

Šmardová, Daniela

"Why should I not live the art I love?" : the liberating power of art in Jeanette Winterson's literary work

Brno studies in English. 2023, vol. 49, iss. 1, pp. 179-192

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2023-1-10>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78905>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](#)

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20231123

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

“WHY SHOULD I NOT LIVE THE ART I LOVE?” THE LIBERATING POWER OF ART IN JEANETTE WINTERSON’S LITERARY WORK

Brno Studies in English
Volume 49, No. 1, 2023

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2023-1-10>

DANIELA ŠMARDOVÁ

Abstract

This article examines Jeanette Winterson’s work to illustrate how art can hold a transformative and therapeutic potential. It presents the argument that by stimulating imagination and conveying a sense of contingency, art functions as a counterforce to several potentially harmful aspects of contemporary society, such as the uncritical belief in science and technological progress, excessive consumption, and blind pursuit of profit, most of which result from prevailing egocentric attitudes. To explore the potential of art to foster opposing values and encourage the transcendence of the ego, the article analyses novels of Jeanette Winterson, all of which portray imaginative worlds challenging conventional patterns of thought and foregrounding alternative ways of perception. The article examines both the role that Winterson ascribes to art by addressing the issue in her texts, and how she herself fulfils the potential of art in the work she produces.

Key words

Jeanette Winterson; art; imagination; contingency; love; therapy

Art is undoubtedly a form of expression which is supposed to inspire its consumers, broaden their horizons, and enrich their perception of reality. The aim of this article is to explore this power of art in greater depth and find out how it can be beneficial in today’s busy and fast-moving world. In order to examine this issue, the paper makes use of the work of Jeanette Winterson, who frequently addresses the potential of art in her writing. Winterson has achieved growing popularity over the years and her work has attracted much attention of academic and non-academic audience alike. Her writing has therefore been widely discussed by critics and scholars. While some themes, such as gender, sex, sexuality and postmodernism have gained meticulous academic attention, others have received less notice. Even though art represents a significant and recurrent theme in Winterson’s writing, it has not been systematically studied by scholars. The point of this article is to explore the role of art in Winterson’s work and in doing so,

recognize its importance and relevance in today's world. By taking into account both Winterson's novels and her non-fiction, such as essays and autobiographical texts, the article demonstrates that art can function as an effective counterforce to several problematic aspects of modern society, such as hyperrationality, ego-driven behaviour and the belief in an autonomous self and free will. Furthermore, the article brings Winterson into dialogue with selected philosophers and critics, such as Hannah Arendt, Iris Murdoch, Richard Kearney, Emma Hutchison, Martha Nussbaum and others. The relevant concepts and ideas of these philosophers, such as Arendt's view on imagination, Murdoch's thoughts on the role of art and love in counterbalancing the ego, Kearney's take on the therapeutic dimension of art etc., provide the theoretical framework for the discussion. Finally, the article comments on how Winterson herself fulfils the potential of art in her literary work and points to several key aspects of her novels, such as unusual narrative techniques and the distinctive use of language. It is particularly this formal side of Winterson's novels which allows her to communicate her message with the readers and which makes her work unique and original.

Winterson's novels imply that the "reality" we live in is based on a set of assumptions and illusions. These assumptions help us make sense of the world and provide us with the comforting feeling of order and stability, yet as Winterson demonstrates, they might also have potentially harmful consequences. One of the most significant general assumptions typical of modern society is the belief that the world and its physical phenomena can be explained in a rational and scientific manner. As Tong Li (2017: 266) points out, Western modernity is based on the ideas of the Enlightenment which "advocates that all knowledge must be of a scientific and rational nature". This ideology of Enlightenment became the essence of modernity and the pillar of modern society. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch (1986: 25) claims that "the idea of an impersonal world of facts" not only dominates in hard sciences, but also plays a crucial role in social disciplines and shapes the general knowledge. Martha Nussbaum (1991: 881) presents a similar idea and argues that the "norm of rationality" still prevails in the modern world and represents the dominant force in the economic practice and also in other social sciences and in political affairs. Winterson's novels constantly challenge this unshakeable belief in science and point to the limitations and even potential dangers of the strictly rational approach to the world.

