‘That was yesterday, this is today’
Challenging the heteronormative dominant discourse by incorporating Jeanette Winterson’s novel ‘Written on the Body’ in the EFL classroom

Author: Sara Modén
Supervisor: Anna Thyberg
Examiner: Anna Greek
Date: Spring 2018
Subject: English
Level: G3 level
Course code: 2ENÅ2E
Abstract

Winterson’s *Written on the Body* is an experimental and provocative novel that challenges the reader’s mindset as well as society’s heteronormativity by implicitly questioning societal norms and fundamental values. With an unusual protagonist as a point of departure, upper secondary school students in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom can discuss important political and social issues and giving them the chance to become more open-minded and inclusive towards all people regardless of one’s sex, gender, and, or sexuality. This essay shows that *Written on the Body* with its unusual, queer protagonist challenges the heteronormativity in modern Western societies and instead of solely focusing on students’ language development during their English education, they are invited to interrupt and question set attitudes, behaviours, and traditions in modern Western societies.

Keywords

Queer studies; *Written on the Body*; heteronormativity; fundamental values; societal norms; literature; Upper Secondary School; EFL classroom; English 6

Thanks

To my supervisor Anna Thyberg, thank you for all your kind help and support during the writing of this essay.
Table of contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1

2. Queer studies ...................................................................................................................................... 2
   2.1 Overview of the field ...................................................................................................................... 3
   2.2 Queer studies, literature, and the EFL classroom ........................................................................... 6

3. Winterson’s *Written on the Body* ................................................................................................. 8
   3.1 The unusual yet axiomatic protagonist ......................................................................................... 9
   3.2 Challenges to heteronormativity .................................................................................................. 11

4. Literature in the EFL classroom ....................................................................................................... 14
   4.1 Queer studies in the EFL classroom ............................................................................................. 15
   4.2 *Written on the Body* in the EFL classroom ............................................................................... 16

5. Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 18

Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................... 22

Appendices ............................................................................................................................................. I

   Appendix A – Questions for discussion in the EFL classroom ............................................................ I
   Appendix B – Questions on Winterson’s *Written on the Body* ........................................................... II
   Appendix C – Questions centering fundamental values and societal norms ......................................... III
1. Introduction

Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body* from 1993, revolves around a protagonist’s life where the protagonist challenges the readers’ mindset about what is rendered as normative in modern Western societies. How is it possible for Winterson’s novel, which is both an experimental and to some extent provocative novel from the early 1990s, to challenge the mindset of members in modern Western societies? What Winterson does is that she never lets the readers learn the protagonist’s sex, gender nor name, however, they do find out that the protagonist has lovers and significant others that are both male and female. As a result of Winterson never giving away who the protagonist is in the novel, the protagonist will throughout this essay be referred to as X and pronouns such as they, their, and them will be used when needed.

In fact, Judith Butler claims that people who fail to accommodate to gendered norms by which culture define them, also contributes to the question of how concepts such as sex, gender, and sexuality can create one’s identity (“Gender” 23). By taking this into consideration, the following quotation, which is an excerpt from *Written on the Body* where the reader gets to follow X’s reflection about the essence and importance with love, forces the reader to become more open-minded about norms and traditions in a heteronormative dominant discourse:

> No-one can legislate love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation. (Winterson 77-78)

Here, X’s reflection is both straight-forward and simple; one loves who one loves because love works in mysterious ways, and does not concern, or mention any specific sex nor gender relationship. Coincidentally, one might wonder how a novel of this nature can be incorporated into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and consequently, in what way? Hence, the aim for this essay is to argue for the inclusion of *Written on the Body* in the EFL classroom to open for discussion amongst students studying English 6 about fundamental values and the existing heteronormative dominant discourse in the Western world as well as giving silenced people a voice.

As the National Agency for Education states in the *Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School*, “no one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender . . . transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation . . . or to other forms of
degrading treatment” (4). Accordingly, when incorporating a novel of Written on the Body’s capacity in the EFL classroom, students will deal with societal norms, thus carrying out a discussion where a foundation will be laid to give students the opportunity to become more open-minded. Furthermore, Antje Lindenmeyer discusses Winterson’s way to challenge both norms and the reader’s mindset by never defining who X is and therefore, teases the reader throughout the novel (51). In addition, when Lindenmeyer states that “for the narrator, sexual difference is of little or no importance” (51) it gives the EFL classroom a substantial opportunity to discuss inclusiveness regardless of how one defines oneself as well as one’s sexual orientation with X as a point of departure. Moreover, when Winterson’s protagonist learns that their love interest Louise thinks that; “I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen.” (84) it further strengthens the opportunity to discuss and problematize societal norms in the EFL classroom.

Furthermore, this essay will start off by making a distinction of what queer studies is to further analyze the novel through the perspective of queer studies, both as a literary theory and a literary-didactical theory. This essay argues that the omission of the protagonist’s gender challenges the heteronormative societal discourse, which would be a valuable subject for discussion to include in the EFL classroom as well. The method used is critical analysis, which means that I will do an in-depth investigation of how Winterson’s novel challenges the heteronormative dominant discourse. Thereto, an analysis will be done where the focus is on the importance of incorporating Written on the Body in the EFL classroom, as well as how it can be taught in English. Finally, there will be a conclusion of the essay in its totality.

