

Written on the Body Study Guide

Written on the Body by Jeanette Winterson

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Plot Summary

Written on the Body by Jeanette Winterson is an erotic tale of love. The novel is about an unnamed narrator who is grieving the loss of love. The narrator, after a long string of fatal love affairs, finally found a soul mate in Louise. However, the narrator came to a point in their relationship where a choice between happiness and Louise's life had to be made. The narrator made the choice alone and comes to regret it. Written on the Body is a story of love with all the stereotypes removed, leaving in its place the purity of love between human beings, not gender or sexuality.

The narrator had a habit of falling in love with married women. The narrator craved the excitement of such a relationship. However, after one such affair ends in terrible heartache, the narrator decides to attempt a more mundane relationship with a woman who does not excite, but comforts. Jacqueline is kind, gentle, and everything a mate needs in a long term relationship. However, Jacqueline is not exciting. When Louise comes onto the scene, the narrator sees in her everything that Jacqueline lacks. Unfortunately, Louise is married meaning a relationship with her will mean the same old habit as before. The narrator hesitates, but there is something about Louise that promises a better life.

The narrator and Louise become lovers. The narrator tells Jacqueline right away, allowing her the dignity of walking away before the lies become too much to overcome. Jacqueline takes the news with outrage, destroying the apartment she shared with the narrator in an attempt to injure in response to her own pain. The narrator is not bothered by Jacqueline's anger and instead focuses on Louise. Louise tells her husband about their affair, also reluctant to live with lies. For a time Louise and the narrator carry on their relationship in her husband's house. However, Elgin eventually has enough of their relationship. Louise decides to file for divorce.

The narrator and Louise move in together. For several months they share a blissful relationship. However, Elgin comes to the narrator to tell of Louise's battle with leukemia. The narrator is shocked and insists that Louise tell all. Louise swears that the illness is minor and that she is not having symptoms. Louise's doctors are doing tests, but are sure that she does not need treatment while she is without symptoms. The narrator goes to Elgin and is told that Louise needs to have treatment at his research labs in Switzerland. Elgin promises that if the narrator will walk away, Louise will come back and consent to the treatment. The narrator agrees.

The narrator spends almost a year away from Louise, imagining her going through her treatments with Elgin at her side. However, the narrator misses Louise so much that the only way to deal with it is to learn all there is to know about the human body. Soon the narrator knows all there is to know about cancer and the systems of the body.

The narrator's boss attempts to begin a relationship. During these attempts, the narrator confesses all about Louise. Gail, the boss, tells the narrator that a mistake was made when Louise was left alone. Gail insists the narrator return to Louise. The narrator goes



back to London, but Louise is nowhere to be found. Louise did not return to Elgin, but divorced him and left him free to remarry. The narrator waits for six weeks for Louise to return to their shared apartment. When Louise does not come back, the narrator goes back to the country. Upon arrival, the narrator finds Louise waiting.



Pages 9-54

Pages 9-54 Summary

The narrator is reflecting on the happy days of a love affair with Louise. The narrator compares this affair with those of the past, many with married women. The narrator also reflects on the reason why married women like to have affairs and how some relationships become boring. The narrator insists that this would not have happened with Louise, but unfortunately never had the time it would have taken to know for sure.

The narrator remembers a past love, Bathsheba, while reflecting on the reasons married women have affairs. Bathsheba brought out the worst in the narrator, while Louise brought out the best. The narrator reflects a large number of past affairs, but recalls how Louise said that the past no longer existed in their love. Despite this, the narrator tells Louise about some of his past loves, including Inge, a terrorist who objected to the female figure in classic paintings and the destruction of classic buildings. The narrator also talks about Jacqueline. The narrator became involved with Jacqueline in the aftermath of the relationship with Bathsheba. The narrator was so heartbroken over Bathsheba that Jacqueline seemed like a safe harbor. Jacqueline was plain, simple, and gentle. Jacqueline did not excite the narrator sexually, but provided companionship that seemed much better than the excitement of a relationship with a married woman. The relationship expanded until the narrator and Jacqueline moved in together. Then they met Louise.

