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Marriage as Hell, Sex as Salvation, and Love as Nirvana: Jeanette Winterson's Concept of Love

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Marriage as Hell, Sex as Salvation, and Love as Nirvana: Jeanette Winterson's Concept of Love

Jeanette Winterson is famous for criticising bourgeois lifestyle and morality, and a close reading of her novels reveals that she is particularly hostile to the institution of marriage, as several of her characters need to get out of a marriage in order to pursue their loves. Critics have noted that “[f]rom *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) onwards, marriage is described as an institution and is castigated, whereas the belief in true love hardly ever wavers” (Ellam 79). The aim of this article is to take a closer look at how Winterson defines and describes marriage and what she offers as an alternative. I shall try to show how the author sets herself on a quest to abolish the centuries-long tradition of putting marriage on the pedestal, as an ultimate accomplishment and realisation of the ideal of love. The analysis will take into consideration two aspects of Winterson's project: the first is her focus on sensuality and carnal pleasures having the power to create a private bond between the lovers which would override the institutionalised one. The second is an attempt to forge a new philosophical ideal of love, a paradigm shift which would allow the lovers to live in a world beyond the power relations ruling contemporary Western societies. The following analysis will confront Winterson's ideas to the theories developed by the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, with an aim to demonstrate that Winterson only partly succeeds in her venture.

I am going to analyse three of Winterson's novels: *Written on the Body*, *Lighthousekeeping*, and *The Stone Gods*. They come from different periods in Winterson's literary career and seem to differ thematically. However, they are strikingly similar in the ideological background which determines their plots, i.e. the denouncement of a traditional, institutionalised matrimonial relationship as a source of falsity, suffering, and the ultimate defeat of an individual. The narrator of *Written on the Body* indulges in several love affairs with married women. Eventually, (s)he¹ falls in love with Louise, whose marriage is unhappy. They have an affair, but Louise's husband (an oncologist called Elgin) successfully schemes to regain control over his wife. The cryptic final scene of the book suggests a reunification of the lovers, although Louise is presumably dead of cancer. The narrator of *Lighthousekeeping* is an orphaned girl named Silver, who learns about life from her protector, Pew. He tells her the story of a clergyman called Babel Dark, who had a turbulent affair with a girl called Molly, and as self-inflicted punishment for the pain he had caused her, he decided to move to a small and depressing town and marry a local woman. His life and marriage were unhappy, and eventually, unable to find a way out of the vicious circle of suffering, the character commits suicide. Silver grows up to be a lesbian, goes on a journey of

1 Winterson deliberately conceals the sex of the narrator.

self-discovery, and finds a lover of whom the reader learns very little. In *The Stone Gods*, the main character Billie falls in love with an intelligent robot Spike, but their affair coincides with a catastrophe (a meteor hit in part one, a war in part three), and they die. All three novels juxtapose marriage and “true love,” all lead their characters through a processes in which they are set free from institutionalised lives (including the institution of marriage), and all end with ambiguous transcendental images which mingle ideal love and death.

Winterson’s criticism of the institution of marriage focuses on its emotional falseness. The author suggests that marriage is only a façade, a social arrangement serving the sole purpose of attaining a certain social status, void of any feelings and usually hiding some awful truth about the reality of the married life. The narrator of *Written on the Body* openly voices this criticism:

I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick. The self-exhibition, the self-satisfaction, smarminess, tightness, tight-arsedness. The way married couples go out in fours like a pantomime horse, the men walking together at the front, the women trailing a little way behind. (13)

Such aversion towards institutionalised life parallels social criticism developed by Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish*, he claims that modern Western society is policed with disciplinary techniques similar to those found in prisons. An individual is subject to the disciplining mechanisms of state authority, which influence the way people think about themselves. This authority imposes on the individual the interpretation of their actions, thoughts, feelings, and the truth about themselves, so that they internalise norms of behaviour to the extent that these become the basic element for the constitution of their identity. It creates “the obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him” (*Discipline and Punish* 129). One way to produce such subjugated individuals is to promote a lifestyle framed by institutions such as marriage. In *History of Sexuality* Foucault describes how since the Antiquity, marriage has been in the centre of attention of philosophers and moralists who have created detailed rules of how a successful marriage should function. Marriage has also become the focus of sexual austerity, with a general obligation to integrate all sexual pleasure into the matrimonial structure. In Plato, this obligation was justified by:

the need to supply the city with the children it required to survive and maintain its strength. In Christianity, on the other hand, the link between sexual intercourse and marriage will be justified by the fact that the former bears the marks of sin, the Fall, and evil, and that only the latter can give it a legitimacy that still may not exculpate it entirely. (*The Care of the Self* 183)

