Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry (1989)
Gender, the Fantastic and the Grotesque

Historiographic Metafiction & Women’s History

- Women’s voices have largely been silenced by traditional, male-authored and male-centred history
- Feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s drew attention to this exclusion, and contemporary feminism continues this project
- Feminists attempt to recover women’s (hi)stories in order to give a more balanced view of history and of women’s oppression through(out) it

1) “Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems” Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988), p.93

- Historiographic metafiction can function as useful tool for feminist history project because of its re-imagining and rewriting of the past, and because of its critique of traditional historical practices

2) “[Contemporary women writers] seek through the very act of writing to deconstruct and reinterpret aspects of the historical process which have previously silenced or been closed to their female subjects.” Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.2

- Historiographic metafiction can serve as a means of writing women into history
- Can also highlight women’s inequality and oppression

3) “It is by interrogating the male-centred past’s treatment of women at the same time as seeking to undermine the ‘fixed’ or ‘truthful’ nature of the historical narrative itself that women can create their ‘own’ (counter-)histories.” Ibid., pp.2-3

- Historiographic metafiction not only concerned with past it revisits and rewrites but also with the present in which it is conceived

4) “Whatever we may wish to say about the past, it cannot be relived, whereas the reinterpretation of history, the recognition of marginal, disenfranchised and powerless groups can serve to empower in the present.” Mary Evans, Missing Persons: the Impossibility of Auto/Biography (London: Routledge, 1999)
• *Sexing the Cherry* reclaims women’s history and also writes lesbian history

5) “I have always enjoyed swimming, and it was in deep waters one day that I came to a coral cave and saw a mermaid combing her hair. I fell in love with her at once, and after a few months of illicit meetings, my husband complaining all the time that I stank of fish, I ran away and began housekeeping with her in perfect salty bliss.” Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 2001), p.48

• Story of the seventh princess illustrates heteronormativity
• Heteronormativity describes a cultural bias in favour of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationships of a sexual nature, meaning heterosexuality is considered “normal” and homosexuality as “not normal”

The Fantastic

• Fantastic can function as a means of recovery rather than escape, particularly in the rewriting of the past and reimagining of previously invisible histories

6) “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’.” Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), p.4

• Rewriting of the stories of the twelve princesses imagines female voices which are often unheard in traditional fairy tales

7) “These tales’ strategies of reversal and humour reconfigure power structures: the women violently reclaim their right freedom and to self-narrative, and their narratives question mythical norms.” Angela Marie Smith, ‘Fiery Constellations: Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* and Benjamin’s Materialist Historiography’, *College Literature*, 32:3 (Summer 2005), pp.21-50 (p.28)

Gender & the Grotesque

• Violence forms part of novel’s grotesque representations, which serve to highlight, destabilise and question traditional gender roles, particularly femininity
• Masculinity and femininity not biologically determined but culturally constructed

8) “It is nature, they say, that makes us get married. Nature, they say, that makes us crave to have babies. [...] It's nature that makes us love our children, clean our houses, gives us a thrill of pleasure when we please the home-coming male [...] Who is this nature?” Fay Weldon, *Praxis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), pp.146-147
• Winterson draws attention to and criticises the limitations of the roles women were (and largely still are) expected to fulfil
• Normative femininity: behaviour (sexual and social) and looks that are deemed feminine and which women are expected to display these traits if they want to be perceived as “proper” or “good” women
• Again deviations from this norm considered as “other” or “not normal”

9) “When I was a girl I heard my mother and father copulating. I heard my father’s steady grunts and my mother’s silence. Later my mother told me that men take pleasure and women give it. She told me in a matter-of-fact-way, in the same tone of voice she used to tell me how to feed the dogs or make bread.” **Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, p.107**

• Critique of idea that women are naturally passive and domestic, and men active, professional and adventurous

10) “In her solitude [Artemis] discovered something very odd. She had envied men their long-legged freedom to roam the world and return full of glory to wives who only waited. She knew about the heroes and the home-makers, the great divisions that made life possible.” **Ibid., p.131**

• Winterson highlights aspects of normative femininity only to then challenge them, often with help of the grotesque

11) “[For Mikhail Bakhtin] the grotesque becomes associated with all that is exiled to the margins of propriety and acceptability. [Some contemporary women writers, like Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson] have, however, played a part in women’s own appropriation and deployment of grotesque imagery in order to expose and critique the processes involved in creating socially acceptable images of the feminine.” ‘**Grotesque**’, *the Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. By Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 1998), p.243

• Grotesque can tell us what is socially unacceptable
• Women writers have appropriated this in order to highlight and challenge constructions of normative femininity
• Dog Woman portrayed as both typically feminine in that she is maternal and caring
• But also represented as physically repulsive because of her looks and her personal hygiene

12) “When Jordan was a baby he sat on top of me as much as a fly rests on a hill of dung. And I nourished him as a hill of dung nourishes a fly.” **Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, p.11**
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- Illustrations of women as both feminine and masculine defy idea of femininity and masculinity as two separate, mutually exclusive identities
- Particularly when Winterson illustrates violent women
- Dog Woman is both maternal and violent (and a murderess)

14) “I lifted Jordan up and I told Johnson that if he didn’t throw back his cloth and let us see this wonder I’d cram his face so hard into my breasts that he’d never wish he’d been suckled by a women, so truly would I smother him. He starts humming and hawing and reaching for some coloured jar behind his head, and I thought, he’ll not let no genie out on me with its forked tongue and balls like jewels, so I grabbed him and started to push him into my dress. He was soon coughing and crying because I haven’t had that dress off in five years.” **Ibid., p.12**

- Princesses are, in normal fairy tales, gentle, kind and beautiful but in Winterson’s rewriting they murder their husbands

15) “He built a bonfire and burned the body of a saint. The saint was very old and wrapped in cloth. I liked him about the house; he added something.’ After that she had wrapped her own husband in cloth and gone on wrapping the stale bandages round and round until she reached his nose. She had a moment’s regret, and continued.” **Ibid., p.49**

16) “In **Sexing the Cherry,** self and other, masculine and feminine, past and present, nature and culture are envisioned not as alternatives but as simultaneous and coexisting.”


- Gender is something we perform
- Jordan is in search of his identity and his masculinity through his travels and the adventures he craves

17) “I had lost myself to begin with, and that is what I lost. Lost it in my mother because she is bigger and stronger than me and that’s not how it’s supposed to be with sons. But lost it more importantly in the gap between my ideal of myself and my pounding heart.” **Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, p.101**
18) “I want to be brave and admired and have a beautiful wife and a fine house. I want to be a hero and wave goodbye to my wife and children at the docks, and be sorry to see them go but more excited about what is to come. I want to be like other men, one of the boys, back-slapper and a man who knows a joke or two. I want to be like my rip-roaring mother who cares nothing for how she looks, only for what she does. She has never been in love, no, and never wanted to be either. She is self-sufficient and without self-doubt. […] We never walked much. She is silent, the way men are supposed to be.” Ibid., p.101