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Identity and Gender Constructs in "Written on the Body"

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"Gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real"

-*Judith Butler*, Gender Trouble

For Jacques Derrida, deconstruction allows for a flexible vision of the world. He takes a binary opposition, finds something that is on each side of the binary, and concludes that the concept is actually flexible. One such binary is male/female. In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson deconstructs this binary by telling a story with a genderless narrator, thus showing that there are so many actions, behaviors, and roles that are not related to gender, though they might be assigned a gender association in society. Gender -- defined here as social differences between masculine and feminine, including some essential physical differences -- is frequently assumed to be something that determines one's attitudes, preferences, and abilities in professions, relationships, and other wide-ranging parts of life. Gender is not to be conflated with sex, which is defined here as the undeniable biological differences between a genetic male and female, such as the fact that males have testicles and females have the ability to give birth. Gender, because of a certain level of undeniable biological differences (sex), is a pervasive category in determining an individual's identity. The most fundamental parts of the human experience are often seen in the context of gender: love, loss, desire, anatomy. If the factor of gender is taken away from these parts of life, the matter of identity is complicated. These aspects seem to hinge upon gender, but it is questionable if gender is actually a stable, relevant way to define oneself.

Written on the Body **and Identity**

Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* evokes the reader himself to question whether gender difference is biological or a social construction. While the plot of the story is compelling to an extent, the reader is further propelled by the enigmatic narrator. Though the story is a first-person, intensely intimate account of the narrator's love affair with a married

woman, the reader gets almost no details that are typical of a first-person narrator, including name, age, appearance, sex, or gender. The reader, with her human desire to categorize, is invited to determine these presumably important aspects of identity through morsels of identity that Winterson purposely plants. Additionally, the themes explored in *Written on the Body* suggest that it is more useful and significant to look at what every human has in common, rather than create arbitrary boundaries that are mistaken for biological between males and females. Winterson effectively illustrates the concept of gender construction through prompting the reader to question gender assumptions in attempts to identify the narrator, and thematically through the focus on universal and unavoidable subjects like anatomy, love, loss, and desire.

Questioning the Identity of the Narrator. The narrator of Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* is gender ambiguous, but there are moments that seem to suggest either female or male. Yet, a reader that is looking for such evidence will be hard pressed to find anything more than 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. Winterson leads the reader through the thought process about the gender of the narrator, guiding the reader to realize that most recognized differences between genders are in actuality not limited to either male or female, and are creations of cultural ideas of female and male rather than essential characteristics.

Allusions and Comparisons to Gendered Figures. There are several points where the narrator refers to other cultural, historical, or Biblical figures as a comparison for him/herself or another that seems as if it would indicate gender. Yet, when closely analyzed they reveal little about the gender of the narrator, and a great deal about how socially constructed gender is. One instance of a false gender clue is when the narrator says that Louise, his/her lover, is "gazing at

me the way God gazed at Adam and I am embarrassed by your look of love and possession and pride" (Winterson 18). This reference to the Biblical story suggests that the narrator is like Adam, and therefore male. Yet, in the context of the novel this is a moment in which the narrator only feels like Adam, as if Louise were God and the narrator was her creation that she took pride in. Still, if, hypothetically, the narrator was a female, choosing to describe herself as the first man rather than the obvious Eve seems odd. However, alluding to Adam when describing how a lover looks at her beloved appears more understandable as opposed to the negative connotations of Eve, the culprit of Original Sin. A comparison to Adam, therefore, could indicate less about the gender of the narrator and more about Louise's pure love, untainted by the implication of Eve's mistakes.

The narrator appears to be not just bisexual, but pansexual -- attracted to individuals of any gender identity or sexual identity. His/her relationships and allusions reflect this fluidity. As Berry says, the narrator:

> is referred to variously as Lothario (a character from Nicholas Rowe's The Fair Penitent who seduces and betrays the female lead) but also Alice (in Wonderland, B. Toklas?), a boy scout, Lauren Bacall, and Christopher Robin. Analogously, in some of the relationships the narrator recounts he/she occupies a more passive traditionally female role (e.g. 'I was Judith's bottom;' Bathsheba gives the narrator emotional clap). In others the narrator occupies more conventionally male ones—the lover as back door man or a 'tweedy big-game hunter.'