The friendship includes Jacqueline at first. However, the narrator soon seeks Louise out without Jacqueline. Louise invites the narrator to the opera, but the narrator is supposed to spend the night with Jacqueline. Fortunately, Jacqueline is called away and the narrator is able to attend. Sexual tension explodes between the narrator and Louise. The narrator learns more about Louise and her husband, Elgin. Elgin is a Jew who was raised by traditional parents. Marrying Louise, a non-Jew, causes a rift between Elgin and his parents. The more the narrator learns, the more the narrator wants to be with Louise, and Louise has made it clear she shares the sentiment. When the narrator thinks of Louise, it all seems so simple, but when the narrator thinks of Jacqueline it becomes difficult. The narrator does not want to hurt Jacqueline who has been so kind. The narrator thinks of the pain suffered at the hands of Bathsheba, staying with her even after the humiliation of being exposed to a sexually transmitted disease, and does not want to cause the same pain for Jacqueline. However, the narrator cannot stay away from Louise. Soon they find themselves sharing a bed where the narrator attempts to express affection, but Louise refuses it. Louise points out that the narrator has said I love you to many people and does not want to hear it until the narrator truly means it.



Pages 9-54 Analysis

The narrator is introduced in this section. The narrator is not given a name or a gender, which is a little confusing for the reader at first, but which becomes unnecessary as the plot begins to develop. The novel is about love and relationships, not about gender, therefore the lack of a gender for the narrator allows the reader to focus on what is important to the plot. The narrator discusses affairs with married women, suggesting that all married women have affairs because they become bored with their marriages. The narrator admits to taking advantage of this boredom by having affairs with married women, touching on the theme of morality.

The narrator discusses a few of the women the narrator has had affairs with over the years, expressing how easy it was to express love for these many and varied women. The narrator always thought it was love, but it often turns out to be just another broken affair. The narrator even believes that love existed with a woman named Bathsheba, but Bathsheba eventually broke the narrator's heart. As a way to avoid being hurt again, the narrator enters a relationship with a single woman who is not exciting, but steady. The narrator believes this is the only way to avoid the pain of a love affair. The reader sees that the narrator is simply using Jacqueline to avoid being alone and getting hurt. The narrator no longer is interested in putting him or herself out there where someone can hurt them. However, meeting Louise changes all that, foreshadowing for the reader another hot love affair that potentially could end like Bathsheba. However, Louise's insistence on not allowing the narrator to express love suggests that this affair will be different.



Pages 54-87

Pages 54-87 Summary

Afterward, the narrator goes to Jacqueline and tells her the truth. Jacqueline locks the narrator out of their shared apartment. The narrator wanders the streets for a while, thinking again of some past love affairs. The narrator remembers watching people through windows with one lover and how it was unsatisfying to do alone. Eventually the narrator goes to Louise. They talk about Elgin and Louise tells the narrator how Elgin's mother died of cancer, leading him to choose cancer research when he finished medical school. Louise talks about how Elgin is bad with people and would probably be unable to practice traditional medicine due to his poor bedside manner. The narrator wonders why Louise is still with Elgin and realizes she has a deep affection for her husband despite his quirks. The next day, the narrator returns to the apartment shared with Jacqueline and discovers that Jacqueline destroyed a great number of the narrator's belongings, as well as pulling some of the fixtures out of the bathroom.

The narrator again reflects on the nature of having an affair. The narrator believes that women like Jacqueline would never appreciate the excitement of an affair. The narrator feels that roles have changed, however, realizing that Louise would and knowing that the narrator does not want Louise to treat this relationship the same way the narrator's other lovers have. Louise tells the narrator that she informed Elgin about their relationship. Louise and Elgin have not had a sexual relationship for a long time and he understands her desire to seek fulfillment elsewhere. Elgin's only concern is that Louise will want to leave. Elgin asked Louise if she intends to divorce him. In turn, Louise asks the narrator if their relationship will eventually include marriage. The narrator tells Louise that it is impossible to know at this point even though the narrator wants to say yes. However, the narrator is afraid the truth will scare Louise away. A time later, while at the narrator's apartment, Jacqueline drops by. When Jacqueline sees Louise she goes wild, attacking Louise. The narrator grabs Jacqueline and hits her to calm her. Jacqueline leaves. Louise is upset, insisting that the narrator never hit her.

Pages 54-87 Analysis

The narrator tells Jacqueline about the affair with Louise. Jacqueline is very angry, causing a great deal of damage to the narrator's apartment and later attacking Louise. This anger seems understandable to reader, if a little over the top. Clearly Jacqueline thought her relationship with the narrator was a commitment with a future. Jacqueline does not know that the narrator was using her. It is ironic, therefore, that Jacqueline is so upset about the loss of a relationship that really was not going anywhere, at least not on behalf of the narrator. Therefore, Jacqueline has been saved the eventual realization that she has wasted half her life with a person who did not love her.



