon the physical body. In this way, gender does not represent an innate quality, but rather an identity one performs according to social conventions. Cultural understandings of gender inscribe bodies with predetermined expectations outside of biological sex, and these understandings have no concrete basis. As Butler affirms, "what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality" (Butler 1999: xxiii).

Moreover, as the narrator does not say anything about him/herself, it is easier for the reader's own assumptions about sexuality, gender and gender roles to come out, thus making a point about society and the pervading heterosexist mentality. Looking for

evidence revealing the true identity of the narrator, the reader will find vague suggestions that depend upon social constructs of gender identities. The mystery of the narrator's gender is telling about how much of gender is actually constructed when an easy categorization is not possible. Either reading ideally brings into question the importance of the (un)gendered body, its role in power structures and the way it disrupts heteronormative interpretations.

3. Unreliable narrator and unreliable language

One of the topics the author deals with is the unreliability of language when it comes to express human experiences as well as its inability to convey these experiences genuinely. These shortcomings of language are encountered especially when trying to express feelings such as love, absence or loss. According to Winterson, this failure is not necessarily a consequence of language *per se*, but because people tend to rely on clichés: “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble” (WB 10), that is to say, that rather than expressing their true feelings, speakers tend to quote them *ad infinitum*:” 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”(WB 9). To an extent, it can be argued that the text mirrors its theme in an attempt to transcend boundaries.

If speakers in general cannot lean entirely on oral or written communication in order to express their feelings genuinely, neither can readers trust language, specifically the English language, to decipher the narrator's gender. A great deal of the text and

narrator's indeterminacy is rendered as such by the particular structure of the English language, which does not make use of a grammatical gender, thus allowing space for sexual ambiguity. The narrator relies on "I" and "you" to a large degree, which concedes the omission of gender designations.

The peril of this indeterminacy, however, is that a reader with a patriarchal, heteronormative background will easily read this unmarked narrator as male, with all the implications that such a reading entails. Accordingly, philosopher Pierre Bourdieu makes the following comment in his essay *Masculine Domination* (2001):

The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it[...]. It has often been observed that, both in social perception and in language, the masculine gender appears as non-marked, in a sense neuter, in opposition to the feminine, which is explicitly characterized. (Bourdieu 2001:9)

In this sense, it could be argued that language can be used as a tool to disseminate sexist values as well as to reinforce gender roles, whereby masculinity is performed through domination, while femininity is communicated by acts of submission, if not silenced or marginalized. The reader perceives the narrative through the eyes of the narrator, whose gaze upon Louise and the facts is active, rather than passive, which again might lead one to believe that this agency belongs to a male entity. This impression can be further intensified by the narrator's use of a phallic language, where the man is usually the explorer conquering the passive shores of a female body: "How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas?" (*WB* 52). The female body represented as a land to conquer and possess is often connected to the traditional heterosexual male describing his desire. In this line

Winterson seems to allude to John Donne's poem *To His Mistress Going to Bed*,² as well as emphasizing the way languages and discourses that society has inherited not only distort the meanings attempted, but they actually re-inscribe structures of power.

The indeterminacy of the narrative voice, paired with the heteronormative values that language sometimes might convey is also problematic because it is difficult to determine specifically in which ways the protagonist participates in or rejects a patriarchal system. The narrator admits his/her endorsement of a misuse of language: "There are victims of change but not victims of things. Why do I collude in this mis-use of language?" (WB 57). It could be argued that this reflection addresses not only the false comfort of clichés, but also how speakers contribute to consolidating a polarized and oppressing system by using certain words or expressions such as implicit or explicit gender markers. For instance, Louise, the narrator's lover, refers to the narrator's appearance by saying, "You were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen" (WB 84), using the unspecified and vague term "creature". The narrator further makes comments on this, reflecting "I don't lack self-confidence but I'm not beautiful, that is a word reserved for very few people, people like Louise herself" (WB 85). This play on the word "beautiful" has drawn attention from some critics, who argue that it is a clue suggesting that the narrator identifies herself as a female (citation needed), as "beautiful" is usually used for women, which is an interesting comment on the usage of language and the heteronormative messages it carries.