The narrator's comparison to him/herself to a Boy Scout would seem to clearly indicate a male narrator. The way in which the allusion is framed, though, is too vague to be conclusive. He/she says "I was wearing baggy shorts which in such weather looked like a recruitment campaign for

the Boy Scouts. But I'm not a Boy Scout and never was. I envy them; they know exactly what makes a Good Deed" (Winterson 58). Here, the narrator is playing with connotations of Boy Scouts, including the childish uniform, the preparedness, and the code of morality and honor. It has less to do with the gender of the scouts, and more to do with the simplicity and innocence of childhood. Similarly, Louise's comparison of the narrator to Christopher Robin is more about the boy being a child than a male (61). When Jacqueline throws out the narrator and he/she sleeps at Louise's house, Louise draws a bath for him/her and serves him/her hot cocoa; this is when she refers to the protagonist as the character from Winnie the Pooh. The Christopher Robin allusion makes the relationship between the two lovers to seem to be child and caretaker at this moment rather than indicate gender.

Gendered Linguistics on Appearance. Syntactically, Winterson plays with the readers' associations and uses of words for appearance; the reader is provoked to question why certain words only fit for males or females. The narrator is described by Louise as "beautiful," which seems to suggest a female. She tells the disbelieving protagonist that "'you were the most beautiful creature I had ever seen'" (84). The protagonist protests, saying "I don't lack self-confidence but I'm not beautiful" (85). While this exchange may seem un-extraordinary for two lovers, calling a man beautiful -- as a term for physical attractiveness and, in this case, internal goodness -- is against the social norm. Typically, a man is handsome, as in good-looking for a man (for a woman it means unconventionally striking) or hot, as in "lustful or erotic", but not beautiful, defined as pleasing the senses or mind aesthetically (Oxford). Thus, the narrator is suggested to be a female; the word is used to differentiate from a pretty, sexy, or hot woman, all which seem to indicate purely a superficial attractiveness. Pretty is a conventional, trivial, superficial sort of attractive quality. An alternate definition is "an attractive thing, especially a

trinket" which even further suggests the negatively female connotations of the word because of the archetype of the trivial woman preoccupied with appearance (Oxford). Sexy and hot are similarly defined for a female as for a male. Yet, there is oddly no male equivalent for beautiful. If the predominantly male adjective, handsome, is used for a woman, it is a positive thing; she has an interesting and unique appearance, accompanied by an overall quality of aesthetically appealing qualities. If a predominantly female adjective, pretty, is used for a man, it is an indication of effeminate qualities. The term beautiful for a man can be used to describe his personality along with his physical appearance, just like for a woman. Yet, the term is not as frequently used for a man because of the female connotations the word carries, even though they are positive. While it is less frequent, and perhaps less desirable, for a man to be called beautiful, it is not unheard of. The syntactical distinctions between words used to describe appearance have positive or negative connotations based on gender, but calling the protagonist beautiful does not determine his/her gender.

Biological Differences are Superficial: A Breast is a Rose is a Breast. For a narrator who never describes his/her own appearance beyond that he/she thinks it unremarkable and that he/she often wears a pair of shorts that say "RECYCLING" on them, he/she is quite detailed about the bodies of others. While, of course, the differences between a male and female physically cannot be denied, the narrator illustrates the relative superficiality of these distinctions. Differences in the bodies of males and females are purely limited to the body. One perplexing moment about bodies that ignites questioning of the identity of the narrator is when he/she recalls a past relationship with a woman named Inge. He/she states that the reason the narrator sticks it out for a while with Inge, who moved to Holland and was an extreme anarcha-feminist, is the narrator's idolization of Inge's breasts. This simplistic and superficial reason

seems to suggest a gruff masculinity because of the relatively modern reincarnation of the bachelor/Don Juan archetype of a male obsessed over the female body with ostensibly no concern for her personality. Again, this is not enough to definitively decide the matter of the narrator's gender because nothing about the bachelor archetype is inherently male.

