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# CONCEPTUALISING TIME AND SPACE IN WINTERSON'S *THE PASSION* AND *WRITTEN ON THE BODY*

**ANDREA KRISTON**
**Tibiscus University, Timișoara**
**4-6, Lascăr Catargiu St, Timișoara**
**andrea.kriston@clicknet.ro**

**Abstract:** Time and space are major themes in Winterson's novels. My goal in this paper is to focus on the way these concepts are analysed from the perspective of two of her novels, *The Passion* and *Written on the Body*. Winterson succeeds in creating and conferring new values on these concepts in her novels, thus allowing them a different interpretation.

**Keywords:** body, social space, space, time, water.

## Introduction

"A book is a magic carpet that flies you off elsewhere." (Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* 34) Quoting from her book of memoirs, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?,* she offers an image that frees literature from its material constraints: her work takes the reader on a journey through different times and places as if on a magic carpet. "Books, for me, are a home. Books don't make a home–they are one, in the sense that just as you do with a door, you open a book, and you go inside. Inside there is a different kind of time and a different kind of space." (Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* 34)

"All of my books manipulate time, in an effort to free the mind from the effects of gravity. The present has a weight to it-the weight of our lives, the weight of now. By imaginatively moving sideways, I try to let in more light and air." (*Art and Lies*, Winterson website)

Winterson's novels are proof that time and space are crucial elements in her fiction. She juggles with these elements in order to get escape from the weight of our present life and to step aside from under its burden. These two concepts are crucial in all her novels, and she is very conscious of the function time and space serve in her narratives.

In the present paper, we shall try to discuss these two concepts from the perspective of two of Jeanette Winterson's novels: *The Passion* (1987) and *Written on the Body* (1992). There are not many similarities between their plots, except for the theme of unfulfilled love, but the same literary approach to time and space can be found in both, even if they appear from a different angle.

*The Passion* tells the story of two characters and is set in the aftermath of the French Revolution, at the time of the rise and fall of Napoleon. The story is told by two characters: Henri was Napoleon's wringer of the necks of chickens in the Grande Armée, while Villanelle was a casino croupier in Venice, the city of mazes. Henri starts out as Napoleon's personal waiter and chicken cook, but then his destiny intertwines with Villanelle's, only for him to finally discover his call to write his memoirs/diary, mainly for himself. Villanelle, by contrast, is a web-footed Venetian woman, whose life is so tough that it often resembles a man's. She leads a bisexual life, arousing passion in both sexes. At the moment of their encounter, Henri falls deeply and helplessly in love with her, but at that point Villanelle's heart is given away. Later on, when she recovers her heart, she starts to love Henri like a brother, in an incestuous way, and the passion he bears for her soon turns into an obsession and sends him to a madhouse, where he eventually finds his freedom of mind.

*Written on the Body* is a story of love and loss, but Winterson has managed to create something as uncommon as an original novel about love. The storyteller of the book falls in love with Louise, who is married to a cancer specialist called Elgin. Interestingly enough, Winterson never reveals the gender of the storyteller and we are left to work out for ourselves whether the story is about a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship. Louise leaves Elgin and moves in with the storyteller, who is unaware of the fact that his/her beloved is seriously ill.

The story is told mainly through flashbacks and turns into a love poem, in which the loved one's leukaemic body is described in every detail in words both wonderful and terrifying. It is a tragic tale that Winterson gives us in *Written on the Body*, but she delivers it with the humour that is always present in her work.

## Time and Space

In *Technospaces*, Sally Munt explains the tremendous importance time and space possess.

> Human knowledge passes through two forms of cognition before it can be conceived: space and time. These two forms can be described as intuitive, in the sense that they precede conscious awareness–in other words, we know that, before we experience things, we will perceive them as phenomena in space and time, which are the first filters of knowledge. (Munt 1)

Sally Munt's explanation of space and time as first filters is closely related to the Biblical *Genesis*, where time and space precede any form of civilization, or indeed, any experience. Winterson makes use of these pure concepts to create novels from a literary point of view in which she can re-create historical time and geographical space from her own point of view.

