Love, the Clock Keeper: The Elusive Nature of Time in Jeanette Winterson's Work

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Abstract

Discussions on the nature of time represent a significant theme in Jeanette Winterson's novels. The author repeatedly challenges the generally accepted notions of time as chronological and measurable by the clock and she offers alternative perceptions of temporal reality based primarily on subjective experience. The aim of this paper is to examine this alternative approach to time and discuss the ways in which the categories of the past, the present and the future are deconstructed in Winterson's work, particularly in the novels The Passion, Sexing the Cherry, The PowerBook *and* The Stone Gods. *This article argues that Winterson's stories encourage the reader to withdraw from everyday distractions and turn inwards towards his/her inner self in order to see and understand these new layers of time. Moreover, Winterson repeatedly portrays love as an all-powerful force defying spatial and temporal boundaries and thus allowing the emergence of an alternative, timeless reality bound by no rules or limitations. In Winterson's novels, it is love that determines the course of time rather than the clock. The paper discusses this special significance of love in the novels and examines Winterson's unconventional conception of the world, one in which the mind is freed from social expectations and where time is meaningless, since different temporal layers can operate simultaneously.*

Keywords

Jeanette Winterson, time, history, simultaneity, storytelling, love

The problematization of time represents one of the most recurring themes in Jeanette Winterson's fiction. Her novels disrupt generally recognized and accepted categories of the past, the present and the future, and the works challenge the conventional understanding of time as linear and easily measurable by the clock. Instead, her work demonstrates that the perception of time is a highly subjective experience which cannot be easily defined or quantified. Winterson's conception of time clearly fits into the subjectivist inward turn traceable in modernist literature. Modernism brought a new perspective to the discussions of the nature of time, stressing contingencies based on the individual observer. Consequently, the distinction between an external "objective" reality and the subjective perspectives of individual people becomes less easy to determine. Winterson adopts this emphasis on inner consciousness in her novels and also makes use of a number of modernist narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, fragmentation and the use of multiple voices. For these reasons, Winterson's novels have been frequently compared to the works of modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. However, Winterson takes the discussion on the nature of time further and she presents in her work a highly complex and unique approach to the problem. The aim of this paper is to examine this alternative conception of time Winterson describes in her novels and discuss the implications of the author's premise that temporal reality is a complex, multiple and multi-layered phenomenon.

To illustrate the unclear and ungraspable nature of time, Winterson recurrently uses the image of a river. A river is constantly moving forward, yet it is also "bowed, curved, sometimes

subterranean, not ending but pouring itself into a greater sea."[1] It is unpredictable, and it can flow in circles. In *The Passion*, the whole of the city of Venice can be understood as a metaphor for the chaotic nature of time. As Andrea Kriston points out, "the image of Venice appears as that of an ever-constant land of change, where nothing is set or fixed."[2] It is an unpredictable and chaotic labyrinth constantly resisting people's efforts to conquer it with reason or words. Mine Özyurt Kılıç points to other examples of the river metaphor which can be found in *Sexing the Cherry, The PowerBook* and *Gut Symmetries*.[3] In all these novels, the river image figures the fluid and unstable nature of time.

Winterson compares the orthodox linear approach to time to the reading of maps. Maps as she describes them are mere attempts to transform the land, which we can never fully get under control, into a form which could be easily understood, read and measured. Cartography can say little about the actual experience people will undergo once they encounter the places in real life. The same is true about the conventional understanding of time, which gives us only a highly limited and incomplete picture of what is really going on. As Winterson puts it, "being in time, in a continuous present, is to look at a map and not see the hills, shapes and undulations, but only the flat form."[4]

Winterson frequently points to subjective perceptions of time in her novels. We are now used to measuring time by the clock, yet the actual flow of time we experience may seem completely different. As she points out in *The Gap of Time*, "time can stand still, move faster, slow down"[5] depending on our state of mind at each particular moment. While some days seem to pass extremely fast, others may appear to be never-ending. Therefore, Winterson suggests that instead of adhering to the established conceptions of time, we should "abandon the common-sense approach and accept what is actually happening to [us]."[6]

In order to understand this subjective flow of time Winterson describes, it is necessary to turn our attention inwards towards our inner selves. Focusing on our personal perceptions and experiences may help us comprehend the uncertain, confusing and sometimes even contradictory nature of time. As Winterson repeatedly emphasizes, "the self is not contained in any moment or any place."[7] The external world might be subject to the clock and the established periods of the year, but our "interior universe" remains completely independent of these artificial categories and "free to ignore the boundaries of here and now."[8]

Winterson mentions a few potential impulses which might help us redirect our attention inwards and achieve at least a partial grasp of this unrestricted and atemporal existence of ours. One of the triggers which can have this liberating power over us is art. Winterson describes art as

1 Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* (London: Granta, 1998).

