It could be said that the novel by Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (1987), includes some of the major themes that characterized British fiction during the eighties. This article shows how uncertainty and ambiguity take place in the narrative, connecting the novel with the postmodern developments in fiction of the last decade. *The Passion* also constructs a discourse in which the reader has to choose between different interpretations, various possible readings that are left open. In this sense, the novel establishes a game where playful, ambiguous structures are present on the syntactic and the semantic level.

The metaphor of roads and crossroads for the British novel, envisaged by David Lodge and substituted by the spaghetti junction (Stevenson 1993, 141) as a more adequate image for the complexity of directions in modern narrative, finds its dismantling in the work of Jeanette Winterson. Her novels refuse to be classified in any particular trend of modern literature. Hers is the concept of the changeable landscape, the image of the city whose limits are unclear and where signposts are no longer reliable.

At sea and away from home in a creaking boat, with Tradescant sleeping beside me, there is a town I sometimes dream about, whose inhabitants are so cunning that to escape the insistence of creditors they knock down their houses in a single night and rebuild them elsewhere. So the number of buildings in the city is always constant but they are never in the same place from one day to the next. (42) Sexing the Cherry.

The city I come from is a changeable city. It is not always the same size. Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land... (97) The Passion

The novels of Jeanette Winterson share an interest in dispersion, in not following a unique theme and, at the same time, they are clear examples of the plural quality of a certain kind of narrative, in particular the fiction that emerged in Britain during the 80s. Writing in 1992, Malcolm Bradbury defined British fiction:

> Aesthetically, it is equally plural, ranging freely from one genre to another, from the detective story to science-fiction, the historical novel to the post-modern pastiche, reviving forms of writing from the past while experimenting with the often media-based forms of the future. (1992, 9)

It should be said, nevertheless, that Bradbury has recently added that he doesn’t see the same stamina in the fiction of the 90s. For him the past decade produced a powerful movement of fiction in many directions, and the fiction in the 90s is still feeding on that big push: “In other words, an awful lot of new agendas were written into the British novel in the 80s and now you have most young writers seem to be producing versions, feeble versions of what was very strong then” (1994).
The novels of Jeanette Winterson include most of the themes that generated the force of the new fiction in Britain during the 80s, creating a body of work embedded in the main ideological movements of its time. In a brief synopsis it can be seen how the novels of Winterson deal with the main issues that characterize recent British fiction. Patricia Waugh, for instance, has shown how many postmodernist texts explicitly state their connection with late capitalism in a rejection of the modernist concept of the autonomy of the work of art (1992, 191). Through their use of parody these novels express their dependence on former texts denying the idea of self-determination. In Boating For Beginners (1985) Winterson writes a parody of the Flood described in Genesis in which she incorporates all the voices of the 80s, Noah being a solid entrepreneur whose discourse sounds like Thatcherite rhetoric. Waugh names Jeanette Winterson among the women writers who have made use of postmodernist devices without completely adopting the apocalyptic tone of postmodern fiction (1992, 198).

Winterson’s work can also be considered as the leading project in the exploration of the construction of gender that has taken place in British fiction in recent years. Throughout her work she has shown an interest in characters who try to break through from oppressive gender structures, and this doesn’t just mean ample sexual preferences, but new possibilities in the conception of the characters themselves, like the Dog-Woman in Sexing The Cherry (1989). This is a complex figure who brings dark echoes of woman as “otherness”: the threatening, distanced, isolated individual. Besides, the Dog-Woman is always reminding herself that the boy she has adopted, Jordan, will one day leave her, as if reinforcing the idea of separation from the mother. But, on the other hand, the Dog-Woman shatters to pieces the traditional Freudian image of the woman whose development is defined by the lack of the male sexual organ. It happens when she takes Jordan to see the first banana brought to London (the action takes place in the seventeenth century), and she mocks it, “‘Where is this wonder?’” (12), and feels repulsion before what she thinks it is “the private parts of an Oriental”. Later on the Dog-Woman bites off the private parts of a man:

As I did so my eager fellow increased his swooning to the point of fainting away, and I, feeling both astonished by his rapture and disgusted by the leathery thing filling up my mouth, spat out what I had not eaten and gave it to one of my dogs. (41)

The “castrated” woman becomes the castrating one in a reversal of roles common in Winterson’s fiction (to stress our point suffice it to remember Mrs Munde’s scream of astonishment in Boating For Beginners, “‘Why don’t you just become a prostitute?’” (11), when her daughter announces her decision to become a secretary).