*The Passion* is a deeply historical book, but contrary to some opinions that declare that "history gets rewritten" (Asensio Arostegui 83), I would say that history is seen from a subjective, limited angle or maybe under a magnifying glass. Historical facts abound, the data are accurate, but everything is perceived from a whole new perspective. Despite the beginning of the novel and its description of Napoleon's greatness as a general of the Grande Armée, the focus falls on a tiny character, Henri, who is at first insignificant. Winterson reverses the habitual patriarchal view and deconstructs the gendered perception of space which associates women with domestic activities, while men are given the primordial public space.

The two main characters occupy inverted roles from the point of view of traditional expectations. Henri, the man, reigns in the kitchen, after having dreamt of "drums and a red uniform" (Winterson, *The Passion* 6), and despite serving Napoleon in the Army for eight whole years, he has never succeeded in killing anyone but only in wringing the necks of chickens. The chicken is one more symbol to represent fear and the female side. Henri is an atypical soldier who does not enjoy going to the brothel, a very common practice in the Army, but when he sees Villanelle he develops a passion for her that will consummate his existence. The female character, on the other hand, has the determination and strength of a man. Villanelle's name has

male influences; it seems to be made up of the noun *villain* followed by the suffix–*elle,* just to emphasize its male aspect. Villanelle works in a casino and occasionally dresses as a man, sometimes just out of fancy or as a disguise, whereas at other times she reveals her true gender. Born into a family of boatmen, she is said to have webbed feet that she can never reveal to anyone; this is a secret pact among all boat people. In addition, she is not as sensitive as Henri, and states that her heart is a "reliable organ" (Winterson, *The Passion* 60). She has always been a gambler both with her life and with the men in her life.

## Social Space

> Social space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity--their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. (Lefebvre 73).

Space, according to contemporary thinker Henri Lefebvre, is a conglomerate of elements containing raw materials and energy that can not be separated from productive forces or from the social division of labour. What Lefebvre seems to imply is that every country creates its own social space by starting from the data its inhabitants have created throughout time, their history, and their anthropology in accordance with present times. This implies that the social space is in constant change, and that this in its turn leads to alterations in the superstructures of society.

Although Henri and Villanelle populate space in an unusual manner, as judged by the reversed male/female roles we are accustomed to in society, Winterson makes them comfortable in their positions. Since happiness is a universal human quest, she keeps her male character waiting until he can develop into an accomplished person. Setting her scene at the time of the Enlightenment, a period of tremendous progress in the sciences and of industrialization, Winterson creates a character, Henri, who seems deeply interested in the cultural and intellectual value of the movement. Although his job is a humble one, this chicken-neck-wringer has always aimed at being an intellectual, even if he has never known exactly what that meant. In this spirit, he starts "to keep a diary. I started so that I wouldn't forget. So that in later life when I was prone to sit by the fire and look back, I'd have something clear and sure to set against my memory tricks." (Winterson, *The Passion* 28) So Henri is very involved in following Enlightenment

theories, including the power to take decisions about his own life without being forced to live under the rule of tyrannical despots. Even at the end of the novel, many years after his time working for Napoleon, Henri believes that he needs "the freedom to make [his] own mistakes" (Winterson, *The Passion* 157). Henri often thinks about the French Revolution and the way in which Bonaparte changed his whole life. "In this sense, *The Passion* pictures Henri as a modern man who dreams of being considered an intellectual and shares the same illuminating experience with such contemporary German philosophers as Hegel and Fichte." (Asensio Arostegui 78)

**Space**

Space, just like time, is a pivotal concept in Winterson's understanding of the novel. Space is so much more than geographical space. Although Winterson relies heavily on geography, she places a great emphasis on human space and the human body. The eyes are not only the light of the soul but also stand for metaphorical representations. Henri lost an eye in the Army, but this only enhanced his ability to perceive reality, while the story of the Princess whose tears become jewels is a philosophical approach to happiness. In the same sense, we have human space mainly dealing with questions of the heart, as the title of the novel suggests.

In *The Passion*, time and space are connected through the geography of palms. Winterson makes use of the practice of palmistry in order to possibly decipher the future, or maybe to understand how the past has led to the present.

Recalling the Greek philosopher Heraclitus' famous dictum "you cannot step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you", Winterson constantly uses the image of a river to reflect the problematic nature of time. In *The Passion*, the image of Venice appears as that of an ever-constant land of change, where nothing is set or fixed.