2 Andrea Kriston, "Conceptualising Time and Space in Winterson's *The Passion* and *Written on the Body*," *Gender Studies* 11, Supplement (2012): 106.

3 Mine Özyurt Kiliç, "Introduction," in *Winterson Narrating Time and Space*, ed. Margaret J.-M. Sönmez and Mine Özyurt Kiliç (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), xv–xvi.

4 Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 98.

5 Jeanette Winterson, *The Gap of Time: The Winter's Tale Retold* (London: Vintage Books, 2016), 39.

6 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 143.

7 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 87.

8 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 99.

"a way into other realities"[9] – realities which may disrupt our long-established assumptions and expectations. In Winterson's novels, imagination serves as a "key to unlocking the self."[10] As she argues in *Sexing the Cherry*, "when we are drawn into the art, we are drawn out of ourselves [and] we are no longer bound by matter."[11] We become free to explore new layers of reality where the dividing line between facts and fantasy and the external and inner worlds no longer exists.

The art of storytelling in particular is used by Winterson as a powerful means of reaching beyond the conventional conceptions regarding the nature of reality. As Jan Rosemergy points out, "for Winterson, the very act of creating fiction is a means of liberation."[12] According to Justyna Kostkowska, it is through stories that "Winterson encourages the readers to see beyond the 'obvious' divisions of identity, space, and time."[13] She further explains that stories also have the power to allow the reader to see "beyond the body and species differences,"[14] giving the reader the opportunity to connect with others and perceive them as mirrors reflecting his own self.[15] Consequently, the boundaries seemingly separating people from one another, just as the artificially created categories of time and space, become blurred and insignificant.

Apart from art, Winterson describes another powerful force allowing people to break away from the limitations of the outside world: love. The author frequently discusses the power of love and desire in her novels and points to the liberating potential of these emotions. In her stories, love functions as a mechanism allowing people to explore deeper layers of both their inner selves and the world around them. As Grice and Woods point out, love as described by Winterson represents a form of self-transcendence.[16] In *The Passion*, Winterson argues that love and longing for another person allow us to experience a deeper self-awareness, since "our desire for another will lift us out of ourselves more cleanly than anything divine."[17] Love is described as a mirror giving people the opportunity to get beyond the limitations of their assumed identities, perceive themselves in a new light, and discover their true selves. Consequently, once people re-connect with their "hearts" – the true cores of their personalities – the presumption of an external reality which can be objectively and truly described starts falling apart.

Temporal and spatial limitations represent two of the artificially created concepts which become meaningless in the presence of the emotions of love. Love as described by Winterson brings about a state of mind which defies all boundaries and for which time loses all meaning. A fitting example can be found in the novel *The PowerBook*, which portrays the complete insignificance of the linear time for a person experiencing emotions in a loving relationship. As one of the narrators

9 Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Vintage International, 1997), 26.

10 Jan Rosemergy, "Navigating the Interior Journey: The Fiction of Jeanette Winterson," in *British Women Writing Fiction*, ed. Abby H. P. Werlock (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 259.

11 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 101.

12 Rosemergy, 248.

13 Justyna Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers: Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 80.

14 Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 80.

15 Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 81.

16 Helena Grice and Tim Woods, eds., *I'm Telling You Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 56.

17 Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*, Penguin Books Fiction (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 154.

observes: "No date line, no meridian, no gas-burnt stars, no transit of the planets, not the orbit of the earth nor the sun's red galaxy, tell time here. Love is keeper of the clocks."[18] In a symbolic rejection of the useless conception of a chronological time, the narrator drops his/her watch into a river. As Annabel Margaret van Baren explains, "the narrator no longer requires the use of his/her watch, as love directs the rhythm of time, instead of the clock."[19] In the reality the lovers experience, time loses all its meaning and significance.

