Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.21

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Anja Mrak
University of Ljubljana

Magical Realism and a Feminist Narrative Technique: Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*

Abstract

This essay examines magical realism as a narratological strategy within feminist literary theory. It argues that the critical potential of magical realism lies not only in its themes but in formal techniques that destabilise naturalised ideological structures. Three key strategies are identified—literalisation, excentric focalisation, and "third time"—showing how they expose the contingency of gender identities, heteronormativity, and historical authority. Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* is analysed as a case study of feminist uses of magical realism. The essay demonstrates that the novel materialises metaphor, privileges marginal perspectives, and disrupts linear temporality to recast ideological constructs of gender and sexuality. Attention is given to the displaced phallic signifier, gender performativity, and the parody of heroic masculinity. The essay concludes that magical realism is not inherently subversive; its critical force resides in the formal possibilities it opens for reconfiguring social norms. *The Passion* exemplifies how magical realist form can serve as a feminist narratological repertoire, creating spaces of ambiguity, plurality, and resistance to universalising claims.

Keywords: magical realism, feminism, narratology, Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: The author acknowledges the financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0239). **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 1 July 2025. Verified: 22 Mar. 2026. Accepted: 23 Mar. 2026.

MAGICAL REALISM: DEFINITIONS, CRITERIA, AND FEMINIST REFRAMING

Magical realism has long occupied a prominent position in literary scholarship, most frequently discussed in relation to Latin American and postcolonial contexts. Canonical readings have framed it as a narrative mode through which writers from cultural, political, and geographic margins articulate alternative epistemologies and contest dominant aesthetic regimes. This critical lineage was symbolically reinforced by the 1982 Nobel Prize awarded to Gabriel García Márquez, whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is often positioned as the paradigmatic magical realist text. Yet despite its subsequent global circulation, the theoretical vocabulary of magical realism has remained largely anchored in postcolonial paradigms. Far less attention has been paid to how its narrative strategies can be mobilised within feminist literary projects, particularly in European contexts.

This essay argues that magical realism offers a productive narratological framework for feminist writing, not merely at the level of thematic representation but through formal strategies that render ideological structures perceptible and open to interrogation. Feminist literature has long confronted structures of marginalisation, patriarchal discourse, and heteronormative regulation, with questions of bodily autonomy, gendered subjectivity, and symbolic exclusion central to its critical project. What remains comparatively undertheorised, however, is the narratological dimension through which these political concerns are formally embedded in literary texts. While feminist criticism has extensively addressed representational questions, less attention has been paid to how narrative form itself participates in the production, destabilisation, or reconfiguration of ideological norms. At this juncture, magical realism proves especially generative: at its intersection with feminist writing, specific textual mechanisms emerge through which binary thinking is unsettled and the construction of the feminine as the Other—defined in opposition to a universalised masculine subject—is revealed as contingent rather than natural. By enabling critique to operate through narrative logic, structure, and epistemological organisation rather than theme alone, magical realism furnishes feminist writing with formal tools for interrogating naturalised systems of power.

Magical realism is best understood as the copresence of two ontological codes—a realist code and a naturalised supernatural code—held in nonhierarchical tension. Unlike the fantastic, which thematises hesitation and demands a choice between rational and supernatural explanations (Todorov), magical realism integrates the magical as an unproblematic fact for both narrator and focaliser, resolving the logical

antinomy through authorial reticence (Chanady 12). As Wendy B. Faris observes, magical realism introduces "an irreducible element that is unexplainable according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by modern, post-enlightenment empiricism" (102). The supernatural is narrated with the same epistemic weight as the realistic, producing a fictional world in which contradictory systems of meaning coexist without hierarchical resolution.

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's structuralist model identifies three defining criteria: the coexistence of two codes of reality, the resolution of the logical antinomy, and narratorial reticence (23–25). These mechanisms ensure that the supernatural is naturalised within the fictional world, presented not as rupture or hallucination but as ordinary fact. Stephen Slemon similarly emphasises that the contradictory systems at work in magical realist texts "never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy," foregrounding their dialogic interaction (410). Together, these accounts establish magical realism as a narrative mode that resists epistemological closure and privileges simultaneity over exclusion.

While these frameworks remain foundational for defining magical realism, their emphasis on descriptive criteria does not fully account for the broader ideological work the mode may perform. They clarify how the supernatural is integrated into realist narrative structures, yet they remain largely silent on how such integration may be mobilised to interrogate dominant systems of meaning. In this sense, they explain the mechanics of magical realism without fully engaging its critical potential as a narratological strategy.