In Written On The Body (1992) Winterson goes further in the transgression of classical psychoanalysis, which has usually considered gender difference as genital difference, and creates a sexually undefined character who escapes any attempt of classification into the categories of female or male subjectivity.

In her novels Winterson also exploits another feature of recent feminist writing, the recourse to fantasy and a kind of humorous fabulation usually explained in terms of escaping from male-dominated reality, but which must be inserted within the general framework of the exploration of new areas of experience. In Winterson’s work the recourse to fantasy has been present since her first novel Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit (1985), and further developed in following works with the elaboration of complex stories, like “The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses” in Sexing the Cherry, where the traditional tale of captive princesses is retold in a series of bizarre stories in which the most common ending is the lesbian relationship or the killing of the husband.
Winterson has shown a great interest in the question of time and history. Her idea of time is concomitant with the boundless exploration of gender she has shown in other works. For a start Winterson rejects the idea of a linear passing of time: "The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body" Sexing The Cherry (80). In this novel Jordan and the Dog-Woman have a correlative voice in two similar characters in our present, thus creating a discourse that is independent from the dictates of daily time: "If all time is eternally present, there is no reason why we should not step out of one present into another" (90). It could be said, following Bakhtian terminology, that the major chronotope in Sexing The Cherry is coloured by value to the point of blurring its limits and transforming itself into a shapeless continuum. The spatial-temporal axes in this novel are those that correspond to the values of exploration and openness that Winterson has shown in her work. If, generally speaking, the chronotope in the novel materializes time in space, in Winterson’s novels it has to come to grips with a shifting space, like the journey through different countries in The Passion, or a space without gravity like the floating city in Sexing The Cherry, or the house without a ground floor in Boating For Beginners. Time and space in the novels mentioned above lose all stiffness and become flexible matter.

In The Passion (1987), the main issue is the building of the past, and in this case Winterson enters history through the back door. The reflector of the fiction is Napoleon’s most humble servant, a kitchen boy, the neck wringer of chickens, and Napoleon merely appears as a reference and speaks only a few sentences in the novel. The narrative is built around the characters of Henri, the neck wringer, and Villanelle, a Venetian girl with magic properties. Events are seen from the point of view of the common people, stressed by the choice of colloquial language. The characters take part in historically verifiable events, like Bonaparte’s Russian campaign, but Winterson doesn’t make use of fictional devices like diaries or memoirs in which to frame the narrative. Quite the contrary, the fictional nature of The Passion is explicitly stated throughout the novel. Prominence is given to imagination, not to fact. As Martin Amis says quoting Philip Roth, “you write not about what happened but about what didn’t happen” (Bigsby 1992, 178).

In the novel, the emperor of the French is connected with chicken, he is shown losing at games and portrayed as a comic figure in his most intimate actions, which are not the contexts that are normally associated with Napoleon Bonaparte. This satirical version of Napoleon is related to the subversive writing of Winterson in an attempt to reverse the reader’s expectations of history. But it could be asked what the reader is to do with these unusual contexts, whether he/she must see any elements of “truth” and, in short, how they should be interpreted.

We start from the assumption that Napoleon in The Passion is a fictional construct, he is portrayed by the perception of Henri, the narrator and the character whose point of view is represented. We also take for granted that the character of Napoleon is framed within a fictional work and that therefore we shouldn’t challenge the veracity of facts in it. But we also know as a historically verifiable fact that Napoleon Bonaparte did exist and that he was emperor of France from 1804 to 1815. The question remains as to how we should connect both images of the emperor, the “real” and the “fictional” one or, in other words, how do both concepts interact with each other.