2. Queer studies

In the following section, the aim is to make a distinction of what queer studies is and what it stands for, as well as putting the theory into perspective together with literature and the EFL classroom. Furthermore, with the help of theorists such as Boellstorff, Butler, Kosofsky Sedgwick, Kochiyama, Lindenmeyer, and Beach et al. the upcoming section will deal with matters such as traditional gender roles, gender as a performance, queer studies as a way to challenge societal norms as well as stereotyping in literature, and dilemmas with teaching literature in the EFL classroom. Subsequently, a foundation will be laid for the analyses where the forthcoming theory will be applied.
2.1 Overview of the field

*Cambridge Dictionary* defines the term queer as an old-fashioned word for describing someone or something as “strange, unusual, or not expected”. In addition, Suzanna Danuta Walters explains the term as “a rather amorphous term and still emergent enough as to be vague and ill defined” (6) to later discuss that queer, and queerness:

it is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an extension of this gender binarism. (13)

Furthermore, Walters’s distinctions of queer and queerness are essential to keep in mind when she continues her discussion by establishing that the term queer does not belong to any gender per se, in contrast to terms such as gay and/or lesbian. Accordingly, by taking these definitions into consideration, the term queer is a rather elusive one. Moreover, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler mentions that “the presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (9). Even though sex can be intractable to define, it is still a biological representation to the same extent that gender is culturally constructed. Therefore, one’s gender is not predetermined solely due to what sex one is born as. Butler continues to explore the possibility of discarding the compelled connection between sex and gender when she states that “sexual difference is . . . secondary to sex” (12) to further argue that:

Within some quarters in queer studies, the future is imagined as a time in which pleasure is released from the regulatory power of sex, and where any and all talk of gender is always dismissed through recourse to the anachronism of ‘sex-desire’. (18)

With that said, Butler considers the possibility for people to become who they are regardless of their sex since there is nothing that guarantees one with a female sex to become a woman or necessarily feminine merely because one is born as a female. Therefore, when Butler argues for the possibility of gender as something being culturally constructed, she thus connotes that regardless of one’s sex, a specific gender cannot be said to follow (“Gender” 9).

In addition, if the ways one enacts one’s gender and, or sexual desire are explored and challenged it is clear to see that there is more than one way to act it out. At least, more than one way in the traditional sense on how to enact one’s gender, therefore, queer studies can be seen as a way to take queer acts, life styles, and thoughts seriously and where queers are treated respectfully. However, if society’s traditions are kept it should not come as a surprise that your gender and the way you are supposed to enact it come with certain expectations,
because, frankly, genders are unfortunately determined by norms and ideologies in the Western world (Moi 32-33). Accordingly, treating queer acts, life styles, and thoughts respectfully and seriously in modern Western societies might not be as widespread as it should, consequently, one’s gender and, or sexual desire can obstruct the way one is living one’s life.

For that reason, to be able to act out one’s gender without hesitation, it is crucial to be explicit with and shine a light on these expectations and characteristics that are valued in the different genders as for now. Traditionally, men are expected to be “assertive, dominant, competitive, and achievement oriented. In contrast, women are expected to show communal traits, such as being helpful, kind, sympathetic, understanding, and compassionate” (Kossek et al. 234). Moreover, Toril Moi’s reflections about gender expectations grants clarification of how gender normally is looked upon as a performance. According to Moi, gender is solely an act, and not who you are (55). Along similar lines, stereotypical behaviours and performances must be separated from gender. You are not your gender, you are your own person, therefore, it is essential to keep the following statement from Moi in mind:

To expect someone to be masculine (which here means ‘to conform to socially normative notions of what a man should be like’), just because he is male, or to deny someone the right to behave in ‘masculine’ ways just because she is female, is to reinforce the sex/gender system. (27-28)

By taking this into consideration, one will inevitably also reflect on Butler’s thoughts concerning whether gender is something one has or something one does (“Gender” 10). Moreover, one could possibly suggest that what sex, gender and, or attributes one has are constructed within the heteronormative dominant discourse, and therefore even contribute to making one’s identity a performance. Mark Norris Lance and Alessandra Tanesini argue that when claiming an identity for oneself, one also supports and defends the behaviours, attitudes, and judgements connected to that identity (179). With that said, one must remember that an identity, as well as genders, is created through repetition when acted out more or less in the same way repeatedly. Butler establishes that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (“Gender” 45). However, despite repeated traditional enactments of genders, hence creating a binary gender system, it is essential to remember that “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman 17 qtd. in Brintnall 52). Likewise, when Butler states that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the
very “expressions” that are said to be its result” (“Gender” 34), it opens a world where it is possible to describe a male body to the same extent as a female one with words such as feminine or woman (9). Subsequently, the aforementioned consequences of having a heteronormative dominant discourse defining who and what one is, and how one supposedly should enact it, are dismissed by acknowledging otherness beyond traditional constructed compulsory heterosexuality.

Moreover, Tom Boellstorff acknowledges concerns within queer studies and more specifically with the term queer and its validity as well as inclusiveness. According to Boellstorff, when trying to include all people regardless of their sex, gender, and, or sexuality by creating an acronym such as LGBT, that represents something out of the ordinary and other than the traditional behaviours in society, it only highlights the requirement to add on letters, as Boellstorff suggests, for instance the letter “I” for “intersexed” to include all identities (18-19). Even though Donald E. Hall indicates that “queer can capture, as a broad identifier, work that includes gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and related interests” (73), it is necessary to constantly keep Boellstorff’s concerns close in mind.

Furthermore, when Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that in a society without genders, the concepts of homo- and heterosexuality would cease to exist (86), she overlooks the fact that terms such as homo- and heterosexuality are closely associated with sexuality and sexual orientation. However, as Boellstorff claims homo and hetero stand for same and different, but there is nothing in the terms that refers to gender. Therefore, to be homosexual could in a cultural context for instance refer “to the desire of a Hindu for a Hindu, regardless of whether the persons involved were two women, two men, or a woman and a man” (26). Whereas, to be heterosexual, one desires a person from another culture, religion, or ethnicity, without any specific preference to gender. Kosofsky Sedgwick might have a valid point when claiming that a society without genders would neither have concepts as homo- and heterosexuality in it. Nevertheless, modern Western societies do have genders as well as sex, but as Butler argues, “The possibility of imagining a life of bodies and pleasure beyond the regulatory force of ‘sex’ remains an ideal” (“Revisiting” 17).

