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Postmodernist Poetics in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

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While postmodernism never had[1] a specific manifesto, it is usually identified with the following themes: contradiction, randomness, excess (Lodge); self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity (McHale); discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, dissolution of character, erasure of boundaries, the destabilization of the reader (D'haen); pluralist, anti-reason, skeptical, resistant, interrogative, transgressive, highly self-conscious, and intertextual (Butler).

Linda Hutcheon points out an additional—and essential—aspect of postmodernism: it is not an "either/or" movement but a "both/and" one. In other words, it incorporates precisely what it wishes to contest, installs that which needs to be subverted, and centralizes that which has to be decentralized (3). It uses "…paradoxical doubled positioning to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside" (69). Therefore, postmodernism is not in the business of rejecting and omitting as it is in that of undermining and de-constructing, and one element that deconstruction exposes is how our understanding of the world is based on oppositional binaries (such as mythos/logos, in which one is culturally preferred over the other).

Another important pillar of postmodernist politics is its great suspicion of anything that makes claims of universal truth, voiced succinctly by Jean-Francois Lyotard through his credo "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). The notion that there is one universal, all-encompassing truth that exists beyond language is dismissed, and he calls into question all "metanarratives" or master or grand narratives such as Marxism, Kantianism, and Science that offer the promise of liberation: these narratives, he avers, confer authority on certain privileged emancipatory goals, depict history as a trajectory of triumphant progress, and suggest that all the systems of knowledge possess a secret unity that is waiting to be discovered.

Lyotard observes that the postmodern mind sees every -ism as suspect and recognizes that a grand narrative is simply a story written in a particular context but masquerading as the absolute truth. Metanarratives function like archetypes: given their totalizing tendency, they subsume within their overarching rubric a number of petit or minor stories and homogenize them. Such homogenization is unacceptable to postmodernism. Instead, it privileges little or

[1]I deliberately use the past tense here, given that we may be wont to believe that the heyday of postmodernity in terms of philosophical input, theory, and fiction may have passed by now.

minor narratives because these voices bring out the inherent diversity and the naturally existing disorder in human society.

Lyotard also asserts that postmodernism "…refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). Truth, history, facts—these are spuriously legitimized by metanarratives. For postmodernists, such master narratives are supplanted by discourses, which signify the provisionality, positionality, and heterogeneity of social reality against any unifying thematic or formal coherence. The distrust of metanarratives knocks down privileged "transcendental signifiers" like reality, god, and the human mind. It also problematizes conceptual binaries like body/mind, speech/writing, and literal/metaphorical. From a "decentered" perspective, it facilitates the existence of multiple truths, realities, and worlds. In effect, with the postmodernist ethos, "historical plurality replaces atemporal eternal essence" (Hutcheon 58) and does away with any "transcendental timeless meaning" (19).

Postmodernism's premise is to constantly highlight the "discourses"[2] through which significance, meaning, and identity are constructed (and are continuously being constructed). Once an idea is accepted as having no more than discursive reality, it can no longer have a sacred, fixed, and permanent meaning. Rather, it is in the nature of discursive meaning to be "open, unfinished ... 'future'" (Still 7). This idea of ever-incomplete meaning also finds expression in Derrida's act of deconstructive reading, which holds discourse, meaning, and reading as historical processes that are produced in the "processes of contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization" (Culler 128). Language itself is "historically" constituted as a fabric of differences. Discourse, therefore, is historical and meaning is historically determined (129). Meaning cannot be defined univocally as the author's or speaker's intention or the reader's interpretation. Rather than attempt to decipher a truth or origin, deconstructive interpretation affirms "play" (131). Meaning is best understood as infinite implication (133).[3] While modernists were, in the wake of their sense of an ending, handpicking elements and creating tradition as salvation for their moment of crises, postmodernists were always more interested in interrogating the very assumptions and beliefs that go into producing such histories.

[2]The notion of "discourse" indicates "…a historically evolved set of interlocking and mutually supporting statements, which are used to define and describe a subject matter" especially of disciplines like law, medicine, and jurisprudence (Butler 44). Discourses also set up the political, moral, and social authority within a society and therefore hold the power to exclude "deviants." Discursive perspectives cannot be escaped; they are imbibed without conscious thought or will. They pervade all social phenomena, and the more dominant a discursive construct is, the more natural it appears to be (46-47). Postmodernism sets itself to the task of exposing the hold of discourses rather than of offering alternatives to them. After all, the idea of an alternative only strengthens the illusion that we might, if we so wish, opt out of a discursively generated reality.

[3]Patricia Waugh traces the deconstruction of oppositions through broad movements in literary fiction. She points out that the social structure was emphasized in eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction through family, marriage, birth or death, and the individual was almost always integrated into the relevant structure. In modernist fiction, the individual became painfully aware of the hold of such social structures and conventions, and struggled for personal autonomy by opposing the same. Such a struggle entailed alienation, angst, and often mental dissolution. However, since the power structures of contemporary society are "more diverse and more effectively concealed or mystified," the postmodernist novelist faces a greater challenge in "identifying and then representing the object of 'opposition'" (10-11). This implies that the postmodernist is often unsure about what the primary and the secondary terms are.