Kenneth S. Reeds addresses part of this limitation by arguing that Chanady's criteria require expansion. He observes that the presence of the neofantastic[1] alone is insufficient for a text to be classified as magical realism: whereas the neofantastic employs naturalised magic to explore the relationship between fiction and nature, magical realism deploys it to "recast history" (130). Reeds's intervention thus shifts the focus from structural description toward historiographic function, foregrounding the mode's capacity to intervene in dominant narratives of the past.

Building on this historiographic expansion, the present essay extends the scope of magical realism further by situating it within feminist narratology. While Reeds does not address gender or sexuality explicitly,

[1] Reeds adheres to Todorov's definition of the fantastic, which requires some reservation on the part of the reader when faced with a supernatural event within a realistic narrative (82). Unlike 19th-century fantastic fiction, where "the magical event occurs outside an otherwise realistic narration and, having not been incorporated in a verisimilar way, it can only be explained as a marvellous addition to the real world" (Reeds 13), the neofantastic naturalises the supernatural.

his emphasis on recasting history opens a conceptual space for examining how magical realist strategies may also be mobilised to recast ideological constructs governing gender, sexuality, and authority. For this reason, I propose the term "recasting of ideological constructs" to describe texts that deploy magical realism not only to challenge historical narratives but also to expose and destabilise normative frameworks of social power. This reframing positions magical realism as a narratological repertoire whose critical force lies in its capacity to destabilise epistemological hierarchies and reveal the constructedness of social norms—an effect that proves especially generative for feminist literary practice.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES OF MAGICAL REALISM

Jeanette Winterson's work occupies a distinctive position in late 20th-century British fiction and has attracted extensive theoretical attention from feminist, lesbian-feminist, queer-theoretical, and postmodernist perspectives (see Makinen; Andermahr; Onega; Front; Seaboyer). Within these paradigms, Winterson's *The Passion* has been read as experimental romance, metafictional historiography, psychoanalytic allegory, or mythic rewriting, with sustained attention devoted to its interrogation of gender binaries, heteronormative desire, and historical authority. Yet the recurrent presence of the fantastic and magical has been consistently absorbed into these interpretive frameworks as symbol, metaphor, or stylistic excess. The critical tendency has thus been to privilege thematic and ideological analysis over sustained formal theorisation, implicitly treating the fantastic as secondary to postmodern play or feminist content rather than as a structuring principle of narrative organisation.

The most sustained engagement with magical realism in *The Passion* remains Barbara Klonowska's discussion in *Contaminations: Magic Realism in Contemporary British Fiction* (see also Lodge; Edelson). In this account, *The Passion* is cautiously positioned as a hybrid or metaphorical variant rather than as a paradigmatic instance of magical realism. Anchored in a recognisably realistic framework yet punctuated by fantastic elements, the novel is read as deploying what are described as "exaggerated metaphors with which we usually describe such phenomena as love, passion or desire" (Klonowska 237). The magical thus appears quantitatively limited but structurally consequential: not ornamental, but constitutive in its capacity to produce defamiliarisation and unsettle epistemic certainty without fully reconfiguring the narrative's ontological ground. Ultimately, the fantastic is located in language itself, since in "*The Passion*, the 'magical' has its source in speech" (237). While this interpretation productively

foregrounds the linguistic and defamiliarising dimensions of Winterson's narrative, it construes the magical primarily as metaphorical deviation rather than as a structuring narratological logic—a limitation that motivates the alternative formal framework developed here. Before turning to a close reading of the novel, this section outlines three narratological techniques that are central—though not exclusive—to magical realism and particularly productive for feminist literary projects: literalisation, the use of an excentric focaliser, and the temporal structure known as "third time." These techniques do not merely embellish the narrative surface. Rather, they function as mechanisms through which ideological structures are rendered visible, destabilised, and reconfigured. By manipulating language, perspective, and temporality, magical realist texts create conditions under which dominant categories—such as gender, sexuality, and historical authority—can be examined as contingent constructs rather than naturalised givens.

Literalisation involves a movement from abstraction to material presence, whereby metaphorical, psychological, or affective states acquire physical form within the narrative world. Rather than treating language as a transparent medium that merely reflects reality, this strategy foregrounds the materiality of signification itself. Literalisation probes the fundamental laws governing figurative language and challenges the conventional distinction between literal and metaphorical meaning. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive theory of metaphor, critical accounts of magical realism conceptualise literalisation as a strategy that challenges the Western hierarchy privileging literal meaning over figurative expression (Hegerfeldt 236). As Anne C. Hegerfeldt observes, this strategy "close[s] the gap between the word and the world" (261–62), enabling magical realist texts to expose the ideological investments concealed within claims of linguistic and epistemological transparency and to position metaphor not as ornament but as a structuring principle of reality itself. Within feminist writing, this strategy proves particularly generative, as it enables abstract structures of power, such as gender norms, desire, or symbolic authority, to be rendered materially legible.