The narrator continues to reflect on the past as the future begins to unfold. The narrator believes that marriage is the end of passion, that commitment is simply the here and now of a relationship and not a conscious choice to remain with one person for a lifetime. This attitude toward relationships is important because it explains why the narrator has had so many relationships and it suggests a change in this opinion as the relationship with Louise continues to develop. Also important about this section is the description of Elgin and his relationship with Louise. Louise thinks of Elgin as a cold person who is more suited to research than patient care. This suggests a man who does not show affection, perhaps explaining Louise's easy affection for the narrator.



Pages 87-139

Pages 87-139 Summary

The narrator becomes so obsessed with Louise that work becomes impossible. The narrator goes to the library to work on the translations from Russian that pay the bills but finds that concentration is not possible. The narrator handcuffs an arm to a chair and gives the key to a fellow researcher. However, when the narrator is ready to leave, the man is gone along with the key. The narrator is forced to alert a security guard who damages the chair to free the narrator's arm. As a result the narrator is thrown out of the library and the narrator's card is taken away. At the same time, the narrator and Louise are carrying on an affair in Elgin's house. Elgin tires of the noise and begins to come to breakfast in a foul mood. Louise and the narrator go on vacation to Oxford and make memories that the narrator will often focus on. Soon Louise decides it would be best for everyone involved to file for divorce. Louise and the narrator move in together.

The narrator and Louise live together in bliss for several months. One day Elgin comes to see the narrator. Elgin says that Louise has leukemia and that the best treatment she can get would be if she came back to Elgin and went to Switzerland where his research labs are located. The narrator asks Louise about the disease. Louise admits that she does have leukemia, but that she has undergone some tests and is waiting for the results. Louise does not trust Elgin and is sure that because she is not having symptoms that treatment is not necessary. However, the narrator goes to speak to Elgin anyway. Elgin convinces the narrator that he should leave so that Louise will return to Elgin and allow him to help her. Elgin promises to keep the narrator informed as to Louise's progress. The narrator pays the rent on the apartment for a full year and then leaves, ending up renting a cottage in the country and taking a job at a local bar. The narrator adopts a cat found wandering the countryside and begins studying everything available on the human body in order to know what Louise is going through.

Pages 87-139 Analysis

The narrator is obsessed with Louise. The narrator is so obsessed that work is impossible. At the same time, the narrator and Louise carry on their affair under Elgin's nose, finally causing Elgin to show some emotion, although he does not throw either of them out of the house. To the reader, this suggests that Elgin loves Louise despite everything. Later when Louise decides to divorce Elgin and live with the narrator, he announces that Louise has cancer. The reader sees this as Elgin's attempt to break the couple up while the narrator sees the best in Elgin's nature and decides that he is simply attempting to help Louise. The narrator decides to follow Elgin's advice instead of seeing what is really going on. The narrator leaves Louise with the hopes that Elgin can cure her cancer and give her a full life, without the narrator in it. The narrator is heartbroken, again, suggesting perhaps this is a state the narrator likes. The narrator has made a life of seeking out married women who cannot commit and always break

the narrator's heart. Louise was not going to leave this time, she chose the narrator over her husband. Therefore the narrator had to be the one to walk away.



Pages 141-190

Pages 141-190 Summary

The narrator settles to life in the country. One night the owner of the bar where the narrator works offers to drive the narrator home. Gail, the bar owner, makes sexual overtones toward the narrator. The narrator allows Gail to come into the cottage despite the fact that the narrator is not interested in a sexual affair. They share a bed, but nothing happens because Gail is too drunk. The next morning, Gail suggests that they have an affair. Gail is aware that the narrator is not interested in her, but suggests that she could provide things the narrator might be missing in life. The narrator and Gail become friends. Later, the narrator contacts Elgin to find out about Louise, but only gets cursory information. The narrator tries to live with this. The narrator is grieving, but is soothed by the idea that Louise is still alive and getting the help she needs. The narrator tries to find comfort in books and church, but is unsuccessful. One night, Gail tells the narrator that a mistake was made when the narrator trusted Elgin over Louise. Gail urges the narrator to return to Louise.

The narrator catches the first train back to London and goes straight to the apartment. Louise is not there. The narrator calls the clinic in Switzerland, but learns Louise is not there. The narrator goes to Elgin's and finds him arriving home with a new woman. The narrator confronts him and learns that Louise does not want to see the narrator again. Elgin says the divorce is final and Louise left town, but he does not know where she went. The narrator visits Louise's mother, but she too insists that Louise does not want the narrator to know where she is. Finally the narrator visits all the places Louise and the narrator went together, hoping to run into her. The narrator waits six weeks and then decides to return to the country. The narrator leaves a note for Louise with the cottage's address and then takes the train. The narrator walks from the train station to the cottage and finds all the lights on. The narrator thinks Gail is waiting for him. Gail is waiting, but it also turns out that Louise is there as well.