While some aspects of postmodernism are a continuation and intensification of some of modernism's aesthetic concerns, there is one area in which the two can be understood to be distinctly different: Modernism, by and large, sought to provide *structure* to the fractured present, and therefore tended towards mythic structures, archetypes, and symbols, while postmodernist poetics emphasized the notion of the *construct* of reality as well as history. It is the complex process of meaning making that postmodernism brought to the fore. It constantly underscores the idea that there is no final truth to be discovered. Everything is a construct; the corollary is that that which is a construct can be de-constructed. Therefore, there is no pre-given sacrosanct center, truth, or reality. If any center can be imagined, however fleetingly, it cannot be done without simultaneously also keeping in mind the peripheral. Conversely, in order to define the local or the regional, the center needs to be provisionally fixed. However, the position of centrality, for logic, ethics, or politics, alters according to the context. It is from this sense of relativism that deconstruction arises. The negation of certainty is the driving force of postmodernism: truths are plural, relative, transient, and only contextually relevant. In such a schema, it is the correspondence between language and reality that is highlighted, and the notion that there is no such thing as unmediated reality strengthened. The postmodernist ethos rests on the idea that there are

> …all kinds of orders and systems in our world—*and* that we create them all.... They do not exist "out there", fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructs in history. This does not make them any the less necessary or desirable. It does, however, …condition their "truth" value. The local, the limited, the temporary, the provisional are what define postmodern "truth"… (Hutcheon 43)

It follows that if truths are multiple and relative, then history, a form that claims to present the truth of the past, can certainly not be regarded as final and authoritative. Rather, it transforms into "historiography," an account that exists in language, is a narrative, is open to multiple versions, and is created through the belief system and context of a historian and her society. That is, history is essentially what the historian deemed worthy of being recollected and recorded. This recollection is often dictated by the discourse in which *a* history (and not *the* history) is being articulated (Barthes 17). Like other commodities, history and narrative are also consumed, and they are consumed (just as they are created) in particular contexts.

These notions are embodied in literary modes like historiographic metafiction, an intensely self-reflexive or metafictional mode (explained below) that appropriates historical events and personages but subverts the "historically verified" versions attached to them (Hutcheon 5). Historiographic metafiction creates skepticism about historical knowledge by distorting the content of history while mimicking the form of historiography. Such fiction suggests to us that both the form and the content of the past can be reworked and reimagined, but that at no point must the reworking itself become conclusive. Its aim is not to offer an ultimate alternative version of history but to erase the belief that history is more "authentic" than fiction. Historiographic metafiction is highly aware of its status as a creation in language while also being firmly grounded in historical and political actuality. As Hutcheon states, the aim of

postmodernism, couched in historiographic metafiction, is not to "…deny the *existence* of the past [but to] question whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains" (19-20).[4]

If reality is so heavily mediated by language and discourse, then by extension, realism—the literary genre that simulates the historical mode—is not something to be taken at face value. Postmodernists would argue that realist language is guilty of naturalizing power structures. For postmodernist writers and readers, fictional narratives are no longer able to offer authoritative slices of reality, and the narrator/author cannot entertain pretentions of possessing omnipotent control over the landscape of the novel. Instead, a typical postmodernist novel either persists in being open-ended, or in being all too accommodating of multiple, mutually-exclusive possibilities within the same fictional world. A postmodernist novel may narrate actual historical events, but it is likely to also insert obvious distortions that compel the reader into accepting that history and "reality" is, after all, constructed through language. Postmodernist fiction revels in demonstrating how characters and narrators not only construct their subjectivities through words but are themselves just that–words (Waugh 26).

These theoretical underpinnings give rise to "metafiction," a mode of fictional narrative that self-consciously and systematically addresses itself as fiction or a construct. And it does so within the framework of the fictional narrative itself. John Barth defines metafiction as a novel that "imitates" a novel more than it does the real world (qtd. in Currie, 161). In expressing itself as a deliberate act of artifice, metafiction problematizes the presumed divisions of reality and fiction, and poses questions about the air of certainty that realist representations assume. Thereby, it "explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction ..." (Waugh 4). Metafictional writings "…not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2). Reality is a highly suspect concept for postmodernism, and this is reflected in metafiction. "Meta" implies a level of discourse, an extra level, as it were. Using "meta" terms, we are able "to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers." In fiction, it means the space to explore the relationship "between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction" (3). Most importantly, metafiction does not pose an opposition to "objective" facts of the "real world" but rather to the language that endorses such a view of reality (11). This idea ties in with the postmodernist belief that reality—or rather, its perceptions and narratives—is so rapidly changing that the art that claims to represent it must, perforce, be ready to admit to its own ephemerality, and even its own triviality (12).

Postmodernist texts highlight the confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, disturb semblances of reality (and realism), question the available narratives

[4]Christopher Butler suggests that postmodernist skepticism, especially of history, does not mean that historians are free to make up things as they go along. For instance, Holocaust deniers will not accepted even by the most ardent postmodernists. In other words, novelists are not wholly free to concoct historical events. What they are expected to do, rather, is to expose, through fictional subversion, the narratives and discourses that constitute history. Essentially, the postmodernist novelist is expected to be "…more sceptically aware, more relativist about, more attentive to, the theoretical assumptions which support the narratives produced by all historians…" (35).

of history, science, and rationality, and lay bare the art of the novel. Postmodernist texts are also very aware of the intertextual nature of the text, of the historical and social context of the text's production and consumption, and of the text's amenability to plural interpretations. It is in the contexts of historiographic metafiction, incredulity, and the provisional nature of reality, that I explore Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989).