The apogee of scrutiny over marriage came in the 17th and 18th century, when three major explicit codes (canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law) governed sexual practices. They were all centred on matrimonial relations. “The sex of husband and wife was beset by rules and recommendations. The marriage relation was the most intense focus of constraints; it was spoken of more than anything else; more than any other relation, it was required to give a detailed accounting of itself. It was under constant surveillance” (*An Introduction* 37). Although, starting from the 19th century, this surveillance apparently

weakened leaving “the legitimate couple” more discretion, what actually happened was a tactical shift of focus on the family, and a claim that “an alliance gone bad” (*An Introduction* 110) is a result of some form of abnormal sexuality. “Then a pressing demand emanated from the family: a plea for help in reconciling these unfortunate conflicts between sexuality and alliance;” and as a result “the family broadcast the long complaint of its sexual suffering to doctors, educators, psychiatrists, priests, and pastors, to all the ‘experts’ who would listen” (*An Introduction* 111). The life of a married couple (with children) became an arena of endless analyses, speculation, and prescriptions.

However, despite such care for the alliance and its scrupulous surveillance, what accompanies the official side of marriage is, according to the narrator of *Written on the Body*, a second, secret life, full of disappointment, betrayal, and boredom, and based on a fundamental lie. One of her previous lovers says, “telling the truth [. . .] was a luxury we could not afford and so lying became a virtue, an economy we had to practise. Telling the truth was hurtful so lying became a good deed” (16). The narrator rebels against the hypocrisy of marriage by saying: “Odd that marriage, a public display and free to all, gives way to that most secret of liaisons, an adulterous affair” (16). The narrator’s point is that adultery proves marriage devoid of love, since, in his or her opinion, love would prevent adultery: “Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation. [. . .] Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire. You may as well take a pop-gun to a python” (78).

The “perfect marriage” is a public affair, without love or passion; it resembles a contract. The protagonists of *Written on the Body* admit it openly: “You see, said Louise, I knew he [Elgin] was safe, that I could control him, that I would be the one in charge.” As for Elgin, “He 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’” (34). Their divorce later in the novel is also a public affair, and its official reason turns out to be the most important issue of all. Louise asks Elgin to divorce her for adultery, but he insists it must be for unreasonable behaviour. “It will help him to save face. [. . .] Adultery is for cuckolds. Unreasonable behaviour is for martyrs. A mad wife is better than a bad wife. What will he tell his friends?” (99).

Falseness, boredom, and adultery are not the worst outcomes of marriage depicted in Winterson’s novels. The most dramatic account of a married life is described in *Lighthousekeeping*, the one of Babel and his wife, whose name the reader does not even learn. Babel’s decision to marry is an attempt to override his feelings for Molly; he believes that the strength of the legal, symbolic bond will be sufficient to tame the restless part of himself. This belief exerts disastrous effects. Babel’s family life is a horrific mixture of sadism and masochism. The sensation accompanying the wedded life is one of coldness: the wife always serves him cold breakfast, their bedroom is chilly, and when they have sex, he keeps her in bed and does not let her get up until his semen goes cold on her (51–8). Later in the text, it is contrasted with Molly’s warm body and the warmth of the room where they make love.

What is most missing in his wife and in their relationship are feelings and emotions. Babel wants to change this state of affairs and begins “to taunt his wife” by making her horse gallop, or by sailing in stormy weather in order to evoke some emotions in her.

He wants to “know her dreams, her secrets,” but the only thing he gets is “the pure fear in her face” or the view of her “drenched and vomiting” (54). Finally, he starts beating his wife. After this first act of violence, Babel burns his hands in a pot of boiling water as penance. He knows that he is the only one to blame for placing himself in such a disastrous condition, but he finds no way out.

Scepticism towards marriage is also expressed by the characters of *The Stone Gods*. In a conversation with Captain Handsome, Billie says, “Nobody I know – ever knew – seems to have that old-fashioned thing called a happy marriage any more. We seem to have lost the knack of happiness” (166). The Captain replies, “love is just nature’s way of getting one person to pay the bills for another person. It’s what my wives really believed” (166). Once again, marriage is considered to be a contract, with no happiness included. *The Stone Gods* paints another, even more negative portrayal of a married couple. One of Billie’s clients is a woman whose husband is a paedophile. To keep him, the wife wants to medically alter her appearance to look like a twelve-year-old girl. She tells Billy, “I don’t want to lose him”, and when asked “Why not?” she “seems baffled by this question” (17). Her marriage is a failure, but she believes it is worth keeping, unlike the main protagonist, who immediately suggests ending an artificial and empty relationship.