In *Art & Lies*, Winterson (1995: 8) compares faith in science with faith in God and points out that even though God is rejected as opposing reason and common sense, science is nowadays even more strange and incomprehensible to the common man than God. She argues that "even science, which prides on objectivity, depends on both testimony and memory. Scientific theory has to be built up from previous results. Scientists must take into account what others have recorded and what they themselves have recorded previously" (Winterson 1995: 30). A similar rejection of an uncritical acceptance of the existing concepts and categories can be found in the work of Hannah Ardent who presents the illustrative metaphor of a banister. What she calls "banisters" are the "categories and formulas that are deeply ingrained in our mind but whose basis of experience has long been forgotten and whose plausibility resides in their intellectual consisten-

cy rather than in their adequacy to actual events” (Arendt 2003: 37). Winterson (1995: 30) repeatedly questions the validity of such concepts and claims that “not all facts are known and what is known is not necessarily a fact”. She argues that the observer can never be disconnected from the observed (Winterson 1995: 30) and that all “scientific truth” is thus necessarily subjective.

Why do we then insist on the scientific and rational explanations of the world so much? All the assumed facts we rely on provide us with life certainties and the illusion of stability and security. As Winterson (1995: 30) asks in *Art & Lies*: “On what can I depend, if not my past, if not objectivity, if not the clean white coats of science?”. As Disch (1994: 144) simply puts it, “climbing or descending a staircase without a banister [is] more taxing and ... more risky than it is with one”. The metaphorical banister, or the “hoard of certainties” as Winterson (1998: 83) calls it, ensures a safe and secure passage of our lives and giving it up is not an easy task. After all, “why risk what was certain for what was hid?” (Winterson 1995: 76). Winterson further shows that even if we are open to alternative ways of thinking and willing to change our views, it is still extremely difficult to break the routine and our habitual patterns of thought and behaviour. As she explains in *Christmas Days*, “why we act or behave in certain ways is usually buried deep – and so it’s hard to change our behaviour unless we change something more fundamental about ourselves” (Winterson 2016: 259). “We lie helpless in the force of patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behaviour. The burden is intolerable” (Winterson 2009: 99). Liberating oneself from this profoundly embedded pattern of life takes tremendous energy and determination. Apart from our own unwillingness to give up the illusion of order and stability, Winterson also implies that preserving the established system of thought is desirable for the authorities in power, because it allows them to keep the status quo. As she points out in *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, people need to separate fact from fiction “so that they know what to believe and what not to believe”. The advantage of “knowing what to believe” is that it keeps people where they belong (Winterson 2001: 91–92). Preserving the illusion of order and stability thus functions as a means of power allowing the authorities to keep people in their place and under control.

Winterson insists that the rational approach to the world is highly limited and might actually do more harm than good. As Jana L. French (1999: 231) puts it: “Winterson implies that human reason is both limited and, in excess, potentially harmful in that it can produce rigid ways of thinking”. Rather than accepting the rational and scientific explanations of reality, Winterson suggests that we consider the artificiality and unreliability of such “facts”. In her novel *Weight*, Winterson claims that our whole worldview is based on fictitious stories that we acquire in order to make sense of the world. “If only I understood that the globe itself, complete, perfect, unique, is a story. Science is a story. History is a story. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves come true” (Winterson 2009: 145). Once we accept that our worldviews are based on mere stories that we believe to be real, we might gradually start “thinking without a banister” (Arendt qtd. in Disch 1994: 143) and thus become open to alternative ways of perceiving the world.

As Winterson’s novels demonstrate, one of the most powerful triggers with the potential to free us from rigid ways of thinking is art. And the most important

source of art's power lies in its potential to stimulate imagination. French (1999: 231) points out that "imagination, with its more fluid conceptualizations of world and self, is a necessary counter force to the dehumanizing effects of hyperrationality". Imagination broadens our minds and challenges our limited worldviews. Winterson explains that "by re-moulding the reality we assume to be objective, art releases to us, realities otherwise hidden" (Winterson 1997: 58) and thus allows us to see the world from a new perspective. Similarly, Murdoch (1986: 88) argues that art possesses the power to wake us from our "ordinary dull dream-consciousness" and thus enable us to perceive new aspects of the world. In this way, art "enlarges and refines our understanding of truth" (Murdoch 1993: 86). Instead of insisting that there is a single reality which can be objectively described and defined, art helps us see that "reality is continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible" (Winterson 1997: 148).

This idea of art as a transformative force allowing us to imagine and explore new possibilities can be traced back to Aristotle and his conception of *mimesis*. Richard Kearney explains that in Aristotle's interpretation, the mimetic function of art is not about a mere imitation of reality. Rather, he defines it as "a creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold" (Kearney 2002: 12). In Aristotle's *Poetics*, art is thus presented as a way "to disclose what is already there in the light of what is not yet (but is potentially)", or simply "to re-create actual worlds as possible worlds" (Kearney 2002: 132). Consequently, "when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important respects" (Kearney 2002: 133). By provoking us to imagine new possibilities, art can thus transform the way we perceive and interpret the world.