Much of *Sexing the Cherry* takes place in seventeenth century London. The novel revolves around such historical events as the Puritan Interregnum, the Great Plague of 1665, and the London fire of 1666. The England of this period is beginning to participate in sea voyages to far-off places, bringing back exotic flora, an activity which will eventually segue into large-scale economic botany as part of the colonial project. This is also a time of political, religious, and moral turmoil with the fall of Charles I and the rise of Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans. Against this historical setting, dotted along "actual" events and historical figures—presented to us solely through the narrative voices of the two protagonists, the Dog-Woman and Jordan—the novel weaves together a reimagined fairy tale and a myth, bawdy satire, and fantastic voyages to cities that defy all laws of physics or conventional reality. In the "Introduction" to the novel, Winterson lays out her agenda: "You remember that definition of a fishnet as holes held together by string? I am interested in the holes" (vii). The novel dips into such gaps via Jordan's travels, the Dog-Woman's embodiment of collapsed binaries, and the re-appropriated narratives of heretofore silenced literary heroines.

The first of the four main sections of the novel contains alternating first person narratives of the Dog-Woman and Jordan. The Dog-Woman (her real name, she says, is forgotten) is a giantess who lives on the banks of the filthy Thames for most of the story's span. She is, as her name suggests, a professional dog breeder, and, as the narrative unfolds, we discover that she is also a violent serial murderer. She sketches out her childhood and her adulthood with a great deal of satire, and her current strong opposition to those that oppress sexual freedom. She comes across as a staunch Royalist, a believing Christian, and a hater of the Puritans. She is simultaneously extremely maternal towards her adopted son, Jordan, whom she had found floating in a basket in the Thames and thought appropriate to name him after another river.

Her narrative alternates with Jordan's, who comes across as contemplative and curious. He is in awe of his mother strong and action-oriented mother, and mentions his childhood love for boats. This serves as an omen to his early apprenticeship, in 1640 to be precise, under the explorer and gardener Tradescant (who is a "historical" figure—John Tradescant the Younger [1608-1662] was the head gardener to Charles I and Queen Henrietta of England). Together, the two travel to exotic lands, with the objective to bring back plants and fruit that no one in England has seen or tasted before: tropical fruits like bananas, pineapples, and cherries feature prominently in the novel. The increasing interest in horticulture and the tradition of royal gardens (such as at Kew) are also invoked through techniques like grafting (the basis of the title of the novel). After Tradescant's death, he continues on solitary journeys to cities that may be "real" or flights of fantasy, we are never quite sure. Jordan confesses that he is obsessed with the "thought of discovery" of the unknown, albeit of more than one kind (Winterson 3), which takes him to

these strange or realistically "incommensurable" (Lyotard's term) places (each in its own way obsessed with love or lust or lightness or space). During one such expedition, he chances upon a mysterious dancer named Fortunata. She is a character from an old fairy tale about twelve dancing princesses and has crossed over from the tale she was born in into the world of the novel, and into Jordan's life. Of course, his trajectory makes the reader aware that the novel itself is fictional (thus, the reader becomes aware of various degrees or kinds of fiction even within this construct) and, within this world, the bringing of the pineapple to England by Jordan is just as legitimate as a city that has escaped the bounds of gravity.

The second section veers away from the historical/realist setting and comprises mostly of a reimagined fairy tale, spurred by Jordan's desire to find Fortunata. The Grimm Brothers' tale, *The Shoes that were danced to Pieces* (also translated as *The Worn-Out Shoes*) is recreated as a set of twelve individual first-person narratives of women (the twelve princess sisters) in search of happiness after their conventional heterosexual marriages have belied their hopes and desires. The stories examine a number of issues related to feminine identity, subjectivity, desire, and homosexuality. The stories do end happily, but in ways that radically subvert our expectations from fairy tales. It is also important to note that this subversion gives voices to (Lyotard's) petit-narratives or narratives of the women characters who did not have a voice in the older versions of the story. The sisters barely speak in the received fairy-tale—they appear to dance secretly and trick their sleuthing suitors, but never speak. Here, they have the agency to not only turn their lives off the offered track but also narrate these to the reader. It is in such instances that the political dimension of Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarrative becomes crucial to the discussion of postmodern fiction, for this kind of fiction brings into focus the narratives at the periphery, the voices of the heretofore marginalized and subordinated, and the claims of those rendered powerless by the legitimizing power of the metanarrative,[5] in this case, the quintessential fairy tale.