The second defining technique of magical realism is its distinctive handling of narrative perspective through what Hegerfeldt terms the excentric focaliser, adopting Linda Hutcheon's terminology. Hegerfeldt highlights the importance of focalisation in magical realist texts, noting that such narratives frequently privilege marginal or socially excluded perspectives (118). These focalisers may include women, children, racialised or sexualised subjects, or figures positioned outside dominant epistemological frameworks. Importantly, the excentric focaliser does not simply reverse the hierarchy between centre and margin. Rather, this

narrative position exposes the epistemological logic that produces such hierarchies in the first place.

Through excentric focalisation, dominant narratives are rendered contingent rather than universal. Constructs of Otherness are revealed as discursive effects rather than ontological facts, and claims to neutrality or objectivity are destabilised. The excentric focaliser thus opens a space for alternative modes of knowledge and self-articulation, allowing subjects traditionally positioned as marginal to function as epistemic agents. In feminist magical realist writing, this technique enables a critique of patriarchal authority that operates through narrative positioning rather than explicit opposition.

The third narratological technique central to magical realism is its distinctive temporal structure. Magical realist texts frequently resist linear, teleological models of historical time, replacing them with what Brenda Cooper terms "third time." This hybrid temporal mode allows linear, cyclical, mythical, and subjective temporalities to coexist within the same narrative space (Cooper 32–33, 75, 137–38, 145–46). Time is no longer presented as a neutral backdrop or progressive continuum but emerges as a construct that is fragmented, relative, and susceptible to manipulation. This temporal instability does not signal a withdrawal from history or political engagement. On the contrary, it facilitates a critical reengagement with the mechanisms through which history is selected, narrated, and authorised. By disrupting causal progression and chronological certainty, magical realist temporality exposes historical narratives as products of perspective and power rather than as transparent records of events.

Taken together, these three narratological techniques—literalisation, excentric focalisation, and "third time"—enable feminist writers to integrate formal experimentation with political critique. Magical realism thus constructs a narrative environment in which ideological assumptions can be examined at the level of structure rather than merely contested at the level of representation. Against this theoretical backdrop, *The Passion* emerges not merely as an illustrative example but as a text that calls for renewed critical attention.

This essay intervenes in existing scholarship by developing a magical realist narratological framework for reading *The Passion*. While the novel has frequently been interpreted as lyrical historical metafiction, a postmodern romance, or a text replete with mythological and religious symbolism, such approaches often treat its magical elements as isolated motifs or metaphors. In contrast, this study argues that magical realism in *The Passion* operates as a systematic narrative mode structured through three interrelated techniques: literalisation (the embodied materialisation of metaphor in figures such as the webbed feet and the detachable heart),

excentric focalisation (via the marginal epistemic positions of Henri and Villanelle), and composite temporality (through the disruption of linear Napoleonic history by cyclical, mythical, and affective time).

Taken together, these formal strategies do not simply embellish the narrative but function as epistemological strategies. They suspend hierarchical distinctions between the real and magical, destabilise the normative regimes of knowledge and desire, and expose the contingency of patriarchal authority. By foregrounding narrative form as the primary site of political and conceptual work, this article reframes *The Passion* as a feminist magical realist text. Methodologically, it integrates close narratological analysis with feminist epistemology to show how the narrative form itself becomes a means of probing ideological assumptions. In doing so, the article advances a theoretical model that understands magical realism not as a culturally bounded aesthetic category, but as a set of feminist narrative resources capable of sustaining multiplicity without closure and reconfiguring relations between history and subjectivity. As such, it contributes a new framework to Winterson scholarship and positions the magical as central, rather than peripheral, to her narrative practice.

READING *THE PASSION*: POLYSEMY AND MYTH

The Passion resembles a lyrical novel, a quality signalled by the naming of its protagonist, Villanelle—a name that also refers to a French poetic form. The poem's two refrains correspond to the novel's dual narrative perspective, with Villanelle and Henri alternating as excentric focalisers, each tested in their respective quests to uncover the source of their passion. The title is polysemous, evoking both desire and the Christian tradition of Christ's Passion, intertwining metaphors of (un)requited love with religious symbolism while situating them beyond heteronormative constraints.