> The idea of flux strikes a chord not only with the Bergsonian concept of time but also with Edward de Bono's 'water logic', one of the categories of lateral thinking he formulates. De Bono contends that traditional logic is static and based on solid foundations which he calls 'rock logic' In contrast to this traditional way of thinking, he proposes 'water logic' based on the flow of the mind interrogating the reasons for things, rather than finding and clinging to fixed definitions. He uses the term to denote 'movement and flexibility in thinking'. (Sonmez and Ozyurt 15)

The image of the river stands for a new way of thinking and a new consciousness. Winterson uses annexes to changing waters with their particular meanings as well. “Bridges join, but they also separate” (*The Passion* 61) is a reference to connectedness on a temporal level once again, because figuratively you cannot have a future without a past. The future predicted for us can only come as a consequence of our past.

If Venice stands for flexibility in thinking, the repeated image of the sea has a different meaning. The sea is not running water, where you could wash away your past and start all over again; the sea is still and immense. In the Napoleonic wars, the sea is the cemetery for 2,000 drowned soldiers, or company for mermaids.

In *Written on the Body*, water is Louise’s natural element. And water is one of the basic elements of life. The productive cycle of nature is less fertile if it lacks water. And so is Louise.

Memories recall a “certain September” (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 9) when everything was as it should be. Love “breaks out in tongues of praise, the high note that smashes the glass and spills the liquid.” (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 9) The damp soil parallels the beauty of Louise, her body fed by the purity of water. Winterson excels in romantic depictions of Louise, confounding her with the magnificent both healing (female) and destroying (male) powers of water/rain. Starting from the assumption that the male body is a destroyer, Winterson contours a female entity with comforting powers. The body of the beloved woman is immersed in water and is sometimes portrayed as a corpse floating on or swimming under water. Competing here with painters, Winterson never omits the colourful palette that water envelops Louise in: “You turned on your back and your nipples grazed the surface of the river and the river decorated your hair with beads. You are creamy but for your hair your red hair that flanks on you either side.” (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 11)

The two colours, red and white, obviously have very strong symbolism. Red is the vividness of love and passion, but red is also the blood of a wound; more probably Winterson’s chosen hue relates to menstrual blood. In a female context, a creamy colour represents the maternal milk for a woman’s unborn child. The red and white flows representing the maternal body are incorporated into the bloodstream, and as red and white blood cells they become subject to disease: “Marrow where the blood cells are formed red and white. Red and white, the colours of Louise” (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 110).

Space is the human body, Louise's body, which in the case of this novel is the physical body inhabited by a cruel disease. The personal space that is Louise's body has turned from her companion into her enemy: it is her body turning upon her, leaving her and disappointing her. Her personal space is being invaded.

Louise's body is a 'battlefield' at war with itself and is also the locus of a war between the narrator and her husband. As Susan Sontag has demonstrated, there is a direct link between politics and disease. Sontag argues that disease metaphors have often been employed to describe political and historical events: " … military metaphors reached to inspire always more, all the aspects of the medical situation description. Disease is seen as an invasion of foreign organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations." (Sontag 97)

Rubinson asserts that Winterson uses political metaphors to describe Louise's diseased body: "Mixing political and medical language genres, is a poetic strategy that challenges the authority of medical discourses over the body by refusing to abandon its representation to a depersonalized, exclusive vocabulary." (Rubinson 227)

If we parody the standard depiction of T-cells as the police force, the narrator is describing an army out of control: "the security forces have rebelled. Louise is the victim of a coup. … Here they come, hurtling through the bloodstream trying to pick a fight. There is no-one but you Louise. You are the foreign body now." (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 115-16)

The political description of the body fighting against the immune system as police is carried to its logical conclusion: the putsch of the security forces, causing death and the destruction of the body. Dissected under the doctors' magnifying glass, Louise's body splits. But the terrible disease involves the entirety of her bodily organs, which have to fear a bomb attack over the battlefield. Cancer cannot cope with the army of invaders that spreads through the organism. Neither can Louise's body cope with the harsh treatments she is subjected to.