² Donne's poem is often connected to the traditional heterosexual male describing his desire. The verses of the poem reflect the use of a colonial language, comparing the feeling that arises when discovering new land to that of discovering a lover's body for the first time: "O, my America! my new-found-land,/My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned, /My mine of precious stones, my empery,/How blest I am in this discovering thee!" (John Donne, *To His Mistress Going to Bed*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180683#about>, accessed June 2015).

Winterson's views on the unreliability of language as well as gender binaries and power dynamics are also addressed through the use of different linguistic discourses. Winterson is yet again set to break boundaries and flaunt her narrative skills by contrasting a highly poetic language with satire, irony or clinical language. The first part of the novel is meant to dismantle old clichés and codes about love or sexuality, while the second part, named *The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body* recovers scientific discourse as a means to write about loss and longing in an innovative, even intimate, way. As one scholar suggests, "[Winterson] confronts the limitations of science [...] as a master narrative about salvation, and as a "naturalizer" of gender biases"(Rubinson 2001:219) and goes as far as suggesting that "the mixing of multiple language genres creates new languages to represent the body, languages that challenge the totalizing and authoritative characteristics of scientific discourse" (Rubinson: 219).

The use of the precise anatomical detail does not render the narrative cold and devoid of meaning. Instead, the language of anatomy is used to achieve a greater level of intimacy with the now absent Louise:"Within the clinical language, [...] I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately [...].I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away"(WB 111). The preciseness of the technical language and that of desire is accentuated by the lack of satire previously found in the narrative. This way the narrator creates a new writing style in the attempt to write about love in a sincere and original manner, avoiding clichés and banalities:" I have no desire to reproduce but I still seek to love.[...] I don't

want a model, I want the full-scale original. I don't want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new (*WB* 108).

The genderless narrator, as well as the poetic message helps to subvert the medical discourse, authoritative as it is, with its claims over body and sex. As Rubinson puts it, "conformation of the narrator's sex would merely reinforce gender stereotypes rooted in male-constructed, "scientific" knowledge about sexed bodies(for example, that men are "naturally" aggressive and women are passive, that women are innately more nurturing, less stable and less intelligent, and so on)" (Rubinson 2001: 220)

4. Written on the body: the gender binary

The novel might try to fight against clichés and gender roles, though at some points seems to succumb to the very same clichés. If breaking boundaries is not quite achieved, fighting against gender binary is not considered, either. While Winterson tries to emphasize some issues, she certainly ignores others, revealing not only plot or narrative failures, but also important gender matters which are not discussed: "At first the concealment of his/her sex forecasts interesting theoretical questions about essentialism, but Winterson doesn't carry these identity questions beyond the gimmick" (Miner 1993: 21).

In spite of being the narrator's lover and playing a vital role in the development of the narrator's thoughts, Louise is not a well built, if ever round, character: her voice is silenced and her identity revolves around different roles she plays as a woman, a lover or as a wife. Her existence seems to depend only on the unreliable narrator's scattered memories or on other men, such as her husband Elgin.

As far as her identity is concerned, Louise seems trapped in the many metaphors the narrator uses to describe her: “If I were painting Louise I'd paint her hair as a swarm of butterflies. A million Red Admirals in a halo of movement and light” (*WB* 29). Moreover, the metaphors and cultural references the narrator makes convey the image of a traditional heroine “She was more of a Victorian heroine than a modern woman. A heroine from a Gothic novel, mistress of her house” (*WB* 49), devoid of agency “I told you that Louise had more than a notion of the Gothic about her. She seemed determined that I should win her from the tangle of my own past” (page), at times a barely human being: “She was a Roman Cardinal, chaste, but for the perfect choirboy” (*WB* 67).