A similar example of this alternative timeless reality experienced by people in love is portrayed in Winterson's later novel *The Daylight Gate*. The mutual affection of the two main protagonists of the story is so strong than neither time nor space poses an obstacle to its realization. As Silvia Antosa puts it, "it is through their love that they manage to dissolve corporeal, spatial and temporal boundaries to transform 'one self into the other' in a queer atemporal dimension."[20] The women's love moves them beyond the conventional understanding of time and space and creates an alternative reality where their mutual affection can be shared. In van Baren's words: "love makes time stand still, builds bridges to cross centuries and countries."[21]

Both love and art function in Winterson's books as potential triggers of an altered state of awareness providing people with the ability to perceive reality more accurately, i.e. as complex, multiple and partly ungraspable. This altered state of consciousness can be described in many ways, of which Winterson names just a few, such as passion, delirium, meditation, or out-of-body experience.[22] Even though love and art may not be generally recognized in this way as valuable or powerful, Michaela Weiss argues that "they nevertheless cannot be fully destroyed as they are present in what could be called the collective consciousness that cannot be deleted."[23]

If people became more open to the transformative power of art and love, one of the realizations regarding the nature of time that they might eventually come to is that time does not simply pass and disappear, and what we really encounter is much more than just "the present." Winterson argues that "all time is always present, but buried layer by layer under what people call Now."[24] She claims that the past, the present and the future are inseparably connected, and the present moment encompasses all past events. Therefore, everything we have met and experienced in the past becomes inevitably a part of our present lives. Winterson repeatedly explores the idea of the eternal presence of all time in her novels and applies this conception to the whole planet Earth. As she claims in her novel *Weight*, Earth "keeps a record of everything that has happened since time began"[25] and all knowledge and wisdom is forever imprinted in it alongside all humanity's

18 Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook* (London: Vintage, 2007), 288.

19 Annabel Margaret van Baren, "Multiplying Narratives, Disclosing Bodies: Story-Telling and Embodiment in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and *The PowerBook*" (Universiteit Utrecht, 2007), 30.

20 Silvia Antosa, "In a Queer Gothic Space and Time: Love Triangles in Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate*," *Altre Modernità*, no. 13 (2015): 164.

21 van Baren, "Multiplying Narratives, Disclosing Bodies," 62.

22 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 101.

23 Michaela Weiss, "Return of True Romance in Jeanette Winterson's *Stone Gods*," in *Postmillennial Trends in Anglophone Literatures, Cultures and Media*, ed. Soňa Šnircová and Slávka Tomaščíková (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 50.

24 Jeanette Winterson, *Tanglewreck* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 20.

25 Jeanette Winterson, *Weight* (Edinburgh; New York: Canongate, 2009), 73.

mistakes and failures. The Earth is a living organism carrying the weight of all the past events, just as the potential for its future developments. If people became more perceptive to the Earth's guidance, they could learn a valuable lesson about themselves and benefit from their past mistakes, yet unfortunately, they mostly remain blissfully ignorant and uninterested. As Winterson puts it: "Of time to come, [the Earth] says much, but who listens?"[26]

Another story describing a planet as a complex organism which "remembers" all past events is portrayed in Winterson's dystopian novel *The Stone Gods*. The story depicts life on the devastated planet Orbus, which suffers from overpopulation and severe climate change. People living on this planet are running out of resources and their reckless and irresponsible behavior leads to the complete destruction of the planet's environment. The place becomes incompatible with human life and people intend to gradually colonize another planet to make a new beginning. However, instead of reflecting on the destructive nature of their behavior and learning from their mistakes, they only end up repeating the very same tragic story again. Time in *The Stone Gods* seems to possess a circular rather than chronological quality. History keeps repeating itself over and over again, since people refuse to learn from the past. As Winterson keeps reminding the reader, "everything is imprinted forever with what it once was,"[27] or in other words, all past events become an inseparable part of the present moment. As Hope Jennings explains, this refrain implies that since all the past mistakes of humankind are never truly forgotten and remain imprinted on the present reality, it is possible for people to benefit from them and avoid committing them in the future.[28] In order to do so, they need to become perceptive of the Earth's voice and of the multi-layered nature of temporal reality.

