Challenging Concepts of Normalcy: The Rhetoric of Destabilisation in Contemporary Narratives by Barbara Gowdy and Jeanette Winterson

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Declaration of Authorship

I certify that the work presented here is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and the result of my own investigations. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Graz, August 2012

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(Victoria Kober)

A Note on Gendered Language

No conscious effort has been made in this thesis to address all genders equally. In fact, by using the male and female grammatical forms, I have perhaps chosen the literally most discriminatory version possible. A slash is used to discriminate between male and female, the effect being a very graphic dichotomy which contrasts absurdly with the contents of this thesis. Creative attempts at being more inclusive have proven barely readable, while more common solutions, such as the neutral pronoun they, would have been inappropriate in contexts where the aim was to emphasize rather than obliterate the narratives’ discussion of dichotomies. I apologize to my readers, knowing that their genders will be more than two.

Short Titles

| MS  | Mister Sandman           |
|PB   | The Power Book           |
|SC   | Sexing the Cherry        |
|WB   | Written On the Body      |
|WOP  | The World and Other Places |
|WSS  | We So Seldom Look on Love |
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1. Introduction: On Truth, Normalcy, and the Works Considered

“The truth is only a version.” This phrase recurs throughout Gowdy’s *Mister Sandman* and describes one of the novel’s central ideas. When it comes to questions of identity, sexuality and the categories *sex* and *gender*, Barbara Gowdy’s and Jeanette Winterson’s narratives unanimously refrain from presenting any clear-cut, monovalent reality. While focussing on the fluidity of such categories and pointing to many, often conflicting truths which exist simultaneously, the narratives heavily depend on reality outside their fictitious realms. Deconstructing concepts of normalcy is a process which always happens by means of clear reference and in opposition to normative concepts prevalent in the real world. Gowdy and Winterson draw the reader’s attention on the one hand to the beauty and peculiarity of what is otherwise often experienced as completely ordinary, while on the other hand succeeding in ‘normalizing’ the potentially grotesque and shocking. Their narratives are bound to challenge their readers’ ideas of normalcy in myriad ways.

It is therefore indispensable to consider the narratives’ content as it relates to the cultural and social context of its time. Feminist narratology as a theoretical framework for analysing literary texts constitutes an innovative approach in its combination of basically structuralist analysis and the taking into account of sociocultural aspects which are generally reflected and reacted to in narratives, as Allrath and Gymnich assert. (cf. 2002: 35f.) Moreover, it is almost unthinkable to ignore categories like ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in literary analyses of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s works. In and for both writers’ narratives, these categories are formative elements which are quite frequently discussed within the framework of these texts.

This thesis focuses on selected narratives which are outstanding examples of the writers’ effort to unsettle common notions of normalcy. *We So Seldom Look on Love* by Gowdy and *The World and Other Places* by Winterson are the two collections of short stories considered in this thesis. Novels taken into account are *Sexing the Cherry, The Power Book* and *Written On the Body* by Winterson and *Mister Sandman* by Barbara Gowdy. I shall begin by outlining the theoretical background which forms the basis of my analysis. Then, I shall give some information as to the social and cultural context in which Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives have developed in order to point out ways in which the fictional texts considered in this thesis interact with and respond to contemporary extra-fictional realities. After that, I shall
demonstrate how concepts of normalcy are established within both authors’ works, highlighting questions of diegetic authority and determining which levels of authority are effective in creating standards of normalcy within the texts. I shall then move on to analyse how these standards of normalcy are questioned in each narrative. Different techniques applied to challenge concepts of normalcy, such as metanarrativity and intertextuality in Winterson’s works, and the effect of the figural narrative mode in Gowdy’s narratives shall be examined. I shall also look at specific themes which frequently appear in both writers’ works, and which form the basis of the narratives’ general discussion of concepts of normalcy. In doing so, I shall take into consideration and critically discuss other scholars’ view on the novels’ and short stories’ ‘statements’ regarding normalcy.

The central question of this thesis being how concepts of normalcy are rhetorically destabilized, it is indispensable to first determine how we define ‘normalcy’. In the context of this thesis, the term is not meant as a moral judgment, but used to refer to what is quantitatively more common. Homosexual relationships, for example, are less frequently represented than heterosexual relationships, both in daily life and in literature, and may for precisely this reason be seen as more interesting or more conflict-laden. (cf. Lanser 1995: 91) How each individual reader defines normalcy, both in terms of what they are used to and what they find morally acceptable, varies greatly. Such differences in perception and their effect on the understanding of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s texts will repeatedly be referred to. However, this thesis mainly focuses on those concepts of normalcy which are effective in the narratives themselves. Whether first- or third-person narrative, the narrators of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s stories frequently display a high level of awareness of the intended reader’s supposed notion of normalcy, which usually conflicts with what is normal in the narrated world. Though obviously giving insight into unusual, alternative realities in which it is, for example, anything but alarming to have two pairs of legs (cf. Gowdy. WSS: 43-71), the narratives also create concepts of normalcy, which they simultaneously seek to undermine. The texts are characterized by the tension between these two processes, affirmation and subversion, which are carefully balanced and on which rests much of the reader’s disposition to accept or reject realities created in the fictional world. The narratives largely succeed in presenting the extraordinary without giving the impression of being sensationalist in nature, which allows many readers to engage in possibly new and very different realities instead of shying away from them.
Today, heterosexist paradigms and the notion that sex is binary are no longer necessary patterns of thought, and both literature and literary criticism have taken up and mirrored this change of mindset. Literary critics have worked out models of criticism that take into account sex and gender as important elements of narratives without defining them in too rigid a manner. Instead of reaffirming binary ideas they show up a certain narrative’s bias or a text’s subversive potential. Susan Lanser has developed such a model, and it will form the methodological basis for this thesis as it is most suitable regarding the objectives of my analysis. In addition, I shall also consider Judith Butler’s view of sex as a social construct and reflect how such a view would reform a reader’s conception of characters as paper beings. As Allrath and Gymnich note in their article “Feministische Narratologie,” Judith Butler’s stance on the category ‘sex’ has hardly been considered in feminist narratology to date. (cf. 2002: 40) The reason for this, as is assumed in the article, may be that it is even harder to draw the line between sex and gender with respect to a literary character than with respect to a human being. However, this difficulty need not prevent critics from the attempt to consider Butler’s view in literary analysis. The line between sex and gender may be blurry in literary texts, yet at the same time the absence of sex as a real, graspable category in narrative texts almost suggests the application of Butler’s stance.

This is the case in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives, which take nothing for granted and whose truths are always only versions. A reconsideration of the categories sex and gender and their interplay in literary texts is most notably prompted in Written on the Body, where the narrator’s sex is unknown and thus, among other things, may not serve as the background against which gender could be measured. In her article “Sexing the Narrative”, Susan Lanser asserts that “sex is a common if not constant element of narrative so long as we include its absence as a narratological variable.” (1995: 87) The nature of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives, being flexible as to what is seen as real or true and constantly questioning normative categories, demands that a considerable part of analysis be devoted to categories which are actually absent, i.e. absent either entirely (like WB’s narrator’s sex), or absent in the sense that their exact meaning remains unclear and undefined, thereby allowing for various readings. Meaning is often taken for granted and thought to be inherent in the text, yet in many more ways than the reader is conscious of, meaning is ascribed to categories within the text by each individual reader. For example, and going with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, the category ‘female’ in a narrative may be thoroughly challenged as a supposedly ‘true’ and ‘stable’ category. Not only is there the linguistic problem that there is
no direct relation between signifier and signified, and that each lexeme will thus differ in each reader’s conceptualization to a greater or lesser degree, but also is there no guarantee that there will not be readers who have internalized very different notions of sex and gender than are the norm in a given society.
2. Theoretical Background

Judith Butler deliberates on the distinction that is drawn by society between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ space of gender. (1990: 133ff.) This distinction and the difficulties that arise from it are strongly reverberated in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives. Many of the characters struggle with precisely the question Butler discusses in her chapter “Subversive Bodily Acts”: “How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?” (1990: 134) However, according to Butler, this “hidden depth” is itself fabricated, not essential. She infers that since gender is performative, enacted through the body, there cannot be an essential gender core within the body which would regulate outer performance. Rather, she argues that performance creates the “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.” (1990: 136) Butler illustrates the constructedness of both inner and outer gender and the misconception of any stable connection between them by talking about the subversion of gender through drag. Citing the anthropologist Esther Newton, she explains that the appearance of a man in drag may communicate two conflicting messages. Either one understands that person to be male but presenting as female, or one infers from the appearance that the person is actually female ‘at core’ but looking male on the outside. The fact that both readings are thinkable yet contradicitive reveals that gender can never be enacted in a true or false way. (cf. 1990: 136-138)

For the reader who has understood this, who has done away with essences, it naturally follows that characters whose gender performances are not in accordance with what is socially expected to be their ‘gender core’ are not necessarily more subversive or complex than others, because there is no gender core to begin with. It seems crucial to me to point out the possibility of such a reading, as I find that there are countless analyses of and essays on especially Winterson’s narratives, concentrating on the subversive character of her fiction as ‘lesbian’ or ‘feminist’, not giving much emphasis to the much greater subversive potential that lies in the narratives’ power to deal with great topics such as love and desire in ways that render gender, sexual orientation and the like quite irrelevant.

Butler’s theories are groundbreaking with regard to various fields and are widely seen as constituting part of the basis of modern gender theory. Nonetheless, they are to this day highly
controversial, especially in their claim that sex and gender are constructed in their entirety. It does not lie within the scope or the interest of this thesis to make any statements as to the verity and the implications of that claim outside the fictitious realm. Working with fictional narratives, however, it seems promising to consider Butler’s view in analyses, because it enables and even forces the analyst to observe closely how ideas about factors which form a character’s identity are conveyed, where these ideas come from, how they shift in the course of a the narrative, and where they are ‘inscribed’. Are they ‘written on the body’ or is the reader made to believe that they somehow form a character’s essence? How do Gowdy and Winterson draw the line between inside and outside, how do they challenge this distinction and how do they manage to manifest conflict of identity not only in single characters but in the structure of whole narratives?

Several of Susan Lanser’s works, most importantly *The Narrative Act*, will serve as a methodological basis for this thesis as far as narrative theory is concerned. Lanser has developed a narrative theory which in many ways is comparable to the more ‘traditional’ theories by Stanzel or Genette, yet which differs mainly as a result of the attempt to give more importance to aspects of gender as well as to be more realistic concerning receptive processes. Being more realistic means that firstly, Lanser mainly works with the terms ‘first-person narrator’ and ‘third person narrator’ in an attempt not to confuse her readers and to provide a theory which is clear and simple, although at the same time, Lanser admits that Genette’s terms ‘heterodiegetic’ and ‘homodiegetic’ are more accurate when it comes to describing a narrator. (cf. 1981: 158) Secondly, Lanser is realistic regarding receptive processes of readers of literary texts. For example, she acknowledges that the distinction between author and narrator, which literary specialists and critics today naturally make, is not necessarily clear to the reader in general. She thus tries to account for this problem and to demonstrate its sources and consequences. (cf. 1981: 149ff.) Lanser’s endeavor to draw attention to the category ‘gender’ and to take into consideration the reader’s role in constructing meaning has brought forth a theory which, amongst other things, is greatly concerned with showing up power structures within narratives. Lanser distinguishes between public and private narrator, which “is useful for recognizing the different levels of authority, narrative autonomy, and narrative purpose implied by public and private narration.” (1981: 140). It is proves highly rewarding to determine diegetic authority in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s texts, narratives which comprise various levels of reality and often a number of different narrative voices and narratees. Naturally, in almost every narrative there are multiple levels of narrative authority and
narrative consciousness, which are interrelated and interdependent. (cf. 1981: 145ff.) Understanding these correlations and unfolding hierarchical power structures within the narratives is essential in order to answer the questions which form the basis of this thesis. The essential questions concerning each narrative are: Which is the narrative voice that ultimately has the authority to set boundaries? Which voice determines the norms prevalent within, and to a certain degree also outside the narrative? How much authority and opportunity to contradict these norms is given to single characters, especially to focalizers, and to what extent are these characters controlled by other narrative voices?
3. Gowdy’s and Winterson’s Narratives in their Socio-Cultural Context

Winterson is frequently referred to as a ‘lesbian writer’. Moreover, her narratives as such are referred to by readers and some critics alike as ‘lesbian’. Marilyn R. Farwell devotes the first chapter of her book *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* to the question of whether and when it makes sense to use such categorization. The discussion of this issue has always been a highly political affair, as the term ‘lesbian’ is seldom used to denote sexual orientation alone, but, as Farwell points out, “has acquired larger implications, in some cases functioning as a metaphor for the feminist woman or for an autonomous female sexuality or body and in other situations as a harbinger of the future or as a revised textuality.” (1996: 16) Such an understanding of ‘lesbian’ is certainly problematic in that it is simply not applicable to every explicitly or implicitly ‘lesbian’ narrative. In addition, it is incorrect to strictly equal the sexual orientation ‘lesbian’ with a feminist agenda, as there is no logical connection between the two. To establish such a connection on principle does not do any justice to the literary text which deals with these concepts in its own way. The ‘lesbian body’ in literary texts certainly has subversive potential, yet very quickly may readings and analyses backfire in which the ‘lesbian body’ is permanently mentioned in connection with adjectives such as ‘grotesque,’ ‘excessive,’ ‘monstrous,’ ‘disruptive’ or ‘non-feminine.’ The idea behind using such qualifying words generally is to draw attention to the contextual meaning of a ‘lesbian body,’ which because of ongoing societal rejection tends to operate as a ‘grotesque,’ ‘excessive’ or ‘monstrous’ body. However, not always do critics differentiate adequately between the effects a certain body would have within a specific society located outside the fictional world, and the body’s meaning within the narrative itself, where it might not have the connotations so readily ascribed to them by critics. Therefore, if the critic calls the lesbian ‘excessive’ or if he/she refers to the excessive as ‘lesbian’ without there being any clear indication in the narrative that the two concepts are to be equated, the critic must make it absolutely clear that the motivation for doing so is the extra-fictional societal background, rather than meaning which is located within the narrative. A remaining question is whether in consideration of e.g. Judith Butler’s theories it is still reasonable today to designate an excessive female body as ‘metaphorically lesbian.’