Alison Lee in Realism and Power raises the question of the ontology of “real” characters who appear in fictional works. She quotes examples from contemporary novels in which there are allusions to historical characters. Some of these references are undoubtedly “true” and some are the product of the authors’ imagination. Considering the inclusion of both kinds of references in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981), Lee asks herself if one is “more or less ‘true’ than the other” (1990, 52). Lee offers a possible solution
quoting Patricia Waugh and her theory that fiction is “quasi-referential”. Fiction, Waugh says, doesn’t imitate the world but the discourses that construct our image of the world. As language is the medium of literary fiction and at the same time it is the medium by which we organize our experience, language is not completely independent of the extralinguistic realities that it represents. Alison Lee explains that the historical characters in *Midnight’s Children* are fictional constructs with the same rank as the main protagonists of the novel. But, at the same time, these constructs make reference to the contextual discourse that we as readers share, in which these historical characters are perfectly situated. For Alison Lee, historical and fictional characters exchange their characteristics in metafictional texts:

> These fictional characters, then, are given the same ontological status as the “real” characters. Equally, however, the “real” characters who exist or existed are fictionalized: they both are and are not the entities who are designated by their names. (1990, 46)

The ontology of “real” characters is deliberately questioned in historiographical metafictions, novels which highlight the indeterminacy of history and the way we know the past. Historical characters are shown in these fictions to be discursive constructs with two levels of reference, with both real and unreal characteristics. If in traditional historical novels real characters were alluded to in order to give authenticity to the fiction, in historiographic metafictions the same real characters are mentioned in order to emphasize the uncertain nature of our knowledge of history. Historical characters appear in ambiguous contexts, so that our knowledge of them, and consequently our knowledge of history and reality, is questioned. These examples of postmodern fiction consciously play with traditional conventions in the writing of history. “While they use Realist conventions,” Alison Lee says, “they simultaneously seek to subvert them” (1990, 36).

When Winterson portrays the emperor in the unusual contexts above, she is allowing a multiplicity of meanings to enter her fiction. She, in fact, is stressing the artificial nature of literature and language. Like many novels of this kind, she is breaking the traditional assumption that reality can be directly mirrored in a narrative fiction. Meaning is seen as plural and ambiguous, and we are offered, as equally valid as the vision of Napoleon the point of view of a neck wringer. The one-to-one correspondence of reality and art as offered by the novels of the realist tradition is implicitly challenged in *The Passion*:

> This morning I smell the oats and I see a little boy watching his reflection in a copper pot he’s polished. His father comes in and laughs and offers him his shaving mirror instead. But in the shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces and so he sees what he might become. (26)

What we see in *The Passion* is the many possible faces of history, the mirror becomes the copper pot in which distortions are reflected.

With respect to the reversal of roles, Villanelle, the female counterpart to Henri, playing with her image, dresses like a man, takes the initiative in love affairs, has a lesbian relationship and it is she who tries to rescue the man who loves her although, in the end, she doesn’t want to be attached to him and values her independence. Besides, Villanelle, like the heroine of Angela Carter’s *Nights At The Circus* (1984) who had grown wings, has webbed feet and can walk on water. By letting fantasy take its part in a fiction that has as a background some historical events, Winterson is playing with history, transforming it into

---

1 Historiographic metafiction is “fictionalised history with a parodic twist” (Hutcheon 1992, 235).
story. The idea of game is present throughout the novel in what Roger Fowler calls cumulative ideational structuring, a way of identifying point of view in fiction.1

The ideational structuring in The Passion is established in the choice of some sentences and vocabulary, repeated in different parts of the novel, which belong to the lexical field of “game”. The context for these terms is provided because Villanelle works in the Casino of Venice and she likes gambling. But the concept of gambling is extended to other spheres. Villanelle, for instance, sees her love affair with the mysterious Venetian woman as a game of chance in which her heart is the stake. In a display of fantasy, when the affair is over, Villanelle literally loses her heart, which is kept in the woman’s house, and she asks Henri to recover it. The idea of play is found in the novel in several contexts. When Villanelle dresses like a boy, she is playing with sexual ambiguity: “It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face paste…” (54). We are even offered the image of a playful God who makes fun of the devil (76).