According to the words of the narrator, which in this respect seem to represent Winterson’s own convictions, “the human body is the measure of all things. We know the world by and through our bodies. This is our lab; we can’t experiment without it. It’s our home too. The only home we really possess” (*Written on the Body* 171). The body is our realm; it determines our wholeness, substance, autonomy and identity. Its instincts are our link to nature and to another human being. Winterson claims that the bond created by the bodies is in fact superior to the artificial union of marriage. In the context of Foucauldian philosophy, creating a non-institutionalised relationship between two lovers may be a way to defy authority. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault investigates how, since the Renaissance, sexuality has come to dominate institutions and their practices:

sexuality is tied to recent devices of power; it has been expanding at an increasing rate since the seventeenth century; the arrangement that has sustained it [. . .] has been linked from the outset with an intensification of the body-with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in relations of power. (*An Introduction* 107)

Repressive power relations have created new ways of control by means of investigation and surveillance of the body and its forbidden pleasures. Every regime tries to control the sexuality of its citizens, so a private union between two people may allow them to create their own world and thus escape the authority’s normative power. Winterson develops the idea of the body as an alternative world and a mysterious land. When the narrator of *Written on the Body* lies next to Louise, she describes discovering the lover’s body as a voyage. Her first impression on seeing Louise naked is compared to the abundance of a pristine land: “How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas? I had no dreams to possess you but I wanted you to possess me” (52). Unlike a conqueror, a lover has no desire to subjugate the partner, on the contrary, she wishes to give up her autonomy and lose herself in passion.

Personalising the body allows one to reclaim one's right to decide about it and, in a way, customise it. The two lovers can therefore develop a secret code of communication and metaphorically mark their commitment to each other as in the passage: "you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body" (89). Winterson develops the idea of an imprint that marks two lovers and distinguishes them from the rest of the world. The narrator talks about shallow bite-wounds left by the lover in her shoulder, which she wears as a badge of honour. However, the visible marks on the body are only a reflection of an inner bond, which she compares to an "L that tattoos her on the inside," not visible to the naked eye. Although this sign (which can be interpreted as *Love* or *Louise*) is invisible to strangers, it gives the lovers strength, a feeling of uniqueness and belonging. It also challenges authority by defying the laws of the outside world.

In *Lighthousekeeping*, Babel's relationship with Molly is also described in a very sensual way. Apart from touch, there are references to other senses, such as smell or sight (with detailed descriptions of colours). The passage depicting their lovemaking takes up many pages, it is very literal and meticulously describes several parts of body. It ends with two important statements: "She said his name – *Babel*" and "his skin (was) unwritten but filling up with this new language" (72). The emphasis on the name symbolises Babel's rediscovered identity. Being with Molly is the only time when Babel is happy and true to himself. The two lovers discover a new, individual, and unique language.

Written of the Body, is particularly focused on reinventing the discourse of love. On the one hand, critics have noted the potential of a transgendered narrator to generate a new system of romantic expression, beyond dualisms and binary oppositions (Smith 414, Schiffer 39). Moreover, Shiffer analyses how the novel "indicts the conventional discourse of love, which has too easily become clichéd. [. . .] Through the body, the novel argues, we may construct new languages of love" (45). The critic argues that "our bodies demand to be heard and can be spoken" (40) and that "*Written on the Body*, [. . .] works to create a text that crosses over from book to body or from poetry to love. [. . .] [T]he narrator constructs a story in which the body is central, literally reshaping his or her and the lover's body as their bodies shape the body of the text" (41). The crucial moment of this "reshaping" occurs when the narrator decides to win Louise back from Elgin. The first thing (s)he does is to reclaim her body from Elgin's medical discourse and redefine the body in her own words.² The subsequent chapters entitled "The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body," "The Skin," "The Skeleton," and "The Special Senses" (115–140) begin with encyclopaedia-like definitions of different parts of body, followed by the narrator's alternative description which is emotional, personal, full of memories but also bitter reflections over Louise's illness. Indeed, medicine has been extremely powerful in creating discourses which aim at depriving the individual of the power over his or her