Pages 141-190 Analysis

Gail, the owner of the bar where the narrator gets a job, wants to have an affair. The narrator does not want the affair, showing the reader that the narrator has grown. Before the narrator would have had an affair with Gail who is much like Jacqueline. However, this time the narrator refuses the temptation, suggesting that perhaps the narrator has really found love with Louise. Gail convinces the narrator to go back to Louise. The narrator does, finally confronting Elgin and realizing that Elgin sent the narrator away for selfish reasons, not for Louise. The narrator also realizes that Louise did not go back to Elgin, proving her deep love for the narrator.

The narrator tries to find Louise, searching for more than six weeks. Finally the narrator gives up, realizing that the mistake is irreparable. The narrator has finally come to a

place in life where love means more than sexual tension or excitement. The narrator has grown. Not only this, but the narrator has finally found real love. This realization touches on the theme of love without gender, expressing the ultimate theme of the novel that love is more important than all the societal restrictions associated with gender.



Characters

Unnamed Narrator

The narrator has no name or gender. The narrator is deeply in love with a woman named Louise. The narrator fell in love with Louise after a long history of love affairs. The narrator, after a series of affairs with single men, had multiple affairs with married women. One of these women, Bathsheba, uses the narrator mercilessly, leaving the narrator heartbroken. The narrator decides that exciting love affairs are no longer worth the pain they cause. The narrator decides to settle down with a girl who does not cause excitement or jealousy. The narrator has decided that love with familiarity, but without sexual tension is better. However, after settling to this mundane love affair, the narrator meets the woman of the narrator's dreams.

The narrator fights the feelings for Louise that propel thoughts of another affair. The last thing the narrator wants is to fall in love again with someone who has the power to break hearts. However, the narrator cannot fight the feelings associated with Louise. The narrator finally falls into Louise's arms. When the narrator tells his lover, her anger is so deep that she destroys his home. The narrator does not care. When Louise decides to leave her husband, the narrator is blissfully happy, finally convinces that love does exist and that Louise is the narrator's soul mate. Unfortunately, after a few months the narrator learns that Louise has cancer. Louise's husband, a cancer researcher, convinces the narrator that by leaving Louise, it will allow Louise to obtain the help she needs. The narrator does, but finds that living with Louise is a dark, sad place worse than sitting by watching Louise die.

The narrator decides to go back to Louise after almost a year. Unfortunately, Louise has left London. Louise is not with her husband, nor is she with her mother. The narrator cannot find Louise anywhere. The narrator goes to all the places they once went together, but still cannot find her. Finally the narrator decides to go back to the country to attempt to forget Louise. However, when the narrator arrives back at the cottage in the country, Louise is waiting.

Louise Rosenthal

Louise is a young woman from Australia who moved to England as a young woman. Louise married her college sweetheart, a medical student, and has made a life with him. However, this life is childless, leaving Louise bored and unsatisfied. Louise's husband is a cancer researcher, a busy man who is often out of the country for his work. Louise spends her time decorating their large home, attempting to keep the home in the style her husband feels their position in society requires.

Louise meets the narrator one afternoon when she, the narrator, and Jacqueline are caught out in a rain storm. The three become fast friends, soon spending a great deal of



time together. However, an attraction soon develops between the narrator and Louise. Louise allows the narrator to know that she is attracted and wants to begin an affair. The narrator resists at first, reluctant to hurt Jacqueline. However, the attraction is so strong that the narrator can no longer deny it. After their first time together, the narrator ends the relationship with Jacqueline. Louise, at the same time, ends her relationship with her husband even though they continue to share a home. In time, Louise leaves her husband and moves in with the narrator.

Louise and the narrator live together for many months, enjoying the joys of a new relationship. Each expect the relationship to eventually become boring, but it never does. Just when it seems things could not get better, the narrator learns that Louise is sick. Louise assures the narrator that she is not that sick, that her doctors have told her that as long as she remains without symptoms there is no reason to treat her illness. However, Louise's husband tells a different story, causing the narrator to leave. Louise receives treatment for a short time, but then disappears, convinced that the narrator has abandoned her and uninterested in seeing the narrator again. However, when the narrator comes looking for her, Louise decides to return to the relationship.