This moment about Inge's breasts indicated another point that is essential to understanding Winterson's novel and how gender and biological differences are related. The narrator goes on to say that his/her worship of Inge's breasts are not "a mother substitute nor a womb trauma," and that he/she admires them "for themselves. Freud didn't always get it right. Sometimes a breast is a breast is a breast" (24). Here, the narrator shows that a statement of the physical characteristics of Inge are enough to show all connotations of the word by the allusion to Gertrude Stein's famous statement, "a rose is a rose is a rose" from *Sacred Emily.* The original quotation -- "A is A and not ~A"-- refers to the classical law of identity in which it is stated that each thing (Inge's breasts, or a breast in general) has an essence (Aristotle, Part 8). If two things, whether general or particular, have the same essence (two breasts), they are the same, but if one has different characteristics (Inge's breasts and someone else's breasts), it is different.

Stein's reference to the law of identity is typically interpreted as referencing this concept that a rose, as a general flower, can indicate other connotations about a rose as a Romantic symbol, a name (as in *Sacred Emily*) or as a specific red rose. Stein attempts to show that in literature, a thing is what it is, meaning that just the word "rose" encompasses a myriad of meanings associated with it. However, when Winterson says "a breast is a breast is a breast," she means to say that Inge's breasts gave no connotations about who Inge was as a person. The statement shows the fundamental desire for the physical body as something different from desire for the actual person. The narrator only stays with Inge because of her breasts, thus they are at

once a part of Inge's identity for the narrator, but also they are not any indication of Inge herself -- her extreme political views, her love for aesthetics -- beyond her appearance.

Furthermore, the allusion to Freud's theories of finding deep-seated psychological reasons for every desire is ridiculed. This emphasizes that a body alone does not indicate anything about a person's behavior, identity, or characteristics beyond appearance. The body can exist and be desirable to another simply as a body, and not as something that means that a person is inherently nurturing, gentle, submissive, or, conversely, competitive, strong, or dominant. A body and personality are not coextensive. Any attribution of a person's physical characteristics as determining a person's behavior is, as demonstrated by Inge's breasts, inadequate. In other words, using the physical as information about identity is insufficient because identity is not influenced by a person's appearance, including gender. Since, according to Winterson's narrator, "a breast is a breast is a breast", physically looking like a female (or male), and even biologically being a female (or male) indicates little about who a person is beyond appearance.

According to Aristotle, if "the parts which are present in such things, limiting them and marking them as individuals" are destroyed, then "the whole is destroyed," meaning that there are elements of an individual that are part of its essence. If these elements are divided and destroyed, the individual no longer exists (Aristotle, Book 8). In the detailed description of Inge's "gypsy sisters," the narrator gives her breasts meaning and intertwines them with her identity, but also states how they are devoid of meaning other than their desirability because of their essence as breasts and nothing else (Winterson, 24). 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.

Subverted Literary Tropes: Castration and Rape. One instance of a deceivingly straightforward clue about the narrator's gender that leads to the questioning of literary tropes -- specifically castration and rape -- occurs when the narrator reflects on a past girlfriend, Amy. She has a thing for papier mache, and has placed a papier mache snake right at groin level in her mailbox. When the narrator goes to ring the doorbell, she/he is nervous because this "meant pushing my private parts right into the head of the snake" (41). Amy wryly demonstrates that the narrator has "nothing to be frightened of" by thrusting a pointedly-phallic object, a leek which they then eat with dinner, into the snake's mouth which subsequently breaks in half from a rat trap meant to deter the postman (42). There is no description of the narrator's reaction, but it can be assumed that he/she is unrelieved.