Space is not just the biological body with its maimed parts, it is also the confined space where everything seems to be bursting out. At the very end of the novel, when it is not very clear whether Louise is dead or alive, and when the narrator has already lost track of her, he/she sees Louise one more time, but maybe it is just a dream.

> This is where the story starts in the threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door,

> where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. Hurry now, it's getting late. I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields. (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 190)

The room is a place under high pressure where almost everything explodes, where objects have grown to incredible sizes. It appears as if the room has been under pressure and is finally giving way. Beyond the door, by contrast, is freedom, where the open fields offer you freedom of mind as well. This paragraph, where space is at first limited, will eventually open up and let you breathe in new perspectives. It offers the reader a set of binaries: inside/outside, confinement/freedom, closed/open, bundled/loose. The brief image of the river suggests the necessity of flexibility and open-mindedness, and together with the images projected above, these qualities stand for the dynamic of postmodernism.

**Time**

The events in *The Passion* are presented chronologically and in parallel, but we may notice many and frequent flashbacks to Henri's childhood. Chronologically, Henri's and Villanelle's lives develop in parallel, with one of them in the Army and the other mainly living in Venice, until they meet and the discourse becomes common. Space and time are pivotal in their existence. Henri was five when the Revolution came and extremely young, still a boy, when he enlisted in the Army. Winterson uses time and a number of space coordinates (France, Russia, Venice) to show his growing up. She also makes use of grammatical tenses in her discourse. In the first three chapters, Henri's narrations are in the past, just as Villanelle mentions events she has lived through. But in the last chapter, where the two characters' narrations intertwine, Henri, now imprisoned in the San Servelo madhouse, uses the present.

> So, in his narration story time and narrative time overlap in a present that projects itself into the future as the novel ends: 'I will have red roses next year. A forest of red roses.' In this sense, although Villanelle's narration in this chapter refers to the same events Henri describes and theoretically enjoys the same status as Henri's, it is psychologically contained within Henri's ending, for her account remains past with respect to Henri's and the reader's presents. The impression is further enhanced by the obvious fact that Henri's ending literally puts an end to the novel, as it is printed after hers. (Onega 15)

Temporality can be seen under several facets. In *Written on the Body*, we have the biological time that encompasses the love story. It is the duration of the romance between the ungendered narrator and Louise. Louise's illness, on the other hand, is measured differently. Winterson makes use of Einstein's theory of relativity in presenting time in her work.

Time is always an important factor in the matrix of life, according to the novelist. "My experience has been that time always ends. In theory you are right, the quantum physicists are right, the romantics and the religious are right. Time without end. In practice we both wear a watch." (Winterson, *Written on the Body* 18)

In this brief paragraph we already find a contradiction between the limited time we all have on Earth and scientific endless time. It is the time used in science, in quantum physics, as opposed to real life time and real life experiences. Time appears as very precise; you feel the ticking of the clock as a threat throughout the novel. In this case the ending is closely related to the possible ending of a relationship, but on the other hand Louise states that "Time is a great deadener"(*Written on the Body* 189) just at the end of the novel. It implies the passing of time, as one needs time to heal and cure its wounds.

We do not live to realize our dreams for the future. In *The Passion*, Winterson affirms her focus on the present: "Domino said it was in the present, in the moment only that you could be free, rarely and unexpectedly." (Winterson, *The Passion* 154)

## Conclusion

Time, space and the narrative are all common points in Winterson's narrative and help her build up her fictional universe. She is a novelist who "aims to transgress the boundaries of time and space, and narrate what it is to be a human being living within the bounds of a patriarchal, traditional and polarised culture. Her novels present moments of being to illustrate how it feels to be liberated from these boundaries." (Sonmez and Ozyurt 10)

Jeanette Winterson's voice is unique in literature. She can always make innovations in such a worn literary genre as the novel. *The Passion* represents history in a non-conventional way, although history occupies a distinct function in the text. *Written on the Body* focuses on love in an ungendered world, in a place where conventions have collapsed. Nevertheless, time and space connect these novels, and Jeanette Winterson teaches us that we have to dispense with the rigidity that reigns over us and to learn to live in a flexible universe, where everything involves

change and relativity. Time and space do not have a merely literary significance but represent an exercise of the mind and spirit we should all experience.

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