The third section, titled "1649," returns to the historical period. The Civil War, the beheading of King Charles I, and the establishment of the Puritans is presented through the narrative of the Dog-Woman. Her moral opinions emerge clearly through these pages: she is particularly incensed at the Puritan men's excessively sanctimonious pretense and their greatly depraved and debauched behavior in private. Using the trope of bawdy humor, she explicitly describes their prurient behavior that she has witnessed first-hand. According to her, Puritans indulge in necrophilia, bestiality, and voyeurism: behavior that clearly belies their exterior of strict morality, denial of bodily pleasure, social propriety, and austerity. Her encounters with the Puritans, whose behavior is quite contrary to what historical accounts would have us believe, also expose history's status as a construction through discourses of power and in language. This section also contains snippets of Jordan's life, and many ruminations of a postmodernist nature

[5]However, it must be kept in mind that postmodernism, by itself, is not necessarily an egalitarian movement even though its politics are geared towards examining power structures and thereby undermining voices that are invested with power. For the most part, it is willing to expose discourses that consolidate hierarchies but it does not think it is possible to abolish power structures. What it does, however, is level the playing field for those petit narratives that have always been excluded from the mainstream. This aspect of postmodernism bodes well for the "liberation" of the ethically and culturally oppressed communities that have so far possessed no voice.

about truth, reality, and verifiability. Jordan finally finds Fortunata, examines the nature of time and the flat earth theory, and notes down what he terms "hallucinations" that expose time and space as constructs rather than immutable givens. He returns to London after the worst of the plague has passed. The great fire of 1666 threatens to burn down London, and the Dog-Woman leaves the banks of the city with Jordan to journey to a new land. Unlike Macondo, which "would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men" (García Márquez 448), London is purified by this purgatory fire so it can be rebuilt.

The last section is titled "Sometime Later." Set in contemporary twenty-first century London, we meet Nicholas Jordan (Jordan reincarnated) and a nameless environmental activist (unnamed, as a nod to her alter-ego, the Dog-Woman). Both narrate, in alternating first-person voices, their childhood and the passions that have driven them to their current states. Their accounts are of a highly realist nature until their nation's historical past begins to interrupt their lives in the form of the novel's other protagonists. They find themselves being visited upon by visions from a long ago past—visions they cannot fathom, but must accept as their destiny. The struggles and passions of the former historical selves (the Dog-Woman and Jordan) are carried forward in these modern day figures. This has the effect of creating parallels between the past and the present, and exposing how a nation may change very little over the course of a few hundred years. The activist and Nicholas meet at the end of the novel, with the inexplicable but tacit understanding that they have lived other lives before and have known each other for a long time. The Dog-Woman and Jordan also appear briefly here, embarking on a new journey, as does the last story that Fortunata had related to Jordan before they parted: Artemis's version of her own myth.

It is also important to note that the banana and the pineapple, both exotic fruits in that time in England and therefore historically relevant, play an important pictorial role in the novel: the banana ends Jordan's first-person narrative portions and the pineapple the Dog-Woman's. Similarly, Nicholas Jordan's narrative is marked by a split banana and the environmental activist's by a split pineapple. Such pictorial symbols hint at connections across time, space, and identities. The split fruits symbolize fractured and fragmented realities, and how the past interrupts the present.

Sexing the Cherry displays its elements of the grotesque and bawdy through its protagonist, the Dog-Woman. She is, by her own admission, a woman of monstrous proportions, and demands space literally and literarily.[6] She claims her size is supernatural: fleas rest in pockmark craters on her face (19); she can hold a dozen oranges in her mouth at once (21); the sweat pouring off her can fill a bucket (16); and as a young woman, she had once displaced an elephant in a competition of weight: "…[w]hat it says of my size I cannot tell, for an elephant looks big, but how am I to know what it weighs? A balloon looks big and weighs nothing" (21). However, she is not merely *like* an elephant. She is the same size and weight as one. Jordan, as a baby, could sit in her palm like a puppy. Given her abnormal appearance, her father had tried to

[6]The novel has been read as a postmodern lesbian text (Aldea). A lesbian body is often expressed through excess because it does not fit categories that medicine and marriage define.

sell her to a circus as a freak when she was still a child. She had killed him with alacrity, which she recalls was her first murder (122).

For most of her adult life, it is her size as much as her un-natural strength that defines her. She is not only strong enough to wring the necks of several men at a time, but also pulls a musket ball out of herself when shot at (69). She is practically invincible—a point proved further when she survives shoveling bodies of the victims of the plague into a pyre without falling prey to the epidemic herself. She is also a woman of strong opinions and a morality that is her own; she is a staunch devotee of monarchy and a devout Christian but thinks nothing of murder when the victim is someone she thinks deserves to die. For her, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is secondary to another antecedent law: "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (92). Once, when incited to inflict violence on Puritan men, she enthusiastically wounds enough of them to collect 119 eyeballs and over 2,000 teeth which she rolls out to horrified church goers (93). Her agenda to rid the country of the "po-faced, flat-buttocked zealots" (70) is eventually echoed in the activist's desire to rid the country of corrupt and greedy "men in suits" who "want to build dams, clear the rain forests, finance huge Coca-Cola plants and exploit the rubber potential" (140).

The Dog-Woman is certainly a creature of contraries and, like a true postmodernist narrator, is also highly unreliable because the reader can never quite trust her stories about herself, nor resolve the contradictions she embodies. She is not a monistic figure that gravitates towards one side in a list of binaries with respect to physical, moral, or philosophical structures. Rather (echoing Hutcheon's point about postmodernism being both/and rather than either/or in its leanings), she smashes these binary divisions by being a creature of contradictions. She is a mother and a murderer, a coy lady and a bawdy comedienne. Though frustrated at never having found a deserving (male) romantic partner and holding a cynical view of men in general, she is nevertheless a doting mother to Jordan and caring towards men like Tradescant. She says that while she must turn sideways to enter or exit a door, she "can melt into the night as easily as a thin thing that sings in the choir at church" (8). She may kill easily, but must turn down a job at a whore-house due to her "frailty of heart" (40). All the same, her explicit descriptions of witnessed debauchery, delivered with an air of naiveté, are not for the faint-hearted. For instance, she uses scatological hyperboles to convince the guards at the king's execution to let her in: she bemoans how she has the clap, stinks like a heap of dung, has rotting genitals, and the pus leaking out of her smells like a dog that has been dead for three days (72). She is comically literal-minded at times and skillfully sly at others, and possesses a vocabulary well beyond the ken of the uneducated poor village woman she calls herself. She can quote from the Scriptures as well as from Shakespeare to emphasize her point (96), though she claims to be uneducated. While more than willing to kill men who oppress women, she is also a staunch advocate of the Church and monarchy, both strongly patriarchal institutions. She evokes laughter, but also pity, sympathy, and appreciation from the sympathetic reader for the way she is. She is almost like a modern day action super-hero, invincible but also extremely unreal and morally ambiguous.