At first glance, the reason for the narrator's anxiety could be explained in two ways: fear of castration or fear of rape. The fear of castration would typically indicate a male narrator, while the fear of rape would typically indicate a female narrator. Castration is closely related to emasculation, a derogatory term which suggests not just a man's fear of the literal removal of the genitals, but of the obliteration of his "power or vigor" (Oxford). If the narrator is afraid of the mutilation of his/her genitals, he/she is likely a male. This theory comes from Sigmund Freud, whose works state that the child fears castration because of the threat of such by the father based on the Oedipus complex ("Penis Envy"). Castration is a male fear which develops after the boy realizes the biological differences between men and women, and then believes his mother to be a castrated male, an identity and gender only defined by the lack of male-ness. Freud believed the female equivalent of castration anxiety to be penis envy, in which a girl has a realization about the difference between genders and recognizes herself to be castrated. She then is resentful of the penis because she is lacking hers (Literary, "Penis Envy"). While Freud's theory has not been

tested extensively, it "has been vigorously criticized and is rarely taken completely seriously" (Penguin, "Penis Envy"). When objectively analyzed, it seems only logical that *any* person, regardless of gender, would be unsettled by the vision of his/her genitals being bitten by a snake, though the traditional literary trope is to reference male castration.

While the phallic leek that is snapped in half by the snake could be interpreted as another suggestion of male castration, Amy uses it to put the narrator at ease, indicating that the narrator has no external genitalia that is leek-shaped to worry about. Perhaps a fear of the female equivalent of castration would be a third explanation for the narrator's uneasiness around the crotch-level snake. There is no specific term for a female equivalent of castration other than the modified "*female* genital mutilation," "*female* castration," and "*female* circumcision," or Freud's theory of penis envy, and though there are terms which derogatively refer to being *less* feminine such as "butch" or "dyke," the primarily used terms that do not involve homosexuality commend women for being more "masculine" -- in personality though not in appearance or sexual orientation -- and ridicule men for being more feminine. For example, the term for being more feminine is "effeminate," which is synonymous with the derogatory emasculate. In the case of a female fearing castration, Winterson would be suggesting that to become less of oneself is not related to one's possession or lack of a penis, nor one's feminine or masculine traits, and that mutilation of an individual's genitals in Western culture is equally horrifying and identity-maiming for males and females. The narrator is not afraid of castration, he/she is afraid of pain, losing the universal ability to have sex, and the loss of a precious body part, whether it be penis or otherwise.

On the other hand, the narrator could be afraid of the snake's proximity to his/her "private parts" because of a fear that the phallic snake is going to dominate him/her through rape. Though

Berry says that "the narrator also has what can only be described as a fear of castration dream the night before he/she first makes love to the powerful Louise," the fact that the thing causing the ungendered narrator's fear is a snake makes the matter more ambivalent ("Suspending Gender"). Additionally, Berry's claim that the section on the snake implies "a Freudian fear of the devouring woman" disregards the narrator's statement that "Freud didn't always get it right", which shows that using Freud's theories as a lens to analyze the narrator's motivations is inadequate ("Suspending Gender"; Winterson, 24). Since the fear of rape is most commonly portrayed as a female one, this indicates that the narrator is a woman. Yet, rape and sexual assault victims are not only women -- a 2010 study by the Center for Disease Control found that 1 in 71 men have been raped -- so a fear of rape is not enough to determine that the narrator is a woman. Though castration is seen as a male fear and rape is seen as a female fear, these distinctions are not absolute; the fears can be universal. Winterson not only flips these literary tropes on their heads, but she proves categorizations of castration and rape to be inadequate for the much more fluid reality.

The Narrator is an Ungendered Person, but Still a Person. The narrator is lacking any sort of definitive gender or exhibition of male or female characteristics. This could be interpreted by the skeptical reader who wants to categorize the narrator as an indication that the narrator is *fiction*, and therefore the ungenderedness is an indication of the narrator as "other," inhuman, and not an indication of a well-rounded character that is relatable. However, though Winterson reveals no conclusive evidence of the narrator's gender, he/she exposes, through the first-person narrative, a great deal about him/herself. For example, the narrator goes into detail about past relationships, about his/her thought processes in these relationships, including beginning the affair with Louise, and his/her wry sense of humor. Since the narrator does this, he/she is meant

to be relatable and well-rounded, not simply an ungendered, unnamed, and therefore unreal character. On the contrary, the fact of the narrator's mysterious gender only further enforces the social construction of gender since he/she is still a likable, sympathetic character, and a believable human without these "essential" male or female characteristics. While one could still argue that perhaps to some he/she is not a well-rounded character, the idea of gender as a social construct is still shown in the fluidity of characters whose gender is known, including Louise, the married woman who has an affair with the narrator, and Elgin, Louise's husband, and an antagonist.