Moreover, even though queer studies is an engaging topic and can be implemented as a theory on almost everything and be taught everywhere and nowhere all at once, it is not normative in the Western world (69; Halberstam 362). Therefore, when Hall states the forthcoming quotation he pinpoints the quiddity within the antinormative queer studies:

Parochialism is invariably a problem, never a solution, even if it is often the easiest path to take. This is especially true for queer studies, for if it is to achieve its oft-stated
goal of radically reevaluating diversity and thoroughly interrogating heretofore naturalized social norms and values, it must be continuously queered by the perspectives of ‘others’ from across the globe. We cannot critique our ‘selves’ by ourselves. (71)

Similarly, to Hall’s statement about the narrowmindedness some people possess regarding queer studies, Boellstorff shines a light on the word queer, because many people have lived in a time where it was used to express homophobia and oppression (18), and still do. However, traditionally it has been a central issue within queer studies, hence, it would not come as a surprise that queer has been used to bring together people that are seen as non-ordinary by the ones who occupy the power in society (Boellstorff 25). Fortunately, the interpretation of queer, both as a concept and a term, has developed over the years leading to acknowledging and displaying a range of human desire and ways to enact one’s gender and, or sexuality beyond compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, one must remember that “a field that resists the ‘norm’ cannot set up its own norms regarding legitimate and illegitimate venues for queer work” (Hall 75). What is more, Hall points out that seeing that queer is in some way a reaction against the normative society, such as a binary gender system and heterosexuality, one should have the right to define oneself. Naturally, such acts of self-definitions should as much as possible refrain from exclusion or denigration of other individuals or groups.

2.2 Queer studies, literature, and the EFL classroom

Kent L. Brintnall argues that “to queer means to question, to interrogate, to trouble: it signifies a process by which the familiar, the dominant, the coherent are rendered strange, marginal, unstable” (53), which thus would mean that what might have been traditionally looked upon as non-normative and unnatural, is being embraced and challenging traditions and norms in modern Western societies. Moreover, the National Agency for Education mentions in the syllabus for English 6 that students during the duration of the course should discuss “how structure and context are built up and how attitudes, perspectives and style are expressed in . . . written language in various genres” as well as deal with “concrete and abstract subject areas related to students’ education and societal and working life; current issues; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; ethical and existential issues.”. Therefore, to utilize the opportunity to incorporate queer studies into the EFL classroom is a substantial endeavor.

Even though the chosen novel is not a fairy tale per se it is still a literary fictional text where readers are faced with a similar content, however, it is implicitly dealt with in
Winterson’s work. Therefore, Arisa Kochiyama’s problematizing of fairy tales can be applied to Written on the Body as well, since “fairy tales often reflect society’s socially accepted value. The stories tell us what gender scripts are accepted in our culture and how men and women should act” (2), which thus have led to stereotyping men and women in literature. As previously mentioned in 2.1 Overview of the field, Ellen E. Kossek et al. argue that men are expected to be dominant and competitive, whilst women are expected to be helpful and kind. In fact, fairy tales contribute to this stereotyping by portraying men as active participants in their lives as well as strong physically and emotionally, meanwhile, women are portrayed as dependent, as well as not being an active participant in their own lives (Kochiyama 4).

Pursuant to Kochiyama, fairy tales have tended to display gender stereotypes and thereby affecting adolescents’ attitudes and behaviours concerning stereotyping (1). For that reason, when Lindenmeyer claims that the body is viewed differently whether one is female or male, it is almost as if she refers to human bodies being either dependent and vulnerable or independent and resilient when discussing female and male bodies (49). Lindenmeyer could be said to refer to women’s bodies as something you can take, whilst men’s bodies are off limit, however, one must keep in mind that students throughout their education should learn how to “reject the subjection of people to oppression and degrading treatment, and also assist in helping people” (Nat. Ag. of Ed. “Curriculum” 10). Therefore, to incorporate a novel dealing with LBGTQ issues to open up for discussion in upper secondary school about fundamental values and societal norms in modern Western societies, would mean that students learn that “literary texts . . . are inscribed with issues of power and shaped by ideological influences as they are created and as they are read” (Beach et al. 135). With that said, by dealing with LBGTQ issues, students would get the opportunity to oppose and discuss societies degrading depiction of different bodies and genders through a literary text.

Moreover, Jelana Bobkina and Svetlana Stefanova discuss the possibility to incorporate literature in the EFL classroom and by doing so, what advantages it would result in. In fact, they argue for literature being “a unique opportunity for students to explore, interpret, and understand the world around them” (677), thereto, students will be taught to read and interpret literature to improve their ability to comprehend human relationships focusing on inequality and injustice (679). However, Bachrudin Mustafa illustrates what could possibly come across as issues or dilemmas with teaching literature, he claims that when including literature into the teaching it is often carried out as something exclusive and only available to some people, when it should be the opposite; inclusive and available to everyone. Furthermore, according to Mustafa it could become an issue when teaching
literature if all one does is merely teach what has to be taught (140). Consequently, “(1) students generally learn what they are taught and do not learn what they are not taught; and (2) what students are taught is not always what teachers think is being taught” (Purves et al. 162 qtd. in Musthafa 141), therefore, teachers must take into consideration what they teach and reflect on whether students are engaged in their learning experience (142).

Subsequently, one will hopefully try to address Musthafa’s concerns by incorporating a novel into the EFL classroom where students are given the opportunity to become engaged in the characters. This is what happens when Written on the Body is incorporated into the teaching, according to Susan S. Lanser students will engage in X and she claims that discovering how X identifies themselves drives Winterson’s novel. In fact, Lanser continues to discuss the reader’s desire to define the protagonist as either female or male by thoroughly analyzing every single word Winterson has written (85). Thus, making the reader annoyed by disturbing perceptions of gendered difference when she plays with the protagonist’s traits (Lindenmeyer 48-51). Nevertheless, by exploring patterns of thought, behavior, value, and power in relations between different characters in novels, students are given the opportunity to challenge what is normally seen as normative or deviating in modern Western societies (Beach et al. 140). In addition, Lanser states that “what we choose to support, to write about, to imagine – even in narratology – seems to me as much a function of our own desire as of any incontrovertible evidence that a particular aspect of narrative is (im)proper or (ir)relevant” (93). Therefore, when the syllabus for English 6 states that students should develop “strategies . . . to understand perspectives and implied meaning” (Nat. Ag. for Ed.) as well as discussing for instance issues, traditions, and values in both a social and cultural context in different parts of the world where English is used, it further opens for discussion about the present heteronormative dominant discourse by using literature that deals with queer studies. For that reason, it also creates an obvious opportunity to teach a novel such as Winterson’s Written on the Body in the EFL classroom.