Emma Hutchison (2010: 357) argues that this transformative potential of art lies to a great extent in its power to "cultivate a sense of contingency" and invite contested response in its audience. Art, and literature in particular, reminds us that any phenomena we might be tempted to see as "facts" can in reality be perceived and interpreted in various ways. As Hutchison (2010: 357) simply puts it, "accepting contingency is to acknowledge that there is no single way to understand the world". Arendt presents a similar argument and claims that "storytelling discloses the arbitrariness of the appearance of consistency, opens one's thought-musings to rival orderings, and invites contrary interpretations of the incidents that inspired them" (Disch 1994: 3). Even though the realization of contingency may generally be associated with chaos, uncertainty and instability, Murdoch (1993: 87–88) claims that in good art, contingency is "presented to us as a source of energy and understanding and joy". Winterson's approach to art resonates with these ideas and she suggests that the imaginative reality of art and the reality of our lives are two sides of the same coin. As she explains in *The PowerBook*: "The more I write, the more I discover that the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel room" (Winterson 2007: 108). In *Art & Lies*, she considers the matter further and reflects on the contingent nature of reality:

Perhaps everything that can exist does exist, as Plato would say, in pure form, but perhaps those forms with which we have become the most familiar now

pass for what we call actual life. The world of everyday experience is a world of redundant form. Form coarsened, cheapened, made easy and comfortable, the hackneyed and the clichéd, not what is found but what is lost. Invention then would return to us forms not killed through too much use. Art does it. And I? Why should I not live the art I love? (Winterson 1995: 199)

Exploring imaginative realities can thus help us overcome rigid ways of thinking produced by science and rationality and start to see and appreciate the richness and complexity of the world.

Apart from transforming our approach to the world, the imagination that art encourages is also essential when trying to find and understand ourselves. In *Art & Lies*, Winterson (1995: 23) points out that in contemporary Western society, people are often “out of their minds”, meaning that they lack self-knowledge and have no idea who they really are. Even though we tend to believe that we are independent individuals and “we tease ourselves with fancy notions of free will” (Winterson 2009: 99), Winterson argues that this confidence is yet another illusion. She poses a disturbing question: “We are solid and confident, safe and strong, we can speak our minds. Can I? Can I speak my mind or am I dumb inside a borrowed language, captive of bastard thoughts? What of me is mine?” (Winterson 1995: 22–23). In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch (1986: 39) claims that the belief that “personality resides solely in the conscious omnipotent will” is prevailing both in social sciences and in the general knowledge. Both Murdoch and Winterson present this concept of an independent and autonomous self as illusory. What constitutes the “selves” that we believe we are then? Winterson’s answer is again unsettling: “What contains me? Fear, laziness, the opinion of others, a morbid terror of death and too little joy in life” (Winterson 1995: 92). According to Murdoch (1986: 87), “any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete”. Or as Kearney (2002: 4) puts it, these stories work as “a stay against confusion”, provide us with a sense of identity and strengthen the desired illusion of a certain “unity of life”. Like the “safe” rational approach to reality, the identification of self with the free will again arouses the feeling of order and stability.

The harmful consequence of such illusory approach to the self is people’s essentially egocentric thinking and behaviour. Murdoch (1986: 52) argues that the fact that “so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind” is the main obstacle in the way towards moral life. She points out that a similar argument can be found in the work of Plato who claims that “the bad (or mediocre) man is in a state of illusion, of which egoism is the most general name” (Murdoch 1999: 426). A potential disastrous result of such egocentric approach to the world is illustrated in Winterson’s dystopian novel *The Stone Gods* which takes the issues to the extreme. The protagonists of the story live in a hi-tech economic system based on excessive consumption and commercialization. They are proud of their achievements and believe that the rapid developments in technology and science make their society advanced and superior to the other “less successful” ones. Even though they live under constant surveillance and their lives are fully controlled by the MORE corporation which is the institution of ultimate power in

the society, they are firmly convinced of their own freedom and autonomy. People have no time to think due to constant distractions in the form of limitless products and various sources of entertainment. The immediate satisfaction of everyone's passions and desires is a goal which is pursued at all costs, even the environment. Due to severe climate change and the long-term abuse of resources, the planet Orbus the society inhabits is gradually becoming incompatible with human life and people have no other choice but to look for another planet to colonize. The society portrayed in *The Stone Gods* is based on pure vanity and egoism and the results of such irresponsible behaviour are catastrophic.