Fluidity of Gender in Other Characters. Besides the obvious ungendered narrator, *Written on the Body* includes several gender-fluid characters such as Louise and Elgin. There is an emphasis of characteristics in each that are non-normative for a female or male, respectively, demonstrating that a person does not have to be completely without a gender to provoke questions about the meaning of female and male categories.

Louise is shown to be a classically feminine woman whose strength comes from her femininity, in a meshing of typical gender roles. Her body is described in detail, and there are frequent references to her vibrant, long red hair. Her hair is a "fiery furnace" and "blood-soaked," both of which evoke power and violence, which are because of, not in spite of her femininity. Louise's personality, as filtered through the narrator, is described in metaphorical language about her strength. This subversion of gender types is evident in Louise's reason for marrying Elgin; she says "I knew he was safe, that I could control him, that I would be the one in charge" (Winterson, 34). Louise's strength and power stem from the very thing that typically is defined by the absence of power: her femininity. The narrator describes her as "a Victorian heroine" from "a Gothic novel, mistress of her house, yet capable of setting fire to it and fleeing in the night

with one bag" (49). Here, Louise is a beacon of feminine strength. Additionally, Louise's scapulae are depicted as beautiful but dangerous weapons. The protagonist says that the beloved is "the winged horse Pegasus who would not be saddled...I want to see your muscle skein flex and stretch. Such innocent triangles holding hidden strength" (131). In the narrator's eyes, Louise has strength in her independent mindset and her fierce passion (she is a redhead, after all).

In another instance, Louise's body is idolized even during her menstrual cycle, one of those purely female, biological differences. The narrator says that Louise's body during her period "smells like a gun... my lover is cocked and ready to fire" (Winterson. 136). Sex and periods are an unusual pair to illustrate as sexually appealing if Louise's lover were male. If the protagonist is a lesbian female, on the other hand, the connection might not be shocking since this is a common lesbian literature trope. As Isobel Gane points out, those who analyze Winterson's novel often "put most of their energies into gathering evidence that the gender-less narrator is female, thus making the novel a 'lesbian novel'" because of the author's personal life (Gane). Gane laments that there is such a conflation of author and narrator because "by focusing on trying to disambiguate the narrator they are missing Winterson's point; that identity does not depend on your given gender; it is fluid and changeable." Winterson's use of a lesbian literary trope in this scene is not enough to call the novel a lesbian novel because of the bi-sexuality (or perhaps pansexuality) of the narrator, and the fact that the narrator is ungendered.

Elgin is full of contradictions, all of which are negative and weak -- which is unsurprising because he is an antagonist to the narrator; he is "put upon and superior," homophobic and effeminate, and a control freak and a masochist (Winterson, 31). According to Ellen Berry, "as a man of science...Elgin, is both powerful and authoritative—enough to make the narrator abandon

Louise—and feminized" ("Suspending Gender"). His appearance, unlike Louise whose appearance both reinforces her gender and her gender defying qualities, is part of what makes him seem feminine -- and is perhaps the reason he overcompensates with homophobia, a desire for control, and his superiority complex. As a high schooler, Elgin "was small, narrow-chested, [and] short sighted," meaning that his body type was far from the ideal beefy masculinity (Winterson, 33). He suspects his teammates of being gay, thinking that "he was better than those square-shouldered beauty queens," but it is notable that these men seem more akin to the traditional idea of masculinity than Elgin (33). They "commanded affection and respect," even if, according to Elgin, "they were all queer" (33). Just as Louise is a strong figure although she is a woman, Elgin is a weak figure although he is a man. Winterson obviously outlines how gender binaries about weakness or strength are unrealistic.