2 This follows the narrator's disastrous decision to leave Louise to Elgin, after (s)he learns that Louise has cancer. Elgin specialises in cancer treatment and uses the authority of science to steal Louise from the narrator. He tells the narrator: "If she dies depends on you. Only I can look after her" (102). He promises that if Louise came back to him he would give her access to the very latest medico-technology, inaccessible to any patients, and very different from the brutal and toxic chemotherapy. "Trusting in the power of the Scientist/Father, the narrator has chosen to leave Louise" as if "for her good" (Shiffer 34).

own body. Foucault describes how “medicine made a forceful entry into the pleasures of the couple: [. . .] it incorporated them into the notions of ‘development’ and instinctual ‘disturbances’; and it undertook to manage them” (*An Introduction* 41). The most powerful tool of medicine is undoubtedly the power to denote the criteria of “normalcy” and “pathology,” and to offer “salvation” by means of accurate treatment.

In all three novels, discourses of power (religion, tradition, medicine, institutional marriage) alienate the protagonists from their true selves and from each other. Lovemaking, on the other hand, creates the feeling of belonging and trust, brings satisfaction, and by matching one’s private desire it leads to self-discovery and inner harmony. Finally, love abolishes barriers and makes all divisions irrelevant. For the lovers, the body is a safe place, an anchor, a fixed point in the ever-changing world. This is the case with Babel and Molly. They have a unique relationship which combines stability and freedom; the narrator points out that Molly had never depended on Babel and “she had used her body as a grounding rod” (101). This kind of bond differs from a relationship cemented by obligation, responsibility, interdependence. The narrator of *Written on the Body* describes it in a similar way, “Louise and I were held by a single loop of love. The cord passing round our bodies had no sharp twists or sinister turns. Our wrists were not tied and there was no noose around our necks. [. . .] I want the hoop around our hearts to be a guide not a terror” (88). Winterson compares an institutionalised relationship to a prison or even a death sentence, whilst a sensual relationship is simple and safe.

In Winterson’s novels, love is an answer to the worries of the contemporary world. Winterson “depicts love as a panacea, [. . .] as if it should solve problems” (Ellam 83). Love brings freshness and hope for a new start, and the encounter of two lovers is a unique experience of newness. Babel’s love for Molly is described in such terms: “He was able to watch her, as only strangers can, and lovers long to do” (89). When the narrator in *Written on the Body* remembers Louise, she also celebrates her newness, her different body with a different rhythm. For Spike, the robot, love “it’s the chance to be human,” a possibility to enter a realm of another existence. When the affair between Billie and Spike starts, Spike says: “Love is an experiment. What happens next is always surprising” (67). Winterson talks about several aspects of love which can have liberating power. In *Written on the Body* we read: “No-one can legislate love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate” (77). Love is anarchic by definition and it cannot be contained by any legal arrangements. According to Winterson, the vows of love and truthfulness are not part of wedding formalities but should actually replace them.

This is how Winterson sets frames for her “philosophy of Love” which is supposed to constitute an alternative to the institutionalised matrimonial relationship. The freshness of the experience unregulated by social norm, the “new order” anchored not in an external institution but within the secret bond created by the two bodies engaged in an erotic alliance would generate the potential to overthrow, or at least to escape the official discourse of power. However, what Winterson seems to offer is not a coherent and material strategy for a revolutionary life. On the contrary, the world created by the two lovers, as the author describes it, balances between a vision of pure fantasy and utopia. When Winterson’s protagonists find “true love,” they are somehow projected into another, less

material existence. Their passion isolates them from the outside world, but also puts them in a drugged-like state. The final passages of all three novels are loaded with fantasy which comes close to hallucination, and the reader may find it difficult to tell what is happening for real and what is only a vision. The author turns the novels into a philosophical debate on the nature of love, but her protagonists dissolve in it and fall into a state of limbo, suspended between the material and the ideal, and between life and death. The fallacy may result from Winterson's inattention to the fact that relations of power go beyond the material aspect of institutions and law. According to Foucault, modern power actually aims at subjugating the body. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault develops the idea of "docile bodies," which are "subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). He describes how "the classic age discovered the body as object and target of power" (136). Structures of power create "disciplines": "methods which made possible the meticulous control of the body" (137).³ This intervention of power relations into the body also encompasses the practice of sex.⁴ Finally, there is no "outside" to power, all resistance, opposition happens within. Foucault admits: "[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [. . .] [Resistances] can only exist in the strategic field of power relations" (95–96). In Winterson's writings, the lovers are set in "a world of love," beyond the reality of power relations, but actually beyond any reality whatsoever – beyond the real world. It is a fairytale-like universe, which dramatically lacks substance and truth.