Farwell argues that it is, stating that it is important to note the connection of strong ‘lesbian texts’ with feminism, because “the development of a metaphoric lesbian subject is a powerful
and necessary response to and the ‘reverse discourse’ of the negative construction of the lesbian by male writers of the nineteenth century.” (1996: 16) She highlights the positive, revolutionary potential of acknowledging lesbian identity in- and outside the narrative: “To ignore the possibility of lesbian identity, even if defined as a discursive position, is to capitulate to Western culture’s systematic ignorance of, and more pernicious, current theory’s erasure of lesbian.” (1996: 19) That is to say that even the critic who has concerns about operating with dichotomies such as male/female and homosexual/heterosexual might decide to apply this terminology out of fear that less explicit but more inclusive ways of looking at the gender and sexuality spectrum might not be understood by the male-centered, heteronormative reader. Indeed, if we consider not the essential meaning of ‘lesbian,’ (which is debatable and ultimately undefinable), but the reality of what homosexuality implies today, the danger of ignoring such identities becomes evident:

Sexual relations between persons of the same sex were criminalized in England until 1967 and in Canada until 1969. (Ottoson 2008: 45) In a poll in Great Britain, 2012, “three in five people still say there is public prejudice against lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain today.” (Dick and Guasp 2012: 2) In addition, “[i]n the last five years six per cent of people - 2.4m people of working age - have witnessed verbal homophobic bullying at work and two per cent - 800,000 people of working age - have witnessed physical homophobic bullying at work.” (Dick and Guasp 2012: 3) Stonewall Living together report also shows that stereotyped notions of homosexuality are still frequent and that heinous attitudes towards homosexuality still exist.

These few facts are meant to raise awareness of the socio-political context from which Gowdy’s and Winterson’s texts have emerged. In how far their narratives are intended as political tools against concepts of normalcy that have led to the societal status quo is questionable, whereas there is no doubt that they are powerful literary texts and recognized for exactly that reason. Still, the connection between the problematization of identity in- and outside narratives is by no means arbitrary, neither concerning the production nor the reception of texts. Neglecting the link between political developments of our time and representations (as well as constructions) of reality in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives would implicate the denial of an important constituent of meaning which characterizes these authors’ texts. After all, their narratives are not merely self-referential, but in dialogue with extra-literary reality to a greater or lesser extent. For example, Winterson’s short story “The
Poetics of Sex” features a series of questions printed in italics, which are put forth by no one in particular but function as subtitles within the story. “Why Do You Sleep With Girls?”, “Which One of You Is the Man?”, “Why Do You Hate Men?” (WOP: 31, 32, 38) It would be ignorant to postulate that these questions are simply posed by some unknown fictional voice within the story and to disregard the fact that they represent a verbatim reproduction of the type of interrogation lesbians so commonly undergo.

There is, thus, a clear need to address and name identities such as ‘female,’ ‘male,’ ‘transsexual,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘bisexual,’ ‘heterosexual,’ etc., even if they are, at the same time, rendered quite meaningless by e.g. Butler’s deliberations on sex, gender and gender performance. Yet the theoretical postmodernist dissolution of such identities merely denotes that identities are not stable and that there is no essential meaning to these terms. However, on a personal level, meaning can be rendered terribly essential. In some parts of the world, whether one’s identity is ‘straight’ or ‘queer’ is still a matter of life or death, and whether one is ‘male’ or ‘female’ will have an impact on so many aspects of one’s life that many people’s struggle to even consider the constructedness of these dichotomies is all too understandable.
4. Diegetic Authority: Establishing Concepts of Normalcy

The act of narrating is a powerful act, for the one who tells the story is the one who determines the rules that apply within the narrated world. What is told and what remains unsaid, who of the characters is given a voice, whether and how the reader is addressed – all of these decisions lie with the narrator. The ultimate ‘narrator,’ the one who effectively controls the story, is, of course, the author. While the author’s voice as such cannot be identified or isolated in a narrative, as each narrative voice we encounter is distinct from the author who created it, the reader may often find that the narrative as a whole pursues different objectives than its narrator(s), which demonstrates that the narrator’s autonomy and exclusive diegetic authority are illusive (cf. Lanser 1981: 146). This brings to mind the fact that there is an extrafictional authority – the author or implied author – who is responsible for the narrative and who may choose to expose deficiencies of the narrator in order to support the overall proposition of the narrative. It thus requires thorough analyses of the many narrative voices in charge of discourse in order to illustrate and understand how each narrative establishes its reality and its proper standards for normalcy. Only then can we address the issue of how these standards are questioned within the narratives and how they relate to and possibly challenge historical, extra-fictional realities.

4.1. The Narrators’ Authority

Any narrator’s diegetic power is, of course, strongly dependent on his/her degree of reliability. Generally, a narrator is reliable if the reader feels he/she can trust him/her. Ansgar and Vera Nünning explain that “[t]he reliability of a narrator is compromised most frequently by his or her limited knowledge, emotional involvement in the events and questionable norms or values.” (2007: 120) In Sexing the Cherry, for example, the Dog Woman’s reliability as a narrator is diminished considerably, as there is a stark and ironic discrepancy between her knowledge about the world and the reader’s. She reveals her comic simple-mindedness, for instance, when talking about her first sexual experience: “‘Put it in your mouth,’” he said. ‘Yes, as you would a delicious thing to eat.’ I like to broaden my mind when I can and I did as he suggested, swallowing it up entirely and biting it off with a snap.” (SC: 41)
Woman’s limited knowledge certainly indicates that her perception of the world is to be received critically.

Susan Lanser draws attention to additional aspects which determine a narrator’s reliability. She points out that the level of reliability is not solely defined by the literary text, but also depends on whether the reader agrees with what is conveyed, as well as, in the case of a first person narration, with the narrator as a character. According to Lanser, an author generally runs the risk of granting a lower degree of authority to his or her narrator by having that narrator be female. If the author herself is female, too, authority is potentially lowered even more. Whether this presumption still holds true today is disputable, yet Lanser brings to mind the fact that the narrator’s gender and a number of other seemingly unimportant factors may influence one’s reading substantially, and may also affect the narrator’s level of reliability, even if such an effect is in no way aimed at in the text and intended by the author. Lanser rightly argues that just as “gender, as culturally constructed, cannot be said to reside ‘in’ the text in the way that narratology ‘proper’ wants features to reside, […] reliability is also a cultural construct” (1995: 88). This becomes clear when thinking about the definition of reliability. In The Narrative Act, Lanser describes a reliable narrator as “intellectually and morally trustworthy.” (1981: 170) While in the case of the Dog-Woman it is safe to say that any reader would regard her as both intellectually and morally untrustworthy, such evaluations prove to be more difficult with regard to other narrators. Nothing in Written on the Body, for example, suggests that the narrator is designed to be unreliable, yet not every reader would esteem a character who has numerous affairs, including a major affair with a married woman, to be morally trustworthy. In theory, disagreement with a narrator’s worldview and morals should not cause the reader to deny the narrator’s ability to reason and power to judge completely. Yet Lanser is realistic in assuming that, depending on the reader’s social, cultural and personal disposition, such an (unwanted) reaction may be evoked.

Interestingly, many first-person narrators in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s stories are aware of the fact that they are running the risk of being denied reliability due to their unconventional views and controversial actions. Repeatedly, their own reliability becomes the subject of their writing.

In The Power Book, the narrator frequently discusses his/her reliability, both as a character in his/her relation with other characters within the story, and as a narrator with regard to the reader. The narrative situation in The Power Book is interesting as it features a number of
first-person narrators on different levels. In theory, it is clear from the beginning that there is one superordinate narrator, the e-writer who is inventing stories in the 21st century. All the other narrators are to be regarded as products of that narrator’s imagination, and therefore as entirely dependent on him/her. Yet the e-writer soon breaks the illusion of having exclusive diegetic authority by asserting that both the person s/he is chatting with as well as the characters in their stories may and do intervene with his/her narrative autonomy. (cf. 26f.) The narrator thus makes the stories s/he invents seem more real and independent, while questioning whether his/her own life and interaction with other people is to be seen as any more real than fiction. Winterson creates a frame tale in which the narrator on the higher level, though obviously fictional, is presented in a realistic manner, whereas the stories narrated are fantastic. By blurring the boundaries between the two levels, Winterson draws the fantastic closer to the reader’s reality. One means through which this is achieved is putting the reader into the position of the woman the e-writer is chatting with. That woman stands for all the notions of normalcy that are challenged throughout the novel. She asks for a romantic story, but what she receives does not comply with her ideas of romance. At the same time, she is discontent with more traditional romantic tales.

‘That wasn’t my idea of romance.’
‘Was it romance you wanted?’
‘Doesn’t everyone?’
‘Download Romeo and Juliet.’
‘Teenage sex.’
‘Wuthering Heights.’
‘The weather’s awful and I hate the clothes.’
‘Heat and Dust.’
‘I’m allergic to dust.’ (PB: 25)

She wants to be transformed through fiction, yet she refuses to acknowledge that fiction and reality may merge, something the narrator tries to teach her and, along with her, the reader.

It’s only a story, you say. So it is, and the rest of life with it – creation story, love story, horror, crime, the strange story of you and me. […] I can change the story. I am the story. (PB: 4f.)

And she is afraid of engaging in a story which is not based on the principles and categories of the ‘real’ world.

‘Who are you?’
‘Call me Ali.’
‘Is that your real name?’
‘Real enough.’
‘Male or female?’
‘Does it matter?’
‘It’s a co-ordinate.’
‘This is a virtual world.’
‘OK, OK – but just for the record – male or female?’ (PB: 26)

The woman asks the obvious questions and her expectations with regard to fiction are those of an average reader. Yet the reader’s expectations are frustrated repeatedly. The narrator, however, is aware of that potential frustration and addresses it directly. In highly meta-fictional passages, the nature of fiction and reality is discussed and the narrator illuminates that fiction cannot and must not function in traditional ways: “At a certain point the story gathers momentum. It convinces itself, and does its best to convince you, that the end in sight is the only possible outcome. There is a fatefulness and a loss of control that are somehow comforting. This was your script, but now it writes itself.” (PB: 53) The narrator writes stories which are dependent to a large degree upon traditional, well known narratives, and s/he follows their patterns for a long time, until a major change is made. Sometimes, that change goes hand in hand with an explicit declaration of the necessity for such an alteration. Through metafictional deliberations, the narrator’s intentions become clearer. “Why did I begin as I did, with Ali and the tulip? I wanted to make a slot in time. To use time fully I use it vertically. One life is not enough. I use the past as a stalking horse to come nearer to my quarry.” (PB: 209) One effect of such explanations is that the reader, who may at times question the reliability of a narrator who constantly frustrates reader expectations, regains confidence in him/her – not confidence in the narrator’s absolute power to control the narrative and to be, in that sense, reliable, but a confidence at least in the intellectual capability, honesty, and transparency of the narrator.