Other, very minor characters who appear in the background of *Written on the Body* nevertheless play a role in emphasizing that gender is socially constructed. Two such background characters are Esau and Sarah, Elgin's parents. Esau declares "'[a] curse on women since the sin of Eve'" after his Orthodox Jew son marries a Christian, while Sarah "felt the curse and lost herself a bit more" (35). This scene is dark, comedic, and a little sad. By making Esau and Sarah comedic caricatures of strictly religious parents and gender archetypes, she portrays the traditional viewpoint they represent about what gender is as outdated and ridiculous. At another point, Esau encourages Elgin to "raise yourself up and be a man," perpetuating the idea that there is such a thing as acting like a man, and it is related to success (33). Another group of background characters who are significant in demonstrating the social construction of gender is the audience of an opera. The women seem to be decorated like soldiers rather than ladies at a

special occasion. They "wore their jewellery like medals" and threaten Louise by "glinting their own warning at...[her] bare throat" (32).

What *is* Inherent then?

In Winterson's novel, gender is shown to be irrelevant to determining identity. It is something fluid and changeable, a choice rather than biology. Humanity as a whole cannot effectively be categorized as either male or female -- beyond physical appearance and, in general, some physical functions -- because there are no fundamental definitions about who a person really is that are determined by this biological makeup beyond social constructions of femininity and masculinity. By leading the reader to this conclusion, Winterson might seem to strip a person of his identity by eliminating the meaning of gender, but she chooses to focus on themes that *unite* rather than separate. The somewhat cliched and conventional plot of the novel -- someone falls in love with a married woman who tragically gets cancer -- is offset by the thematic meaning about universality. After the question of what it is to be a male or female is in effect answered by its irrelevancy in the narrator, it becomes apparent that what *is* important is love, health, loss, and desire; these are universal themes that literature explores, and nearly everyone will experience.

Human Anatomy and Biology. Most superficial biological differences become irrelevant when looking at the body anatomically. This is evident in the deconstruction of the body, beginning with "The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body." Here, Louise's body is analyzed with textbook explanations of each function, followed by a poetic lament of the beauty and tragedy of her failing body. Though the narrator clearly is expressing love to Louise specifically, this emotion is tied to her as a human being, and not as a woman. The functions of cells through mitosis, and the final death of nerve cells have a poetry all their own about

humanity and what unites individuals. Simultaneously, there is an emphasis on Louise's specificity, as all people have specific unique qualities. These are not determined by gender, but vary by individual.

One digression of the narrator suggests that even undeniable differences between the sexes is performative. This occurs when he/she questions his/her own perception of his/her relationship with Louise, and whether he/she is foolishly "hoping for a savior in Louise" (77). This is a parody of the female archetype of the virgin. The narrator goes into detail about the various practices of cultures to fake virginity; "in Japan they do a nice virgin substitute with the white of an egg. For twenty-four hours at least, you can have a new hymen" (77). The scene is meant to show that physical virginity is falsifiable. The idea of the girl virgin as a savior of her male lover is ridiculed; the salvation she provides is a trick and cannot provide "an almighty scouring of deed and misdeed" (77). Like Butler, Winterson shows that physical difference is an entrenched, cultural, superficial difference that must be completely overridden. Both writers reject that one can “presuppose a generalization of ‘the body’ that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance. This ‘body’ often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body’” (Butler, 2542). While Winterson might not explicitly voice this philosophy in her novel, her bodiless narrator, and idealization of Louise not just as a human and not just a woman demonstrates the insignificance of the body in identity.

The section on cavities and the brain illustrates questions whether deconstruction is an adequate way to understand a person because of the disparity between a person's parts and a person as a whole. The narrator says "I'll have you bagged neat and tidy...womb, gut, brain,

neatly labelled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?" This shows that simply categorizing a person does not give the full essence of her identity. Yet, in the paragraphs that follow about the narrator exploring every crevice of Louise show that deconstruction offers another way to look at the body that both makes Louise just a human like so many others, and also a specific individual with a personal identity all her own. This deconstruction actually unites aspects of the anatomy and goes deeper than gender distinctions. The section demonstrates that these distinctive physical characteristics are only a small part of the entire body, and should not determine identity. According to Winterson, and also Butler, the body is an equalizing medium at best that parodies distinctions (as with people like Elgin and Louise, drag, and other performances of gender) or a superficial cultural construct at worst that is taken as an inherent difference and source of identity.

