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The Effects of Winterson’s Written Gender Ambiguity on Readers

In today’s world, we have made leaps and bounds in women’s rights and leveling the playing field between men and women, both at work and at home. While this is true, there is still a certain stigma that stands with regard to traditional patriarchal ideologies. Men still rule the world, so to speak, and women are still often overlooked. When it comes to literature, there are many modern, women writers working to expand their reach with their words. They are pushing the envelope and experimenting with themes and challenging the traditional ideologies that are so often assumed. Jeanette Winterson has challenged traditional gender representations in *The PowerBook.* Winterson writes her characters with gender ambiguity throughout most of the book, perhaps strategically working to provide the reader with a more connected experience with the story. This style of writing allows the reader to open their imagination to further experience virtual situations and emotions that they would not normally experience with sharply defined gender roles. As the narrator Ali suggests, readers can be someone else just for one night.

Becoming someone else through a story, through someone else’s words, is a pastime for many people. We read for escape, for our imagination, and often to see the world through someone else’s eyes. But how does the way the story is told affect the reader? For a straight white man, it is often taboo for him to read a novel with gay male erotica in it. Because of this taboo, many people are not able to experience and understand certain subcultures. Winterson’s *The PowerBook* is ultimately a story of love and the bravery it takes to love someone else, no matter the odds. Towards the end of the story, the narrator asks, “what does a person need in life except a roof, food, work, and love?” (Winterson 241). This idea of love being all we need is a universal theme that everyone can relate to, and with Winterson’s lack of pronouns and the obscure gender identities, she ensures that readers of all sexes and sexual orientations will be able to relate to the story she is telling. Many believe that it is “irrelevant… to consider sexual orientation as a factor of interpretation” (Galvin 1) regarding literature, but I believe that this is not true, consider that “the gender of the writer has been taken into account critically since the days of Plato and Aristotle” (Galvin 37). If gender has been accounted for, so too has sexual orientation, whether on the conscious level or not.

In addition to the reader not knowing definitively whether or not the narrator or other characters are male or female, Winterson allows her characters to cross gender boundaries, such as in the tulip story. Ali is a girl who is smuggling tulip bulbs to another country, and in an effort to blend in and to keep the bulbs hidden her mother straps them to her groin, representing a male penis. The story goes on to have Ali falling for and making love to another woman with her tulip penis, crossing the traditional gender role boundaries with an amusing tale of sexual identity, for the other woman had never seen a naked man before and knew no better. This story was an easy and entertaining story to read and allowed the reader to experience a different kind of love story with ease. This non-traditional love story is told in a way that allows universal readers to understand the tale of lust and love Winterson is trying to convey.

What is a different kind of love story, anyway? Our culture has been trained to accept heterosexuality as a norm, so typically anything outside of this box is different, and Winterson brings that to life in *The PowerBook.* She deliberately writes her characters with vague sexual identities if they are not downright ambiguous. With the ongoing story between the narrator and the married woman, we are not sure the narrator is a woman or a man, and Winterson leaves it up to the reader to decide. Does the story change if it is a woman versus a man? It should not, as love knows no boundaries. In Rubinson’s book, he suggests that by leaving out the narrator’s sex, “Winterson’s aim… is to suggest that gender is or at least should be *inconsequential* to narration” (130). He further argues that this lack of definitive sexual identity “teaches us to become aware of how we view the world in polar, sexualized, and essentialized terms” (Rubinson 130). With the reader interpreting the narrator’s gender as they please, this leaves the story to be widely accessible to all kinds of minds.

Another reason for Winterson’s lack of clearly determining her narrator’s sex may be political, in a sense. Andrea Harris suggests that this is a strategy, that by removing “she” referencing the narrator (assuming the narrator is presumed to be a “she”), that Winterson “grants them [women] a different status, the status of the universal, a position historically available only to men” (145). This strategy also implies that the reader not only read the narrator’s character as it is written, but also how we presume it to be written. In addition to this strategy, Em McAvan says that “simply because gender *is* compulsorily declared and institutionally produced” (438), that the writing of characters with gender ambiguity transgresses the traditional, patriarchal roles of gender in our culture, making a political statement against our society. There are many times that there are several meanings behind a writing, and therefore there are also several ways of interpreting stories and characters, and I think this is Winterson’s intention: to allow the reader to experience the story through their own eyes *and* through someone else’s, as well as to take a stance against society’s standards.

Being able to walk a day in someone else’s shoes is something we pretend we can do, but stories are the best way to allow us to view the world through another person’s eyes. The way we view ourselves has a large role in how we interpret the rest of the world, and Susan Pelle begs the question, “can sex, gender, and sexuality simply be strapped on and removed at will?” (35). Can we as readers remove the biases of our own sexual preferences in order to read another’s? Can we forget about the author’s? Jago Morrison suggests that the reader may unknowingly have a hard time separating Winterson and her characters (qtd. in Pelle 35). In this sense, Roland Barthes’ theory of the death of the author—removing the author from the equation in order to properly interpret and criticize the writing—must happen.

The idea of gender being something we can switch on and off in our minds is something that has become more accessible in today’s age of technology. It is easier than ever now to hide behind a screen and create another self through the Internet. “Cyberspace allows people to change their identities and enables them to adopt roles as different individuals” which leaves us asking, “what’s one’s TRUE identity?” (Kilic 288). Knowing one’s true self will determine how readers interpret Winterson’s *The PowerBook.* Biases and stereotypes are sure to play a role in interpretation, but hopefully readers are able to cast those aside and truly experience love through a non-traditional lens. The often small-world view then becomes universal.

During the developmental stages in life, the sex typing of our self directly relates to how we view gender roles in the world. Liben and Bigler say that “the nature of the relation between these two constructs is a crucial issue for gender research because… many prominent theories of sex-role development posit that individuals’ stereotypes about others play an important causal role in shaping sex typing of the self” (14). Essentially, no matter how hard we try to nix stereotypes of gender and sexual orientation, it all boils down to how we ourselves developed sexually, and those stereotypes are bound to play a part in our interpretation of literature and life.

IN a hypothetical, universal world, free of stereotypes and biases, readers would be able to interpret stories purely. Modern writers are breaking the shackles of traditional patriarchal ideologies and blurring the lines between male and female. Winterson has done this with *The PowerBook,* with Ali/Alix/etc., and she has done this with a purpose. According to Stacey D’Erasmo, “we look through the eyes of the other not via identity—this is what it’s like to be you—but via a way of making narrative—this is what it’s like to tell a story, to frame the world, the way you do—and suddenly we are able to apprehend the world anew” (1). This tactic of obscuring gender is not purely for the joy of turning people on to (presumably) lesbian love, but to allow others to view love in a way they never could on their own. Love is not always as our society and culture portray it to be. It can between two men, two women, transgenders, human and animal, and so much more. Winterson has opened up a whole new world of love for gays, straights, and everyone in between.

Whether or not the reader interprets Ali’s love story the way Winterson intended, we may never know. *The PowerBook* has opened my eyes to other forms of love as well as romantic ideas of Great Love. Overall, I believe that Winterson’s strategy of writing her characters with vague or changing gender roles has allowed readers to step into the shoes of another and consume this raw story of love and loss in a way that they would not have been able to under standard, heterosexual gender representations. Winterson takes risks with her writing and challenges the standards set by our society with regard to what love looks like, and for this, perhaps many people out there are able to understand that elusive thing called love just a little better.

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