3. Winterson’s Written on the Body

In the aforementioned section a foundation was laid for the distinguishing of what queer studies is and what it stands for as well as the correlation between queer studies, literature, and the EFL classroom. In accordance with the previous section, the forthcoming one will analyze instances from Written on the Body where the omission of Winterson’s protagonist’s gender and sex as well as how it challenges society’s heteronormative dominant discourse will be in focus.
3.1 The unusual yet axiomatic protagonist

In Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body*, X’s sex nor gender are never revealed, however, throughout the novel X gives the reader clues of who they possibly could be, but never truly giving away who they are. Therefore, Winterson has written a provocative novel where she challenges the reader’s mindset on what is rendered as normative in modern Western societies. As Lindenmeyer claims, the reader is annoyed with Winterson’s way of playing with various connotations since she never fixes X’s gender throughout the novel (51). However, X is transparent and there is no need to prove them as someone or something, thus making them into an axiomatic protagonist. Lindenmeyer further argues that in addition to being frustrated and never knowing who X is, the reader tries to solve who X is, but never fully coming to terms since X is a woman one page, to a few pages later be interpreted as a man (50). For instance, early into the novel the reader learns that the protagonist had a relationship but when they ended it, X states; “That is how I came to rent the attic floor of the Pimlico Women’s Institute” (Winterson 23). With that said, X are giving the reader evidence of being a woman due to living in a women’s institute. However, later in the novel, X states; “I gave her my handkerchief” (160), which could point to X being a man. Figuring out who X is, is what drives the novel forward as much as Winterson’s writing, according to Lanser (85).

Moreover, readers learn that X has had both female and male lovers, as for instance when X describes their desire for Louise; “I didn’t only want Louise’s flesh, I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together” (Winterson 51). Later, in the novel, the readers learn that X has had a boyfriend named Bruno (152), X also reveals a few pages earlier that “I had a boyfriend once, his name was Carlo . . . We lasted six months and then Carlo met Robert who was taller, broader and thinner than me” (143). Thus, at some point X has had a same-sex relationship, either with Louise, Bruno, or Carlo, and Carlo himself has had at least one same-sex relationship in his life. Is this something the reader should problematize, or should the reader try to be more like X themselves, who solely focuses on the emerging feelings when they meet someone new: “A treasure had fallen into our hands and the treasure was each other” (99)? No focus on gender nor on sex, instead, X embraces these feelings. As a result of not caring whether their lover is a woman or a man it is possible to argue that to X, sexual difference has little to no importance at all. Thereby, when X mentions lover after lover in *Written on the Body*, they queer, which according to Brintnall “means to question, to interrogate, to trouble: it signifies a process by which the familiar, the dominant, the coherent are rendered strange, marginal, unstable” (53). When X goes through their long list of lovers throughout the novel, it could have made an impact on the reader of X
as an unbelievable protagonist. Instead, since X simply mentions it in passing to be as explicit about who they are and who they have been with to let the readers create their own interpretation of who X is, readers are to believe X as a reliable narrator who questions, interrogates, and troubles a familiar and coherent context.

By taking the idea of X having a same-sex relationship at some point in their life into consideration, it is important to remember that in Winterson’s context a same-sex relationship is implied to refer to genders. In addition, Boellstorff raised an important issue when he questioned whether homo- and heterosexuality should be as closely related to gender as it is for now, or is one’s sexuality, instead, something that refers to whether one is attracted to someone from the same culture or religion without focusing on the involved people’s gender (26)? With that said, one often takes for granted that homo- and heterosexuality are directed to genders and should instead challenge the norms of what is seen as normative, because, it might be something else than what one is led to expect. Therefore, when X tells the reader about Bruno, or Louise for that matter, it might as well refer to the possibility of them being homosexual to the same extent as heterosexual if Boellstorff’s definition is applied. As a result of never revealing who and what X is, the reader cannot know for certain, and that is the beauty of Written on the Body. For that reason, could it be that Kosofsky Sedgwick did not, in fact, overlook the fact that sexuality and sexual orientation are closely associated with homo- and, or heterosexuality when she suggested that “without concepts of gender there could be . . . no concept of homo- or heterosexuality” (86)? Instead, Kosofsky Sedgwick could have grasped what Winterson tried to imply when she let X state; “Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love” (Winterson 10). More specifically, “love is blind” (10) is perhaps the most essential point here, since love does not care about one’s gender, one’s sex, or one’s sexuality. Consequently, when one believes that love is blind, it is one’s feelings and not how one defines oneself that matter, it is as simple, and at the same time, as complicated, as that.

Whether the reader interprets X as the normative definition of homo- and heterosexual where it refers to gender, or if they apply Boellstorff’s definition, the protagonist in Winterson’s Written on the Body is queer. Moreover, Boellstorff reflects about the usage of the term queer in situations of homophobic and degrading characteristics both historically and in present time (18). Therefore, when the reader faces X’s thought-process about a potential lover and they never mention gender, it could possibly become a problem; “I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another’s boundaries and make ourselves one nation” (Winterson 20). As previously stated, regardless
if X would have defined themselves as a woman or a man, they still have had both male and female lovers, due to this, X is in an exposed position where readers judge X’s every decision. Yet, X sacrifices everything and risks being a subject of degrading and homophobic treatment when they do not make any difference between genders throughout the novel. Instead, X thinks and talks about their love life as well as their lovers naturally and without hesitation, without any focus on their or their lover’s gender or sex, thus avoiding setting up norms that contribute to a heteronormative dominant discourse. The protagonist’s attitude towards their own gender and other people’s gender is a necessity to keep in mind. As earlier mentioned, X does not care whether one defines oneself as woman or man, every human being is equally worthy and valuable, therefore, since X themselves do not make any difference between people, their sexual orientation or lover’s gender will not matter. In fact, taking Boellstorff’s definition of homo- and heterosexuality into account will hopefully result in readers not declaring it as a problem not knowing. Optimistically, Boellstorff’s definition could perhaps let the readers rise to the challenge to move beyond these prejudices of homo- and heterosexuality and instead work in an accepting and open-minded way towards all people, and more importantly, towards X.