A significant structure that reinforces the idea of game is the repetition in different parts of the novel of the sentences “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play”. The reiteration of images related with “play” has the effect of a cumulative building of a particular world-view, in which the novel itself is seen as a game that the author is playing with the reader. The repetition of these terms creates an expectation in the readers’ minds, in the sense that they wait for the conclusion of the game, a final explanation from the side of the author that never comes. By the end of the novel it is clear that the reading of the fiction has been a game that the author has been playing all the time. There is no final conclusion, only the idea of a game:

You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. The end of every game is an anti-climax. What you thought you would feel you don’t feel, what you thought was so important isn’t any more. It’s the game that’s exciting. (133)

Another significant structure that builds up an expectation of something to come in the reader’s mind is the presence of the sentences “I’m telling you stories. Trust me”. These sentences are found five times in the novel, and we identify them as the author’s voice because they appear in different contexts and are spoken by different voices. Henri, the main narrator, repeats the sentences three times; Patrick, one of the characters, pronounces them once, and Villanelle also mentions the same structure. By the use of these sentences Winterson stresses the fictional nature of the novel, the fact that this is not history, but story (“I’m telling you stories”). The second sentence (“Trust me”) is telling the reader to maintain his/her suspension of disbelief, to go on with the reading despite the breaking of conventions and the presence of fantasy because, at the end, everything will be explained. By the end of the novel there are no clarifications or final meanings and the reader realizes that everything was a game. Winterson has been cajoling the reader with a final explanation (“Trust me”) so that he/she would go on with the reading. The author has been tantalizing the reader by building expectations of a solution to the riddle, and at the end it was only the game that mattered. As Villanelle says at one point of the novel: “I learned to put a challenge in such a way as to make it irresistible” (89).

This way of delaying a final meaning that never comes is characteristic of postmodern texts, and Alan Wilde calls it suspensive irony. Wilde connects this concept with the indeterminacy of history that these novels present, an uncertain and unstable ground that postmodern fictions, such as The Passion, share:

---

1 Fowler defines cumulative structuring as “regular and consistent linguistic choices which build up a continuous, pervasive, representation of the world” (1986, 150).
Postmodern irony, by contrast, is suspensive: an indecision about the meanings or relations of things is matched by a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate and, in some cases, to welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd. (1992, 16)

It is in this context of uncertainty and multiplicity of meanings that Winterson presents history as story, and the whole fiction, by means of cumulative structures, interacts with the reader in the form of a game.

*

The second part of this paper is devoted to a linguistic analysis of the first paragraphs of the novel in order to show how the elements of play, history as story and reversal of traditional roles appear from the start in the narrative. But it is important to make some previous remarks. It is clear that any linguistic analysis of a literary work is limited and partial. Bakhtin has shown that the study of the language of a particular author presupposes a single language system within the novel, and thus what is central to the very essence of the novel, the multiple voices that surround it and that are incorporated in it, remain outside of such analysis. However, it should be remembered that Bakhtin stated that linguistics was to be considered as an auxiliary subject to a general theory of poetics (Bakhtin 1991, 17), and he also stressed the supportive role of linguistic analysis (1994, 417). The first part of this study, nevertheless, has tried to describe the context that encloses The Passion. The piece of descriptive criticism attempted here has the aim of showing that the ideology behind Winterson's work is fully in accord with the linguistic construction of the text. The novel begins:

It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chefs working around the clock. What a kitchen that was, with birds in every state of undress; some still cold and slung over hooks, some turning slowly on the spit, but most in wasted piles because the Emperor was busy.