Louise is only described in terms of her femininity, as opposed to the narrator's androgyny:” Her mouth contradicted her nose, not because it wasn't serious, but because it was sensual. It was full, lascivious in its depth, with a touch of cruelty. The nose and the mouth working together produced an odd effect of ascetic sexuality” (*WB* 67), or in terms of her sex and sexuality:”She arches her body like a cat on a stretch. She nuzzles her cunt into my face like a filly at the gate. She smells of the sea.[...] She opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She's refilled each day with fresh tides of longing” (*WB* 73).

The narrator projects an image of Louise where the main traits of her identity seem not only hard to grasp, but sometimes succumb to clichés:

Louise's tastes had no place in the late twentieth century where sex is about revealing not concealing [...]. She was not a D.H. Lawrence type;[...] Her mind, her heart, her soul and her body could only be present as two sets of twins. She would not be divided from herself. She preferred celibacy to tugging. (*WB* 67)

If the narrator's identity is fluid, Louise's seems fixed, rooted exactly in the clichés and metaphors about femininity and sensuousness.

Her status as Elgin's wife is demeaning. Though not explicitly, her marriage is presented as unhappy and unfulfilling on all levels, and objectification and lack of agency is yet again reinforced: "He [Elgin] knew I was beautiful, that I was a prize. He wanted something showy but not vulgar. He wanted to go up to the world and say, "Look what I've got" (WB 34). Furthermore, there is little to no emphasis on her professional career, despite the fact that she has earned a doctorate: "She'd found a job teaching Art History" (WB 99).

Besides, Louise seems to be the only character suffering from the consequences of her alleged non-normative behaviour and sexuality. Her affair with the narrator is seen as a threat to her marriage and, to a larger extent, to the whole patriarchal system based on binary pairings and family. Her disease was read by some scholars as a consequence of a non-normative behaviour (Rubinson:2001, Wisecup:2006), as well as a metaphor for the oppression and marginalization that the minorities she embodies suffer from: she is, at the same time, an unfaithful wife, possibly a lesbian, and a diseased woman. The disease can also be interpreted as a means to exert control over the body. Louise's husband Elgin is a notable cancer researcher and he offers to provide treatment if the narrator agrees to stop seeing her. This way Elgin epitomizes patriarchal and medical authority with their respective claims over Louise as a woman and as a diseased person, and over her body. Furthermore, though not much importance is being placed upon this, it is mentioned a few times that Louise cannot have children as a consequence of her condition, and she appears to be ashamed of it. Her condition as a diseased woman can be read as the pressure society puts on women and their bodies, as well as being an excuse for her husband and the narrator to fight over her and try to

wield control over her body. This conflict might as well stand as a depiction of the dynamics of power in a heteronormative society, and an interesting comment on the condition of women in society, the norms over their body, their sexuality and their role as females and child- bearers.

If gender really is irrelevant, the narrative still makes some implicit claims about power and how minorities are being silenced and oppressed. Even though Winterson states that gender is irrelevant and sets to deconstruct gender binaries, *Written on the Body* aligns itself at times with traditional ways of depicting men or women, ways the reader is familiar with and cannot escape. In this sense, I would agree with Julia Cream's statement that an androgynous reading is apparently beyond the bounds of the socially gendered reader: "in our society sexual ambiguity [of the body] is untenable" (Cream 1995: 33).

5. Absence: the paradox of desire

Though the novel is named *Written on the Body*, what is ironic about it is that it deals with the absence of the narrator's body, on one hand, the absence of Louise's body, on the other. One question which arises as a consequence of this absence is whether it is possible to attribute an identity, a sex, gender and other traits to a narrator whose body the reader knows nothing about. This absence of a body and its socially inscribed sex, gender and gender roles is a device to emphasize reader prejudices and stereotypes as well as clichés. According to Berry (2007), "the novel is about reading this and other absences generated through its complex resistance to conventions of

autobiographical, gendered and sexual representation, a resistance that pushes the text to the limits of representation itself.” (Berry: 2007)