3.2 Challenges to heteronormativity

In Written on the Body when X states; “What other places are there in the world than those discovered on a lover’s body?” (Winterson 82), they do not exclude anyone, neither women nor men. One must keep in mind that working in an including manner for all people and not setting up its own norms are the quiddity of queer studies, here the protagonist does not add any value to their lover’s gender, instead, X acknowledges the simplicity of love by not including any preferred gender. Thus, when Hall discusses that “queer . . . resistance to systems of sexual normativity, destabilization of gender binaries and notions of “natural” gender identity, and validation of the individual’s right to self-define sexually” (72), Winterson’s Written on the Body fulfills Hall’s volition of including all people and does not set up its own norms. In addition, in the following quotation when X thinks about a potential life with Louise, they do mention a specific personal pronoun, her. Even so, it is essential to keep in mind that it is not a reference to whom the protagonist is, instead, it is a reference to their lover’s gender, however they could just as likely have said him:

I do like to pass the day with you in serious and inconsequential chatter. I wouldn’t mind washing up beside you, dusting beside you, reading the back half of the paper while you read the front. We are friends and I would miss you, do miss you and think
of you very often. I don’t want to lose this happy space where I have found someone who is smart and easy and who doesn’t bother to check her diary when we arrange to meet. (Winterson 38)

Furthermore, what matters throughout the novel is how naturally non-normative the protagonist is. X does not have a filter, X does not censor anything in their life even though they for instance have had lovers of both female and male character, which makes the reader uncertain of who and what X is. According to Butler “gender is neither the casual result of sex nor seemingly fixed as sex” (8), consequently, in a heteronormative dominant discourse, people assume that every person follows the binary gender system, nevertheless, when genders are said to be culturally constructed they cannot be said to follow a specific sex. Accordingly, Winterson does every reader a favor throughout the novel, instead of adding to a heteronormative dominant discourse, she challenges the reader to question norms and one own’s attitude towards what would be defined as queer.

In addition, when X states that “bigger questions, questions with more than one answer, questions without an answer are harder to cope with in silence” (Winterson 13), X is, in fact, reflecting about the necessity to question what, how, and why certain things are defined as normative or anti-normative. Moreover, in the forthcoming quotations X is questioning themselves what they want, as well as how the nuclear family is depicted and what a family is in relations to a heteronormative dominant discourse:

They were grouped the way families like to group; dad with the paper propped on his overhang, mum sagging over the thermos. Kids thin as seaside rock sticks and seaside rock pink. (Winterson 11)

... Is that what I want? The model family, two plus two in an easy home assembly kit. I don’t want a model, I want the full-scale original. (Winterson 108)

Consequently, X is asking themselves questions where the answer, in a traditional manner, would only have one given answer. However, for X who constantly challenges traditions and norms, these questions can be framed in more than one way, and therefore, there is more than one given answer to each question. Furthermore, Lance and Tanesini reflected about the possibility of when claiming an identity for oneself, one also confirms and supports the attitudes, behaviors, and judgements connected to that identity and one should supposedly also defend that identity’s propriety. In accordance, when Moi argues for the possibility of social norms and ideologies being synonymous with genders (32-33), a gender comes with certain expectations. Could that be why Winterson, and specifically X, does not define
themselves? X does not want these “cluster of attitudes, behaviours and judgements on the part of oneself and of society” (Lance and Tanesini 179). If they were to identify as either male or female, they had to defend what is normative in society, as the idea of a monogamous relationship, leading to a completely different protagonist. Substantially, the reader would not encounter a protagonist who thought, “Cheating is easy” (Winterson 77). With that said, the protagonist that readers now encounter, challenges what is rendered as normative since one should be in a monogamous relationship between a woman and a man. However, here one does not know what gender X has and, thereto, they repeatedly have sexual relations with other people without hesitation. Subsequently, if X was to define themselves as gay, or more specifically, queer, Lance and Tanesini mean that they would make their sexual orientation a matter of normative concern (182). Withal, it becomes clear why X does not define themselves, they want to live in a society where all talk of sex and gender is discharged, instead, X wants a society where the focus is merely on one’s desire and pleasure. Most importantly, X believes that:

No-one can legislate love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation. (Winterson 77-78)

Consequently, when Butler argues for a life and society in which pleasure is released from the regulatory power of sex and gender, and where one instead embraces bodies and pleasures (“Revisiting” 17-20), her claim corresponds with X’s utopia. Similarly, Judith Halberstam acknowledges the possibility to refute sexuality as a singular inquiry within queer studies (361), thus, seeing X’s life with undefined sexuality, sexual orientation, and, or lack of gendering as a battle worthwhile undertaken. Therefore, one can see that the omission of X’s sex, gender, and, or sexuality is an important aspect present throughout their life in the novel.

Furthermore, one must remember, as Walters claims, being queer is not gender specific, it is rather something beyond the gender divide where one’s desire is aimed towards the non-normative in a heteronormative dominant discourse (13), thus, making Winterson’s protagonist as queer as one can be. X does as they want, X loves who they want, and makes love to whom they want without caring about their own gender, their lovers’ gender, nor does X care about the heteronormative dominant discourse that they live in and what is expected of them. Therefore, when Kossek et al. claim that men are supposed to be dominant and achievement oriented whilst women should be helpful and compassionate (234), it does not concern X; X challenges set norms and characteristics. So, when X themselves state “that was
yesterday, this is today” (Winterson 184) when reminiscing about their love interest Louise, X might as well have talked about questioning and interrupting the normal, heteronormative dominant discourse that they live in with set norms, traditions, and characteristics. Only they themselves, and possibly Winterson, know for certain.