Odd to be so governed by an appetite.

It was my first commission. I started as a neck wringer and before long I was the one who carried the platter through inches of mud to his tent. He liked me because I am short. I flatter myself. He did not dislike me. He liked no one except Joséphine and he liked her the way he liked chicken.

No one over five foot two ever waited on the Emperor. He kept small servants and large horses. The horse he loved was seventeen hands high with a tail that could wrap round a man three times and still make a wig for his mistress. That horse had the evil eye and there's been almost as many dead grooms in the stable as chickens on the table. The ones the beast didn't kill itself with an easy kick, its master had disposed of because its coat didn't shine or the bit was green.

What strikes the reader in the first place is that the text, and the novel, begins with a cleft sentence, a linguistic structure that breaks the neutral word order of English by giving prominence to a particular element. If the focus of information is usually placed in English at the end of the sentence, the cleft sentence marks it at the beginning. In this case the subject of the “original” sentence (Napoleon had such a passion... ) is given focal prominence emphasizing that it is Napoleon, and no other, who is the subject of the sentence, the one who had a passion for chicken. The correlative subordinators (such...that) in the relative clause of the cleft sentence have the function of showing the result of the state of things expressed by the verb “have”. It is interesting to notice that the agentive role of the
subject is made explicit by the reference to Napoleon in “he kept”. It was Napoleon who had the passion and it was Napoleon who kept the chefs working. He is shown to be the direct force that causes the action. Notice also that the word “passion”, a term with a high emotional value is connected with a more prosaic term like “chicken” from a completely distant lexical field (farm, poultry yard, filth, etc.). The contrast is made greater by the choice of the subject, Napoleon, which, in the associative level connects the name with our knowledge of history: the emperor, grandeur, etc. The first two terms may be related (Napoleon-passion). But the inclusion of the third term, chicken, produces a defamiliarizing effect, a contrast that surprises the reader as something unusual, weird.

The next sentence begins with an exclamatory clause (“What a kitchen that was”) characteristic of a colloquial style, setting the tone of the text. Prominence is given to the word “kitchen”, which phonetically contrasts with “chicken” in the previous sentence, creating a humorous effect; both are terms that students of English, for instance, usually confuse. The prepositional phrase that follows acts as an explanation to the exclamatory clause, and it includes a metaphorical expression, “in every state of undress”, for the different stages in the cooking of chicken. The metaphor provides some human qualities to the birds (only humans can undress), and the phrase is explained by a set of correlative clauses (some...some...but most...) in which there is ellipsis of part of the subject (some of the birds). In the last clause, introduced by “because”, the subject is the same as the noun which was focused in the first sentence of the text (Napoleon: the emperor), indicating again his presence as the cause of the action. In the following sentence, which remains typographically apart, the normal flow of discourse is broken again by the ellipsis of subject and verb “(It was) Odd to be so governed by an appetite”. Because of the ellipsis, the object is given prominence, breaking the principle of end-focus (new information at the end). The adverbial “so” gives exclamatory force to the statement, reinforcing the idea that we are dealing with a text written in a colloquial style. But what is more striking is the choice of the verb “governed” in this sentence. The paradox comes from the fact that Napoleon, the most important ruler of his time, was in fact governed by an appetite, a physical need, contributing to the ironic vision of the emperor portrayed in the text.