Winterson's narrative mechanisms align with magical realist structures, including ontological duality, literalisation, and composite temporality. Villanelle and Henri function as excentric focalisers, striving to transcend the ideological and social frameworks into which they are embedded. Neofantastic elements, such as miraculous occurrences and symbolic distortions, open alternative possibilities for self-actualisation outside traditional confessional or societal norms. The narrative challenges constructs of femininity, masculinity, and sexual orientation. Archetypal motifs, including the love triangle and the pursuit of the beloved, are structurally doubled: narrative voices exchange positionalities, and relationships extend beyond heterosexual norms to include homosexual connections.

This structural duality is intensified by intertwining individual love stories with the historical backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15). Napoleon is depicted ambivalently—as an object of blind adoration and simultaneously a caricature of vanity who "greedily devours poultry"—reflecting the destructive potential of authority and unrealised aspirations. Beyond its historical framework, the novel draws on mythology and courtly love, including the quest for the Holy Grail. Alternating perspectives and spatial fragmentation construct a diverse narrative world, while the open ending subverts traditional love-adventure narratives.

Winterson opens the novel with a quotation from *Medea*, which, as Susana Onega notes, prefigures the parallel quests of Henri and Villanelle, each driven by a destructive desire to possess something unique—Jason seeks the Golden Fleece, Medea his love (56). Beyond the quest motif, the quotation resonates with a deeper theme: the female figure who, through extreme actions, challenges heteronormative conceptions of family and the assumption that women exist solely as mothers. Medea's act of filicide disrupts roles presented as natural and self-evident within patriarchal society. Building on this foundation, Winterson frames her lyrical novel as a critical exploration of rigid patterns of femininity and masculinity, signalling from the outset her central theme: the transgression of traditional gender roles.

THE DISLOCATED PHALLUS AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER

The central neofantastic element[2] in the narrative is the webbing on Villanelle's feet, traditionally reserved for the male offspring of Venetian boatmen: "There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (Winterson 51). By assigning this apparently masculine trait to a female body, Winterson foregrounds the constructed nature of sexual difference. The midwife's attempt to "castrate" the newborn Villanelle by cutting the connecting skin between her toes (52) reveals an effort to preserve the symbolic order, while the indestructible webbing resists this intervention. Villanelle's stepfather, by contrast, relies on the inviolability of gender norms—"it won't be the feet he'll be interested in" (52)—exposing how social roles are naturalised independently of the

[2] Throughout the novel, various neo-fantastic elements are interspersed, such as: Henri's roommate possessing extraordinary vision, allowing him to see more than thirty kilometres away; an icicle with a golden chain that does not melt for several months, even in the heat of the Venetian summer; a tapestry capable of binding a person to it; memories of one's own birth; and walking on water.

material body. A bodily feature understood as "naturally" male becomes symbolically potent when transposed onto a female body. Winterson uses this displacement to explore the discursive gendering of bodies and the instability of the categories "masculine" and "feminine." As Chloë Taylor Merleau notes, Villanelle becomes "a female with a male body part of mythic status, a sort of displaced phallus," which renders her gender ambivalent or hybrid (98).

Judith Butler's critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis provides the theoretical support for this interpretation. She challenges the notion of the phallus as "the privileged bodily signifier," contending that it can be appropriated and recirculated without an intrinsic connection to the penis (qtd. in Salih 84). Defining the phallus as "the phantasmatic rewriting of an organ or body part," Butler makes clear that no single bodily organ is its necessary signifier (*Bodies* 81). On this basis, the conceptual separation of phallus and penis exposes the arbitrariness of the symbolic patriarchal order, in which the phallus nevertheless uses the penis as its "naturalized instrument and sign" (*Gender Trouble* 135). By destabilising the phallus/penis dyad, Butler uncovers the masculinist and heterosexist privilege embedded in phallic symbolism and demonstrates that gendered meanings are discursively produced rather than naturally given.

Winterson's relocation of the phallic signifier to Villanelle's webbed feet parodically demonstrates how any arbitrarily selected body part may become the bearer of socially constructed power. Transforming the female body highlights that the categories of masculinity and femininity, typically taken as biological givens, are ideological and political. The fact that Villanelle's "phallic" sign remains hidden by footwear while she is still barred from becoming a boatwoman (Winterson 53) underscores that gendered social position is grounded not in visibility of the body, but in normative discourse. The novel thus interrogates how the phallocentric symbolic order legitimises the supposedly "natural" binary division of the sexes.

The setting of Venice further reinforces this challenge. As a mutable city "where things change" (Winterson 113), Venice symbolises fluidity and the instability of classification. As a city of masks, it foregrounds disguise and cross-dressing, exposing the illusion of an original core of sexual identity (Burcar 56). Gender becomes performative play: "trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant facepaste" (Winterson 54). In line with Butler's theory of performativity, gender emerges as a repeated practice that must be constantly maintained within a heterosexual matrix, and is therefore fragile and nonessential.