4. Literature in the EFL classroom

In the syllabus for English 6 it is stated by the National Agency for Education that students should deal with “contemporary and older literature, poetry, drama and songs”, however, one has to be careful when incorporating literature into the EFL classroom to avoid teaching literature solely as a way to develop students’ language skills. In fact, according to Bobkina and Stefanova that is what usually happens when literature is incorporated into the EFL teaching. Allegedly, “literary texts have traditionally been employed as a source of studying grammar structure and vocabulary” (Bobkina and Stefanova 678), thus teaching an overarching comprehension of the texts. Furthermore, this is something Musthafa discusses as an issue as well when teaching literature. He argues against the idea of using literature primarily to aid students’ language development, instead, literature in the EFL context should, in Musthafa’s opinion, be used to “promote students’ understanding and appreciation of cultures and ideologies reflected in the literary texts they read” (137). With that said, it is essential to keep in mind that literature should be incorporated into the EFL classroom in a way that students find meaningful. Accordingly, Richard Beach et al. state that powerful young adult novels that are engaging and encourage discussions address important political and social issues explicitly (51). For that reason, to incorporate a novel of Written on the Body’s capacity where the reader never learns the protagonist’s sex, gender, name or any physical detail about them, thus dealing with aforementioned issues, students are given the possibility to be more engaged in the learning process than if a novel without important political and social issues would have been chosen.

Moreover, when incorporating and teaching literature in an EFL classroom, the selection of materials is fundamental for the level of engagement in students. Thereto, as Beach et al. argue, the literature chosen should deal with real-world issues one wants to teach to create an optimal learning environment where students become more empathic and engaged in the characters (51). Furthermore, Bobkina and Stefanova claim that students will be engaged in the teaching if one also includes elements from for instance gender studies and not solely focusing on language development (679). In accordance with Beach et al. as well as
Bobkina and Stefanova’s discussions, Winterson’s protagonist in *Written on the Body* could be what the students need to become engaged in their learning process.

4.1 Queer studies in the EFL classroom

Winterson’s protagonist X is never mentioned by name, nor are their sex or gender defined throughout the novel, however, as stated earlier, Lanser claims that knowing how X identifies themselves drives the reader to continue reading. Nonetheless, it should not matter if X is a woman or a man, since all people should be treated equally and therefore, it should be as thrilling to read the novel regardless of X’s gender. Winterson’s novel is not a traditional fairy tale per se, although, it is still a fictional work where the same content as a traditional fairy tale implicitly is dealt with, nonetheless, in a provocative and experimental way. For that reason, when Kochiyama explains that fairy tales often depict what is accepted behaviours, values, and attitudes in societies to further argue that “fairy tales often reflect society’s social accepted value” (2) one must keep in mind that this applies to *Written on the Body* as well. Thereto, the teaching can see to it that “no one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender . . . transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation . . . or to other forms of degrading treatment” (Nat. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4) and school should also “actively promote equality of individuals and groups” (10). By encouraging critical thinking about how different genders are portrayed in both the novel and the society the students are living in, a discussion about gender issues as well as creating further understanding why people act in certain ways can arise (Kochiyama 1).

Furthermore, one should as Beach et al. discuss, try to create conditions in the EFL classroom that allow both teacher and students to interrupt and question the existing heteronormative dominant discourse in modern Western societies instead of falling into the same patterns and contributing to the already existing dichotomy (125). Both teachers and students must dare to queer, as Brintnall states, they must dare to question and interrogate what society defines as familiar and coherent (53). Subsequently, when the *Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School* claims that “education should support the development of students into responsible persons who actively participate in and contribute to professional and societal life” (5), it should be without contributing to the stereotypical heteronormative discourse. By discussing existing traditions, norms, and behaviours in societies in the EFL classroom, students can begin to question what is seen as normative and anti-normative, thus, questioning the heteronormative dominant discourse present in modern Western societies.
Moreover, whatever gender the reader reads into or assumes X to be or have should not change the text and give it different meaning, nonetheless, Lindenmeyer claims that it does (52-53). Even if, readers, and more specifically students, are encouraged to interpret X freely, Lindenmeyer insinuates that how readers define X also changes how the text is interpreted (53). With that said, students might interpret the novel as feminist critique to the same extent as a lesbian narrative, it all comes down to how students define X. It is as Kochiyama argues, even though modern Western societies have become more equal thanks to becoming aware of societal norms and stereotypes, they are more prevalent than ever (2). In fact, people are substantially more aware of what is expected out of a man compared to a woman. As previously mentioned in the theory section, Kossek et al. discuss how women are expected to be kind and compassionate, meanwhile, men should be competitive and assertive (234). With that said, Walters argues that “non-gay scholars must teach gay ‘subjects’, as male professors must teach about women and whites must teach about people of colour” (10), therefore, the utilization of incorporating queer studies into the EFL classroom is a considerable opportunity that should be taken seriously by everyone.

4.2 Written on the Body in the EFL classroom

What pronoun is correct to use for a person who does not identify as either male or female, nor as a man or a woman? Is it s/he, they, or perhaps the Swedish hen is the most efficient to use?¹. In the Western world, where discussions about gender and sexuality, as well as the questioning of gender norms are constantly present, these are important questions to ask oneself. Therefore, when Bobkina and Stefanova campaign for the inclusion of literature into the EFL classroom to teach students to interpret texts in a “reflective manner for a better understanding of power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” (679), the choice of working with Winterson’s Written on the Body in the EFL classroom is justified. By taking the aforementioned speculating question regarding what pronoun to use when talking about or with a person not identifying as female or male, nor as a man or a woman into account in the EFL classroom, both teachers and students get the possibility to discuss “equal value for all people” (Nat. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4). Furthermore, when the National Agency for Education states that “no one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender . . . transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation . . . or to other forms of degrading treatment” (“Curriculum” 4) a reflecting and questioning discussion in the EFL

¹ The Swedish term hen is used for, and by people who do not or would not identify themselves or other people as either male or female, man or woman.
classroom focusing on fundamental values and societal norms with *Written on the Body* as a point of departure will hopefully arise.