Jacqueline

Jacqueline is a young woman who works at a zoo. The narrator meets Jacqueline through friends. The narrator does not find Jacqueline sexually appealing, but she is a kind woman who is gentle with people as well as animals. The narrator decides to begin a relationship with Jacqueline because she is single and because it would be a safe relationship that would not end in pain. While the narrator is using Jacqueline to avoid pain, Jacqueline is deeply in love and expecting a long term commitment. When Jacqueline learns about the affair, she locks herself in the apartment she shared with the narrator and destroys it. Jacqueline ruins the narrator's belongings and removes fixtures from the apartment, including bathroom fixtures.

Elgin Rosenthal

Elgin Rosenthal is Louise's husband. Elgin is a mild mannered man who studied medicine but decided to pursue a career in cancer research after his mother died of cancer. Elgin is not good with people. Elgin would not have had a good bedside manner. Elgin and Louise's marriage has become stale and they no longer share a bed. When Louise begins her affair with the narrator, she tells Elgin about it immediately. Elgin looks the other way while Louise carries on the affair in his house. However, when noises of their lovemaking reach him in the night, Elgin becomes resentful of the relationship. Louise decides to leave Elgin. However, Elgin does not want to let Louise go. Elgin convinces the narrator that Louise has cancer and only by coming back to Elgin can she be saved. The narrator leaves, but Elgin is unable to lure Louise back to their marriage. Elgin moves on with his life, taking on a new girlfriend, leaving Louise to fight for herself.



Gail

Gail is an older woman who owns a bar in the small, countryside town where the narrator comes to live after leaving Louise. Gail is not attractive, but expresses a knowledge of the human body that would please the narrator. Gail drives the narrator home and talks her way into the house, intent on beginning an affair. However, the narrator is not interested and much relieved when Gail falls asleep before anything of substance can take place. Gail continues to court the narrator, however. When Gail learns of the narrator's relationship with Louise, she tells the narrator that a mistake was made when the narrator left Louise without discussing the decision with her. Gail urges the narrator to return to London to find Louise. When the narrator does and fails, Gail is waiting back at the cottage. It is not what the narrator believes, however. Louise has come back.

Esau and Sarah Rosenthal

Esau and Sarah Rosenthal are Elgin's parents. Esau and Sarah bought their house after squatting there during the war and convincing the rightful owners to sell it to them. After the war, Esau and Sarah opened a shop selling Jewish goods only to good Jews. Esau and Sarah have a strong work ethic. When Sarah becomes ill with cancer, she ignores her symptoms and continues to work despite the pain. Eventually Sarah is forced to go into the hospital. However, the day she dies, Esau returns to the shop, unwilling to close long enough to grieve his wife. Elgin dislikes his parents and avoids visiting them, even after his mother's death. However, it is his mother's death from cancer that leads Elgin into pursuing a career in cancer research.

Bathsheba

Bathsheba is one of the narrator's married lovers. Bathsheba is a dentist whom the narrator met while sitting in her dental chair. Bathsheba is controlling, setting the rules for their relationship and saying when and where they might meet. The narrator is deeply in love with Bathsheba and comes to believe that she will eventually leave her husband. Unfortunately, this never happens. When Bathsheba breaks up with the narrator, the narrator is left devastated. The narrator moves to a new place, doing everything to avoid the memories of the relationship. The narrator even turns to a woman who does not excite sexual tension in order to have a relationship that will not end in heartbreak.

Crazy Frank

Crazy Frank is one of the narrator's male lovers. Frank was raised by midgets even though he was over six feet. Frank went everywhere with his adoptive parents, carrying them on his shoulders most of the time. Frank also had a passion for miniatures. Frank did not want commitment, but liked to have a relationship in every town he visited.



When Frank refused to commit to the narrator, the narrator was wracked with grief. However, the narrator soon realized that Frank's passion for miniatures and his affection for his tiny parents did not make him the ideal husband, therefore the narrator decided there had to be someone better out there.

Bruno

Bruno is one of the narrator's male lovers. Bruno was a motorcyclist who was very exciting and full of rebellion. However, after a wardrobe fell on Bruno, he found religion. Bruno did clearances and was moving a Victorian wardrobe when it fell on him. The wardrobe nearly suffocated Bruno to death. While laying under it for the four hours it took the fire brigade to find him, Bruno found Jesus. Bruno gave the narrator his motorcycle and prayed that it would help the narrator find religion. Unfortunately the motorcycle blew up outside of town.