Interestingly, a similar technique is used in most of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s first person narratives. Metafictionality is characteristic of Winterson’s works in general, and first-person narrators in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s stories are aware of a reading public and display high concern about possible reader reactions. In the following, I shall give an overview of the narrative situations in the works considered here, contrasting first-person narrations with the figural narrative mode Gowdy most frequently applies. I shall demonstrate how first-person narrators directly or indirectly address their own status as narrators, their reliability and their identity in the context of certain norms. The aim is to see how their deliberations, sometimes meta-narrative and sometimes on the level of the story, have an impact on their position as diegetic authorities.
As stated above, the narrator in *Written on the Body* is neither explicitly male nor female. For the reader, the information provided is insufficient when it comes to reconstructing the narrator’s sex, for the clues given are contradictory. It is possible that for a certain time the reader does not mind or even not notice that lack of information, but it is most likely that for each reader the narrator’s unclear sexual identity does become apparent and relevant in the reading process. Yet if the reader’s expectation (of being provided with clear information) is frustrated, where is that frustration directed? Is it the narrator who will be esteemed less reliable? Usually, it is not the first-person narrator him- or herself who gives information about his/her sex. It is often through the narrator’s name being mentioned by another character, or through his/her specific life situation that the reader comes to know the narrator’s sex. Such information is almost always given indirectly; thus, it is not so much the first-person narrator whom the reader will hold responsible for the lack of information, but rather the author or implied author. In spite of the narrator being highly self-reflexive and talking about his/her own narration and potential reader reactions, the topic of his/her sexual identity is by no means addressed. The choice of this narrative device, having an apparent blank space within the novel, is an interesting and unique feature of *Written on the Body*. Whereas the narrator in *The Power Book*, whose sexual identity is also uncertain, does address and ponder on the significance of such a category (cf. *PB*: 26), *Written on the Body* leaves it to the reader to question his/her need to categorize, should such a need arise in the reading process. The narrative’s aim is not to ignore or erase the category *sex* altogether, which is evident by the fact that all the other characters’ sex is given. *Written on the Body* only ignores the question of the narrator’s sex, establishing a reality which enables the narrator to present him- or herself and to be treated by other characters in a way that allows him/her always to remain neutral in terms of sexual identity, and to be ambiguously marked in terms of gender identity. If the narrator’s sex is one of the central problems in *Written on the Body*, it is a problem triggered by the narrative as a whole, but detached from it. The reader may be almost certain that the omission of information about the narrator’s sex is meaningful and deliberate, for to construct a narrative which allows for such ambiguity is complicated, unusual and thus certainly meant to trigger reflection. Such reflection, however, is not guided by the narrative in any definite way, as the text does not seem to create any implied reader reaction to this phenomenon.

While the narrative does not address the reader’s potential surprise at the absence of clear information about the narrator’s sex, it does however presume certain reader reactions where
the narrator’s morals and reliability are concerned. On the third page already, the narrator admits having lied to many women: “I don’t like to think of myself as an insincere person but if I say I love you and I don’t mean it then what else am I?” (WB: 11) According to Lanser, this information, which reveals the narrator as not necessarily morally trustworthy, might already have an impact on the reader’s estimation of the narrator’s reliability. At the same time, however, the narrator also gains reliability through such a statement, as it highlights his/her honesty towards the reader. Throughout the novel, a certain concern for the reader’s evaluation of what is told is perceptible, yet what adds to the narrator’s reliability and gives him/her authenticity is the fact that s/he never holds back confusing or ambiguous information for fear that it would lower his/her credibility: “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator. Why didn’t I dump Inge and head for a Singles Bar? The answer is her breasts.” (WB: 24) With a sense of self-irony, the narrator points out that no narrator, especially no first-person narrator, can be completely reliable. Subjectivity and the fact that as a ‘human being’ it is impossible to always act in a rational and universally understandable way contradict such an expectation. Through heightening the reader’s awareness thereof, as is also the case with regard to the narrator in The Power Book, the concept of reliability is relativized, while the narrator him- or herself gains authenticity. At an early point in the narrative, when the topic of adultery is introduced, the narrator addresses the reader, “You think I’m trying to wriggle out of my responsibility? No, I know what I did and what I was doing at the time. But I didn’t walk down the aisle, queue up at the Registry Office and swear to be faithful unto death.” (WB: 16) Engaging with the reader in such a way is frequent within the narrative. It allows the narrator to establish a framework of norms, and to show that the norms which apply within the narrative are comparable to the ones that are also common in extra-fictional reality. At the same time, in addressing these norms, the narrator can challenge them in an intellectual and direct way, rather than merely subverting them on the story level.

Another component of the narrator’s authenticity is his/her frequent reflection on his/her own behavior. Lying, selfishness and committing adultery are faults which the narrator admits, yet his/her own self-conception is not a clearly negative one. Neither does the narrator’s rhetoric allow the reader to come to such a one-sided conclusion. Thus, while honesty, compassion and faithfulness are concepts the narrator accepts and establishes as norms within the narrative, s/he also critically questions the implications of regarding such norms as absolute and irrevocable in a world which repeatedly reveals their ambiguity. For example, the narrator
wonders whether it is even possible to stay true to his/her lover after something within himself/herself has changed. The narrator has not yet committed adultery and would like to stay faithful, yet at the same time, s/he feels that faithfulness is no longer an option open to him/her:

I used to think that Christ was wrong, impossibly hard, when he said that to imagine committing adultery was just as bad as doing it. But now, standing here in this familiar unviolated space, I have already altered my world and Jaqueline’s world forever. She doesn’t know this yet. She doesn’t know that there is today a revision of the map. That the territory she thought was hers has been annexed. You never give away your heart; you lend it from time to time. If it were not so, how could we take it back without asking? (WB: 38)

Wondering thus and using the inclusive ‘you,’ the narrator presents his/her situation in a more general framework, pointing out that the difficulty s/he deals with is one shared by other human beings, as there is a logical cause for the problem.

In *Mister Sandman*, we have a very different type of narration. The novel, which relates the story of a Canadian family, is rendered in a figural narrative mode. Each family member works as a focalizer at different points of the narrative, except Joan, whom the older daughter of the family gives birth to as a teenager. Joan is brain damaged and behaves strangely in many ways, but is also gifted when it comes to playing the piano or mimicking different sounds. She is the ‘mystery’ within the story, both in terms of plot and narrative strategy. The story revolves around her, yet the reader never learns about her thoughts and feelings except, to a certain degree, through her actions. Not granting insight into Joan’s mind allows Gowdy to keep Joan’s occupation in the basement secret until the very end of the narrative. Joan’s position in the narrative is similar to the reader’s in that she does not speak but is incessantly spoken to. Joan is the only character whose thoughts are not presented in the narrative, yet she is also the only one who knows most of the other characters’ thoughts and secrets. Gowdy’s choice of a large number of focalizers allows her to present various viewpoints, a technique which supports a statement often repeated within the novel: that the truth is only (a-)version.

There is an interesting tension between a narrator’s potential authority when it comes to conveying ‘the truth,’ and the apparent effort of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives to point towards the unreliability of any single perceiving consciousness. In *Mister Sandman*, such tension is avoided by featuring no perceptible individualised narrator. Except for very few instances of ‘telling,’ the action is solely shown through presenting the internal perspective of
the characters. Susan Lanser explains in *The Narrative Act* that there exists a “cultural assumption that written discourse carries a particular validity and authority, that it comes closer than most speech to approximating ‘the truth.’” (1981: 121) In Gowdy’s and Winterson’s works, however, ‘the truth’ is shown to be hardly representable. *Mister Sandman* frequently offers different impressions of a single event. The absence of a personified narrator allows a completely non-judgemental presentation of the characters’ viewpoints and brings about a certain ambiguity as to what ‘truly’ happens, which is never revealed within the narrative. For example, when Joan is born, numerous characters assert that they have heard her scream something. Two possible variants of that scream are offered to the reader: “FLO! FLO! SHE’S INSANE!” as well as “OH! NO! NOT AGAIN!” (*MS* 21) The scream is certainly important and of interest to the reader, as it is one of the many mysteries about Joan. The second variant is even repeated at a later point in the narrative, as it happens to be what the girls’ grandmother says right before she dies. Despite the scream’s symbolic importance, its exact wording remains unclear. There are barely any moments in the narrative when the reader is allowed more insight than any given character. The effect is a plurality of conceivable readings and the impression that the narrative’s reality may be any of these readings, or all of them together. The events are presented through the characters’ consciousness until the very end, and the reader is never granted insight into what seems so central to the narrative – Joan’s consciousness and her motivation for recording and compiling her family members’ shocking statements. Since Joan’s version of the ‘truth’ remains untold, one piece of the puzzle is always missing for the reader to understand what ‘really’ happens. Before this background, it is clear that presenting any definite reality entailing definite standards for normalcy is by no means intended in the narrative. Emphasis is instead put on the characters’ perceptions and evaluations of reality, which are affected but ultimately not determined by their notions of normalcy.

**4.2. The Characters’ Sense of Normalcy**

The characters’ diegetic authority is, naturally, always dependent on the narrator. It is the narrator who authorizes a character to speak, or who decides which parts of the narrative a reader gets to see through the eyes of a character. Despite this apparently clear-cut structure of authority, it is important to keep in mind that the narrator him- or herself in turn depends on an extradiegetic authority. The characters’ utterances and thoughts are “dependent on the
outer text both for their existence and for their contextual meaning” (Lanser 1981:135), the outer text being more than just the produce of a fictional narrator.

In Sexing the Cherry, for example, there are two main narrators (or four, if one is to regard the 17th-century and modern versions of Jordan and Dog-Woman as entirely separate entities). The reader, perhaps more than with other narratives, is aware that there must have been an extrafictional authority that structured the narrative and divided it into parts, some of which are told by Dog-Woman, some by Jordan. This intentional structuring, which takes place outside the fictitious realm, is foregrounded through the use of little emblems which mark Dog-Woman’s and Jordan’s speech. Whereas Dog-Woman and Jordan are public narrators, telling their stories to an implied readership, the princesses in Sexing the Cherry are private narrators, addressing a character within the story, Jordan, as they tell the stories of their lives. The princesses are in a very interesting diegetic position. For although they are apparently private narrators and located on a diegetic level subordinate to Jordan’s and Dog-Woman’s level, they are also granted emblems which mark them as narrators. In addition, the fact that together they act as narrators over twelve pages in a rather short book shows that they need to be taken very seriously as narrators. One conspicuous element in their narrations is that at times, a certain ‘you’ is addressed. On one level, ‘you’ is, of course, Jordan, who listens to the princesses’ stories within the narrative. Yet there is also the possibility that ‘you’ addresses the implied reader. In this case, the princesses must be seen as breaking out of their position as private narrators and acting, at least for a moment, as public narrators. Instances which suggest that ‘you’ addresses the implied reader rather than Jordan, occur whenever the princesses build on or mention collective experience, which, in the end, is the implied reader’s. The princesses refer to the reader’s knowledge of specific fairy tales and the structure of fairy tales in general, and presume his/her familiarity with other literary texts. “‘That’s my last husband painted on the wall,’ said the second princess, ‘looking as though he were alive.’” (SC: 49) It is clearly the reader’s associations which are invoked here (especially bearing in mind that the poem alluded to is not one 17th-century-Jordan will be familiar with).

In theory, the speech situation within the narrative is one between Jordan and the princesses. However, the reader may almost forget Jordan’s presence and theoretic diegetic superiority over the princesses, for he recedes into the background until all the princesses have told their stories, and thus the distinction between public and private narration becomes blurry. (cf. Lanser 1981: 139) “You know that eventually a clever prince caught us flying through the window,” (SC: 48) one of the princesses says, again addressing the reader at least as much as
Jordan, and establishing that they are indeed the princesses the reader knows from Grimm’s fairy tale. Just as Jordan and Dog-Woman are not bound temporally but live in the 17th century as well as in contemporary England, the princesses are not bound to one story. In Winterson’s narrative, they have agency, both on the story and the discourse level.

The characters in *We So Seldom Look on Love* define their identities against the background of social norms, accepting some and disapproving of others. There are ways in which the characters correlate with those norms and ways in which they differ radically. In each short story except for the two first-person narratives, the narrator never judges their behaviour but tells the stories in a neutral, unaffected way. Whereas the narrators in Winterson’s work tend to intellectualize questions regarding ‘normalcy’ and reflect on them over and over, Gowdy’s narratives relate numerous peculiar incidences without displaying any concern. In *We So Seldom Look on Love* as in *Mister Sandman*, it is the characters who raise the topic of normalcy and establish a context for judging their own or other characters’ behaviour. Whether the reader shares the characters’ sense of normalcy may impact his/her sympathy for the respective character, yet it does not necessarily determine the reading of the story in the sense that the reader would be forced to classify the characters’ actions and either agree or disagree with them. In her analysis of *We So Seldom Look on Love*, Hernáez Lerena speaks of “abnormal sexual behaviour in ‘Ninety-Three Million Miles Away’ and ‘Lizards’ and biological discontinuity – gender metamorphosis – in ‘Flesh of My Flesh.’” (2003: 724). Such a view is in no way encouraged by the text as a whole. Even though the characters often struggle with being ‘different’ and transgressing norms, the narratives themselves rather question the concept of ‘normalcy’ and integrate a wide spectrum of viewpoints through different focalizers, which raises the question whether ‘discontinuity’ as well as ‘abnormal’ are appropriate terms in this context.