Moreover, a common problem when teaching literature is that students are given limited time during the classroom literature discussions devoted to students’ own responses (Applebee et al. qtd in Beach et al. 175). However, Beach et al. argue for the possibility to extend this limited time to create an opportunity for students to develop and formulate their opinions and responses to the text they have read (176). Therefore, one should take the opportunity to incorporate Winterson’s novel since, just as Beach et al. state:

> We want to help young people understand the social, political, and cultural contexts that shape their lives. We want to help them see that the literary texts we assign them to read are inscribed with issues of power and shaped by ideological influences as they are created and as they are read. (135)

By doing this, one utilizes the possibility of students questioning and challenging what might have been, or is, seen as normative. With that said, if one were to incorporate *Written on the Body* into the EFL classroom, more time would be needed to be devoted to discussing the students’ own responses to the text than what they normally would have gotten.

More interestingly, how does one cope with questions such as “would *Written on the Body*, for example, be assumed to have a female narrator because it is written by “Jeanette Winterson”?” (Lanser 89) when incorporating the novel into English 6? If readers assume X to be female, they will read the novel as a lesbian narrative, Lanser discusses, but if students instead read the novel from a heteronormative and heterosexual perspective, X would be assumed to be male (89). Therefore, it would be interesting and a challenge, both for the teacher and the students, to discuss higher order questions such as:

- “How does the absence of the protagonist’s gender affect you?”
- “What gender do you think X has, and why?”
- “Discuss the different interpretations of the concepts; sex, gender, and sexuality. What do these concepts contribute to in society?”

By asking these questions, students will hopefully begin to reflect on societal norms and traditions, to further be able to discuss how a heteronormative dominant discourse has had an impact on the society they live in. Therefore, to ask students how the absence of X’s gender affect them, teachers will give students the opportunity to interpret *Written on the Body* freely,

---

2 For access to all questions for discussion, both about the novel as well as the ones centering fundamental values and societal norms, in the EFL classroom; see Appendices A–C.
instead of being shaped by gendered actions, values, and identities (Beach et al. 125). Unfortunately, the feasibility of students using derogative terms and ridicule what could be seen as non-normative in a heteronormative dominant discourse when discussing the novel could occur. However, if so, one must be explicit that it is acceptable for students to have their own opinions, but it is not solely their opinions that count in these discussions, instead the discussions will be a way for students to reflect about their own and others’ opinions.

What is more, if Winterson’s Written on the Body is incorporated into the EFL classroom to open for discussion about societal norms and fundamental values in upper secondary school, one will ameliorate from Musthafa’s concerns of including literature in the EFL classroom merely to promote students’ language development. In addition, teachers will also avoid teaching students what is said to have to be taught (137-40), for instance teaching poetry for the sake of poetry. Thus, literature can instead be used to enrichen students’ understanding and sympathy in and for the society they are living in. Moreover, by incorporating Written on the Body into English 6 students in Sweden get the opportunity to refrain from dividing people solely into women or men, good or bad, or pretty or ugly (Kochiyama 4). As Kochiyama further explains, there is more to people than this and therefore, this binary polarization of people must stop (4). With that said, she also reflects upon the issue that “traditional fairy tales also portray what is considered acceptable behavior for women” (3), even though Written on the Body is not what might be seen as a traditional fairy tale, it is rather a novel that questions norms and acceptable behaviour in a heteronormative dominant discourse. Regardless of X identifying as female or male, man or woman, Winterson questions the structure of modern Western societies, and therefore, students will be encouraged to do the same with the help of the incorporation of this novel. Coincidently, by opening for discussion where students get the opportunity to challenge the heteronormative dominant discourse by discussing the novel, one can hopefully benefit from giving the text different meaning whether X is read as a woman or a man.

5. Conclusion

The aim for this essay was to argue for the inclusion of the experimental and provocative novel Written on the Body by Jeanette Winterson into the EFL classroom as a substantial endeavor to create a discussion about the Western world’s heteronormativity. By making a distinction of what queer studies is and through critical reading of the novel, this essay has argued that the omission of X’s gender challenges the heteronormative dominant discourse. Thereto, as a result of never defining who and what X is, Winterson has created a
protagonist with little or no care of both their own as well as other’s sex, gender, and, or sexual orientation. Hence, giving upper secondary school students in English 6 the opportunity to discuss inclusiveness in modern Western societies regardless of how one defines oneself as well as one’s sexual orientation.

What drives the novel forward is the readers’ desire to figure out who and what X is. Does X correspond with the heteronormativity in society or does Winterson challenge the reader’s mindset by never defining X? It is safe to say the latter, and therefore, making a protagonist resistant to societies’ heteronormativity. Written on the Body continues to challenge readers by introducing lovers of both male and female character, which could pose as a problem to the readers if they choose to focus on sex, gender, and, or sexuality. However, since never coming to terms with who X is, the best option for readers is to embrace the feelings as they arise without focusing on the aforementioned concepts, just as X would have done and are doing. In fact, one could say that X queers because all that matters to X is that “love is blind” (Winterson 10), love does not care about who or what, instead it is one’s feelings that matter. It is both as simple and as complex as that. For that reason, whether homo- and heterosexuality is said to be referred to genders in a normative discourse or refer to something else such as the desire of a Muslim for a Muslim without reference to genders, X is queer. Which means that, X could be a subject of harassment, homophobic treatment, and oppression, due to questioning modern Western societies’ heteronormativity.