From an intertextuality aspect as well, she is a remarkable figure, reminiscent most strongly of Rabelais's bawdy Pantagruel. Like the monstrous giant of French literature, the Dog-Woman is also a conventionally grotesque figure, scatological, explicit, violent, but also in a certain way innocent and humorous. Both Pantagruel and the Dog-Woman are born to un-natural parents: the former to a giant (Gargantua) and the latter to a witch. Both find comical, and what may appear to be absurd, justifications for their actions. Like Pantagruel, she also interacts with others in a free and familiar way, treating the reader and her conversationalists with a no-holds-barred approach.

The counter-point to the Dog-Woman's size, heaviness, and rootedness, is the corporeal lightness of Fortunata and her eleven sisters. In the novel, these twelve dancing princesses took off each night to a mysterious city (which was floating in the sky) to dance all night (109). When Jordan watches her dance, Fortunata appears to be as light as a floating point of brightness. She "believes that we are fallen creatures who once knew how to fly" (perhaps invoking the figure of Satan, the fallen angel), and teaches her pupils to turn into "points of light" that are not bound by gravity (76). The implicit belief that she personifies is that gravity is escapable. When the reader tries to contrast the Dog-Woman and Fortunata, at first, the differences appear stark. However, because the Dog-Woman is clearly a creature of contradictions, one wonders if Fortunata is just another spin-off of the Dog-Woman, or her alter ego (and if they are both alter-egos of the modern day activist). We learn that the Dog-Woman's heaviness is born from lightness, thus confusing the difference between the two. Her mother was believed to be a witch because she was light enough for the wind to carry her away, yet was able to carry her gigantic daughter for miles. "There was talk of witchcraft but what is stronger than love?" muses the Dog-Woman (21). It is with such paradoxes presented in the novel that the reader begins to understand the constructed nature of reality that relies on making choices from binaries (male/female, good/evil, light/heavy, etc.) and the cultural value each side is hegemonically assigned.

Jordan is the link between the heaviness represented by his mother and the lightness of Fortunata. Crucially, he finds both women to be better than himself. Both, sure of their beings and in control of the world around them, have already arrived where he wishes to be.

Jordan is also portrayed as a contrast to his mother's qualities: he is sensitive, delicate, and is desperately seeking to be a hero while also caught in philosophical quandaries of the true natures of time, space, gender, and truth that seem to have already been problematized by his mother and Fortunata. Constantly in awe of his mother's (masculine) physical and moral strength (115), he finds himself lacking in such traits as brashness, courage, and physical heroism (89). His desire to become an explorer is modelled on Tradescant—as an explorer, he "might be a hero after all, and bring back something that mattered" (115). He lives up to his riverine name, meandering and traveling through fantastic cities. His retrospective account of his journeys informs us of the postmodern untrustworthiness of records themselves:

> Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the paths not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the one I made but

> the ones I might have made, or perhaps made in some other place or time. I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books. (2)

Statements such as these, alongside his explorations and anecdotes, focus on the constructed (and unreliable) nature of reality through language and the genre of the documentary—closely mirroring the postmodernist ethos.

The environmental activist of modern-day England is carrying out a one-woman campaign against mercury pollution, a lone evangelist for her cause just as the Dog-Woman is for the sexual freedom. Fighting her lost battle against water pollution, the activist remembers her childhood alter ego, an omnipotent and "huge and powerful" woman (142), presumably the Dog-Woman (who we may now think is a wishful creation of the activist herself, though we cannot be sure of that). The activist's physical bigness as a child became channeled into a "Rabelaisian dimension of rage" (141) against corporations and factories dumping chemical waste into rivers. She supposes that staying so close to the mercury is making her hallucinate. "I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant" (138). She fantasizes about kidnapping men from the World Bank, the Pentagon, and world leaders, and giving them compulsory training in feminism and ecology. In her and the Dog-Woman's struggles lie the political crises of their time, whether in the form of industrial pollution, ruthless capitalism, or the moral and sexual repression of Puritanism.