Biblical allusions intensify this critique: "That I cross-dress? So did Our Lord, so do the priests" (Winterson 72). Masculinity and femininity

are shown to be historically variable and relational rather than natural categories. As Burcar observes, once restrictive representations imposed by patriarchy are dismantled, gender can be enacted in multiple ways and combinations (58). Through disguise and relational mobility, as will become evident below, Villanelle refuses rigid gender norms and exposes the authoritarian character of idealised gender roles. Combined with the displaced phallus, these strategies reveal the instability of gender categories and the unattainability of normative gender.

SUBVERSION OF HETERONORMATIVITY AND EXCENTRIC FOCALISATION

The heteronormative matrix is revealed as phantasmagoric: it sustains the appearance of reality on the surface while, at a deeper level, it is subject to upheaval and subversion. This corresponds to the logic of magical realism outlined earlier: the apparent stability of social reality coexists with its simultaneous destabilisation, and both remain in unresolved tension rather than being hierarchically ordered. The naturalisation of heteronormativity—echoing the refrain structure of the villanelle—turns back on itself through the two relationships into which Villanelle enters. In the first case, Winterson reworks the traditional heterosexual love story by integrating a relationship between two women into a love triangle. Disguised as a man, Villanelle falls in love with a married woman whom she names the Queen of Spades, and, while still in disguise, begins a romantic relationship. At this point, heterosexuality functions as a mask, an external appearance that does not correspond to the reality of the narrative subjects: "'She thought I was a young man. I was not . . . What was it about me that interested her?'" (Winterson 65–66).

The moment of unmasking operates as a literalisation of gender performance. When Villanelle reveals her sex, the supposed shock fails to materialise—"'I'm a woman,' I said. . . . She smiled. 'I know'" (71). The revelation does not produce rupture, hesitation, or explanatory framing; instead, it is fully integrated into the novel's ontology. In terms of magical realist theory, the "contradiction" between biological sex and social gender is not resolved but naturalised in the narrative world, functioning analogously to the coexistence of two ontological codes. The heteronormative matrix, which legitimises only heterosexual desire, is therefore exposed as a construct rather than a given. This is precisely what the essay previously termed the recasting of ideological constructs: magical realist strategies render visible the artificiality of gender norms by integrating transgressive desire as ordinary narrative fact rather than as deviance.

A mirrored structure develops in Villanelle's relationship with the cook, who is gradually revealed as a paradigmatic representative of hegemonic masculinity. The cook embodies dominant Western masculine ideals associated with possession, profit, and instrumental rationality. He is a war profiteer, accumulating wealth by supplying meat and horses to the French army. His character is not merely thematically masculine but also functions as an ideological construct that the narrative exposes and ironises. Villanelle attracts him through her boyish appearance, and when he discovers she is a woman, he is satisfied rather than destabilised. Heterosexuality is thus performed, not assumed; it requires continual confirmation and is heavily dependent on outward signs.

Winterson stages here what feminist magical realism achieves at the level of excentric focalisation. The narrative perspective of Henri and Villanelle—figures positioned outside dominant masculine orders—renders the cook's masculinity contingent rather than natural. The patriarchal subject is not neutral but becomes an object of focalisation, exposed to critique. When Villanelle ultimately marries the cook after recognising the impossibility of her relationship with the Queen of Spades, the heteronormative matrix appears restored on the surface. However, it is simultaneously undermined from within: even the "central" representative of patriarchal order enacts gender norms only superficially. As Villanelle notes, "He has promised to keep me in luxury . . . provided I go on dressing as a young man in the comfort of our own home" (Winterson 63). Publicly, the couple performs normative heterosexuality; privately, the matrix fractures. Masculinity becomes dependent on props, costume, and repetition, aligning with Butler's understanding of gender as performative action rather than ontological essence.

Winterson humorously extends the heterosexual couple into a triad—"Just the three of us. Him, me and my codpiece" (96)—which again literalises metaphor. The codpiece is not merely symbolic of phallic authority but becomes a third member of the relationship. This literalisation exposes the artificiality of phallocentric power structures and demonstrates how magical realist narratology transforms ideological metaphors into material presences. Yet despite these cracks in heteronormativity, complete subversion does not occur. Power relations remain intact; Villanelle's agency toward the cook is limited, and relations of domination persist. Winterson therefore stages both the exposure and partial reassertion of the heteronormative matrix, aligning with magical realism's refusal of full ideological closure. Contradictory systems coexist without resolving into a new stable order—precisely the "nonhierarchical tension" theorised earlier.