Desire. Though a male body and a female body are different, there are basic components of each body that are universal, and the desire of a body is universal as well. The narrator of *Written on the Body* illustrates this through his/her desire for Louise not as a woman, though he/she does desire Louise's feminine qualities, but as a human with a human body. This is evident in the quote "I didn't only want Louise's flesh, I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together"; this is not just a romantic declaration of intense love, but a demonstration of the universal humanity of desire for another human's body (Winterson, 51).

The deconstruction of the body section gives a prime example of desire as something universal to humanity. On the surface, this section is about the narrator's attempts to distance him/herself from Louise by breaking her down into parts and distancing her from any resemblance of the beloved as a whole. Though this is meant to ease the pain of the protagonist, the section becomes a series of love poems of anatomy, physiology, and the individual bodily

functions of Louise as a human. The narrator, in "The Skin" portion, illustrates how the body, any body, physically reacts to desire, saying "tubes hair-thin intervening between arteries and veins, those ramified blood vessels that write the body's longing" (124). The individuality and simultaneous universality of desire is demonstrated. The narrator says that "The physiological effects of lust are easy to read... It's such an ordinary thing, happening millions of times a day all over the world...and yet, extraordinary" (124). The passion between the protagonist and the beloved Louise is a common theme, but Winterson builds upon the universal theme by saying that it is common for humanity, human to human rather than gendered individual to gendered individual, homo or heterosexual. Similarly, Halberstam says that what defines intelligence (separating the predictable from the fallibly human) is a "random interference"; desire is this random "interference running across a binary technologic," showing that it is without boundaries, universally human, and unrelated to gender ("Automating Gender", 442-4). The universality of desire is more important than the division of the population into males and females through socially constructed ideas about it means to be each.

Loss. Part of what makes the narrator so accessible is how much loss he/she has experienced. The theme of loss is apparent in the first sentence, "why is the measure of love loss?' (Winterson 9). The unconventional narrator is made nevertheless relatable by his/her tendencies to avoid commitment and the potent pain of lost lovers. The protagonist's ex-girlfriend Bathsheba is continuously mentioned. Her restlessness matched the narrator's; "she was so little there that while she occupied a fair stretch of time, she filled my days hardly at all" (79). The narrator's six-month capacity for a relationship was cheated because Bathsheba was so inaccessible. This commitment-phobia of the protagonist is also typical of the bachelor archetype for male characters; he/she says "I'm addicted to the first six months" (76). He/she then

knowingly idealized Bathsheba as "the one who got away" until Louise because she was so distant. In the wake of Bathsheba, the narrator begins dating the safe girlfriend, Jacqueline, as an alternative to the depression of loss. He/she says "poor me. There's nothing so sweet as wallowing in it is there? Wallowing is sex for depressives," demonstrating the allure of reveling in lost love (26). The narrator's loss of Louise is profoundly illustrated. He/she says that "misery is a vacuum. A space without air, a suffocated dead place..." and goes on to provide imagery about misery as a road, hell, free-falling, and several other metaphors (183). It is at these moments when the narrator is depicting such loss that he/she is the most relatable in some ways. Loss is a universal emotion, and by fore-fronting it as a major theme of the novel Winterson draws in the reader to the experiment of the genderless narrator.

Love is Not Just a Cliche. For Winterson's narrator, love is something that is a universal part of the human experience. The narrator alludes to the "cliches" about love "that cause the trouble," including "all you need is love," "think of the children," etc. (Winterson, 10). Love -- similar to the other unifiers of humanity such as desire, physicality, cells, and loss -- is at once something that is universally human, and also something precisely different for each individual, which is likely why there is so much art about love. As illustrated by the narrator, "a precise emotion seeks a precise expression," which demonstrates that language is all humanity has to communicate, but is often inadequate to express individuality (10). The universality of love is such that "it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service"; it is something that is unavoidable and uncontrollable (77). Like the indiscriminate illness and the uniform anatomy, the essential cellular makeup, and the human condition of loss, love is something that cannot be changed and is more important than superficial distinctions like gender.