Similar behavioural patterns which are portrayed as dangerous and destructive in the dystopian story can be found in contemporary Western society. As Winterson argues in *Art Objects*, we live in a "money culture" (Winterson 1997: 139), a society driven by materialism, consumption and the deeply held faith in technology, progress and economic growth. Our constant exposure to the bombardment of media and popular culture gradually "deadens our sensibilities and makes us fear what is not instant, approachable, consumable" (Winterson 1997: 15–16). Tong Li (2017: 267) argues that the expansion of modernity and its strict rationality has deformed contemporary Western society, which is now "enslaved by economy" and places money and profit above everything else. Many people are so busy building their careers and pursuing what they believe is a "success" that they hardly have time for anything else. Others keep themselves distracted by the limitless forms of entertainment that the consumerist society offers. Either way, such endeavours only lead towards the satisfaction of the ego. Winterson claims that this hectic lifestyle brings people comfort because it provides them with the illusion of purpose, and at the same time prevents them from being confronted with the emptiness of their thoughts. Winterson (1995: 114) calls this pointless state of existence "death-in-life" and points out that people who live such empty meaningless lives will never find out who they truly are.

Winterson believes that one of the counterforces to this ignorant and egocentric way of living is art. Art functions as a powerful stimulus which can awaken our consciousness and "open to us dimensions of the spirit and of the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living" (Winterson 1997: 137). Art requires a lot of time from both its creators and its consumers, which in itself is a demand calling for a deviation from our common behaviour. In order to enjoy a piece of art and be moved by its artistic qualities we must slacken our usual frenetic pace. And, as Winterson points out, "[this] time that art needs ... is anathema to a money culture" (Winterson 1997: 138–39). The author suggests that if we are willing to invest the time and energy that art demands and we let the artistic excellence move and impress us, we might find some hidden parts of ourselves. A similar argument is presented by Martha Nussbaum (2008: 243) who asserts that while reading literary works, the reader is "at the same time reading the world, and reading her own self". She further claims that this "painful self-examination" (Nussbaum 2008: 2) is the only way towards better self-knowledge and consequent better grasp of reality.

The way towards better understanding of our true selves is a journey of a gradual dissolution of the ego. Hannah Arendt explores the role of storytelling in the

formation and transformation of identity and claims that its greatest power lies in its potential to spark imagination, which is of two kinds. The first type which she calls a “representative imagination” (Disch 1994: 158) helps to create distance.

It detaches me from the immediacy of the present where there is no space in which to stop and think. It also takes a step back from the pull of self-interest, which makes it difficult for me to conceive of a situation except in terms of its effect on me. Finally, it disrupts the familiarity of the present, inclining me to stop and think about things that would otherwise pass unnoticed. (Disch 1994: 158)

Arendt’s conception of representative imagination is comparable to what Murdoch (1986: 65) calls “unselfish attention”. She argues that good art encourages us to direct attention away from self and focus exclusively on the things we see at the moment, which detaches us from the ordinary rush and disrupts our habitual way of thinking. As Murdoch puts it, art “invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness” (1986: 85–86). She believes that art shares this power with nature. Kearney (2002: 138) also emphasizes the significance of detachment and asserts that “the very contrivance and artifice of mimesis detaches us from the action unfolding before us, affording us sufficient distance to grasp the meaning of it all”.

In contrast, the second type of imagination stimulated by art which Arendt calls “visiting imagination” (Disch 1994: 158) is about bridging distance. Art allows us to imagine ourselves in situations which are unfamiliar or inaccessible in real life and in this way encourage empathy and compassion with others. As Kearney (2002: 138) explains, “as well as being distanced, we need to be sufficiently involved in the action to feel that it matters”. As he aptly sums up, “it is this curious conflation of empathy and detachment which produces in us ... the double vision necessary for the journey beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being” (Kearney 2002: 13). By encouraging this double attitude of compassion and detachment, art can thus function as a powerful force which can help us free ourselves from the authoritative voice of the ego and consequently perceive new dimensions of both ourselves and the world around us.

An illustrative example of the liberating and empowering role of imagination in the search for self and meaning can be found in Winterson’s novel *Sexing the Cherry*. Jordan, one of the main protagonists, lives a rich imaginative life in which he searches for an imaginary dancer Fortunata. He is in love with her and seeks to find her. This quest for his lover symbolizes Jordan’s inner journey towards self-knowledge and self-understanding. At a certain point, Jordan himself realizes the true meaning of his search and asks: “Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?” (Winterson 1991: 39). Jeffrey Roessner (2002: 110) explains that Jordan’s imaginative quest results from his “urge to transcend the limitations of the physical self” and his desire to find access to his true inner identity. As Winterson (1991: 101) argues, “when we are drawn into the art we are drawn out of ourselves. We are no longer bound by matter”. Imagination thus enables Jordan to escape the

limitations of time and space and the confinement of his body and begin his journey for true meaning. Unlike Jordan who freely pursues his quest, the second main character of the story, the Dog-Woman, is not given the same opportunity. Natalia Andrievskikh (2015: 21) points out that the only artistic activity that the Dog-Woman engages in and that arguably brings her pleasure and happiness is singing. Unfortunately, she is forbidden to sing in public, and she thus cannot realize her artistic desires. “The Dog-Woman remains rooted in what society – and the symbolic order – delineates as reality” (Andrievskikh 2015: 21) and she is not given the chance to explore her inner self.