Nicholas Jordan is a naval cadet. Like Jordan, he was very fond of making and sailing toy boats as a child. As Nicholas Jordan reminisces about his childhood, we learn that he remembers a painting he once saw of the first pineapple being presented to England's king.[7] He also remembers an afternoon from his childhood when a man in terribly antiquated clothes had come up to him and asked him about his boats. This man had said, "I used to make them ... and sail in them too. I've been everywhere, but I still have a feeling I've missed it" (130). This stranger (Jordan) walks away, and Nicholas's friend Jack comments that this man must be a "nut" because he was wearing clothes nobody wears any more. Already we see the past interrupting Nicholas's reality. Six months after he has become a naval cadet, Nicholas is on board a ship at night when he hears a man's voice tell him that the king is being buried at Windsor. Again, he thinks "nobody wears clothes like that any more" (137). Nicholas looks at this man, and tries to remember where he knows him from. The suspicious reader may speculate that it is the memory of a painting or a hallucination, until Nicholas realizes: "I heard a bird cry, sharp and fierce. Tradescant sighed. My name is Jordan" (137). And so the past and the present become fused.

Nicholas Jordan and the activist are destined to meet, though they realise how improbable the feeling is that they have already known each other (159). The activist's final words in the novel to him are: "Let's burn it," "it" being a factory polluting the water (165). The novel ends with the Dog-Woman and Jordan as they turn their backs on the purging fire—whose flames she

[7]This is a reference to Hendrick Danckerts' 1675 painting titled *Royal Gardener John Rose and King Charles II,* which is indeed a painting of a pineapple being offered to the king. In the novel, Jordan is said to have brought the first pineapple to England in 1661 (9).

has fanned—swallowing a pestilence ridden London. By conflating these two story-lines, Winterson is bending time, and also substantiating connections that exist beyond logical (and realist) dimensions. The interruption of the past (the Dog-Woman) into the present (the activist) is also a reminder that cultural forces have always been tilted against women, especially those that openly rally against dominant (patriarchal and hegemonic) systems, and that this bias has changed form but not its essential nature.

It can be inferred from Brian McHale's notion of the ontological dominant in postmodernist fiction (11) that readers are expected to think of fiction as being beyond questions of true and false. Through the "ontological perspective," we see fictional worlds as capable of violating the rules of logic. Characters and events can be outrageously transformed in an ontologically pluralist world. Positions become relative and unstable. The boundaries of fiction and the real world are rendered porous, and the distinctions between the various kinds of fictional worlds (fantastical, real, historical) erode as they are nestled within one text. It is not uncommon to find these varied worlds intruding into the worlds of other texts in postmodernist fiction. *Sexing the Cherry* also displays this kind of pastiche of literary modes and genres.

As mentioned before, its setting is deliberately historical, and liberally peppered with historically verifiable dates and events (for instance, Charles Stuart I's trial that began on 20 January 1649 and lasted seven days, the Civil War, the formation of the Parliament, the Puritan Interregnum, and the Great Plague), and historically "real" figures. These create a reference system that cements the novel's time in the past. However, this historical narrative becomes postmodernist historiography by inverting the gaze from a bird's eye view record to a subjective and particularized one. We are informed of these historical events and others through the first-person narratives of the Dog-Woman and Jordan. Clearly, these events cease to be merely documented facts; rather, the reader encounters them as selected incidents that affect the characters in peculiar ways, and the events themselves stand altered from conventional accounts given the positions of the narrators who are also actors in this historical account.

The historically realist setting is interrupted first by Jordan's desire to "fly" away to fantastical cities, a quality that he finds reflected in Fortunata's dance. These voyages are opposed to the Dog-Woman's rootedness to land. She "anchors the historical narration in the material and visceral, while Jordan's stories are ephemeral flights of fancy" (Aldea 95). She appears abnormal but provides a historically accurate account; he appears normal and aspires to be a supernatural hero (Winterson 114), but travels through magical means to strange cities (reminiscent of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*). Neither of them can be treated as reliably realistic though. The Dog-Woman's real world feats are unreal and excessive; Jordan's fantasy is rendered real through his empirical approach. He says:

> I've kept the log book for the ship. Meticulously. And I've kept a book of my own, and for every journey we have made together I've written down my own journey and drawn my own map. I can't show this to the others, but I believe it to

> be a faithful account of what happened, at least, of what happened to me. (Winterson 115)

Jordan's journeys suggest that the boundaries between the real and the fantastical are porous. Besides, the verifiable and the fantastical, the experienced and the imagined, appear to be complementary and reversible. These journeys are also postmodern insofar as they question the stability of time and space, and cut through intertextual worlds (a fairy tale, references to Sindbad, Gulliver, and the myth of Artemis) that are fully appropriated and re-configured into the main fabric of the narrative. One must consider that given fantastic/unverifiable accounts of eye-witnesses on long sailing trips, one may be inclined not to dismiss Jordan's accounts as flights of fancy. All the same, whether these journeys really take place is always doubtful, and the novel does little to resolve this question. The log suggests that he has made these journeys, but he simultaneously also claims that: "To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is, in conversation or at dinner, and walk through a series of winding streets to a house standing back from the road" (11). This may indicate that the cities he purportedly visits may exist only in his imagination, but it could also mean that the boundaries between the real and the imaginary are contiguous and porous. Linear time also ceases to matter in these journeys. He notes: "The scene I have just described to you may lie in the future or the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her. I cannot be sure. Either I am remembering her or I am still imagining her" (104). The line between truth and falsehood is very fine too: "And so what we have told you is true, although it is not" (106).