Connecting the idea of the biology makeup of a human and the universality of love, the narrator explains that the supposed characteristics of a living thing lack the human need of love. These characteristics are "excretion, growth, irritability, locomotion, nutrition, reproduction, and respiration" (108). The narrator dismisses these as not truly reflecting what it means to be alive, and asks "what of...the longing to be loved?" (108). This indicates that, according the narrator, love is a basic human need that all of humanity shares; love is greater than any sort of scientifically proven characteristics that humans have.

In another scene, Winterson demonstrates the importance of love over socially constructed differences by exploring a hypothetical virtual reality. The narrator says that "as far as your sense can tell you are in a real world" even though it is an artificially engineered reality (97). Rather than this "reconstructed" world, the narrator would rather live a life with Louise in "a real English meadow in real English rain" (97). He/she critiques such a false reality by saying "how much choice have I over their other inventions? My life is not my own..." (98). The virtual reality is comparable with the social constructions about identity that govern the world as if they were real, such as gender roles.

Shortcomings of *Written on the Body*

Though overall the novel offers a complex message of the construction of gender, and comes close to advocating for defining identity as a human rather than as primarily a man or woman, it is also a celebration of mostly a normative female body and, at times, a condemnation of the male body and the non-normative female body. For example, the narrator responds to Inge's statement that "'Renoir claimed he painted with his penis'" by saying that "'He did. When he died they found nothing between his balls but an old brush'" (Winterson, 22). There is a nearly identical scene in which the narrator says the same thing about Henry Miller. Winterson pokes

fun at the male body, which gives the novel an "anti-phallic undertone" according to Britta Sonnenburg. The male body is portrayed as absurd, impotent, and grotesque. When describing Elgin's masochism with Louise, the narrator describes in unappealing detail how "he lay on his single bed, legs apart, and begged her to scaffold his penis with bulldog clips" (Winterson, 34). Even the flashbacks to the narrator's past boyfriends are more cartoons than realistic characters -- though some ex-girlfriends are admittedly not much more fleshed out than the males, Louise, Bathsheba, Jacqueline, and others certainly are.

For example, the uncommitted ex-lover Frank "had the body of a bull," nipple rings, and dwarf parents (93). According to Sonnenburg, "the male characters are...ridiculed in their physicality [and]... also portrayed as negative in their personalities." This is a flaw of the novel's attempt to show the fluidity and changeability of gender because it reinforces binary distinctions by giving females mostly favorable illustrations and males mostly unfavorable illustrations. According to Judith Halberstam, "the split between mind and body -- as feminist theory has demonstrated -- is a binary that identifies men with thought, intellect, and reason, and women with body, emotion, and intuition" ("Automating," 439). Using this definition of gender binaries, Winterson actually perpetuates this somewhat with Elgin, a scientist with a grotesque physique, and Louise, whose body is celebrated. What keeps the novel as a whole from reinforcing binary genders is the ungendered narrator and the overall rhetoric of flexible genders.

Significance of Findings. Winterson leads her readers to challenge ideas about the essentialism or social construction of gender, provoking them to understand how the narrator of the novel is without a gender, though he/she exhibits many characteristics that one might have assumed to be gendered. She goes on to illustrate that what is important is that the novel tells a story, without a gendered narrator, about those universalities of the human experience that so

much art and thought is about: love, loss, desire, and anatomy. The significance of the social construction of gender for Western culture is far-reaching. Winterson illustrates in a novel much the same message that Judith Butler does in *Gender Trouble;* for Butler, the sense of an "interior essence…is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse" (2548-9). Thus, there is no gender difference underneath the superficial ideas of society. The significance of this recognition is that the oppression of the "other" is eradicated. As in Derrida's ideas about deconstruction, Winterson rattles the male/female binary by showing how much communication and biology are on both sides of the slash; the elements of gender that were assumed to be essential are actually flexible. If the social construction of gender were widely applied to society, there would be no question of an individual's suitability for anything because of his or her gender. Culture should unify humanity, or be a medium for individuals to choose to express an identity. It should not impose or reinforce constructed gender distinctions masked as biological differences. Without socially constructed gender as a main identifier, people would be free.

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