As much as in the reader’s life, the myth ‘normality’ also persists within Gowdy’s short stories and has a great impact on the characters. They are well aware that normative physical appearance, social behaviour, sexuality and gender exist and that parts of their identities are contradictory to some of those standards. Since most of the third-person short stories are, like *Mister Sandman*, rendered in a figural narrative mode, there is no sense of an instance that would judge the characters from a position of greater diegetic power. Instead, evaluation only ever comes from the internal perspective of the characters. They very consciously construct their identities through differences from and similarities with others. In most stories the
characters emphasize their own strangeness at such rate that it seems to define their identity instead of just being a part of it. The first-person narrator in “We So Seldom Look on Love” states that she is a necrophile, using the noun and thereby letting her sexuality define who she is. In “Lizards” the main character, Emma, who sleeps with various men while being married to Gerry, wants to tell her husband, “This is who I am” (WSS: 169). In both stories the protagonists feel that their sexuality is who they are rather than just what they do. They focus on what makes them different from others and, by closely connecting those differences with their identities, often accept and justify them. This justification is expressed very directly in “We So Seldom Look on Love.” The narrator objects to her boyfriend Matt’s wish to make love to corpses as she does, and argues that one has to “be born to do it” (WSS: 183), which she believes she is. She thereby legitimises her behaviour, but also constructs her identity as a ‘freak of nature.’ At other points in the story, when she tries to defend her behaviour, she often bases her arguments on standards and stereotypes she does not question. While cultural, moral and sexual standards have placed her in a position she perceives as ‘abnormal’ in the first place, she makes use of exactly those standards to defend her actions. She stresses that she is good-looking, blond and pretty, and argues that under these circumstances, her necrophilia is not as abhorrent as it would otherwise be. (cf. WSS: 173, 177) On the one hand she challenges socially accepted norms and insists that there is nothing wrong with what she does. (cf. WSS: 173). On the other hand, she is still part of that society and feels ‘abnormal’ in relation to it.

‘Abnormality’ and ‘difference’ are concepts which come into effect only when we look at people or situations from a distance, put them into context and compare them. This holds true for the reader as much as for the characters themselves. As soon as the reader or a character in one of the stories labels an action, for example calling undressing in front of a window ‘exhibitionism,’ their acceptance changes and they reject what is happening for being ‘abnormal.’ Because of that mechanism it becomes very difficult for the characters to actually look at themselves, another person or an event. When they do, they often see something either in contrast to other characters or a given norm, or through the eyes of other characters altogether. Especially “Ninety-Three Million Miles Away” deals with the subject of ‘being-looked-at.’ Ali, the main character, has a very significant dream “about spotting her signature in the corner of a painting, and realizing from the conversation of the men who were admiring it (and blocking her view) that it was an extraordinary rendition of her naked self.” (WSS: 96) This passage indicates Ali’s inability to look at herself in any other way than through the eyes
of the men looking at her. Gowdy shows how being-looked-at and being conscious of it can alter the way people perceive themselves, to the point where they actually cannot see themselves anymore. Ali, looking into the mirror, “couldn’t get a fix on what she looked like.” (WSS: 97) Even when she masturbates in front of the window, she experiences the act indirectly, incorporating her voyeur’s gaze: “Seeing what he saw, she witnessed an act of shocking vulnerability.” (WSS: 106) In *We So Seldom Look on Love* there are many other short stories as well which point out the impact of being-looked-at. In “Sylvie”, for example, the main character, who was born with a second pair of legs attached to her body, does not know there is anything unusual about her until she enters school. Unlike her parents, her schoolmates label her a freak, which immediately changes the way Sylvie perceives herself. When she is among strangers, she can control whether other people see her as a freak by either revealing her second pair of legs or by hiding it under long dresses. However, once she knows about people’s general idea of normality, she is unable to perceive herself the way she did before, as a ‘normal’ human being.

What is special about “Ninety-Three Million Miles Away” is that the power of the man observing Ali is completely reduced to his gaze. He is described as “a dead-still man whose eyes she had sensed roving over her body the way that eyes in certain portraits seem to follow you around a room.” (WSS: 107) The man at the window never moves and never shows any sign of approval or disapproval, and still his look changes Ali’s self-perception completely. Indulging in a show of real and pretended desire, Ali comes to understand that her feeling of reality changes depending on her perspective, which is not solely a question of location, but also of attitude. By simply imagining to be looking at herself from a different perspective, Ali’s feelings about herself change dramatically. She realises that “everything hinged on where you happened to be standing at a given moment, or even on who you imagined you were.” (WSS: 117)

Other characters, such as Marion in “Flesh of My Flesh”, draw different consequences from this relativity of identity and normality. Marion’s husband is transsexual, something she has great trouble accepting. Like Ali, she understands that something which, as she believes, is abnormal, can look normal from a distance: “If somebody were looking down on them now […] they would seem like two happily married, perfectly normal people.” (WSS: 245) However, despite theoretically understanding the relative nature of concepts of normalcy, this understanding does not effect a change in her own perception.
Gowdy’s short stories emphasise relativity and the unstable nature of identity and concepts of normalcy. In connection with sex and gender, Judith Butler talks about a “fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization.” (1990: 138) We So Seldom Look on Love demonstrates this fluidity along with its theoretical openness to resignification. Each short story offers the characters (and readers) the possibility to look at situations from different perspectives. Rendering the narratives in a figural manner allows Gowdy to offer recontextualization without having a personalised narrator determine whether this process necessarily results in resignification. Instead, consequences are only drawn by single characters, which again foregrounds the relativity of concepts of normalcy. It also permits the reader to evaluate the characters’ shifting perceptions of reality for himself or herself, and to go through individual processes of resignification.

4.3. The Author-Figures and their Impact on the Reading Process

Another instance which may have a considerable impact on the reader’s understanding of the narratives is the author herself, i.e. the reader’s ideas about the author. Naturally, as pointed out above, the author is located outside the literary text and therefore cannot directly form part of literary analysis. Considering the author-figures in literary analyses is an undertaking which is always to some extent speculative. In spite of this drawback, leaving the author aside completely when looking at the narratives would mean to ignore one perhaps not substantial, but nonetheless contributing factor which comes into play when reading and interpreting Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives.

Susan Lanser draws attention to how and when in particular information about the author may impact a reader’s viewpoint on a literary text. Firstly, she calls to attention the fact that there is always extrafictional information which the reader usually considers in the reading process, whether consciously or unconsciously. Such information includes for example the title of a book, the author’s name, the narrative’s appearance on the page or the very structure of its story. Lanser states that “Whatever information is provided, whatever expectations are called forth, the reader’s mimetic participation in the text includes the building of an author-image from this historical material.” (1981: 124) She further explains why the reader’s construction of an author-image and the nature of the extrafictional voice may impact the reader’s viewpoint considerably: “Because much of the extrafictional material is encountered before
the fiction begins, and because the extrafictional voice carries the ontological status of history, it conventionally serves as the ultimate textual authority.” (1981: 128)

What makes it rather difficult to include extrafictional information in literary analyses is the fact that it is almost impossible to determine how many and which specific extrafictional sources the reader will consider. While readers generally notice the title and chapter headings of a novel, it is more difficult to say whether they will also regard dedications, information about the author preceding or succeeding the narratives, or perhaps even other contextual information about an author, such as interviews or other works by the same author.

In order to understand the significance such contextual information may have for a reader, one may look at Written on the Body and raise the question whether the reader’s idea about Jeanette Winterson would impact his/her reading of the narrative. Susan Lanser rightly argues that it would, stating that the reader is generally prone to equate the author’s sex with that of the text’s narrator, unless it is marked otherwise. (cf.1995: 89) In addition, the reader who is either aware of Winterson’s own sexual orientation, or who has read other works by Winterson which openly deal with homosexuality (cf. e.g. Oranges are Not the Only Fruit), may thus more readily than other readers conclude that Written on the Body’s narrator is female. As much as it is a valid argument that such contextual information should not determine one’s reading, let alone one’s literary analysis, nothing will keep a reader from approaching a text with certain expectations which arise from all the background knowledge he/she has gathered. A good reminder of the fact that even scholars of literature encounter this problem is Jeffrey Roessner’s interpretation of Sexing the Cherry, in which he sees Winterson using “passion not simply to open a space for, but to naturalize lesbian desire.” (2002: 108) It is highly questionable whether Roessner would come to this conclusion, or even detect ‘lesbianism’ as a central theme in Sexing the Cherry, if it was not for the contextual information about Winterson, which as a literary scholar he is clearly familiar with. Barbara Gowdy, in contrast, who in an interview states that she likes “imagining lives other than my own,” (Hannon 2012) is less likely to run the risk of being suspected of pursuing a political agenda in her writing. “I like writing about people who aren’t like me,” Gowdy says. “When I lie in bed at night, I think about my neighbours or what people I’ve seen on the street might be doing. Humans still seem exciting to me.” (Hannon 2012) It is thus apparent that such differing impressions of the authors, and the reader’s suspicions about why the author might be preoccupied with certain themes, have their impact on every interpretation of the
narratives, whether the reader is conscious of it or not. In the following analysis of how Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives challenge concepts of normalcy, possible expectations and preconceived ideas on the recipient’s part are thus occasionally referred to.

Yet to further complicate the discussion of a reader’s possible author-narrator equation and perhaps also demonstrate the positive effects of making such a ‘mistake,’ I would like to point out Susan Lanser’s explanation of what it may mean to view the author and narrator of a text as equivalent. Apart from naively assuming the author and narrator to be literally the same, which some readers may of course do, Lanser speaks of sameness on the diegetic level, i.e. an equivalence that “works not on the level of referentiality but on the levels of imagination, ideology, and even narrative style.” (1981: 153) Very simply speaking, this is to say that if an author feels strongly about something and conveys his/her feelings through the narrator of his/her story, (who is, of course, still not actually the author), then this may be seen as diegetic equivalence. Admittedly, no matter how much the reader believes to know about an author’s ideologies, private life, or objectives in writing a particular text, diegetic equivalence will always remain an assumption on the part of the reader, a construct. However, one important reason for assuming or considering an author-narrator equation may well be the desire to understand a text by trying to detect the author’s voice, the extrafictional voice as the greatest authority regarding the narrative. Whereas what the reader ultimately identifies may have more or less to do with the actual author’s voice, the endeavor itself has helped the reader in the process of working out levels of authority within the narrative, which is an integral part of literary analysis.
5. Identity Trouble: Challenging Concepts of Normalcy

This section deals with the rhetoric of destabilisation applied in Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives. While the reader’s awareness of elements which construct concepts of normalcy and his or her recognition of elements which destabilize them commonly alternate or coincide, the two processes are, for reasons of clarity, dealt with separately in this thesis. After having looked at multiple factors which concern the establishment of norms, I now look at different techniques used to destabilise those standards of normalcy predominant within the narratives. I pay special attention to specific concepts which are frequently addressed in both writers’ works, and explore whether destabilisation of those concepts happens in favour of certain other concepts, or whether it is rather aimed at illustrating a general unattainability of truth.

5.1. Metanarrativity and Intertextuality

One way of challenging concepts of normalcy within narratives is through explicit or implicit references to specific traditional stories or story patterns, and through the development of strong counter narratives. Jeanette Winterson in particular works with intertextual references and at times even re-writes stories to demonstrate potential for change within seemingly rigid structures.

The breaking of the traditional fairy tale structure proves to be a powerful element in Sexing the Cherry. In this novel, the rewriting of The Twelve Dancing Princesses plays a central role, not only as a tale embedded within the larger story, but as a source of meaning that informs the narrative as a whole. The Brother Grimm’s fairy tale tells the story of twelve princesses who secretly leave their father’s home at night to spend the night dancing. In the end, a soldier reveals their secret and gets to marry the eldest sister. In Winterson’s adaptation, it is a prince who tells the king about his daughters’ secret, and as a prize, the prince and his eleven brothers get to marry the princesses. Yet they do not live happily ever after, for the princesses are unhappy in their married lives, and end up murdering or leaving their husbands until finally, the princesses all live with each other again.
Firstly, Winterson’s alternative ending to the real fairy tale is a clear rebuttal of marriage as the typical closure of fairy tales. The princesses in *Sexing the Cherry* are self-determined and dare to seek their happiness in unconventional, if cruel ways. Yet the exaggerated cruelty forms part of what makes the narrative satirical, a mode which allows the depiction of a world in which authority is undermined completely. As Walezak points out, the satirical mode shows most strongly in the princesses enunciation, for they speak about the endings of their married lives in a light and unconcerned tone which strongly contrasts with the contents of their stories (cf. 2009: 65f.)