In the next paragraph the narrative voice presents itself for the first time. After the first descriptive paragraph and the evaluative sentence that follows it, the appearance in the second paragraph of the noun phrase “my first commission” and the subject “I” identifies the voice as belonging to the narrator and character of the fiction. The noun phrase acts in a cataphoric way and demands an explanation (what was his commission), which is offered in the following sentences. The narrator also specifies his social status, neck wringer: servant, which makes a constrast with the first noun that appears in the narrative, Napoleon: the emperor. This is, we understand, a historical kind of fiction told by a servant, which explains the colloquial style. The occupation of the narrator is connected with the lexical field of the first paragraph, neck wringer: kitchen, chicken, etc. contributing to the cohesion of the text. The use of some verbs of progress (the dynamic verbs “started”, “carried”), the adverbial “before long” and the prepositional phrase “through inches of mud to this tent”, gives the text an impression of movement which also appears in the description of the hectic activity of the kitchen in the first paragraph, “he kept his chefs working around the clock”. The effect achieved by the use of these expressions is that of vitality, energy.

In the final part of the paragraph there is a combination of subject and verb that appears with unusual regularity, the repetition of “he liked” (with the variation “he did not dislike”). We can say this construction is a case of foregrounding. According to Roger Fowler, foregrounding is an example of extra structure which invites interpretation, “whenever some item or construction appears in a text with unusual or noticeable frequency and
apparently for some valid reason, then cumulatively a distinctive effect emerges” (1986, 71). The same combination appears five times in three sentences:

He liked me...
He did not dislike me.
He liked no one...
he liked her...
he liked chicken.

By the repetition of this verb of emotion and feeling, “like”, and the subject that refers to the emperor, the author is emphasizing the whimsical personality of Napoleon. He is presented as someone governed by his likes and dislikes, an arbitrary character. Notice, for instance, the disparity of the objects of his liking: “me”, “no one”, “Joséphine”, “chicken”. What he likes is almost contradictory, and it forms an extravagant group of things and persons. Further details confirm this impression. Napoleon liked the narrator because he was short. From what we know of history, Napoleon was also a short person, and the implication, confirmed later in the text, that he didn’t like tall people reveals an arrogant personality. The sentence “He did not dislike me” seems an afterthought. It is not that the emperor liked the narrator, but rather that he did not dislike him (because he liked no one except Joséphine).

As we have seen so far, the author offers a picture of a great historical character quite different from the heroic figure that could be portrayed in a traditional narrative, and the irony from which we see Napoleon is built by means of a cumulative structuring of elements. From the start he is connected with chicken, his figure is seen from the point of view of a servant, and he is shown to have a fanciful personality: “governed by an appetite”, the contradictory nature of his likes, etc.

The rather enigmatic clause “he liked her the way he liked chicken” deserves special comment. The clause consists of two parallel structures joined by a link (“the way”) that indirectly implies comparison. The two objects are set in the same level of equivalence, “her” (Joséphine) and “chicken”. Because of their similar position in the clause they are connected semantically. The comparison is unusual and it demands an explanation that is not immediately provided as the paragraph finishes with that sentence. The reader is forced to re-read the text again in search for a clue to interpret the striking linking of two different concepts, human being and fowl. Generally speaking, when two concepts are semantically connected, we mentally attribute to one of them some of the characteristics of the other. We look then for some of the attributes of chicken that can be applied to Joséphine, or at least those characteristics of chicken in the text that can be applied to humans (we wouldn’t connect Joséphine with the concepts “still cold”, “slung over hooks”, or “turning slowly on the spit”), so that the linking of the two elements in the second paragraph can make sense. We read in the first paragraph that Napoleon had a passion for chicken, and it is recognised as a possible interpretation of the clause: he had a passion for chicken/he had a passion for Joséphine. The comparison could be explained in this way, but if we go on reading the text offers a startling solution to the puzzle. The birds, we read, were “in every state of undress”. Because of the association syntactically established between the two nouns, it wouldn’t be completely absurd to apply to Joséphine this characteristic of the chickens in the emperor’s kitchen: he liked her the way he liked chicken/the chickens were in every state of undress/he liked Joséphine in every state of undress. The connection here works in a similar way as the rhetorical figure of zeugma, where the same concept is applied to two semantically unrelated nouns, but in both cases it makes sense in a different, striking way.