Inge

Inge is one of the narrator's past love affairs. Inge is an anarcho-feminist who could not blow up buildings of which she admired the architecture. However, Inge likes to set off bombs in men's rooms. It was the narrator's job to clear the bathrooms of people before the bombs are set to go off. Unfortunately, most men would not believe the narrator, so a gun became necessary to clear the rooms. The narrator and Inge also spent a great deal of time in Lourve, critiquing the famous paintings hanging there. Inge found the nudes to be repressive and examples of the inequality between the sexes while the narrator found them to be beautiful and exciting.



Objects/Places

Narrator's Apartment

The narrator lives with Jacqueline when Louise comes into their lives. The narrator tells Jacqueline about the affair with Louise, causing Jacqueline to become outraged and leaving her to destroy sections of the apartment. Later, the narrator and Louise live in the apartment until the narrator learns about Louise's illness. The narrator pays the rent for a year and leaves Louise in the apartment only to return and discover Louise has left.

Rosenthal Home

The narrator and Louise begin their affair in Louise's home. Later, after Louise tells Elgin about the affair, the narrator often spends the night in the Rosenthal home, causing tension between Elgin, Louise, and the narrator.

Cafe

There is a café in London where the narrator and Louise have often met. When the narrator comes back to London to find Louise, the narrator spends several afternoons in the café hoping to run into Louise.

Zoo

Jacqueline works at the zoo.

Library

The narrator translates novels from Russian into English. The narrator is so obsessed with Louise that the narrator handcuffs a hand to a chair to force concentration on the translations only to give the key to an unreliable neighbor. The narrator ends up getting thrown out of the library.

Train

The narrator rides the train out of London to the countryside after leaving Louise and again after attempting to reconnect with Louise.



Gail's Bar

The narrator goes to work in a bar owned by Gail. Gail is attracted to the narrator and attempts to begin a romance only to give the narrator advice on Louise.

Cottage

The narrator rents a rundown cottage some distance from London after learning that Louise has leukemia.

Lake

The narrator and Louise once spent an afternoon at the lake where they caused an uproar by showing an excessive amount of skin and affection toward one another in front of families.

Louvre

The Louvre is a museum in Paris. The narrator once visited the Louvre with a lover.

London

The narrator and Louise live in London.

Switzerland

Elgin is a cancer research who works in Switzerland. Elgin convinces the narrator that he can save Louise if he takes her to his clinic in Switzerland. The narrator later learns that Louise received treatment briefly, but later rejected her husband and his expertise.



Themes

Love Without Gender or Stereotypes

The writer of this novel chooses not to name the narrator or to give the narrator a clear gender. Throughout the novel, the narrator talks about past relationships, but mentions both men and women who have been a part of the narrator's past. The narrator is bisexual, leaving the reader unclear whether the narrator is male or female. By doing this, the writer removes preconceived ideas of sexuality as well as the biases of homosexuality. The narrator could be a woman, suggesting her love for Louise is a homosexual love for which some readers might have objections. However, the narrator may be a man who has had male lovers in the past. This suggest, too, could color the reader's feelings for the narrator with this past taking away some of the narrator's masculinity. Therefore, the author has taken away all of these biases by simply not naming or assigning gender to her narrator.

Society puts labels on everything. Differences between people should enhance the human experience. However, many people are afraid of differences and this fear causes biases and hatred. In these modern times, many people are biased against gays and bisexuals because they are different. This bias adds complications to relationships that should be as simple as love between two people. In order to underline the simplicity of a relationship, the author removes gender and therefore removes the possibility of bias. The author wants the reader to appreciate love for the sake of love without adding to it sexual bias or even the traditional pressures of a man-woman relationship. It's not about traditional roles to this author. It is about love, pure and simple.

Morality

The narrator in this novel is deeply in love. The narrator has been in love before and found that love can be complicated by the excitement of an affair. This narrator prefers to have relationships with married people. The narrator finds loving a married woman exciting because of the secrecy and the inevitable pain of separation. However, the narrator has been hurt so many times that it seems pertinent to avoid any more pain. To avoid this pain, the narrator moves in with a woman who is neither exciting nor sexually inviting. This relationship is designed to be safe, to keep the narrator from feeling pain. However, this relationship is also boring. When the narrator meets Louise, love becomes the goal again. The narrator is no longer focused on the excitement or the safety of a relationship, but on love.