Heteronormativity is constructed through a complex interweaving of social norms that regulate the enactment of individual identity

by defining "correct" and desirable patterns of behaviour linked to established constructs of femininity and masculinity. Subversion can occur only through action outside these prescribed frameworks, for, as Butler notes, "If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex" (*Gender Trouble* 143). Winterson, through Henri and Villanelle, interrogates rigid gender roles and foregrounds actions that escape confinement within prescribed categories. In the first part of Henri's narrative, we follow his blind and uncompromising devotion to Napoleon and his imperial ambitions, which, with each new battle and fallen comrade, push him toward a personal examination of the object of his desire. By situating much of the action against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars, Winterson engages with a domain traditionally regarded as exclusively masculine and thus strongly gendered, parodying both the concept of war itself and the cultural memory of warfare.

The parody of Henri as a conventional war hero is staged from the outset: contrary to his desire to become a military drummer, he is assigned the role of a cook's assistant. As one of the more significant functions in battle, the drummer's role symbolises order and rhythm, introducing measured cadence into the aggression and chaos of combat, whereas the world of the kitchen represents a subordinate and domestic space in contrast to the battlefield. Similarly, on the battlefield, Henri operates in a function diametrically opposed to that of others—while others kill, he saves: "He [Henri] told me, on the way home from Moscow, that he had been in the army eight years without so much as wounding another man. Eight years of battle and the worst he'd done was to kill more chickens than he could count" (Winterson 147). Winterson here parodies the masculinist association between war and agency by presenting a protagonist whose proximity to violence does not culminate in heroic action. Henri's masculinity is defined not by conquest but by endurance, obedience, and unexamined devotion—particularly to Napoleon.

From the timelessness of the war in which they are caught, where the present is constant and the future becomes unreachable (Winterson 86), Henri decides to desert, and Villanelle joins him. Their meeting establishes a new love triangle—or an analogous love quadrangle. Henri redirects his passion for Napoleon toward Villanelle, who is already caught between her husband and her unrequited love for the Queen of Spades. From the Moscow winter, they journey back to Venice. Their odyssey represents not only a geographical return but also a symbolic trajectory toward self-realisation and the reclamation of desire. From the outset, Villanelle assumes initiative, signalling a displacement of traditional gender roles. As

Burcar observes, albeit in the context of children's literature, adventure narratives often reinforce phallocentric gender patterns, where the female character "is the one who is marginalized and functions as a lack, upon whose shoulders it is only possible to construct the heroic image of a self-sufficient and autonomously acting" male character (87). In contrast, Villanelle assumes decisive authority: without her linguistic knowledge, navigational skills, and strategic acumen, neither she nor Henri, together with Henri's fellow deserter, would have survived the journey. Winterson thus foregrounds the female protagonist as an active, capable agent, subverting conventional adventure-hero paradigms.

Archetypal adventure narratives also posit the heroine as a reward: alongside treasure or secret knowledge, the hero encounters the woman, who is either rescued and integrated into the narrative conclusion or waits passively for his return. Her powerlessness contrasts with the male hero's courage and ingenuity, legitimising his claim over both the treasure and her person. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, underscores this dynamic: "The motif of the difficult task as prerequisite to the bridal bed has spun the heroic deeds of all time and all the world" (318). Winterson's subversion, however, reconfigures the gendered economy of heroism: Villanelle is neither passive nor supplementary; she actively shapes the course of the adventure and the outcomes of desire, undermining the traditional symbolic alignment of male heroism with mastery and female marginality. Through this strategy, the novel stages a critique of heteronormative and phallocentric structures embedded in classical adventure narratives, aligning with Butler's understanding of gender as performative and socially constructed.

RECASTING DESIRE, LITERALISATION OF THE HEART, AND THE REFUSAL OF CLOSURE

Villanelle and Henri ultimately arrive in Villanelle's native Venice, which again places Henri in a dependent position, as he does not continue his journey to his birthplace in France. The mythological return to the point of origin therefore fails to conform to traditional gendered schemata: it is not the male hero who returns home and claims his reward but Villanelle who directs the narrative trajectory. By consciously choosing to step outside the heteronormative matrix, she mobilises precisely the kind of recasting of ideological constructs central to the magical realist logic outlined above. In the idiom of courtly love, she asks Henri to perform a quest and reclaim her lost heart, taken by the Queen of Spades. Winterson here rewrites two medieval motifs: the quest for the Holy Grail and the topos

of heart consumption. Crucially, the loss of the heart is not metaphorical but literalised,[3] moving from abstraction into material presence—Henri places his hand on her chest and "[can] feel nothing" (Winterson 116). Literalisation, a central magical realist technique, renders desire and emotional dispossession physically legible, collapsing the hierarchy between figurative and literal meaning.