It is important to notice that nowhere in the text it is explicitly said that Napoleon liked Joséphine in every state of undress, and the narrator doesn’t say that Napoleon liked
chicken in every state of undress either. These associations are made in the reader’s mind because of the grammatical parallelism of the nouns in the clause. The image makes sense in its own way, and although it is not explicitly confirmed in the text, it has an enduring effect (Fowler 1986, 43). The possibility of a different reading is left open in the same way as history is considered in The Passion as a fictional construct with multiple interpretations. By means of this reorientation of meaning the author is indicating the open nature of fiction and history.

The last paragraph of the text confirms the analysis of what has been said above. The first sentence of the paragraph begins with a non-assertive form similar to one of the objects of the previous sentence, “no one”. Semantically the sentence is related to one of the previous paragraphs “He liked me because I am short”. With the new information provided, our idea that the emperor didn’t like tall people is confirmed, and it adds to the building of his personality. The following sentence shows two objects in a parallel position, small servants/large horses, and again the two objects are set in a relation of equivalence, human beings and animals, but the opposition expressed by the use of the adjectives small/large seems to indicate that in the emperor’s mind animals created a more favourable impression than people. The following sentence expands this idea. The author uses a verb with a high emotional value, love, in “the horse he loved...”. In this case the object of the affection is a particular horse, in the same way as chicken provoked in the emperor a highly emotional response, passion. This sensitivity towards animals constrasts with the simple “liking” that the emperor had for just a few persons like Joséphin. The idea that for the emperor animals were superior to human beings is also indicated in the use of the hyperbolic expression of “with a tail that could wrap round a man three times...” in which a man is placed, both symbolically and literally, in an inferior situation to an animal. The last two sentences of the text reiterate the idea of the superiority of animals over men by means of parallel structures. Two objects are found in the same syntactic position implying semantic equivalence, “...as many dead grooms in the stable as chickens on the table”, and the comparison sends us back to a former similar structure above, “he liked her the way he liked chicken”. Human beings are again on equal terms with chickens. But, as I have said before, animals are better favoured as it is implied in the last parallel construction “the ones the beast didn’t kill/its master had disposed of”. It is revealing that both the horses and the emperor are the subjects of similar actions, and the correspondence between “the beast” and “the emperor” is established. Notice also how the horse is the subject of a personification, the horse “had the evil eye”, a malicious superstition commonly applied to humans. The text, then, gradually constructs the image of the emperor as an arrogant person, who is arbitrary in his decisions, someone who puts animals on a higher level than people. The reading will confirm this picture by showing how common people suffer because of the actions provoked by the emperor.

Such an inconocastic portrayal of an heroic figure is just one of the features of a novel which is consistent in its irreverent treatment of history. Winterson offers the version of a marginal character, she allows different interpretations and teases the reader in a game of broken expectations. The subversive nature of The Passion is also evident in its use of linguistic structures; the normal order of the sentences is reversed, and devices like parallelism or foregrounding offer second readings between the lines.

Starting from a concrete historical situation, Winterson constructs a fantasy in which nothing can be taken for certain, questioning our idea of reality and the way history is considered. The Passion disrupts linguistic and ideological conventions by means of a playful discourse that contradicts itself, that sends the reader backwards and forwards. There is in the novel a delight in telling and re-telling, history is transformed into stories that are told by the different characters, uncertainty is present, it is, in fact, a delight in
words, and that may explain the name of the book. The title doesn’t refer to the rather
anecdotal detail of Napoleon’s passion for chicken, but to the passion for telling stories.
The sentence that is repeated along the narrative by different characters, “I’m telling you
stories. Trust me”, indicates this idea. What matters is not the result, or the truth or untruth
of the facts about Napoleon. In Winterson’s novel what matters is the telling itself; it is a
passion for words.

WORKS CITED


—— Interview with the author. 16 Dec. 1994.

Writing. 169-184.


London: Longman.

Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Waugh, Patricia 1992. Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy
Arnold. 189-204.

14-21.


* * *

ATLANTIS XVIII (1-2) 1996