Identity and Gender Constructs in Written on the Body
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Motivation, Related Work, and Approach Used

Theories referenced:
- Sigmund Freud: penis envy, castration anxiety, Oedipus complex
- Jacques Derrida: deconstruction of binaries, flexibility or “play”
- Judith Butler: social construction of gender and identity, biology and gender
- Gertrude Stein/Aristotle: law of identity, essence
- Reader-response theory
Gender is Seen as Difference

- Gender is often the major divider of humanity
- “Sex” is frequently conflated with “gender”
  - “Sex” includes the undeniable, genetic differences between men and women, such as physical appearance
- “Gender” includes social differences between masculinity and femininity
- Where is the line between social construction of gender and biological, essential differences between men and women
Written on the Body and Identity

- The novel has an ungendered, first person, narrator-protagonist.
- The reader constantly questions if the narrator is male or female.
- These questions show where gender difference is assumed to be.
- The reader decides whether these differences are essential or constructed.
Universalities in Humanity

- The novel emphasizes what unites all people:
  - Anatomy
  - Love
  - Loss
  - Desire
Allusions and Comparisons to Gendered Figures

The narrator is compared to:
- Biblical Adam
- A Boy Scout
- Christopher Robin
- Alice in Wonderland
- Lauren Bacall
- Lothario from The Fair Penitent

These comparisons actually reveal little about the gender of the narrator in context, and shows more about the relationship between the narrator and his/her lover, Louise and how he/she feels about him/herself at the moment.
Gendered Linguistics About Appearance

“You were the most beautiful creature I had ever seen” (84)
- Louise speaking to the narrator
- What does this show about the narrator?

“Pretty” – female; conventional, trivial, superficial attractiveness; an attractive thing, esp. a trinket
- For a man, effeminate

“Handsome” – male; good-looking
- For a woman, unconventionally good-looking

“Sexy” or “Hot” – gender-neutral; lustful or erotic

“Beautiful” – female; aesthetically or mentally pleasing
- Could be used for a male, but unusual
Some Biological Differences are Superficial

“Why didn't I dump Inge and head for a Singles Bar? The answer is her breasts...I had idolised them simply and unequivocally, not as a mother substitute or a womb trauma, but for themselves. Freud didn’t always get it right. Sometimes a breast is a breast is a breast”

“A rose is a rose is a rose” allusion: A statement of the physical characteristics (of Inge) is enough to show all connotations of the word, if Winterson uses Stein’s meaning

Inge’s breasts give no connotations about who Inge was beyond her physical appearance

Narrator doesn’t desire Inge’s extreme anarcha-feminism, her preoccupations with aestheticism, just her breasts
“Freud Didn’t Always Get It Right”

- With the Inge example, Winterson shows that a body alone does not indicate characteristics beyond appearance.
- Using the physical appearance of a person to inform about identity is insufficient and limiting; identity is not influenced inherently by appearance.
- Inge’s breasts are only important for the narrator’s physical desire for her and aesthetic value; should not be confused as determining identity, only a part of it.
Subverted Literary Tropes: Castration and Rape

“Poking out of the letter-box just at crotch level was the head of a yellow and green serpent...I hesitated...because to reach the bell meant pushing my private parts right into the head of the snake... ‘It won’t hurt you,’ [Amy] said. ‘It’s for the postman. He’s been bothering me.’... She returned with a leek and shoved it in the snake’s mouth. There was a terrible clatter and the bottom half of the leek fell limply on the mat.” (42)

Does this show fear of castration or perhaps fear of rape?
Fear of Castration

- Castration = emasculation
- Derogatory term, suggestion obliteration of power or vigor
- Indicates the narrator is a male based on Freud’s theories on castration anxiety and penis envy
- “Freud didn’t always get it right”
- Female genital mutilation/castration/circumcision exists in some cultures (sub-Saharan, north-east Africa, Yemen, Iraqi Kurdistan)
Fear of Rape

- The phallic snake could be attacking the narrator not to castrate, but to rape
  - This suggests a female narrator

- Rape and sexual assault victims are not only women
  - Center for Disease Control found that 1 in 71 men have been raped (2010)

- Castration and rape are universal fears and not limited to gender in reality

"How can a girl rape a boy?"
"Man up."
"My dear, Greek in response to the police attack I was having caused by nearly my rape. For the first time since the incident had occurred, eight years previous."
Fluidity of Gender in Other Characters

- Louise – the narrator’s lover is often depicted as strong and powerful; not a submissive female love interest
  - “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)

- Elgin – Louise’s husband, the antagonist, is full of contradictions, all negative and weak
  - A doctor, masochist, Orthodox Jew, homophobe, control freak, a man of science, small in stature

- Gender binaries are unrealistic
What is Inherent then?

- If gender is irrelevant to identity, humanity is essentially defined by universalities.

- Human anatomy and biology:
  - Deconstruction of the body’s anatomy shows that most biological aspects are universal.
  - Describes textbook functions of the body, then writes own poetry about Louise.
  - The body is important (i.e. the title. The body is beautiful, but not a way to inform about gender).
  - Winterson uses biology as a way to unite rather than differentiate.
Desire

- The desire of a body is universal; the narrator desires Louise as a human, not a woman.

- “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 Louise and the narrator is common throughout the novel.

- Winterson shows that desire is common for humanity, human to human rather than gendered individual to gendered individual.
“Why is the measure of love loss?” (8) – the first line of the novel

Loss makes the narrator relatable

“Poor me. There’s nothing so sweet as wallowing in it is there? Wallowing is sex for depressives.” (26)

Major theme, universally felt emotion
Love is Not Just a Cliché

- Love is part of the universal human experience
  - “it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service” (77)
- “A precise emotion seeks a precise expression” (10)
- Supposed characteristics of a living thing:
  - “excretion, growth, irritability, locomotion, nutrition, reproduction, and respiration” (108)
  - But “what of...the longing to be loved?”
- Love is greater than any scientifically proven characteristics of humanity
Criticism of the Novel

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.

“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” (Isobel Gane, “Readers Notes on Jeanette Winterson”)
Criticism of the Novel

- Celebration of a female normative body mostly (the book jackets)
  - Negative portrayal of male body at times
- Elgin and ex-boyfriends are grotesque
  - There’s a whole beautiful deconstruction of Louise, but no favorable mentions of the male body
- “Renoir claimed he painted with his penis”
  - “He did. When he died they found nothing between his balls but an old brush” (22)
Significance

- The novel leads readers to challenge own ideas about essentialism or construction of gender.
- Ungendered narrator tells a story about the universalities of the human experience that so much art and thought is about.
- Like Judith Butler, the sense of an “interior essence...is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse” (Gender Trouble).
- There is no male/female binary.
Works Cited and Consulted