Winterson's premise that all time is simultaneously present carries major implications concerning human life and death. Since all time is eternally present, Winterson extrapolates that countless lives are existing simultaneously. There is not only the actual life journey we have decided to take, but also all the other ones we might have possibly taken. Kate Haffey argues that this time of "what might have been" runs parallel to the human event timeline in Winterson's books, creating a parallel reality of "perpetual possibility."[29] Several parallel realities thus exist at the same time, even though "we can only tune in to one state at a time."[30] Winterson compares this phenomenon to radio stations, which work on the same principle. All the stations are playing simultaneously, yet we can usually only tune in to one of them at a time.[31]

Winterson demonstrates these ideas of temporal simultaneity on an invented computer game she describes in *The Gap of Time*. In the alternative universe of the video game, time again functions in a circular rather than chronological manner. The game contains several different time levels which represent separate domains, yet the boundaries between them remain unclear and permeable. Even though the players are situated in one particular time zone at a time, they

26 Winterson, *Weight*, 73.

27 Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 246.

28 Hope Jennings, "'A Repeating World': Redeeming the Past and Future in the Utopian Dystopia of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 136.

29 Kate Haffey, *Literary Modernism, Queer Temporality: Eddies in Time*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 89.

30 Winterson, *Tanglewreck*, 340.

31 Winterson, *Tanglewreck*, 371.

"may be observed from another level – and [they] may be aware of another level. It may be that [they] can operate simultaneously on different levels."[32] This metaphorical representation of the world figures Winterson's conviction that there might be different temporal layers which can freely meet and mingle.

Another example of this simultaneous coexistence of several different time layers can be found in the novel *Sexing the Cherry*. The story is set in the seventeenth century England, yet at a certain point an unexpected time switch occurs, and two main characters are suddenly turned into their twentieth century counterparts dealing with contemporary problems. Even though they occupy a different temporal zone, the seventeenth-century characters seem to coexist with their present-day alter egos. The time in *Sexing the Cherry* is thus fluid and flows back and forth without following any traceable rules or restrictions.

A similar temporal synchronicity is also described in *The PowerBook*. In this novel, Winterson presents a collection of short stories which are set in different historical backgrounds, yet are all connected by the same theme of tragic love. Even though the context of the events changes, it still seems as if it was the very same story that keeps repeating itself in different time periods. As one of the narrators points out: "I keep telling this story – different people, different places, different times – but always you, always me, always this story, because a story is a tightrope between two worlds."[33] By describing one shared story which takes place at various times and places connecting different narrators, Winterson again challenges the conventional understanding of time as linear, pointing toward the possibility of the simultaneous presence of several discernible temporal layers.

The idea that all time is eternally present should bring the reader to wonder about the implications for human life and death. If all possibilities and all our potential lives exist at the same time, where does the boundary between life and death lie? According to Winterson, this boundary line is again unclear and blurry, since "outside of the rules of daily time, not to be is as exact as to be."[34] Our embodied living selves cannot be regarded as constant and stable, since our physical and mental state is continually undergoing changes. And death is simply yet another of these changes. As Winterson argues, "there is no such thing as death as you describe it. Our states alter, that is all."[35] Birth and death as Winterson portrays them become "only markers, pauses, changes of tempo."[36] Death can thus be understood as a mere transformation from one state of being to another, rather than the final and definite end of existence.

Another important aspect of death Winterson mentions recurrently in her novels is its inseparable connection to love. First of all, love is portrayed as an all-encompassing and all-powerful force which is independent of time, space, death or any assumed division or barrier separating people from one another. As one of the narrators in *The PowerBook* claims: "I could find the place where time stops. Where death stops. Where love is. Beyond time, beyond death, love is. Time and death cannot wear it away."[37] When it comes to love, death is powerless. In her discussion of

32 Winterson, *The Gap of Time*, 61–62.

33 Winterson, *The PowerBook*, 141.

34 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 99.

35 Winterson, *Tanglewreck*, 338.

36 Winterson, *The PowerBook*, 256.

37 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 99.

the novel *The Stone Gods*, Adeline Johns-Putra even comes to the conclusion that the experience of death in the dystopian story might be understood as "a way to re-experience and re-encounter love."[38] When Billie, the main heroine, and her robot lover Spike die together soon after their arrival on the uninhabited planet, the shared moment of the near-death state becomes a transcendental experience of deep mutual love and connection. Moreover, as Weiss points out, their shared love does not end with the death of their bodies, but it "transcends time and space and its existence will be imprinted forever in the private world of both lovers."[39]

The complex and multi-layered nature of time Winterson portrays in her stories is clearly reflected in the highly experimental form of all her novels. The stories she depicts are never told in a clearly arranged linear manner. Instead, the narration is usually fragmented, temporally ambiguous and broken by flashbacks, random stream of consciousness or various stories within stories. The novel *The PowerBook* can serve as a fitting example. As Kostkowska points out, the individual chapters of the novel are only very loosely connected, and the reader is given the opportunity to arrange the book according to his or her own preferences. The text can be arranged in many different ways and the result is a diversity of readings.[40] Moreover, "instead of having to accept the author's ending, the reader himself/herself is invited to make the decision"[41] or, as Kostkowska further argues, simply accept the coexistence of multiple endings of the story without giving any of them a preference.[42] By choosing such an ambiguous ending for her story, the author encourages the reader to consider the idea of simultaneous multiple realities.