In the subsequent quest, Henri searches through the Queen of Spades' house until he finds the heart preserved in glass. He completes the heroic task, but the logic of patriarchal romance is subverted: the recovered heart does not function as a reward for the male protagonist. Instead, Villanelle consumes her own heart, a grotesque and cannibalistic act through which she reclaims control over her emotional life—her heart is both literally and figuratively returned to herself. The feminine subject is not positioned as prize, but as agent who reclaims sovereignty over desire. This scene exemplifies how magical realism enables feminist narration not only thematically but formally: literalisation exposes emotional dependence as a structure of power and reconfigures it.

The *Odyssey* allusion further reinforces this subversion. Henri discovers an unfinished tapestry depicting Villanelle; finishing it would imprison her within a fixed narrative of love and possession, just as Penelope's tapestry is tied to marriage. By refusing closure, Winterson disrupts the teleological drive of the romance plot. Here the temporality of the novel approaches what has earlier been defined as "third time": mythic, cyclical, and subjective temporalities coexist, undermining linear progression toward marriage or resolution. Time becomes a field in which patriarchal narrative expectations are suspended rather than fulfilled.

The transformation of conventional adventure romance reaches a climax in the novel's final episodes, where the metaphor of the heart resurfaces, but now shifts from the neofantastic to crude material realism. Villanelle is discovered by her aggressive former husband, and a violent chain of events ensues in which Henri kills a man for the first time, performing the act he had successfully avoided throughout his entire military service. The scene evokes a final combat with a monster:

> I remember he [the cook] leaned forward when she spat and tried to kiss her. I remember his mouth opening and coming towards her, his hands loosed from the boat side, his body bent. His hand scraped her breast. His mouth. His mouth is the clearest image I have. A pale pink mouth,

[3] The motif of the heart also appears among soldiers on the front. Henri describes how, in order to survive in war, one must necessarily renounce the heart, asserting, "When I say I lived with heartless men, I use the word correctly" (Winterson 83).

> a cavern of flesh and then his tongue, just visible like a worm from its hole. . . . I had the knife in my hand and I thrust it at his side. As he rolled I thrust it in his belly. (Winterson 127–28)

For the first time Henri acts decisively and uncompromisingly: "'You said he had no heart, Villanelle, let's see.' . . . I cut a triangle. . . . He had a heart" (128). This confrontation contrasts sharply with Villanelle's earlier magical realist literalisation of her own lost heart, highlighting the tension between symbolic and material registers. The cook's body becomes the site where moral and emotional significations are tested: "His heart was blue. Did you know hearts are blue? Not red at all. A blue stone in a red forest" (138). Whereas Villanelle's stolen heart materialised desire and autonomy in a magical realist mode, the cook's "heartlessness" is revealed as ideological rather than anatomical. The physical presence of his heart paradoxically underscores his ethical absence, marking a return from the fantastical to the crudely real while maintaining the coexistence of contradictory meanings. This juxtaposition exemplifies the nonhierarchical tension characteristic of magical realism, where literal and figurative realities intersect without collapsing into a single, resolved truth.

Although the scene recalls phallocentric narrative models—hero rescues woman from monster—the reward structure collapses. Henri avoids execution but is confined to the psychiatric hospital on San Servolo. The asylum functions as a space of suspended time, another instance of "third time": linear social time gives way to stasis, hallucination, and repetition. Henri retreats into an internalised version of the heteronormative matrix, sustaining imagined roles for himself and Villanelle. When she announces her pregnancy, he is unable to reconcile desire with the impossibility of normative closure and momentarily mirrors the violent cook: "He was silent and when we made love he put his hands to my throat and slowly pushed his tongue out of his mouth like a pink worm. . . . 'I'm your husband,' and he came leaning towards me, his eyes round and glassy and his tongue so pink" (Winterson 148). The pink worm imagery foregrounds not only phallic symbolism but also Henri's recognition of his proximity to the violent masculine Other. As Seaboyer argues, it is the collapse of this boundary that returns to haunt him (503).

Henri ultimately refuses the heroic role offered to him when Villanelle proposes escape: "Was she mad? I'd have to kill again. I couldn't do that, not even for her" (Winterson 152). This decision not to kill again and his subsequent life within the asylum expose the limits of his subversion: he cannot step fully outside the ideological frame he recognises as constraining. The adoption of the nameless bird—"I won't give it a name. I'm not Adam" (156)—marks a symbolic rejection of patriarchal acts of naming and

creation, where naming entails possession and asymmetry. By refusing to name, Henri breaks with the patriarchal lineage embodied by Adam as the first man of the heteronormative matrix. Yet this insight remains confined within the institution. In Foucauldian terms, critique is contained within the category of madness, marginalised from the social order it interrogates.