Jordan’s journeys to the imaginative reality and his explorations of his inner life suggest that the concept of a singular and stable identity is a mere illusion. Winterson (1997: 15) argues that “true art, when it happens to us, challenges the ‘I’ that we are”. As Tyler Bradway (2015: 189) points out, the fact that Winterson puts the “I” in scare quotes clearly indicates her “abiding suspicion of an essential identity” and her notion that our real selves are much more complex. Winterson demonstrates that just as our conception of the world is based on fictitious stories which we accept as the truth, our perception of our own identity is similarly misleading. She explains in *Art Objects* that “we mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others” (Winterson 1997: 59). However, these stories give us only a highly limited idea about who we really are. Winterson claims that imagination disturbs the assumed stability and singularity of our identity and replaces it by a certain chaos. Similarly, Murdoch (1993: 88) points out that “good art mirrors not only the (illusory) unity of the self but its real disunity”. The gradual exploration of the self encouraged by art thus leads towards the necessary revelation of the complexity and instability of identity. In accordance with the postmodern conceptions of self, Winterson’s stories portray identity as multiple, fluid and highly fragmented.

In Winterson’s fiction, the power of art to help people on their quest towards meaning and self-understanding is portrayed as potentially redemptive and therapeutic. Reina Van Der Wiel explores the role of art in *Art & Lies*, particularly in the story of Picasso, one of the three narrators in the novel. Picasso represses her traumatic memories of her childhood when she was sexually abused by her brother, and she tried to commit suicide. The final healing journey that allows her to overcome her past and regain her self-confidence starts with the process of painting. Wiel (2014: 160) says that “the act of painting ... is described in terms of religious ecstasy or enlightenment, just as the pictures Picasso looks at are spoken of as ‘The Divine’”. As Emily McAvan (2019: 98) suggests, Winterson describes art as a force challenging the binary opposition between the body and the spirit. Similarly, Silvia Antosa (2009: 135) argues that Winterson’s novels portray the “image of artistic creating as a way of merging body and soul together”. This disruption of the assumed division between the physical and spiritual worlds facilitates the therapeutic process of self-discovery and self-appropriation. Both the consumption of art and the active artistic creation stimulate imagination which functions as a cure allowing Picasso to explore her inner life and finally heal and get over the emotional trauma of her past.

Kearney (2002: 142) also points to the therapeutic potential of imagination and argues that the healing power of art further lies in its “function of making absent things present”. By encouraging its consumers to imagine various life possibilities, art can become an effective stimulus on the way to overcoming trauma. An example of such therapeutic use of imagining can be found in Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body* which portrays the trauma of love and death. The main protagonist is grieving after a failed relationship with a woman she/he loved but abandoned when she developed cancer. At first, the narrator is unable to deal with the situation and she/he lives in a state of constant pain, fear, and depression. She/he becomes obsessed with death and images of the physical deterioration of her/his lover’s body affected by illness. However, these painful imaginings began to serve as a coping mechanism which eventually helps the narrator overcome her/his anxieties. As Laurie Vickroy points out, “[the narrator] attempts to know and empathize with Louise’s experience of her illness in manageable doses of reading, rumination, and (re)enactments and imaginings of death. This seems to be the place from which she/he can tolerate the situation; it’s a path toward overcoming fear” (Vickroy 2015: 142). The imaginative exploration of life possibilities which are not present in real life can thus serve as an effective coping strategy on the way towards mental recovery.

Another potentially therapeutic aspect of art portrayed in Winterson’s stories is its power to stimulate the recovery of authentic feeling. Winterson repeatedly points to the alarming lack of feeling and compassion in contemporary society. In *Art & Lies*, she asserts: “The spirit has gone out of the world. I fear the dead bodies settling around me, the corpses of humanity, fly-blown and ragged. I fear the executive zombies, the shop zombies, all mouthing platitudes, the language of the dead, all mistaking hobbies for passions, the folly of the dead” (Winterson 1995: 64). Winterson (1988: 7) remarks that “we’re a lukewarm people” who lost a sense of empathy and compassion. “I look on suffering and feel it not. Isn’t it well known that nothing shocks us?” (Winterson 1995: 13).