If we accept the notion of time as multiple and multi-layered, the whole concept of one single objective reality becomes meaningless. As Winterson demonstrates, everybody perceives reality in their own subjective manner, and there are thus no "real" facts which could be regarded as the truth. Some of Winterson's books illustrate this multiplicity of realities by presenting several different narrative voices. Instead of supporting the conventional understanding of reality as single and objective, the novels challenge this assumption by including many different points of view and perspectives in the narrative.

Once we reject the idea of one objective reality and one linear time, what necessarily follows is an altered approach to history. Winterson often sets her stories into a historical background, yet she blends in historical facts throughout the fictional stories. As she explains in *The PowerBook*: "The more I write, the more I discover that the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel room."[43] Combining historical events with fiction allows Winterson to keep her stories independent of any temporal or spatial categorization and at the same time this technique highlights the unreliability of historical facts. As Kiliç points out, "Winterson uses and distorts

38 Adeline Johns-Putra, "The Unsustainable Aesthetics of Sustainability: The Sense of an Ending in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," in *Literature and Sustainability: Concept, Text and Culture*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra, John Parham, and Louise Squire (Manchester University Press, 2017), 190.

39 Weiss, "Return of True Romance in Jeanette Winterson's Stone Gods," 43.

40 Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 77.

41 Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 79.

42 Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 79.

43 Winterson, *The PowerBook*, 108.

the historical data to show that history is a mere construct and a mirror which reflects a dwarfed version of common people whereas some other who are made heroes look like giants in it."[44]

According to Winterson, even the way we perceive our own personal history cannot be considered reliable, since "everyone remembers things which never happened" while "people often forget things which did."[45] Our memory can easily deceive us, since it is highly selective and subject to our emotions and subjective interpretations. As Winterson explains in *Gut Symmetries*, what remains in our memory from the events we have experienced is nothing more but single images and words – particular moments that stick in our minds.[46] The "real" events that happened are never preserved, since "the power of memory is such that it can lift reality for a time."[47] But again, how do we define reality? In *Written on the Body*, Winterson poses an unsettling question: "Or is memory the more real place?"[48] Maybe it is our personal perception and interpretation of the world which matters the most. We encounter reality in our own subjective way and the experience we make is "real" and the only one relevant for us. And this subjective reality we live in is not bound by any temporal or spatial boundaries.

As the paper has argued, Winterson's novels challenge the conventional understanding of time and suggest alternative ways of approaching reality. The author emphasizes the subjectivity of the perceptions of the flow of time and examines the idea that there might be multiple layers of time operating simultaneously. Her novels suggest that countless possible life journeys coexist at the same time, even though we are only able to "tune in" to one at a time. In order to become aware of these new dimensions of time that usually remain hidden and to explore reality in its complexity, it is necessary to turn inwards and get in touch with our inner selves. In this way, we might be able to reach an altered state of consciousness which can be provoked or strengthened by various forms of art or by the experience of intense feelings of love. Once we re-focus our attention towards our own unique inner approach to the world, the concept of a single version of an objective reality becomes meaningless. Consequently, "historical events" become mere stories with no objective value or significance. Since every person perceives the world in their own subjective manner and stores different experiences distorted by feelings and emotions in their memory, no interpretation of the world can ever be regarded as the truth. In order to understand what is actually going on, Winterson encourages the readers to accept time as a complex, highly subjective and even "fictitious" phenomenon which cannot be easily defined, measured or recorded. In Winterson's words: "'Tell me a time' you say. And what you really say is 'Tell me a story.'"[49]

44 Kiliç, "Introduction," xiv.

45 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 102.

46 Winterson, *Gut Symmetries*, 79.

47 Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 61.

48 Winterson, *Written on the Body*, 61.

49 Winterson, *Weight*, 7.

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