The narrator has compromised morals many times in affairs with married women. Now, the narrator wants to do things right, to do what will be the best for the woman the narrator loves. When the narrator finds out the Louise has cancer, the question becomes what is best for Louise. The narrator is told that the best thing for Louise is the receive treatment that only her husband can supply. The narrator, desperately in love



and afraid of losing the only woman the narrator has truly loved, decides to listen to the expert and do all possible to make sure Louise gets what she needs. The narrator walks away. However, the narrator never stopped to ask Louise what she wants. The narrator never tells Louise what her husband has said. The narrator makes the decision alone, leaving Louise out of the ultimate decision on how she should spend the remaining days of her life. The narrator believes that the choice made was the moral choice, but soon realizes that a mistake was made. Once again, the narrator has compromised morals in order to do what was right for the narrator, not what might be right for his love.

Marriage versus Commitment

The narrator believes marriage is a joke. The narrator feels as though a married woman grows bored being with the same man day in and day out. The married woman who is bored will look for excitement anywhere. The narrator is often there, waiting for the married woman to reach out. The narrator has multiple affairs with married women, most lasting less than a few months. It is the excitement that draws both the married woman and the narrator. Weekends and week nights together, sneaking around, and making clandestine calls to the husband. It is all very exciting. However, the excitement eventual turns into the mundane leaving both the married woman and the narrator looking for another source of excitement.

When the narrator meets Louise, thoughts of an affair are not the same as they were in the past. The narrator does not want to just have some fun, the narrator wants a commitment. Louise is different, their relationship is different. It is not about marriage, the narrator does not want marriage. The narrator does not want Louise tied down and at risk of boredom. The narrator wants a commitment, a life together, that is filled with love and happiness. This is different from all relationships the narrator has had in the past. This is something the narrator has never wanted before. This is love.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator is character that neither has name nor gender. The narrator tells the story in a rambling sort of way, as though sharing with a friend the events that led to deep heartbreak. In fact, the narration often includes comments from the narrator expressing emotions as though the narrator is speaking directly to the object of that person's affections.

The point of view works in this novel because it is written as though a narrative to a close friend or a rambling letter written to a lover. The novel is an intimate, rambling story that begins as though in the present but moving through the past to retell a story from the beginning. The point of view makes this structure easy to believe, engrossing the reader in the narrator's story and allowing the reader to forget the lack of identifying information regarding the narrator. If not told in the first person point of view, this style would not have worked because a main character without name or gender would not work in a third person point of view where the format depends on gender articles and names to keep the identity of the narrator separate from those of the characters around him or her.

Setting

The novel begins in London where the narrator and his lady love live. The novel moves to the countryside after the narrator runs away from the reality of Louise's illness. At the same time, the narrator reflects on the past, taking the reader to the various places the narrator has lived, including Paris. The most important settings of the novel are the narrator's apartment, Louise's house, and the cottage in the country. The narrator's apartment is important because this is the home the narrator shares with both Jacqueline and Louise. The reader can see how the setting changes with each woman, reflected the feelings the narrator has for these women. The house that Louise shares with her husband is large and well furnished, but feels stuffy and stiff to the reader, reflecting Louise' feelings for her husband. Finally, the cottage in the country is old and rundown, falling apart much like the narrator's emotional state during the time spent here.

The settings of this novel work because they closely resemble the actions and emotions of the plot. The apartment the narrator shares with Jacqueline is destroyed when she learns the truth about Louise, reflecting the pain of the narrator's betrayal. When Louise moves in, the apartment becomes warm, cozy, reflecting the relationship between Louise and the narrator. The cottage is old, filled with holes and difficult to keep warm. This reflects the broken heart that consumes the narrator's life during this time period. The setting is reflective of the tone of the book, making all the techniques hidden within the narration work well together.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The language often contains slang that enhances the conversational tone of the narration. The novel is told mainly in internal dialogue, expressing the thoughts and feelings of the narrator. The use of conversational language helps to express the narrator's thoughts and feelings in a way that is clear and easy for readers of all ages and ability to comprehend. The novel's language is almost poetic at times, rough at others, again reflecting the emotions of the narrator.

The language of this novel is simple, reflective of a lover's thoughts and emotions. The novel is written as though it is the rambling letter or thoughts of a lover who has lost the object of desire. The language reflects this, at once both poet and rough, emotional and objective. The descriptions of the narrator's lady love are bold and exciting, while descriptions of other characters are simple, to the point, without elaboration. The language is important, showing the reader how the narrator feels without expressing those feelings in precise language. The language of this novel works because it is complimentary to the structure of the novel.

Structure

The novel is written in three, rambling section. There are no chapters, with the exception of several sections that contain specific information on the body and its systems. Before and after the sections of the body, the novel is one, uninterrupted section, without parts or chapters to divide the narration. The novel is written as though a letter to a lover, a rambling description of emotion and desire, describing the relationship between the narrator and the lover lost. The novel is written primarily in exposition with the bulk of the novel internal dialogue between the narrator and Louise.