Just as Winterson rewrites the traditional fairy tale, she also reshapes the story of the traditional male hero. Jordan sets out to see the world, yet through the repositioning of female figures as being anything but determined through patriarchal norms, and through Jordan’s personal disposition as sensitive and philosophical, what he sees and learns differs from the typical male hero’s experience. The princesses’ story, the altered fairy tale, serves to educate Jordan and causes his own story to follow unconventional paths. Farwell observes that Jordan’s journey is unique in that he constantly moves through ‘female spaces’ and accepts that females’ stories, such as the princesses’ or Dog-Woman’s, determine his own. (cf. 1996: 181)

The Dog-Woman’s mode of enunciation is, similar to the princesses’, highly satirical. Thus, the Dog-Woman, who lives at the time of the English Civil War, and the princesses show a strong connection on the verbal level, yet metaphorically, there is an even deeper connection between their stories if one considers the contemporary ‘Dog-Woman’. Towards the end of the narrative it becomes clear that the Dog-Woman may be seen as the way a certain contemporary woman pictures herself. By doing so, through her imagination, she manages to cross boundaries and escape laws of any kind. In that way, she does what the princesses manage to do in the altered fairy tale, which differs from the original mainly in that the princesses are empowered not only with regard to their actions within the stories, but also in that they are given the authority to be the narrators of their own stories. In Grimm’s tale, the princesses dance with soldiers and leave their room through a trap door. In Winterson’s version, they dance by themselves and leave their home by flying out the window. Dog-Woman enjoys the same freedom. In this context, the drawings used to mark the different narrators in *Sexing the Cherry* are highly interesting. A banana stands for Dog-Woman as a narrator, a pineapple for Jordan, and small female figures for the princesses. The Dog-Woman's mode of enunciation is, similar to the princesses’, highly satirical. Thus, the Dog-Woman, who lives at the time of the English Civil War, and the princesses show a strong connection on the verbal level, yet metaphorically, there is an even deeper connection between their stories if one considers the contemporary ‘Dog-Woman’. Towards the end of the narrative it becomes clear that the Dog-Woman may be seen as the way a certain contemporary woman pictures herself. By doing so, through her imagination, she manages to cross boundaries and escape laws of any kind. In that way, she does what the princesses manage to do in the altered fairy tale, which differs from the original mainly in that the princesses are empowered not only with regard to their actions within the stories, but also in that they are given the authority to be the narrators of their own stories. In Grimm’s tale, the princesses dance with soldiers and leave their room through a trap door. In Winterson’s version, they dance by themselves and leave their home by flying out the window. Dog-Woman enjoys the same freedom. In this context, the drawings used to mark the different narrators in *Sexing the Cherry* are highly interesting. A banana stands for Dog-Woman as a narrator, a pineapple for Jordan, and small female figures for the princesses. The Dog-Woman's mode of enunciation is, similar to the princesses’, highly satirical. Thus, the Dog-Woman, who lives at the time of the English Civil War, and the princesses show a strong connection on the verbal level, yet metaphorically, there is an even deeper connection between their stories if one considers the contemporary ‘Dog-Woman’. Towards the end of the narrative it becomes clear that the Dog-Woman may be seen as the way a certain contemporary woman pictures herself. By doing so, through her imagination, she manages to cross boundaries and escape laws of any kind. In that way, she does what the princesses manage to do in the altered fairy tale, which differs from the original mainly in that the princesses are empowered not only with regard to their actions within the stories, but also in that they are given the authority to be the narrators of their own stories. In Grimm’s tale, the princesses dance with soldiers and leave their room through a trap door. In Winterson’s version, they dance by themselves and leave their home by flying out the window. Dog-Woman enjoys the same freedom. In this context, the drawings used to mark the different narrators in *Sexing the Cherry* are highly interesting. A banana stands for Dog-Woman as a narrator, a pineapple for Jordan, and small female figures for the princesses. The Dog-
Woman’s twentieth-century double is marked by a split banana, whose emblematic meaning Walezak convincingly explains as follows: “The cut suggests the symbolic castration which marks the subject’s entry into language and the subsequent submission to the law of the signified. Fantasy distinguishes itself through the absence of such a cut.” (2009: 69) In the fantastic world, thus, both Dog-Woman and the princesses are free.

The princesses, many of whom have killed their husbands, but also Dog-Woman are characterized by a high level of violence. This violence does not stand for itself but is to be read in a wider context in which agency in general and (domestic) violence in particular are predominantly connoted male. Dog-Woman castrates males whom she engages with in a brothel. This extremely violent and grotesque act, however, needs to be read as satirical. Mary Bratton points out that the castration, taking place because the men ‘ask for it’ (cf. SC: 41) constitutes “a neat reversal of the rape paradigm.” (2002: 217) Similarly, the princesses’ murders of their husbands also have broader implications. The sisters do not only kill their husbands to free themselves from the violence and paternalism they endure, but they also metaphorically ‘kill’ the traditional, compulsory ending of fairy tales. Their literal doing away with marriage as the female heroine’s destiny and closure of her story allows the princesses to break the traditional pattern and live in a self-determined way, which in the actual fairy tale is only possible while the princesses reside in the enchanted city.

In Written on the Body, the allusion which runs like a thread through the whole narrative is not a reference to a specific literary text, but to a genre: the blazon. The narrator verbally takes apart and scrutinizes the lover’s body. This taking apart is a theme which is present within the whole narrative, as Elizabeth Harvey points out, through “the structural split between narrator and sexed body.” (2002: 337) It is through this structural split that anatomical dissection itself is explored and questioned. Written on the Body challenges the practice of looking at bodies and interpreting them without giving thought to the cultural norms that inform interpretation. The blazon, as the prime example for that practice, is subverted in the narrative both because the narrator’s body is not sexed, and even more so because the narrator constantly questions his/her own approach to Louise’s body. “I’ll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labelled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?” (WB: 120) The narrator goes way beyond describing or praising only the surface of the lover’s body, as is mostly the case in poetic blazons. Instead, he/she seeks to go not only beyond the surface of the body, but also tries to explore the body
from a viewpoint not dictated and predetermined by cultural notions and norms. Written on the Body, as Harvey observes, “seeks to redefine female eroticism and the anatomical discourse that subtends it.” (2002: 319) Again and again, the narrative presents images of conquest and colonisation, evoking the idea of the colonisation of the female body throughout (male-dominated) history. “Louise, in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you […].” (WB: 20) Yet the objectification of the woman’s body is contrasted many times with the narrator being himself/herself in the object position. The narrator is in love, thus vulnerable. Louise has as much power over the narrator as he/she over her. The quote above continues “[…] and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another’s boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop me in your hands for I am good soil.” (WB: 20) Here, the narrator gives up the trope of colonisation, which would denote the wilful and forceful appropriation of one body by another, and instead blurs the boundaries between the two bodies, which renders them equal. In a next step, the narrator even puts himself/herself in an object position by asking Louise to deal with him/her as though he/she were soil. The soil metaphor again clearly evokes the trope of colonisation, only now it is the narrator who is in the position of the colonised. This reversal of subject and object position characterizes the narrative as a whole. The practice of portraying one lover, the woman, as an object, which has been common especially in the blazon, is subverted, quite irrespective of whether the reader pictures the narrator as female, male, or entirely beyond these categories.

While the narrator reflects on Louise’s body, the narrative itself almost comes to a standstill. Time becomes unimportant and reflections displace the progression of the story. Yet even before the narrator begins to verbally anatomize Louise’s body, there is very little linear and illusionist story telling. Intertextuality, digressions, metanarrativity as well as unrealistic or exaggerated passages are characteristic of the narrative’s style. What happens in the story is often highly meaningful and metaphoric rather than realistic. For example, after having been examined for sexually transmitted diseases, the narrator buys some flowers and, upon being asked if he/she is visiting someone, answers, “Yes, myself. I want to find out how I am.” (WB: 48) Equally unlikely in terms of plot is the passage where the narrator handcuffs him/herself to a library chair in order to work instead of daydreaming about Louise. The degree to which such a scenario is realistic is secondary. Through this unrealistic image and her powerful language, Winterson conveys the narrator’s despair. In Written on the Body, the plot repeatedly becomes less realistic in favour of communicating feeling: Love and passion.
are rendered surprisingly palpable through unconventional images and a departure from linear narration.

A narrator whose sex remains unknown is rendered a little less lifelike. In the same way, an exaggerated plot full of intertextuality and metanarrative comments departs from what the reader could easily identify with. However, as the narrator’s love and despair take form through intense, almost lyrical language, the action becomes accessible not because it follows causality, but because the reader understands that common logic is not central to or in any way important in the narrative. The meaning of ‘realistic’ thus shifts for the reader from that which is most likely plot-wise to that which is most strongly palpable. That is to say that the narrator, out of strong feelings of love, desire and sometimes despair, is driven to act or use his/her imagination in unconventional ways, yet those acts and deliberations convey the intensity of his/her feelings with such vigour that the act itself seems but consequential. The narrator herself/himself also directly addresses the importance of mental processes in constructing and perceiving reality. Remembering past relationships, he/she notes, “I wasn’t happy but the power of memory is such that it can lift reality for a time. Or is memory the more real place?” (WB: 61)

The nature of reality is questioned in all of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s works. Challenging the idea that there is only one possible truth is crucial in narratives which strive to break with established notions of normalcy. Whereas Gowdy never lets one version of reality alone dominate or determine her narrative by always presenting various (unconventional) viewpoints, Winterson tends to address the problem of what is to be seen as real more directly and at times abruptly, often through metafictional comments.

In The Power Book, the meaning of reality is reconsidered most radically with regard to the aspect ‘time’. The Power Book being an e-novel in which the protagonists’ encounters take place in the virtual world, time plays an exceptional role throughout the narrative. The main character and narrator, writing e-mails in the present, is also the one who brings the first tulip from Turkey to Holland in the sixteenth century. This is the first piece of information that confronts the reader with the deferred sense of time which dominates the novel. The reader may differentiate here between the present-day narrator and the first-person narrator in his/her story in the virtual world. Yet the narrative does not allow the reader to keep up such a clear distinction, for though the e-writer may not physically be Ali, who carries the tulip, or any of
the other invented characters, he/she is still connected with them mentally, in the present. In one of his/her stories, the e-writer explains, “I can’t take my body through space and time, but I can send my mind, and use the stories written and unwritten, to tumble me out in a place not yet existing – my future.” (PB: 53) This metareference to the narrator’s own writing points towards the great strength of imagination when it comes to shaping reality. The power of imagination serves to create alternative realities which may not have been considered before. The narrator is conscious of the danger to live life as it has been lived before, to write stories that have been written numerous times, because without wilful reflection, this happens automatically: “Refuse all the stories that have been told so far […] and try to tell the story differently – in a different style, with different weights – and allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use, and give some substance to the floating world.” (PB: 53) This represents both a metanarrative statement on what constitutes good writing, and a philosophical observation of how one and the same reality – in this case a story – may appear in a very different light and may carry different meaning if told in a different style or from a different point of view.

Time, the narrator points out, demonstrates the instability of reality because it inevitably changes the pattern of the world as well as our viewpoint:

History is a collection of found objects washed up through time. Goods, ideas, personalities surface towards us, then sink away. Some we hook out, others we ignore, and as the pattern changes, so does the meaning. We cannot rely on the facts. Time, which returns everything, changes everything. (PB: 242)

In The Power Book, ‘time’ returns narratives which the reader has read or heard before, and changes them. Indeed, as Winterson modifies the well-known patterns of those stories, their meaning is also altered. For example, one tale retold by the e-writer is that of Lancelot du Lac and Guinevere. The plot is almost unchanged, although some parts of the original story are omitted. What is changed is the reader’s viewpoint on the story, the reader being both the actual reader and the character for whom the e-writer produces stories. The legend is told from Lancelot’s perspective, which at the same time is the e-writer’s perspective. This mingling of known material with a new point of view, and the ambiguity of the story-teller and the recipient’s identities brings forth a new perspective which unhinges the legend from its specific context and presents it as part of numerous great love stories which the narrator portrays not as exotic tales but as universal, as “the riddles of our lives.” (PB: 78) Here, the narrator presents intertextuality not as artful, but as a natural constant in life:
We go back and back to the same scenes, the same words, trying to scrape out the meaning. Nothing could be more familiar than love. Nothing else eludes us so completely. I do not know whether or not science will formulate its grand theory of the universe. I know that it will not make it any easier to read the plain text of our hearts. *(PB: 78)*

Whereas Winterson often uses intertextuality as a tool of resistance, rewriting well-known narratives and braking with their patriarchal or otherwise rigid patterns, she here applies intertextuality to point towards something universal, which is not immune to change but tends to reappear in familiar forms.

### 5.2. Transgressing the Distinction between Inner and Outer

Judith Butler states that the coherence between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ subject “is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. […] ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject.” *(1990: 134)*. ‘Abject’ is a complex term used in Julia Kristeva’s work *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* to name that which is in between subject and object, which is a reality belonging to the subject, yet which the subject must perpetually reject and exclude from itself.

Within society, many of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s characters would be abject, some for their appearance, some for their actions and some almost in their entirety. *(The latter group is discussed in depth in chapter 5.4. on monstrosity.)* Their position as standing outside society, yet being undeniably part of it, plays an important role within the narratives. It affects not only how those characters are seen by the reader as well as by other characters, but also how they look at themselves. Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives present various ways in which characters reject the cultural orders which dictate what must be seen as abject, and which thus, from a normative societal point of view, must not be part of the characters as coherent subjects.