This weakness of Winterson's writing has been denounced by several critics. Ronny Noor describes Winterson's ideal of "love – all love – love of this dirt road, this sunrise, a day by the river, the stranger I met in a café" as a "laudable view, very insightful but hardly original." Benjamin Kunkel goes even further by claiming that in *Lighthousekeeping*, Winterson's metaphors "have altogether slipped free of their sponsoring facts; her figurative language has turned into so many solemn doodles. The novel concentrates the worst qualities of her writing [. . .] and the result is rhapsodic inconsequence and vacuous romantic uplift." Kunkel mocks Winterson's similes by accurately noticing that Silver falls in love with someone known only as "you":

"You are the carved low door into the Chapel of the Grail. You are the door at the edge of the world. You are the door that opens onto a sea of stars." About the look of this doorperson's face, the timbre of her voice, her gestures, moods and thoughts, we are told approximately nothing. Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* described just this peril: "Explosion of language during which the subject manages to annul the loved object under the volume of love itself."

3 "The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed [...] at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (*An Introduction* 137–38). See also passages about the emergence of "bio-power" (139–140).

4 "We must not make the mistake of thinking that sex is an autonomous agency [. . .]. On the contrary, sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures" (*An Introduction* 155).

Ursula Le Guin criticises *The Stone Gods* in a similar tone, finding there “a love story that is asked to carry far too much weight.” Le Guin goes on to define sentimentality as “the product of a gap between the emotionality of the writing and the emotion actually roused in the reader” and concludes: “to me, both the love stories in the book are distressingly sentimental.” Winterson’s treacherous writing about love falls short of her ambitious plan to create an all-new romantic paradigm.

Jeanette Winterson sets herself an uneasy task – to write about love in an original way, to find a definition and a theory of love without falling into clichés. This venture seems to be only partly successful. In condemning the institution of marriage, Winterson runs the risk of oversimplification. In a review of *Written on the Body*, Malca Litovitz notes: “Many of the husbands in Winterson’s novels are terrifically flawed.” The critic mentions Elgin, but also Jove in *Gut Symmetries*, and a story of twelve princesses in *Sexing the Cherry*, who are all unhappily married. Litovitz also points out that “[l]esbianism and adultery are linked in Winterson’s work, exemplars of forbidden, secret love, and often represented as more passionate than the tepid co-existence of marriage.”

The passages in which Winterson juxtaposes an institutionalised relationship with the privacy of an intimate bond between lovers are powerful and substantial. The author manages to convey with words the strength of sensuality and the uniqueness of the lover’s experience. However, when the discussion of love shifts from the corporal to the immaterial realm, it becomes turgid and void. Winterson describes love as a nirvana-like state, where the boundaries between the real and the fantastic are blurred or abolished completely, the same applying to boundaries between life and death. In *Written on the Body*, the lover comes back as a phantom. In *Lighthousekeeping*, Silver’s lover has no name and is in fact quite an abstract being. In *The Stone Gods*, the lover is disembodied and not even human.

Winterson objects to a model of life determined by principles of social behaviour and squeezed into an institutional framework. Her novels suggest that “true love” is a means of escaping these restrictions as well as the outside world, but the author says little about how to incorporate this love into life within society or how to combine personal fulfilment with keeping both feet on the ground. As a result, her novels often fail to discuss the issues of obligations or responsibilities towards the world and other people, the burdens of routine which eventually enter into a relationship, or – in case of *The Stone Gods* – the possible risks and the doubtful nature of developing a sentimental relationship with an artificial intelligence. Winterson’s protagonists enter into relationships with unreal creatures who are clearly superior (morally, intellectually) and yet weaker and subordinate to the lover. This confusing fact as well as the highly abstract character of Winterson’s deliberations hinder the author’s mission of being an apostle of “true love.”

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Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje przedstawienia małżeństwa oraz miłości w trzech powieściach Jeanette Winterson: *Zapisane na ciele*, *Podtrzymywanie światła* i *Kamienni bogowie*. Autorka przedstawia jednoznacznie negatywny obraz małżeństwa, przeciwstawiając mu ideał miłości zmysłowej i duchowej dwojga kochanków. Fragmenty powieści dotyczące cielesnych doznań bohaterów i ich intymnych relacji są nowatorskie i wartościowe, natomiast fragmenty rozważające filozoficzny ideał miłości są schematyczne i mało wyraziste. Reasumując, Winterson tylko częściowo udaje się stworzyć alternatywny model udanej relacji między kochankami, stojącej w opozycji do tradycyjnego związku instytucjonalnego.