The absence of both the narrator’s body and Louise’s (in the second half of the book) questions the correlation between gender, sex and body and how this correlation is conveyed through language and discourses. At a narrative level, the absence of the lover and his/her body is justified by the loss of Louise, either because the narrator chooses to abandon her or because she succumbs to the disease. Louise’s absence plays a key role in the structure of the novel, because it triggers the narrator’s soliloquy. From a theoretical perspective, the paradox of the discourse of desire accounts for the lover’s absence. In Roland Barthes’s words,

[...] absence can only exist as a consequence of the other: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain. The other is in a condition of perpetual departure [...] Amorous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves: an always present *I* is constituted only by a confrontation with an always absent *you*. (Barthes 1990: 13).

Even though the narrator at some point expresses his/her desire to become one with Louise, this can only happen fleetingly in brief moments of superlative happiness and intimacy. This distance from the other, the loved one, creates certain anxiety and even sorrow, accentuated by the loss of the lover. However, it is precisely this loss and the feelings it causes which shape the narrative as it is, a collection of disorganized memories about Louise paired with the narrator’s own musings. As well as accounting for absence as a narrative device, the discourse of desire also offers an insight into the lover’s psyche.

The absence of the body is relevant from the point of view of the gender binary as well. The question arising is whether a bodiless narrator diminishes the narrative’s coherence and credibility. If there is no body to which to attach a sex, a gender and thus

a gender role, the whole heteronormative system should ideally be challenged and questioned. As we have previously seen, Winterson's narrative does not succeed entirely in breaking gender boundaries or clichés entirely, although it does stress the extent to which readers are influenced by a heteronormative background when making a polarized, gender- biased reading of the text and its narrator. What the novel does succeed in doing, though, is exploring beyond the confines of gender as marker of identity and exemplifying how bodies are culturally and socially inscribed. In words of Paige Van de Winkle:

Winterson gives an account of the relation of the body to identity, showing that while the body is important for a person's physical desire and aesthetic value, the body is not to be confused with a thing that determines identity, only as a part of it. (Van de Winkle 2013: 7).

As Miner (1993) previously pointed out, Winterson does not fully commit to the body and gender issues she brings up. The narrative voice does not make any clear statements about how he/she positions in regard with heteronormativity and appears to be deliberately oblivious of his/her indeterminacy. After all, the narrative voice is just that: a voice, a device Winterson uses to give shape to a particular view on different issues, as it serves the purpose to retell the story of how he/she lost Louise. It can be argued that the narrator's identity "persists [only] through and as the absence of Louise" (Gilmore 2001: 133).

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper follows the narrator in his/her exploration of gender and identity boundaries while narrating the loss and consequent absence of his/her lover, Louise. The novel parts from the theory of gender as a social construct which is not only performative, but also fluid. Therefore the narrator's impersonations of different identities constantly fluctuate from one pole of the gender continuum to the other. Readers are compelled to participate actively in the reading, construction and interpretation of the novel, as often they have to fill in the missing information. This is a suggestive exercise as it repeatedly reveals gender-biased readings of the narrator and the plot, which further result in attempts to pin down the narrator's identity and assign him/her a specific gender role. This mission of assigning an identity to the narrative voice is hindered by the narrator's lack of a body, which also jeopardizes the coherence and credibility of the entire novel. Louise's body is also relevant in the debate on the authoritative claims of patriarchy and science over minorities and especially women and their bodies. Louise's physical absence reveals in a more subtle and almost insidious way her silenced voice as a character, as a woman, an unfaithful wife and diseased person, in a society in which non-normative behaviours and conditions are seen as abnormal and thus marginalized. The novel might work as an exercise of style in which Winterson mixes different cultural references and discourses, but at a social level it shows how binarism inscribes bodies and even their absence and the ways heteronormativity is reinforced through language and especially clichés, which are as unavoidable as gender binary.

The indeterminate narrator should ideally challenge these notions, yet it capitulates to the same clichés and categorizations. The peril of the linguistically and textually unmarked narrator is that it can be read as masculine, which is yet another proof of the constant presence of gender binary.

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