Our materialistic society offers countless attractions and forms of entertainment which people greatly enjoy, but Winterson warns that we should not mistake indulgence for emotions: “Is appetite excess of feeling or lack of it? The glutton is not a gourmand. The alcoholic does not love fine wine any more than the womanizer loves women” (Winterson 1995: 118). The author implies that while people tend to live lives of excessive indulgence, they might still lack the ability to feel true emotions. Similarly, the author points to the sharp division between romance and love. While love implies the experience of authentic feelings and the search for our inner selves, romance is described as a mere “sentimentality that passes for love” (Winterson 1995: 28).

“Romance. Love’s counterfeit free of charge to all. Fall into my arms and the world with its sorrows will shrink up into a tinsel ball. This is the favourite antidote to the cold robot life of faraway perils and nearby apathy. Apathy. From the Greek A Pathos. Want of feeling. But, don’t we know, only find the right boy, only find the right girl, and feeling will be yours. My colleagues tell me I need just such a remedy. Buried up to my neck in pink

foam nothing can hurt me now. Safe to feel. All I can feel is you darling.”
(Winterson, 1995: 14)

Winterson makes clear that even though we live in a world which is devoid of feeling and emotions, we still long to feel. As she states in *The Passion*: “not much touches us, but we long to be touched” (Winterson 1988: 7). Winterson’s stories show that the experience of love enables people to get in touch with their inner selves and finally understand who they are. It can help them abandon their habitual patterns of thought and open their minds to new ways of seeing and thinking. Iris Murdoch (1999: 417) supports this vision of love and claims that falling in love can often be a transformative and deeply revealing experience, since “the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality”. As Winterson puts it, “only through feeling can I get at thinking. Those things that move me challenge me. Only a seismic shock can re-order the card index of habit, prejudice and other people’s thoughts that I call my own” (Winterson 1995: 89). The author makes clear that both the experience of love and the encounter with good art can stimulate true and authentic emotions and consequently help us transform our approach to the world and to ourselves.

Our need to experience true feelings and love is closely connected with our longing for connection. As Winterson (1997: 13) argues, in the end, “it is connection that we seek; connection to the past, to one another, to the physical world”. Winterson shows that art is inherently inclusive and by portraying the world’s richness and diversity, it helps to deconstruct the assumed boundaries separating people from one another. Hutchison explores how storytelling encourages empathy and compassion and points out that “central to imaginative stories is that a reader can journey into worlds far beyond the comfort of their own”, which necessarily invites “imaginative engagements with foreign people and perspectives” (Hutchison 2010: 355). These unknown territories that the reader enters “facilitate empathetic identification or understanding across difference” (Hutchison 2010: 355). As Justyna Kostkowska asserts, Winterson’s conception of art is intrinsically inclusive and supportive of difference which carries major environmental implications. She claims that art, and storytelling in particular, provokes “awareness that there is always another reality, another view, equally valid and valuable, to be taken into account” (Kostkowska 2013: 94), which necessarily promotes “values of the ecological coexistence of difference and otherness” (Kostkowska 2013: 57). Winterson (1997: 99) states that “what all art promises [is] a greater pleasure in the moment and a sense of permanencies. It is not time-locked and it will unlock for you a history otherwise hidden; the history of the human heart”. Since art is indifferent to time, it allows people to get beyond the superficial differences and divisions in identity, body, space and time, and pay more attention to what they share. Art conveys the “sense of the human spirit as always existing” (Winterson 2011: 153) and encourages people to become aware of the collective human experience across time and space. As Murdoch (1999: 461) puts it, “art is a great international human language, it is for all”.

It can thus be argued that Winterson's writing depicts art as a counterforce to a number of potentially harmful tendencies in our society resulting from our egocentric behaviour and our limited and rigid ways of thinking. By stimulating imagination, art broadens our perspectives and invites new approaches to the interpretation of reality and ourselves. Apart from addressing this issue and illustrating the great power of art, how does Winterson herself attempt to fulfil this transformative potential in the art she produces? As the author asserts, "the true writer knows that feeling must give way to form. It is through the form, not in spite of, or accidental to it, that the most powerful emotions are let loose over the greatest number of people" (Winterson 1997: 105–06). Therefore, in order to reveal the techniques and mechanisms which Winterson uses to disrupt the common worldviews it is necessary to focus on the formal side of her work.