What is more, X’s behaviours and attitudes point to them including all people, all people are equally as worthy and vulnerable in their eyes, thus, making X queer studies personified. If X were to define themselves in a binary gender system, a specific gender would have been said to follow their sex, they would only add to the existing dichotomy. Therefore, when X questions themselves and the way nuclear families are depicted, X is also questioning the heteronormativity and challenging societal norms. Accordingly, to X, there is never a given answer and neither solely one answer to a question. So, when one defines one’s identity, one must also confirm, support, and defend that specific identity’s judgements, attitudes, and behaviours. In X’s case, if they were to define themselves, X would defend the normative society. Consequently, X would not be X. Furthermore, if X were to follow society’s norms, they would make their sexuality a normative concern and limit the possibility of challenging a heteronormative dominant discourse as well as the reader’s mindset. However, the society X lives in does not affect them, they do as they please regardless; because “that [set norms, traditions, and gendered characteristics] was yesterday, this is today” (Winterson 184).
In upper secondary school, students should during the duration of their English 6 course deal with literature in some way, however, often literature is incorporated into the EFL classroom as a way to teach language development and overarching reading comprehension. Instead, if understanding and appreciation of different cultures and ideologies reflected in the chosen text is promoted as well as dealing with important political and social issues, students are given the possibility to refrain from solely being taught an overarching reading comprehension and develop their language. Hence, by incorporating *Written on the Body*, students can create a discussion of expectations in society by analyzing how accepted behaviour, attitudes, and values are depicted in the novel. By discussing what is rendered as normative and anti-normative in societies, students will get the opportunity to question and interrupt an already existing dichotomy in the Western world. As a result of shining a light on societal norms and stereotypes, people can become more aware of what is expected of a man and a woman in a heteronormative dominant discourse. Moreover, if students are given time to discuss and reflect upon the society they are living in with the incorporation of queer studies and *Written on the Body* into the EFL classroom, students are also given the opportunity to question and interrupt norms, traditions, and attitudes. In addition, students will hopefully become more open-minded and less prejudiced towards all that is seen as anti-normative in a heteronormative societal discourse. Therefore, in this scenario, literature would be used to enrichen students’ understanding and sympathy in and for the society they are living in, since the choice of novel can be a way for students to refrain from dividing people into good or bad, pretty or ugly, and most importantly, woman or man. Just like the unusual yet axiomatic protagonist in *Written on the Body* has refrained from doing.

Nevertheless, even if this essay argues that the omission of Winterson’s protagonist’s gender challenges the Western world’s heteronormativity which creates an opportunity to discuss societal norms and fundamental values in modern Western societies with upper secondary school students in English 6, it is safe to say that there are several other topics that could be of interest for future research. For instance, it would be intriguing to research the novel’s setting, not merely the time and place for the events but also the context it was written in, the structure of the language used and the use of senses in *Written on the Body* are also possible topics of interest for future research.

In retrospect, considering society’s heteronormativity and the urge to define oneself and others, I would dare to say that the need to incorporate Winterson’s provocative and experimental novel *Written on the Body* in the EFL classroom is substantial. After all, it is when the Western world dares to interrupt and question an already existing dichotomy that
people can start accepting each and every one as they are. Only then, when people are becoming more open-minded and start questioning set norms and expectations, only then will queer no longer be seen as something strange, unusual, or not expected. Instead, queer has the possibility to be rendered as something natural and accepted the more modern Western societies reflects upon it. For that reason, I am certain that both the EFL classroom as well as modern Western societies would benefit from the incorporation of Winterson’s *Written on the Body* where a protagonist values and treats all people the same regardless of their sex, gender, and, or sexual orientation. Fortunately, with the novel’s help a range of different human desires and ways to enact one’s gender, and, or sexuality beyond compulsory heterosexuality are displayed, acknowledged, and hopefully, even accepted.
Works Cited


Musthafa, Bachrudin. “Seven Issues and Dilemmas in Literature Teaching in EFL Context:


Appendices

Appendix A – Questions for discussion in the EFL classroom

In the EFL classroom, teachers have to be careful when creating questions for discussion especially when trying to interrupt and challenge set behaviours, attitudes, and values in the Western world. In fact, question such as “Could X be a person in your surroundings? If so, how would you treat that person?” could create an interesting discussion, however, it could also contribute to students not participating in the EFL teaching. Therefore, since discussing fundamental values and societal norms are delicate subjects that students could find difficult to talk about, each question is framed in such a way that students should not feel ambushed and forced to answer with their own opinion. Furthermore, the questions are also framed in such manner that students would not be able to answer them with a simple “yes” or “no” without giving justification for their answers. Coincidentally, by framing higher order questions for discussion about fundamental values and societal norms, and not solely questions aimed towards the novel *Written on the Body*, each question could also be applied in different teaching contexts in the EFL classroom. Several of the questions aimed towards the novel can however also be applied to other novels with similar themes as Winterson’s *Written on the Body* if they are slightly modified, nevertheless, one must be aware that all questions might not be suitable or applicable to every single novel or context in every EFL classroom. Subsequently, all questions, both the ones on Winterson’s novel as well as fundamental values and societal norms, are framed in such a manner that they can be suitable for English 5, 6, or 7.
Appendix B – Questions on Winterson’s *Written on the Body*

- In your own words, how is the heteronormative dominant discourse depicted in *Written on the Body*?
- Why is X an example of queer act, thought, and, or behaviour?
- How can it be that Winterson never defines X as male or female, man or woman?
- What would the consequences be if X was defined as man or woman, male or female?
- How does the absence of the protagonist’s gender affect you?
- What gender do you think X has, and why?
- The protagonist has had both male and female lovers and, or significant others at some point in their life, what effect does this have on the readers?
Appendix C – Questions centering fundamental values and societal norms

- Discuss the different interpretations of the concepts; sex, gender, and sexuality. What do these concepts contribute to in modern Western societies?
- How are identities formed?
- Discuss the possibility of an individual being in charge of the creation of their own identity.
- What is most important, being who you are or fitting in? Draw parallels to the novel and justify your answer.
- What is the purpose of defining oneself and others?
- Is it possible for an individual, say for instance you, to challenge a society’s heteronormativity? Regardless of your answer; why, how, and in what way?
- What does a family look like? Justify your answer.