The fairy tale is the second intrusion into the underlying historical fabric of the novel. A fairy tale usually takes place at an undefined time, and in an undefined place. In the Grimm Brothers' version of the story deployed here, the sisters are locked up each night but secretly escape underground and go dancing with twelve princes. Each morning, they are found exhausted, and their shoes torn. Baffled, the king proclaims that whoever deciphers this mystery can marry the princess of his choice; of course, the princesses have no say (or voice) in the matter. Many princes try and fail because the eldest princess mixes sleeping draughts in their drinks. One poor, wounded soldier proves impervious to this trick and follows the sisters one night. Having successfully discovered their secret, he gets to marry the eldest princess and becomes the king. In this novel's retelling, the princesses go dancing to a floating city and their secret is discovered by a young prince. The twelve girls were promised to the prince and his eleven brothers. Fortunata is the youngest and runs away from the altar. The remaining eleven live through failed marriages, and are forced to make choices in order to truly live happily ever after (although they no longer dance). Through first-person narratives, we become privy to the lives of these women after the point where a conventional fairy tale ends. Each woman exemplifies the various ways in which conventional heterosexual marriage can oppress women, and these women's narratives are a fresh collage of alternate desires, passions, and freedoms. Their stories represent the confines of marriage and domesticity, the desire for homosexual love, the ignominy of unfaithful husbands, and several forms of sanctioned cruelty. After being freed of their marriages, the eleven sisters have come to live together again in a sort of sisterly commune. This is where Jordan meets them and hears their lives tales.

Winterson's use of a reworked fairy tale[8] woven into the historical world of seventeenth century England is in "…the manner of a playful palimpsest that simultaneously evokes and critiques through its critical, parodic distance from the pre-text" (Makinen 149). She twists the seemingly innocuous fairy tale to raise questions about genre as well as subjectivity. Although fairy tales are widely circulated, narrated over and over again, and exist in both oral and written traditions, their tropes, characters, and plots remain more or less fixed. Further, they are inherently patriarchal, and reinforce stereotypes about women. In Winterson's choice and reworking of the tale, these stereotypes are challenged: the princesses in the original tale are not docile to begin with, and rebel against patriarchy (the king, their father) by sneaking out at night. However, in the original tale, they are selfish and think nothing of the men being beheaded after they fall asleep and are unable to discover the princesses' secret. In the reworked version, the murders of the husbands are an act of rightful rebellion and a desire for individual happiness. Through the use, re-use, and ab-use of such a story, the author creates space for alternative voices, change, and the restructuration of identity within a familiar context, but also highlights the limitations of a genre. Once again, Lyotard's contention that petit-narratives from ex-centric points of view are an integral part of postmodern narrative becomes germane.

Finally, Artemis's story is reworked and narrated to present yet another facet of being a woman in a patriarchal culture. Fortunata claims she was in the service of the Greek goddess and it is from her mouth that she heard this story. Artemis begs her father Zeus to let her live alone on an island and hunt instead of marrying and bearing children. In her solitude, she discovers the joy of traveling and being alone as only men could be. She knows "…about the heroes and the home-makers, the great division that made life possible. Without rejecting it she had simply hoped to take on the freedoms of the other side..." (150). Artemis here becomes an example of what Hélène Cixous refers to as the fluid notion of bisexuality, "…understood not principally as a form of sexuality, but as an embodied recognition of plurality and the coexistence of masculinity and femininity within individual subjects" (Onega 97).

However, Artemis's quest for equality and solitude is rudely interrupted by Orion, a massive hunter with a terrible reputation. His sole intention is to disturb her for the choices she has made: "She was a curiosity; he was famous. What a marriage" (Winterson 151). He eats her goat, scatters her goods, rampages on her island, and finally rapes her. However, she does not suffer in silence: "[h]er revenge was swift and simple. She killed him with a scorpion" (152).[9]

[8]The use of a reworked fairy tale is a literary style also seen prominently in Angela Carter's work of fiction *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

[9]The myth of Artemis has several versions. In one such version, Artemis and her companions are portrayed as strict virgins who are very harsh on any man who threatens their virginity. Actaeon, for instance, chances upon Artemis and her followers bathing in a secluded pool and is unable to stop staring at the beautiful goddess. Enraged at this violation, Artemis turns him into a stag and sets his own hounds upon him. Another story is that Orion, a giant and a hunter, rapes her and she kills him with an arrow or a scorpion. A different version of the same story is that Apollo, jealous of Orion and Artemis spending time together, and challenges her to shoot an object at a great distance: the object turns out to be Orion's head.

This version of the myth is another intriguing reversal in the world of the novel. A mythic goddess must struggle in her quest for freedom from patriarchal norms, while a mortal (the Dog-Woman) has no trouble sustaining hers. It is, therefore, not a goddess, but the Dog-Woman, who is the alter-ego for the environmental activist. We are aware of the fictionality of the Dog-Woman, but she is real in the historical-realist world of the novel. Artemis and the princesses are also rendered "real" in the novel, but the source of their origin is other stories. In using these "literary" women, Winterson is creating a narrative space for them to renegotiate their destinies, and offers the readers with alternate histories.

The idea that two contradictory terms combine to form a new kind of organism, or affect, manifests in several ways in *Sexing the Cherry*. Primarily, the title of the novel is based on the horticultural technique of "grafting" wherein a tender or weaker plant is fused artificially with a hardier strain, which produces "a third kind, without seed or parent" (84). Jordan and Tradescant manage to successfully graft a cherry branch for the royal garden in Wimbledon. However, the Dog-Woman echoes the Church's sentiment that grafting is an unholy, unnatural act of artificially creating things. She believes that things that have not grown naturally have "no gender" and are "a confusion to themselves." Jordan mollifies her by saying that "we have sexed it [the cherry plant] and it is female" (85). The essential point being made here is that gender is not automatically assigned at birth. This third kind of plant acquires gender eventually.