The novel contains only one story line. The story is about the relationship between the narrator and Louise. Louise is a married woman who comes into the narrator's life after the narrator has given up on the idea of ever falling in love. The narrator is surprised by this relationship and elated, though cautious at first. However, the narrator soon gives up everything to this relationship, spending a few happy months living the ideal relationship. When the narrator learns that Louise has cancer, the narrator leaves her in order to allow her to reunite with her husband, a cancer researcher. However, the narrator comes to regret this decision, returning only to find Louise has disappeared.



Quotes

"Why is the measure of love loss?" p. 9

"You were careful not to say those words that soon became our private altar. I had said them many times before, dropping them like coins into a wishing well, hoping they would make me come true. I had said them many times before but not to you." p. 11

"You will think I have been constantly in and out of married women's lumber-rooms. I have a head for heights it's true, but no stomach for the depths. Strange then to have plumbed so many." p. 17

"There are people who say that sex isn't important in a relationship. That friendship and getting along are what coast you through the years. No doubt this is a faithful testimony but is it a true one?" p. 20

"What to do? Should I stay in with Jacqueline and hate it and start the slow motor of hating her? Should I make an excuse and go out? Should I tell the truth and go out? I can't have it all my own way, relationships are about compromise. Give and take. Maybe I don't want to stay in but she wants me to stay in. I should be glad to do that. It will make us stronger and sweeter." p. 31

"The wise old hands who advocate a sensible route, not too much passion, not too much sex, plenty of greens and an early night, don't recognize this as a possible ending. In their world good manners and good sense prevail. They don't imagine that to choose sensibly is to set a time-bomb under yourself." p. 71

"Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book." p. 89

"If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away." p. 111

"No-one tells you in grief-counseling or books on loss what it will be like when you find part of the beloved unexpectedly. The wisdom is to make sure your house is not a mausoleum, only to keep those things that bring you happy positive memories. I had been reading books that dealt with death partly because my separation from Louise was



final and partly because I knew she would die and that I would have to cope with this second loss, perhaps just as the first was less inflamed. I wanted to cope." p. 154

"In the night, the blackest part of the night, when the moon is low and the sun hasn't risen, I woke up convinced that Louise had gone away alone to die. My hands shook. I didn't want that. I preferred my other reality; Louise safe somewhere, forgetting about Elgin and about me. Perhaps with somebody else." p. 174

"I had scrupulously avoided our old haunts—that's the advice in the grief books—until today. Until today I had hoped to find you or more modestly to find out how you are. I never thought to be Cassandra plagued by dreams. I am plagued." p. 179

"This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. Hurry now, it's getting late. I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields." p. 190

Topics for Discussion

Who is the narrator? What is the narrator's gender? Why does the author chose to hide this gender? Are there any hints as to what the narrator's gender is? How would it change the story if the narrator is given a gender and a name? What gender would you assign to the narrator? Why?

Why does the narrator enjoy relationships with married women? What are the basic differences between a relationship with a married woman and a single woman? What makes a married woman more exciting? Are these relationships moral? What do these relationships say about the narrator?

Who is Bathsheba? Why does the narrator become involved with Bathsheba? What is different about the narrator's relationship with Bathsheba as compared to other relationships? Why does the narrator stay with Bathsheba longer than other married women? Is the narrator in love with Bathsheba? Why or why not?

Who is Jacqueline? Why does the narrator become involved with Jacqueline? Does the narrator love Jacqueline? Why does the narrator become involved with Louise while with Jacqueline? Why does Jacqueline destroy the narrator's apartment? What does Jacqueline hope this will solve?

Discuss Louise. Who is Louise? What is different about Louise? Why does the narrator attempt to avoid a relationship with Louise at first? What makes the narrator hesitate? Is this relationship moral? Is this relationship different from the narrator's other relationships? Compare and contrast this relationship to the narrator's relationship with Jacqueline.

Discuss leukemia. What is leukemia? Is it fatal? Will Louise die? What do the doctor's say about Louise's illness? What is Louise's opinion of her illness? What does Elgin say about the illness? Why does the narrator believe Elgin over Louise? Why does the narrator leave?

What makes the narrator leave Louise? Why does the narrator leave? What does the narrator hope will result from this desertion? Does the narrator's plan take place? Why or why not? Does the narrator eventually regret this decision? Why or why not? Did Louise have a right to help make this decision? Why did the narrator not consult Louise before leaving? Should the narrator have spoken to Louise first? Why or why not?