The narrative which deals with the theme of abjection most explicitly and strikingly is Gowdy’s short story “We So Seldom Look on Love”. The first-person narrator and main character is a young, necrophile woman. Kristeva writes about death:
Death represents the ultimate abject, which the living body seeks to repudiate. The young necrophile in “We So Seldom Look on Love” engages with the abject in disturbing ways, not only concerning her physical acts, but also her spiritual preoccupation with cadavers. She shows high awareness of the limit Kristeva talks about, the border between subject and abject. Yet the narrator is not repulsed by it but seeks to experience the moment when life turns into death, when a subject becomes an abject. The narrator only sleeps with ‘fresh corpses’ which, as she describes, “radiate an intense current of energy.” (WSS: 170) She further specifies the experience by telling the reader that a corpse’s will “is all directed to a single intention, like a huge wave heading for shore, and you can ride along on the wave if you want to, because no matter what you do, because with or without you, that wave is going to hit the beach.” (WSS: 175) The narrator emphasizes the cadaver’s power and explains that all she does is participate in a process she herself has no power over. It is thus made clear that not only the corpse as such is abject, but also the narrator’s action which denotes a complete lack of order and control, and which, along with the disturbance of coherent identity and the disruption of societal or cultural systems, is a defining characteristic of the abject. The narrator draws our attention to the question of what makes something an abject, and the answer is along the lines of Kristeva’s definition, which holds that the abject is not a priori unclean or unhealthy, but rather is “what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience […]” (1982: 4) The necrophile narrator declares that as a child, when she became interested in dead animals and started to embalm them, she did not know at all that what she was doing went way beyond the cultural norms. Later, she does understand, yet she has become Kristeva’s ‘criminal with a good conscience.’ She now apprehends that society regards her behaviour as abnormal; however, she does not agree with that evaluation at large.

I really had no idea that I was jumping across a vast behavioural gulf. In fact, I couldn’t see that I was doing anything wrong. I still can’t, and I’m including what happened with Matt. Carol said I should have been put away, but I’m not bad looking, so if offering my body to dead men is a crime, I’d like to know who the victim is. (WSS: 172f.)
This statement does not explain why the narrator is a necrophile, neither will the fact that she is not bad looking seem a convincing argument to most readers. However, what the narrator manages very impressively is to demonstrate the process of how something becomes abject, or, in her case, does not. Initial lack of awareness for cultural boundaries allows the narrator to familiarize with what she would otherwise regard as abject. When she understands that society views necrophilia as abnormal, it has already become part of her identity. She herself has thereby, in the eyes of society, become abject.

The reader is forced to consider the abject, think along with it. By presenting a necrophile not only as a main character, but also giving her almost absolute diegetic authority, Gowdy grants the reader insight into the thought processes and feelings of an individual placed in an abject position. Gowdy manages to turn that which the reader would normally most likely reject into the focus of interest and transforms it into a matter of fascination. The narrator presents herself as a young, beautiful, intelligent and sane person, sane in that she is able to analyse and explain her own behaviour. Through discourse, she can make herself understood, though perhaps not accepted. For the reader, these features make it possible to get involved and regard as a subject what ‘should’ be seen as abject. However, the ultimate fascination arises from the ambiguity that is typical for the abject. For what allows the reader to engage in the narrative is at the same time what makes the abject especially repulsive, namely those things which one ought to be drawn to: beauty, youth, and intelligence. When such features constitute an abject, the fragility of system and order becomes disagreeably evident (cf. Kristeva 1982: 4). The narrator communicates the striking and also shocking ease with which the absolute ‘Other’ may be transformed into the familiar, and the common or even desirable into the abject. It is transformation, too, which fascinates the narrator about corpses. Rather than death, which is the ultimate abject, the narrator is interested in the process of transgressing boundaries, the boundary between life and death. Thus, the narrator makes the reader ponder not on necrophilia itself, but on boundaries and transgression.

I was making love to corpses, absorbing their energy, blazing it back out. Since that energy came from the act of life alchemizing into death, there’s a possibility that it was alchemical itself. […] I now believe that his [Matt’s] addiction to my energy was really a craving for such a transformation. In fact, I think that all desire is desire for transformation, and that all transformation – all movement, all process – happens because life turns into death. (WSS: 187)
Perhaps less shocking, but nonetheless radical are the instances of transgression of inner and outer in Gowdy’s *Mister Sandman*. Here, the term ‘abjection’ applies to each character in a different manner, because whereas some characters struggle to accept those parts of themselves which they deem abject, others struggle only because of how other characters see them. In *Mister Sandman*, there is a stark difference between what the characters are actually like and how they present themselves by denying that which is socially not acceptable. Their fear of representing the ‘socially not acceptable’ in any way reveals as much about the social norms effective in the narrative as it reveals about the characters’ personalities. For example, the parents in *Mister Sandman* decide not to tell her younger daughter Marcy that it was their older daughter Sonja who gave birth to Joan, but pretend that Joan is Sonja and Marcy’s sister. At the end of the novel, they cannot remember whether they lied out of fear of social consequences or for any other reason: “‘We should have told Marcia about Joanie,’ Doris says. […] ‘I can’t figure out why we didn’t. Why didn’t we?’ ‘It was easier not to.’ ‘Oh, easier,’ she says sarcastically. […] ‘Oh, all right then. Well aren’t we swell parents.’” (*MS*: 261)

As much as Joan is a highly interesting character, she is also compelling as an anti-character, a creature with no palpable feelings of her own, whose function is to mirror the psychological processes of her family members. Joan is the great mystery of the narrative, that which cannot be. Likewise, her family members entrust Joan with facts about their lives which cannot be, because, from a societal point of view, they must not be.

What Marcy keeps secret from everyone but her little ‘sister’ Joan is her many boyfriends. Yet the fact that she does not talk about her relationships openly is motivated by the wish not to agitate her parents rather than an inner rejection of her behavior. What is truly remarkable in terms of an inner/outer transgression, however, is Marcy’s practice at times not to make a distinction between Joan and herself. Marcy’s transgression of the boundaries of what should constitute herself as a coherent subject manifests itself, for one thing, linguistically. Whether she speaks for Joan and herself or for Joan exclusively, she frequently uses the pronoun ‘we’. In conversations with Joan, Marcy is the only one speaking, and she interprets the questions or answers that come to her mind as actually being Joan’s. (cf. *MS*: 104) Joan’s silence and impassivity when it comes to hearing shocking stories encourage all family members to talk to her, for they are certain that Joan will keep the information to herself. Marcy
psychologically increases Joan’s trustworthiness even more by blurring the distinction between her sister and herself.

In the case of Gordon, the father, the part of his identity which greatly defines him but which he cannot accept is his homosexuality. His sexual orientation seems foreign to him; it is something he cannot understand intuitively, because he does not allow himself to do so. Instead, he reads about his ‘affliction’ in the library and consolidates books to find out how to ‘heal’ himself. (cf. MS: 71) Ultimately, Joan is the only person he can speak to openly about his sexuality, mainly because she does not respond. Yet at the end of the narrative, Joan’s answer does come in the form of a tape recording she made, on which she compiled all family members’ voices, revealing their secrets. Interestingly, the ‘resolution’, an at least partial acceptance of what the family members viewed as abject before, comes as soon as their secrets are pronounced publicly. Gordon listens to shocking truths about himself and his family and wonders, “How is it that he can conclude these things without feeling appalled? Well, he can.” (MS: 256) In the end, thus, the truth turns out to be more than ‘only aversion.’

As so many of Gowdy’s narratives, Mister Sandman provides a space for the extraordinary. What the characters would at times rather not view as part of themselves becomes tolerable not because it is portrayed as ‘normal’ or unproblematic, but because the narrative contrives to show it as part of something bigger, which in its entirety is comprehensible and can even be appreciated. At the end of the novel, the whole family is playing ball. “They could be a family spending a day at the beach together. If they were on a beach. If it was day.” (MS: 268)

Despite challenging many ‘truths’, the narrative never questions the strong cohesion within the family and the family members’ love for each other.

5.3. Challenging Dichotomous Difference

Gowdy depicts the constructedness of ‘reality’ by destabilizing binary oppositions such as male/female, active/passive, etc., as well as prevalent associations such as femininity/passivity. In “We So Seldom Look on Love” Gowdy seems to take the active/passive binarism to the extremes by letting the female main character sleep with dead people. However, the narrator introduces her theory of corpses radiating “an intense current of energy” (WSS: 170), thus relativizing the corpses’ passivity. As mentioned above, the narrator perceives the corpses as powerful and sees herself as submitting to their will. Once she begins
to engage with a corpse, she is no longer in control of herself, and she suggests that instead it is the corpse who is powerful and energetic. (cf. WSS: 175) The active/passive dyad is thus dissolved, or at least becomes blurry. In the same short story, another very interesting example of active/passive ambiguity can be found. The narrator repeatedly explains that necrophilia came natural to her. To describe her actions as being natural, she uses words such as “acting solely on instinct” (WSS: 175). At some point she understands that she really is a necrophile and “unable to fall in love with anyone who wasn't dead” (WSS: 179), which means she was “born to do it” (WSS: 183). This suggests a certain passivity on the side of the narrator, as though necrophilia was something that just happened to her. However, the narrator equally emphasizes some conscious decisions she made about her sexuality. “Even though I was only thirteen, I was cutting any lines that still drifted out toward normal eroticism.” (WSS: 174) The way she narrates her history of necrophilia is highly analytical and contrasts with the idea that she just followed her instincts passively. This contrast draws attention to the fine line between active and passive formation of a certain identity. In other words, the narrative raises the question whether necrophilia is an implicit part of the narrator’s identity, or whether it developed in the course of time. Never presenting a definite answer, the narrative instead implicitly instructs the reader to reflect whether identity can ever be seen as definite and unchangeable.

More obviously, this problem is presented in “Flesh of My Flesh”. Marion’s husband Sam is transitioning from female to male, and about to have his final operation. Touching his genitals, Marion says, “It’s you,” and he answers, “It is.” “And it isn’t.” (WSS: 245) Gowdy could have written the dialogue this way: ‘You’re female.’ ‘I am. And I’m not.’ But she goes even one step further. She destabilises the opposition male/female by introducing a character who seems in between, yet at the same time she emphasizes the power of this opposition. Sam feels he cannot have a definite identity beyond male/female. Whereas being transsexual subverts the idea that sex and gender are implicitly correspondent, it also perpetuates the effective male/female opposition because in Sam’s case, it is an attempt to correspond with one part of it.

In *Written on the Body*, attention is drawn to the binary opposition of good and bad. While this opposition is challenged in all of the narratives considered in this thesis, the process is most explicit in *Written on the Body*, a story told by a highly self-reflexive narrator. S/he is aware of society’s moral standards and partly agrees with them. For example, s/he is anything
but proud of having broken his/her promise to Jaqueline, his/her former partner, but explains to the reader that love is something one cannot control: “Would that I had the overseeing spirit to interpret my actions in plain English. I would like to come to you with all the confidence of a computer programmer, sure that we could find the answers if only we asked the proper questions. Why aren’t I going according to plan?” (WB: 57) In posing such a question, the narrator involves the reader, as ‘you’ can also be seen as addressing the reader, for the narrator is eager to justify his/her actions throughout the novel and attempts to answer any question the implied reader is thought to have. Comparing himself/herself with a machine not working correctly, the narrator points towards the unrealistic idea that human beings could, like computers, always ‘function.’ That good and bad, according to the narrator, are relative concepts rather than a clear-cut dichotomy becomes clear when something reminds him/her of the Boy Scouts and s/he states: “But I’m not a Boy Scout and never was. I envy them; they know exactly what makes a Good Deed.” (WB: 58) The statement is neither entirely earnest nor ironic. The narrator does not propagate a complete devaluation of the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ but strongly questions the rigid dichotomous difference made between right and wrong by certain groups, such as the Boy Scouts or the Church. He/she does so by communicating to the reader that while being able to make a clear distinction between right and wrong is desirable, it is not, to his/her mind, humanly possible:

I went to look at my sunflowers, growing steadily, sure that the sun would be there for them, fulfilling themselves in the proper way at the proper time. Very few people ever manage what nature manages without effort and mostly without fail. We don’t know who we are or how we function, much less how to bloom. Blind nature. Homo sapiens. Who is kidding whom? […] Why is it that human beings are allowed to grow up without the necessary apparatus to make sound ethical decisions? (WB: 43)

Human beings are portrayed as lacking access to any true knowledge about how to live one’s life. The truth thus remains, to humans, always only a version.

5.4. Monstrosity and the Grotesque

In many of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives, the reader is confronted with characters who diverge from the norm, some to such an extent that they may be called monstrous or grotesque. In fact, the word ‘grotesque’ is very frequently used in analyses of both writers’ works. Why is it that grotesque bodies are repeatedly used to convey certain meaning? How
do they work within the narratives? Is the expression ‘grotesque’ accurate to describe these characters, or even whole narratives, like some of Gowdy’s short stories?