Postmodern feminist philosophy has stated over and over again that gender is not a "fact" but a social construct. It is "…a space in the psychic life, a hole or lapsus in identity onto which are projected the images, archetypes, or stereotypes comprehended in terms male and female" (Front 109). That is, as exemplified by grafting, gender is belatedly determined by societal norms rather than by birth. This is also personified in the figures of Jordan and the Dog-Woman who display a clash of stereotypical gender roles: she is endowed with traditionally masculine strength, logic, and fearlessness whereas he is sensitive, intuitive, and imaginative. Jordan, under pressure to be a conventional hero, wonders if the technique of grafting can be applied to him as well: he believes that if he could be grafted onto the stronger hardier Tradescant (Winterson 85), he would find it much easier to be a hero. This belief rests on Jordan's notion that if these stereotypical qualities are not innate, one should be able to acquire them from elsewhere. Further, such an idea implies that the features of a hero are culturally decided upon, and one can become a hero if one is not born one.

There are several instances where the novel creates a new kind of gender performance, which is a mix of both masculine and feminine characteristics. For instance, Jordan dresses up like a woman in the brothel, and at the King's execution (29, 72). He turns into a woman in the eyes of those around. Further, he claims that he is not the only one to do this: "I have met a number of people who, anxious to be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women and women as men" (28). Gender stereotypes, therefore, are not only a construct but also a burden.

The grafted cherry plant is also an instance of hybridity. Hybridity "shakes our assumptions about the boundaries between the sexes and between species" and it "violate(s) categories in different ways" (Caroline Walker Bynum qtd. in Onega 96-97). The cherry plant may be termed female, but it is essentially a third sex, having been ascribed to the plant belatedly (Front 109). In a similar fashion, the Dog-Woman's personality is also a hybrid. She cannot be classified as either completely masculine or feminine; her being oscillates between gender stereotypes, and creates a third kind that cannot be neatly compartmentalized as masculine or feminine (88).

It is important to remember that postmodernist poetics does not seek an alternative final truth. Its aim is not to merely reverse the value invested in one of the pair of binary oppositions. Rather, by destabilizing or deconstructing dichotomies, identity and meaning become fluid constructs. Winterson appears to posit, through the characters in her novel, the desire to turn binaries into hybridity, thereby adding newer dimensions to reality itself. As readers, we too cannot decode the Dog-Woman with any kind of finality, for she is simultaneously pious and profane, coy and murderous, coarse and ladylike, heavy and light, desirous of (patriarchal) order and the agent of political chaos. In these ways, her character deconstructs the clear distinctions between assumed masculine and feminine gender identity markers. If anything, she identifies herself with nature: "I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains" (32). In her fluid personality, the Dog-Woman transforms into "…something that escapes these categories, something which appears as supplemental to the realist realm where these binaries are expressed" (Aldea 97).

Yet another relevant aspect is channeled through the ontological concerns voiced by Jordan when he ruminates over the hybrid nature of time and space, wherein the binaries of here and now and then and there are dissolved and recreated anew. Jordan lists four anachronistic short stories in which characters (echoes of the novel's protagonists) find time and space jumbled up. They find themselves inhabiting a reality that cannot be defined by logical/accepted parameters of time and space. From these stories, Jordan gleans the "lies" that we believe in: thinking of time as a straight line; believing that we can be in only place at a time; assuming that the past has occurred and the future has not; and accepting reality to be synonymous with truth (Winterson 90). These "lies" mirror both postmodernist concerns, and posit the basic fallacy of existing in a system of dualities, and allowing it to circumscribe reality. This blurring of neat boundaries between past and present continues when Nicholas Jordan and the activist are revisited by their previous versions.

The novel also contains traces of postmodernist self-reflexivity and self-conscious narrators. For instance, Jordan recognizes that there is written proof of his voyages, but his own life is a piece of fiction: "I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me like the Twelve Dancing Princesses who shot from their window every night and returned home every morning..." (2). The Dog-Woman is also aware that her life is a story chosen over another equally plausible story. She remembers the time

her neighbor, a witch, had predicted that Jordan would abandon his mother and go away, and thinks to herself, "I should have killed her and found us a different story" (7).

Postmodernist ontological concerns are especially voiced in the conversations between Jordan and Fortunata. When he asks how it was that the sisters flew every night to an enchanted city to dance when there are no such places, Fortunata responds: "Are there not such places?" (106). We do not receive any direct and final answers to such questions, but these instances press the reader to ponder over not the possibility of the existence of such worlds but what such an existence means. Rather, *Sexing the Cherry* demands that the reader remain in a constant state of awareness of the hybridity that rests on a collapse of normative dualities, a typical postmodernist trait.

The novel closes with these words: "And even the most solid of things and the most real, the best-loved and the well-known, are only hand-shadows on the wall" (169). It aptly sums up what I have pointed out as a postmodernist trait: de-constructing assumed notions of reality/realism and history/historiography and turning the binaries that dictate our understanding of the world into hybrid entities exemplified in theme, character, and genre.

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