The form of Winterson's books is usually highly innovative and experimental. The author combines aspects from several different genres and makes use of various narrative techniques. Instead of narrating her stories in a clear linear manner, Winterson usually presents narratives which are fragmented and chaotic. The narration might be broken by flashbacks, random stream of consciousness or seemingly unrelated stories within stories. This fragmentation reflects Winterson's notion of time and challenges the general perception of time as chronological and easily measurable. Instead, the narration of the stories encourages the perception of time as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. In the case of *The PowerBook*, not even the sequence of individual chapters is clearly arranged. As Kostkowska points out, the chapters are only loosely connected, and it is left up to the reader to make the arrangement. As a result, the text can be read in many different ways (Kostkowska 2013: 77). In a similar manner, the ending of the story is left ambiguous and thus "instead of having to accept the author's ending, the reader himself/herself is invited to make the decision" or, as Kostkowska (2013: 79) further argues, we can simply "let them coexist in our minds without actually 'choosing' or prioritizing one over another". All of these literary techniques not only challenge common literary conventions, but also inspire readers to rethink their assumption that there is a single objective reality. Instead, they are encouraged to accept that there are always multiple different perspectives and points of view. To demonstrate this multiplicity of realities and promote the appreciation of diversity, Winterson also frequently includes multiple narrative voices in her stories.

Another mechanism which Winterson (1997: 142) uses to support her claim that "[there is] no conflict between reality and imagination" is the blending of historical facts and fictitious stories. As Emma Hutchison (2010: 352–53) argues, "often combining history with fantasy and established patterns of knowledge with myth, Winterson's stories have the effect of blurring the distinctions between fact and fiction, between what is real and what is not". In this way, Winterson points to the artificiality of the concept of history and stresses the unreliability of historical (and other) facts. Similarly, in order to cross the line between reality and fiction, Winterson usually makes it very difficult for the reader to "escape" into the fictitious world of her stories. As Christy L. Burns (1996: 301) points out, "Winterson persistently disrupts her story's autonomy with metafictional references

that break the reader out of the story's spell". The fictional illusion is interrupted by "references to reading, writing, and the impact of art" (Burns 1996: 292) and repeated refrains such as "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (Winterson 1988). In this way, Winterson again crosses the seemingly obvious boundary between the worlds of fiction and reality.

In order to confront the readers with their assumptions regarding their perceptions of their own selves, Winterson destabilizes the concepts which are considered essential for the construction of identity. For instance, Winterson challenges the binary perception of gender difference. As Laura Doan (1994: 154) claims, Winterson's fiction is "a serious invitation to readers to imagine the emancipation of 'normal' and 'natural' from the exclusive and totalizing domain of patriarchal and heterosexual authority". In *Written on the Body*, Winterson presents a main protagonist whose gender is never revealed. By keeping this information hidden until the end of the story, Winterson confronts the readers with their own assumptions and expectations regarding gender roles and encourages them to rethink their prejudiced beliefs. Another method Winterson uses to disrupt the established notions of gender difference is the portrayal of characters whose physical or mental state does not fulfil general expectations. A fitting example can be found in *Sexing the Cherry*. One of the main protagonists of the story is Dog-Woman – a gigantic muscular woman who is well-aware of her strength and does not hesitate to use it for murders and other violent acts. Both her physical and mental qualities deny the image which is usually associated with femininity and feminine behaviour. Winterson thus clearly challenges and destabilizes the established notions of the "normal" and desirable behaviour of each sex, and instead promotes individuality and freedom of each person to express his or her unique personality.

Moreover, to demonstrate that identity is actually very unstable, fragmented and independent of time and space, Winterson portrays characters with "double" identities. The story in *Sexing the Cherry* takes place in the seventeenth century, but at a certain moment a sudden time switch occurs and turns Jordan and the Dog-Woman into their twentieth century alter egos. Even though they occupy a different temporal layer, the contemporary characters seem to coexist with their "older" counterparts. In this way, the human body is described as nothing more than a disguise or "a shell through which earthly time flows" (Morrison 2006: 175). Similarly, the seemingly separate stories portrayed in *The PowerBook* set in different historical contexts share the same theme of tragic love. As one of the characters puts it: "I keep telling this story – different people, different places, different times – but always you, always me, always this story" (Winterson 2007: 141). The shared experience connects people throughout centuries as if there was no temporal barrier separating them.

Another very powerful means of arousing emotions in the readers is Winterson's extraordinary use of language. Winterson puts the literary language in opposition to the banal language of everyday speech and argues that the poetic language of literature functions as a medium between the worlds of reality and imagination. As she explains in *Art Objects*, "a true writer will create a separate reality and her atoms and her gases are words" (Winterson 1997: 44). Winterson uses poetic language and lyricism to achieve the desired impact and startle readers out of their

everyday reality. As Susann Cokal (2004: 22) puts it, “aesthetic language offers a way of transforming and translating the world” and Winterson uses it to challenge common clichés and attack the conventional approach to the world.