In the narrow sense of the word, the ‘grotesque body’ refers to a body which simultaneously appears comic and horrifying. In his book On the Grotesque Geoffrey Galt Harpham further describes the grotesque body, thing or form as standing “at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world […]” (1982: 3) As much as this description holds true for grotesqueries, not everything which defies categorization and challenges our understanding can be called grotesque. The adequacy of this category even with reference to such characters such as the Dog-Woman or Sylvie (a girl with two pairs of legs, from Gowdy’s short story “Sylvie”) is debatable. Harpham himself points out that the perception of something as grotesque depends much on cultural conventions and assumptions, and that in Western cultures the grotesque is presently becoming both less possible and more invisible. (cf. 1982: xx f.) He states that representing the grotesque in contemporary art has become difficult due to an increasing “tolerance of disorder, of the genre mixte.” (1982: xx)

As Harpham’s time and culture specific approach to the grotesque already shows, it is impossible to claim that any of Gowdy or Winterson’s texts or characters must universally be seen as grotesque. Evaluating something as grotesque is always a necessarily subjective process, which is based on one’s experience. What appears absurd and impossible at first sight, because it does not fit into any preconceived category, may with time become familiar and stand for itself. Harpham describes the process as follows:

Eventually we discover the proper place for the new thing, and recognize it not only for what it is like but also for what it is, in itself. We have followed this process in learning to call mouse-birds bats, horse-men centaurs, and women-bosses chairpersons. The interval of the grotesque is the one in which, although we have recognized a number of different forms in the object, we have not yet developed a clear sense of the dominant principle that defines it and organizes its various elements. (1982: 16)

Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives are highly interesting in that they seem to work both ways. Characters and circumstances which appear familiar and perfectly ‘normal’ at first are assigned extraordinary attributes, which transform them into ‘Others’ that may be perceived as grotesque by the reader. At the same time, the potentially grotesque is described in such ordinary terms as to familiarize it. Whether something is perceived as grotesque does not only
vary from reader to reader, but also from one passage of a narrative to another. Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narrative techniques ensure that their characters occupy a space in the texts which is their own, and defined in their own terms rather than merely in opposition to normative reality. Yet at other times the characters are meant to disrupt the narrative, to appear in opposition to a certain norm and thereby to challenge it. In such moments, the narrative intentionally opens up the possibility to interpret a character as grotesque.

The same ambiguity when it comes to the grotesque can be seen in scholarly articles on Gowdy’s and Winterson’s works. Whether or not one calls e.g. the lesbian body ‘grotesque’ must be understood as a political decision, as a matter of viewpoint. The label ‘grotesque’ denotes more than a simple departure from the norm, namely a disorder which renders the body or object almost impossible (to grasp). When the term ‘grotesque’ is used in this context, therefore, it is clear that it is not meant to imply that the lesbian body is in itself absurd or impossible. Rather, the term is applied in an attempt to draw attention to the qualities of the body which render it grotesque within a certain system. By doing so, and by showing up the body’s integrity at the same time, the opposed system of norms is itself exposed as being defective.

The short narrative “The Poetics of Sex” by Jeanette Winterson addresses such systems of norms which dictate the perception of the lesbian body as grotesque. Firstly, the questions “Which One of You Is the Man?” (WOP: 32), “What Do Lesbians Do in Bed” (WOP: 34) and “Don’t You Find There’s Something Missing?” (WOP: 41) are representative of one system of norms in which the concept of two women being in love and having sexual intercourse is logically impossible, thus grotesque. The inquiry also illustrates a method of resolving the grotesque by reimagining it in a way that is compatible with the norms effective in the world of the inquirer, namely by picturing one of the women as male, or manly. The ‘answer’ which follows, however, ignores the set of norms which one would have to accept in order to see the lesbian body as grotesque, and instead presents the body in a context which pays no heed to the assumptions of the inquirer. For example, the narrator declares very simply that “[w]ho’s on top depends on where you’re standing but as we’re lying down it doesn’t matter.” (WOP: 35) As is so often the case in Winterson’s works, the narrator describes her feelings for another character in a way that not only renders sex insignificant, but also a number of other details about the character.
I’d heard all about you my tear-away tiger, so fierce, so unruly. But the truth is other as truth always is. What holds the small space between my legs is not your artistic tongue nor any of the other parts you play at will but the universe beneath the sheets that we make together. (WOP: 35)

Whereas Gowdy tends to describe her characters’ personalities in such a detailed way that they become almost too familiar and comprehensible as to call them ‘grotesque’, Winterson often applies the converse strategy, as the passage above shows. Characters’ relations or the situations they are in are universalized, and the reader’s attention is directed towards bigger concepts such as love. In the example above, the narrator’s attraction to and feelings for her lover, Picasso, are not explained by naming external factors such as body parts. In fact, the narrator’s attempt to look under the surface is perceptible throughout the narrative. Instead of describing her lover’s outer appearance, the narrator speaks about the colour of Picasso’s blood, about her veins, heart, digestive juices and lungs. (cf. WOP: 32) The narrator tries to gain an understanding of love and her loved one which goes beyond the categories and terminology often used for that purpose. This tendency can also be seen in other narratives by Winterson, notably in Written on the Body, where the insides of the lover’s body are explored in detail.

The effects of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s techniques are surprisingly similar. Both the personalisation and generalisation of characters and situations have the potential of changing the reader’s perception of them. What at first gives the impression of being disruptive (of certain norms) is turned into something which can be accepted as a coherent subject. This happens through a relocation of the feature which causes the disruption – it is either presented as being part of universally shared concepts (such as love or desire), or it is portrayed as part of a character or system so unique and personal that the feature gains entirely new meaning in that special context.

The latter holds true for many of Gowdy’s characters, and shall briefly be exemplified with reference to “Sylvie.” In this short story, as briefly explained above, the main character Sylvie grows up with a second pair of legs attached to her body. The story is interesting in that there is a great tension between the many different angles from which Sylvie is presented, some of which let her appear completely normal, and some of which render her utterly grotesque. On the one hand, the reader learns that Sylvie is an ordinary girl whose parents treat her as though there was nothing unusual about her and who “never had reason to believe that her mother was upset about having a daughter with an extra pair of legs.” (WSS: 44) Sylvie deals with her
additional legs in a pragmatic way, massaging them from time to time to avoid cramps but feeling unconcerned about her condition. On the other hand, the reader soon learns that as much as Sylvie’s parents accept their daughter the way she is, her mother also believes to “have a daughter who was nothing but legs.” (WSS: 44) She thinks of Sylvie’s additional legs as an actual person, whom she calls Sue and whom she talks to and treats even better than she treats Sylvie. A peculiarity the reader might already have accepted is thereby again turned into an oddity. Yet as much as Sylvie’s mother’s attitude and actions may alarm the reader, they also have the effect of ‘normalising’ Sylvie while suggesting that the ‘grotesque’ is constructed through interpretation – in this case through the grotesque interpretation of Sylvie’s mother. Later, when Sylvie joins a carnival to make money by exhibiting her legs, this effect is again attained by presenting Sylvie as almost too ‘normal’ to shock people by just being herself. At this point, the story almost reverberates Harpham’s observation that the grotesque has become more invisible and more difficult to represent. (cf. 1982: xxi) People are fascinated with the grotesque, but in order for them to remain fascinated, the grotesque must become more grotesque, or else it ceases to be grotesque at all. At the carnival, Sylvie must present her second pair of legs as belonging to a male Siamese twin, a tactic to render herself more spectacular. The narrative clearly addresses the sensationalism which determines and shifts the perception of something as grotesque. The carnival promotes its ‘freaks’ claiming that they are the “TALLEST, SMALLEST, THINNEST, FATTEST, STRANGEST, RAREST EVER TO WALK THE FACE OF THE EARTH!” (1992: 53) From whatever angle Sylvie’s additional legs are presented, they are never depicted as a simple deformation. In the narrative, they are a source of fascination, trouble, and even pleasure. (cf. WSS: 66) Ultimately, her second pair of legs is portrayed as something that defines Sylvie personally. When she gets the chance to have them removed, she worries that other aspects of her might also change: “Will she forget baby Sue’s face? What if her freak memory is connected with her freak legs? What if she becomes somebody else for whom nothing that happened to the person she was will be worth preserving?” (WSS: 68) Sylvie’s anatomy and the life she lives as a consequence are no doubt strange. Yet on the whole, Sylvie’s appearance is so strongly connected with her thoughts, character, and experience of life that it is difficult to perceive Sylvie as grotesque. Although she is strikingly different from what the reader is used to, she constitutes a coherent subject which the additional pair of legs happens to be part of. Owing to the figural mode of narration, the reader is provided an insight into Sylvie’s experience instead of constantly looking at her from the outside, which would be much more likely to render her a grotesque character. Indeed, the narrative even explicitly addresses the difference
it makes whether one looks at something from a distance or has a more direct connection to it. When Sylvie first wants to go to the carnival to see Siamese twins, who she thinks are just like her, Sylvie’s mother objects, “Not like you and Sue! […] Naked! Meat on display! That’s what I saved you from!” (WSS: 53) In this narrative a personal insight is provided, which establishes a familiarity with the ‘abnormal’ and allows the reader to grasp the difference Sylvie’s mother sees between her daughter and other Siamese twins. By communicating various characters’ perspectives on Sylvie, the narrative draws attention to the importance of context in perceiving something as ‘normal,’ ‘abnormal’ or ‘grotesque.’

5.5. Sex and Gender

Not very frequently is the category sex in the focus of literary analyses. With the growing awareness of gender as being a social category which is as diversely constructed and represented in literature as in real life, gender has found its way into literary analysis. Sex, however, is mainly considered to be a given. Judith Butler’s theory on sex, as discussed above, holds that sex is likewise a construct, a notion which for most people is difficult to grasp. Yet even for the reader or analyst who regards Butler’s claim as unclear or unfounded, Winterson’s narrative Written on the Body at least raises questions about the category of sex which are otherwise often disregarded. Questions first and foremost arise because of the way Winterson represents the main character and narrator’s sex, namely not at all. The reader is free to picture a female, male, or otherwise sexed narrator.

Susan Lanser correctly points out that for the reader who either assumes a female narrator because the author’s name is female or, according to the heterosexual default structure (cf. Allrath and Gymnich 2002: 40f.), pictures a male narrator, this interpretation might be challenged to some degree towards the middle of the novel, when the reader learns that the narrator has also had male lovers. (cf. 1995: 89) Lanser comments this ‘turn’ in the novel as follows: “Now we do have certain information, not about the narrator's sex, but about his/her bisexuality. The non-marking of sex yields somewhat in importance to a new category which had been hitherto unmarked: the narrator's sexuality.” (1995: 89) Though most readers are likely to interpret the new information as Lanser does, ‘bisexuality’ and ‘marked sexuality’
are in no way necessary denotations of the new fact that the narrator had sexual relationships with males. In a way, such a reading must be seen as another set of default structures, notably that of the gender binary. If a narrator undefined in terms of sexual identity, and therefore also in sexual orientation, is suddenly perceived to be ‘marked’ for having male and female lovers, then the reader is missing an important function of the narratological device of having a sex-neutral narrator. For is it not possible and even likely that the author chooses a sex-neutral narrator not primarily to hide something from the reader and heighten their awareness of the categories ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’, but to present something that may exist in its own right, namely a character unmarked in sexual identity? Must the reader not at least consider the possibility that there is in fact nothing concealed, that the narrator’s unmarked sex is not a puzzle but a given?

Elizabeth Harvey points out that “[m]ost readers, even though they recognize that the narrator is ambiguously gendered, tend to confer a sexual identity on the narratorial voice.” She adds that “for me, the voice always sounds female although there is no textual evidence to ‘prove’ it.” (2002: 336) Harvey’s observation calls attention to the distinction between sex and gender which does become relevant when reading Written on the Body. Since plenty of information about the narrator is provided, it is possible for the reader to come to his/her own conclusions about the narrator’s ‘gender performance’. That, however, theoretically does not allow the reader to infer the narrator’s ‘sexual identity’, which is the term Harvey uses. Whether it is because of a confusion of the two concepts, or because she actually suspects the reader not to distinguish between the two, Harvey’s statement brings to mind the fact that the two categories are often perceived as one, even by readers who are aware of the difference, simply because characters in literary texts usually do not necessitate a clear distinction. With Written on the Body, the situation is different. The reader is being teased with conflicting information about the narrator’s gender identity, and the desire to know his/her sexual identity remains unsatisfied. Why is it that this missing piece of information has such a great impact on the reading process and may at times frustrate the reader greatly? Is the body not always marginal in literary texts, compared to a character’s thoughts, feelings and actions? What information is it that is written on a body, bodies which in literary texts are frequently conceptualized as male or female by no more than a gendered name?