Winterson therefore resists both romantic idealism and total renewal. The novel dismantles the narrative logic of reward, marriage, and heterosexual closure, yet it refuses to posit a new stable order in its place. Instead, it writes ambiguity into its conclusion. The open ending and the refusal of marriage as narrative telos split open the tyranny of the romance plot, producing a politics of multiplicity and indeterminacy (Diamond 114). The final sentence—"I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (Winterson 160)—returns us to authorial reticence. It foregrounds the constructedness of narrative while simultaneously invoking belief, holding scepticism and trust in unresolved tension. As throughout the novel, magical realism here operates not as decorative fantasy but as a narratological strategy through which gender norms, desire, and historical authority are exposed as contingent rather than natural.

CONCLUSION

A feminist narratological approach reveals that the novel's critical force resides not solely in theme but in narrative form. The copresence of magical and mundane establishes conditions under which epistemological hierarchies can be suspended. Literalisation materialises abstraction, exposing the arbitrariness of symbolic authority; excentric focalisation privileges marginal perspectives without romanticising them; and composite temporality disrupts teleological models of history, war, and desire. Together, these strategies demonstrate that gender norms and social roles are discursive products rather than natural givens.

Through this lens, *The Passion* shows how magical realism can serve as a narratological repertoire for feminist writing in European contexts. Villanelle's displaced phallic signifier, the mutable space of Venice, the parody of heroic masculinity, and the refusal of conventional romantic closure collectively destabilise notions of what is rational, natural, or universal. Importantly, Winterson does not propose a replacement system; instead, she enacts ambiguity, multiplicity, and incompleteness as critical values.

Magical realism is not intrinsically subversive; its power lies in the formal possibilities it affords: to naturalise contradiction and to destabilise narrative hierarchies without imposing new totalities. By enabling a recasting of structures governing gender, sexuality, and authority, *The*

Passion exemplifies how magical realist form facilitates feminist critique, operating simultaneously at the levels of narrative structure, embodiment, and epistemology. While this analysis focuses on a single text, it points to broader possibilities for comparative work on feminist magical realism beyond its traditional postcolonial frame.

Works Cited

Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-11352-8

Burcar, Lilijana. *Novi val nedolžnosti v otroški literaturi. Kaj sporočata Harry Potter in Lyra Srebrousta?* Sophia, 2007.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*. Garland, 1985.

Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. Routledge, 1998.

Diamond, Fleur. "The Mark of Desire: Rewriting the Romance and Lesbian-Feminist Textual Strategies." *Crossing Boundaries: Thinking Through Literature*, edited by Julie Scanlon and Amy Waste, Sheffield Academic P, 2001, pp. 112–20.

Edelson, Maria. "It May or May Not Be True. It Does Not Matter": (Magic) Realism and Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*." *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Anglica*, no. 7, 2007, pp. 19–33.

Faris, Wendy B. "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism." *Janus Head*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 101–19. https://doi.org/10.5840/jh20025225

Front, Sonia. *Transgressing Boundaries in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2009. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-00515-8

Hegerfeldt, Anne C. *Lies that Tell the Truth. Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*. Rodopi, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202831

Klonowska, Barbara. *Contaminations: Magic Realism in Contemporary British Fiction*. Maria Curie-Skłodowska UP, 2006.

Lodge, David. "Outrageous Things." *The New York Review of Books*, 29 Sept. 1988, pp. 25–26.

Makinen, Merja. *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-80259-9

Onega, Susana. *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719068386.001.0001

Reeds, Kenneth S. *What is Magical Realism? An Explanation of a Literary Style*. The Edwin Mellen P, 2013.

Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler*. Routledge, 2002. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203118641

Seaboyer, Judith. "Second Death in Venice: Romanticism and the Compulsion to Repeat in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1997, pp. 483–509. https://doi.org/10.2307/1208976

Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." *Magical Realism*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke UP, 1995, pp. 407–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw5w1.24

Taylor Merleau, Chloë. "Postmodern Ethics and the Expression of Differends in the Novels of Jeanette Winterson." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 26, no. 3/4, 2003, pp. 84–102. https://doi.org/10.2979/JML.2003.26.3-4.84

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated by Richard Howard, Cornell UP, 1973.

Winterson, Jeanette. *The Passion*. Penguin, 1988.

Anja Mrak works at the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. She completed a PhD in literary studies, focusing on magical realism and feminist narrative techniques. Her research is mainly in feminist literary theory, gender studies, narratology, and contemporary feminist literature.
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1461-2211
anja.mrak@ff.uni-lj.si