As this article has argued, Winterson’s novels represent a highly unique and innovative form of art which forces its readers to step out of their comfort zones and confronts them with their deeply held convictions. Even though the belief in science and rationality and the idea of an autonomous and independent self provide people with a feeling of certainty and security in a world they cannot control, Winterson points to the potentially harmful consequences of such assumptions and shows that they produce rigid and egocentric ways of thinking. Winterson’s fiction suggests that art functions as a counterforce to such destructive tendencies in contemporary society and foregrounds alternative behavioural patterns. By stimulating imagination and creating “a world apart”, a place where the rules of the everyday life no longer apply, art reveals the contingent nature of reality. It allows detachment from the everyday world and at the same time encourages empathy and compassion with others. This “double vision” helps to disrupt some of the habitual patterns of thought and to gradually dissolve the ego. Transcending the ego necessarily leads towards the revelation of the instability of identity and towards better self-understanding, which can have a therapeutic and healing effect. Winterson’s fiction clearly demonstrates that if we let art move and impress us and we start exploring the infinite universe of the imagination, we might become able to see and appreciate reality in its true richness, multiplicity, and complexity.

References

- Andrievskikh, Natalia (2015) Consumption as Theme and Textual Strategy in *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson. *Pacific Coast Philology* 50 (1), 5–24.
- Antosa, Silvia (2009) Journeying Through Space and Time towards the Sources of Artistic Inspiration: Jeanette Winterson’s *Art & Lies*. In: Margaret J.-M. Sönmez and Mine Özyurt Kiliç (eds.) *Winterson Narrating Time and Space*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 121–38.
- Arendt, Hannah (2003) *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bradway, Tyler (2015) Queer Exuberance: The Politics of Affect in Jeanette Winterson’s *Visceral Fiction*. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48 (1), 183–200.
- Burns, Christy L. (1996) Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson’s Recovery of the Post-modern Word. *Contemporary Literature* 37 (2), 278–306.
- Cokal, Susann (2004) Expression in a Diffuse Landscape: Contexts for Jeanette Winterson’s Lyricism. *Style* 38 (1), 16–36.
- Disch, Lisa Jane (1994) *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Doan, Laura (1994) Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Postmodern*. In: Laura Doan (ed.) *The Lesbian Postmodern*. New York: Columbia University Press, 137–54.
- French, Jana L. (1999) ‘I’m Telling You Stories.... Trust Me’: Gender, Desire, and Identity in Jeanette Winterson’s Historical Fantasies. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 10 (3), 231–52.
- Hutchison, Emma (2010) Unsettling Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Cultivation of Political Contingency. *Global Society* 24 (3), 351–68.
- Kearney, Richard (2002) *On Stories*. London: Routledge.

- Kostkowska, Justyna (2013) *Ecocriticism and Women Writers: Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Li, Tong (2017) Modernity and Postmodernity: The Characteristics of Postmodern Cultural Media. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 12 (2), 265–77.
- McAvan, Emily (2019) *Jeanette Winterson and Religion*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Morrison, Jago (2006) 'Who Cares About Gender at a Time Like This?' Love, Sex and the Problem of Jeanette Winterson. *Journal of Gender Studies* 15 (2), 169–80.
- Murdoch, Iris (1986) *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge.
- Murdoch, Iris (1993) *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin.
- Murdoch, Iris (1999) *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Penguin.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (1991) The Literary Imagination in Public Life. *New Literary History* 22 (4), 877–910.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (2008) *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roessner, Jeffrey (2002) Writing a History of Difference: Jeanette Winterson's 'Sexing the Cherry' and Angela Carter's 'Wise Children'. *College Literature* 29 (1), 102–22.
- Vickroy, Laurie (2015) *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Wiel, Reina van der (2014) *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma: Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Winterson, Jeanette (1988) *The Passion*. London: Penguin Books.
- Winterson, Jeanette (1991) *Sexing the Cherry*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Winterson, Jeanette (1995) *Art & Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Winterson, Jeanette (1997) *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Winterson, Jeanette (1998) *Gut Symmetries*. London: Granta.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2001) *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. London: Vintage Books.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2007) *The PowerBook*. London: Vintage Books.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2008) *The Stone Gods*. London: Penguin Books.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2009) *Weight*. New York: Canongate.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2011) *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* London: Grove Press.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2016) *Christmas Days: 12 Stories and 12 Feasts for 12 Days*. New York: Grove Press.

DANIELA ŠMARDOVÁ is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno. Her doctoral research explores the ethical implications of the literary work of Jeanette Winterson and examines ways in which Winterson's fiction contributes to the deconstruction of some of the conceptions and categories common in Western culture.

Address: Mgr. Daniela Šmardová, Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 60200 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: d.swardova@mail.muni.cz]



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.