We can certainly say that even if the character’s body is marginal, even if the category sex is not exhaustively discussed but only swiftly established through e.g. a character’s name, its
mere existence generally has a great impact on the reader’s understanding of the whole narrative. Almost any reader’s evaluation of a character’s personality, thoughts and actions will to some degree depend on the sexual identity assigned to that character. If, as in Written On the Body, a character’s sex remains entirely unmarked, the reader is missing one ‘lens’ through which to ‘read’ that character. Although it is only the category ‘sex’ which the reader is missing, much of the given information appears unclear as a consequence. For example, even though the reader knows about the narrator’s love life in detail, he or she is unable to categorise it. For the first half of the narrative, the reader will be quite sure of the narrator’s sexual orientation, as it is obvious that the narrator loves women. Yet due to the narrator’s unclear sexual identity, s/he cannot be associated with any category such as ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual.’ The reader is thus forced to think outside these categories, and in this way the narrative destabilises concepts of normalcy without even directly addressing them. In Written On the Body, the rhetoric of destabilisation is no rhetoric at all where the narrator’s sex is concerned. In this narrative, it is the absence of a concept which challenges that very concept’s meaning, importance and position within as well as outside the narrated world.

5.6. Sexuality

Winterson’s main focus in all of the narratives considered in this thesis is desire rather than sexuality. Her works depict the incredible strength and inevitability of desire, and demonstrate how characters’ attempts to keep desire under control often fail. In Sexing the Cherry, the Puritans’ sex morals are ridiculed and their hypocrisy is revealed repeatedly, for example when Dog-Woman finds Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace having sexual intercourse with each other in a brothel, and a woman in the brothel declares, “We have no shortage of preachers here.” (SC: 87) While in this narrative religion as an institution fails to suppress desire, in Written on the Body it is mainly matrimony which is presented as having little potential to keep desire at bay: “Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire.” (WB: 78) Various characters who are married or in a relationship feel drawn to other people, commit adultery, or fall in love. Written on the Body presents desire as something valuable and ultimately inevitable. It celebrates desire, yet does not romanticize it or portray it as a force whose effects would always be positive. On the contrary, the narrator frequently has to deal with the negative consequences of desire and love. However, s/he ultimately states, “And if anyone had said this was the price I would have agreed to pay it. That surprises me; that
with the hurt and the mess comes a shaft of recognition. It was worth it. Love is worth it.”

(WB: 156)

There is much debate among scholars of literature as to whether or not Winterson is propagating so-called ‘lesbianism’ in her narratives. Apart from the frequent misuse of the word, (sexual intercourse between women does not equal lesbianism), the prominence of that question is striking. In pondering on what Winterson propagates and if, in doing so, she might “risk compromising the feminist currents in the novel,” (Roessner 2002: 105) scholars themselves risk compromising literary analysis in favour of political deliberations which are an important part of, but not the aims and ends of Winterson’s narratives. The quote above also raises the question of what kind of feminism Roessner has in mind when arguing that desire as a foundation of identity conflicts with feminist principles. His argument for instinctual desire to be anti-feminist in Sexing the Cherry is that Winterson portrays the desirable woman as “a symbol for mystical qualities outside language, concept and time.” (2002: 109) Roessner fears that such a notion of desire equals a disregard for the woman as a material subject. In this context, he especially emphasizes Fortunata’s lack of agency and argues that “presenting Fortunata as a symbol of an irrational, ungovernable passion, the novel actually perpetuates the mythic use of the desirable woman as an ‘Other’ to masculine rationality.” (2002: 111)

Roessner’s point that Fortunata is presented in a mystical, not necessarily material way is comprehensible. However, it seems inappropriate to contrast her with masculine rationality, as Jordan is certainly not a representative thereof, and neither is there any indication of Fortunata being irrational. Jordan is a thinker, yet in a philosophical, almost dreamful way which resembles Fortunata’s thinking. Moreover, it is Fortunata who laughs at Jordan’s gullibility concerning the story about her flight from the wedding. Fortunata’s sisters told Jordan that their youngest sister “flew away and walked on a wire stretched from the steeple of the church to the mast of a ship at anchor in the bay,” (SC: 95) yet Fortunata, upon hearing this, wonders how such a thing could be possible. But ultimately, both Fortunata and Jordan understand that certain things, although rationally impossible, may nonetheless be true, for example in the sense that they best represent how someone feels about an event or how they experience it. If Fortunata appears bodiless or irrational, this is not because she is denied a body as a woman, but because it is the argument of the novel as a whole that any given
actuality, be it the body, time or objects, does not constitute an insurmountable reality. Jordan presents this view very explicitly, referring to time, finite space and reality as ‘lies.’

Lies 4: We can only be in one place at a time.
Lies 5: Any proposition that contains the word ‘finite’ (the world, the universe, experience, ourselves…)
Lies 6: Reality as something which can be agreed upon.
Lies 7: Reality as truth. (SC: 83)

Fortunata learns how to dance on her own, metaphorically, as opposed to depending on someone else or hoping for someone else to rescue her. She draws strength from weightlessness and dancing, whereas the heavy, oversized Dog-Woman is the mental realisation of another woman who draws strength from precisely that kind of identity. And Jordan, too, feels that his outer appearance in no way determines who he is, but grants that his imagination is just as decisive. “Are we all living like this? Two lives, the ideal outer life and the inner imaginative life where we keep our secrets?” (SC: 102)

Roessner does not interpret the force of passion and desire in Sexing the Cherry as universal, but argues as follows: “Indicating that this force often leads to happy and healthy lesbian relationships, Winterson depicts lesbianism as a more natural expression of desire than either heterosexuality or male homosexuality.” (2002: 105) Unfortunately, Roessner fails to give any examples from Winterson’s text that would back up his claim. The mere portrayal of happy same-sex relationships in a literary text, even if they play a more dominant role than heterosexual relations, must not readily be interpreted as an argument for them being ‘more natural.’ If that were so, one would also have to regard all literary texts which only portray heterosexual individuals and relationships as arguments for the exceeding naturalness of heterosexuality, which would be absurd. This is not to say that what is represented and what is rendered invisible may not mirror, perpetuate, subvert or even construct reality. Such functions and effects should, of course, be examined; yet declaring them a literary text’s aim and political agenda is highly problematic. Deliberations on what kind of sexual relation or sexual orientation is more natural are simply not to be found in Sexing the Cherry, and efforts to analyse the narrative in such a way lead to such unfortunate phrasings as Jeffrey Roessner’s, who repeatedly writes about Winterson’s effort to naturalize lesbian desire. (cf. 2002: 105, 108, 109) Of course, Roessner might imply here that Sexing the Cherry portrays in a natural way what part of the reading public may still regard as ‘deviant.’ However, Roessner should have been more precise and explicit in order to avoid misunderstandings and to
explain whether his evaluation actually refers to lesbian desire itself, or merely to some reader’s perception thereof.

The short narrative “The Poetics of Sex” is an outstanding example of Winterson addressing lesbianism openly and directly. As described above, the narrative consists of different sections, each of which is introduced by a question which displays great ignorance of lesbian issues. The ‘answers’ given are highly elaborate. For the careful reader, they are indeed answers, although most sections do not constitute direct responses, but instead subvert and refute the very questions. The first-person narrator rebuts the categories dictated by each question, and instead of explaining or arguing shows her view by talking about Picasso, the woman she loves, and through various metaphors and references to Greek mythology.

The question “Were You Born a Lesbian?” is destined to be answered in medical terms, yet when the narrator speaks about her birth it is not her actual mother, but her lover Picasso she refers to. The narrator states that “We are honour-bound, love-bound, bound by cords too robust for those healthy hospital scissors” (WOP: 36), and says that she was ‘born’ a lesbian the moment she met Picasso. She thus refuses to enter the usual argument, instead putting forth her very personal view of what it meant to her to have been ‘born a lesbian.’ At the same time, she implicitly answers the question. In her metaphor, she is the child, whose ‘mother’ Picasso has to explain to her why people are staring at them. The narrator is ‘born a lesbian’ when she learns to see her love in the context of society. What was pure love at the beginning is distorted and labelled. “The world is full of blind people. They don’t see Picasso and me dignified in our love. They see perverts, inverteds, tribades, homosexuals.” (WOP: 37) The narrator’s birth as a lesbian is thus linked to society rather than nature. The original question ultimately remains unanswered, the argument being that if people only learned how to look at love properly, the question would lapse.
6. Conclusion

It is among the chief concerns of Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives to further the reader’s “tolerance of disorder” (Harpham 1982: xx) and present as a unity what by some may be seen as a deviation from ‘normaley’ or a distortion of the ‘proper form.’ I have attempted to show that this concern is not motivated by the desire to present any specific alternative concept as being necessarily good, let alone better than the norm. Instead, the narratives deal with the formation of concepts of normalcy in general, presenting ‘truth’ from various angles. While the narrator in Written on the Body, for example, suffers from the unattainability of truth, Sonja in Mister Sandman repeats her little saying, ‘the truth is only (a-) version,’ quite unconcernedly. Some versions of truth the characters get to choose, others they deal with inadvertently. Each narrative stresses the possibility to look at concepts from different angles and to interpret them in myriad ways. Yet the recognition that reality appears in a different light depending on one’s viewpoint does not necessarily need to entail the reader’s acceptance of alternative notions of normalcy, neither do all characters accept what seems ‘abnormal’ to them, as I have shown with reference to the short story “Flesh of My Flesh.” The main character learns about the fluidity of identity and the disparity that sometimes exists between the outer and inner subject. (cf. WSS: 226) Despite understanding what she learns and partially accepting it – Marion does marry the man she considers to be doing something ‘abnormal’ – she never changes her attitude towards the category of ‘sex’, which she deems binary and unchangeable.

I would argue that Gowdy’s and Winterson’s narratives, in portraying different characters’ emancipation from fixed norms, do not favour any specific concept of normalcy over another. Instead, they demonstrate the possibility of exchanging one concept or one rule for another. As I have repeatedly shown above, and as many critics who have written on Gowdy and Winterson have emphasized, the authors’ portrayal of ‘truth’ as only a version has great subversive potential. Yet subversion must not only be seen as working in favour of certain categories while aiming at undermining others. More importantly, the narratives’ flexibility with regard to concepts of normalcy uncovers underlying structures which unite different concepts and mark them as equal in terms of their right to exist, their importance and sometimes even their meaning. As I have pointed out especially as regards The Power Book, an emotion such as love may be conceptualised in various different ways and may appear in
different forms, yet its universal component of meaning causes it to continuously reappear in familiar patterns. (cf. PB: 78) The narratives thus demonstrate that change, be it material or mental, may alter the outer appearance of a subject, situation or concept, yet does not overrule its fundamental meaning. This is shown even in “We So Seldom Look on Love”. The narrator is able to point out the most basic principle underlying her necrophilia: fascination with change from one state to another, with transformation. The aim is not to make the reader accept an alternative set of norms or sense of reality, but to further an understanding for difference by referring to simple, universal features which lie at the centre of that which appears to be ‘Other’.

Likewise, The Power Book may further the reader’s understanding of homosexuality, yet it does not, as Kiliç claims in her article “Transgressing Gender Boundaries”, portray “lesbianism as the only real emancipation from patriarchal norms.” (2008: 288) Kiliç believes that “Ali criticises her lover because she does not think of leaving her husband in spite of her love for Ali; in her criticism, Ali questions the nature of heterosexual love and marriage” (2008: 292). It is interesting that Kiliç, especially in an article concerned with the topic of crossing gender boundaries, would read Winterson’s narrative in such a one-dimensional way. In The Power Book, ‘heterosexual love’ is presented as difficult and at times unsatisfying, but so is ‘homosexual love.’ More importantly, Winterson is concerned with showing the very blurry boundaries between what is traditionally termed ‘male’ and ‘female’ – her works should thus not be misread as mere criticism of male dominance or heterosexual love. Rather, Winterson writes, as she herself states, about desire and love in general. (cf. Vintage Living Texts 2002) She does so in a way that shows the universality of these feelings and renders sex and gender quite irrelevant.

Barbara Gowdy and Jeanette Winterson present realities which are alternately familiar, shocking, fascinating and strange. The authors’ works always present reality from multiple angles, whether through metanarrative comments, blanks within the narratives, or the rendering of different characters’ perceptions and viewpoints. To consider different views on reality is crucial, as The Power Book shows. When the main character remarks that the Turks are barbarians, his Captain responds,

There is always a city. There is always a civilisation. There is always a barbarian with a pickaxe. Sometimes you are the city, sometimes you are the civilisation, but to become that city, that civilisation, you once took a pickaxe and destroyed what you hated, and what you hated was what you did not
understand. \textit{(PB: 17)}

Gowdy and Winterson exchange pickaxes for storytelling and aim not at destruction but destabilisation in order to challenge those understandings of normalcy which are all too exclusive and hinder the acknowledgement of other truths or views on reality. As Winterson illustrates quite explicitly in a note preceding her narrative \textit{Sexing the Cherry}:

The Hopi, an Indian tribe, have a language as sophisticated as ours, but no tenses for past, present and future. The division does not exist. What does this say about time?

Matter, that thing the most solid and the well-known, which you are holding in your hands and which makes up your body, is now known to be mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light. What does this say about the reality of the world? \textit{(SC: 8)}
7. Bibliography

**Primary Literature**


**Secondary Literature**


**E-Sources**


