



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Mythical Hero's Quest in Jeanette
Winterson's *The Passion*

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2018

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1. INTRODUCTION: *THE PASSION* AS A POSTMODERNIST NOVEL

Published in 1987 and winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in the same year, Jeanette Winterson's third novel, *The Passion*, is a very complex, yet entertaining novel. Set during the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815), it tells the story of Henri, a young Frenchman working as a scullion in Napoleon's army; and of a young Venetian woman, Villanelle, working in the casino as a *croupière*. After losing a wager, she is forced to marry Henri's former master, the Cook, now turned horse-meat dealer, who sells Villanelle as a *vivandière*, or army prostitute, to serve the officers in the Russian campaign. It is on the frozen fields of war that the journeys initiated by Henri from Boulogne and by Villanelle from Venice eventually converge. Then, they cross Europe again in the contrary direction as they decide to desert and take refuge in Venice. The working hypothesis for the analysis of the novel is that the double loop formed by Henri's journey responds to the archetypal structure of the quest for maturation as theorised by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

1.1. Historiographic Metafiction

Thematically and stylistically, *The Passion* meets Linda Hutcheon's definition of "historiographic metafiction": "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). Winterson's novel recreates the Napoleonic Wars and includes historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte and Joséphine de Beauharnais. History is supposed to be made of facts and, hence, be truthful. But it is written by the winners

and leaves aside the version of the defeated. It is made of what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard described in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) as *grands récits* — the “grand narratives” of bourgeois liberalism. *The Passion* questions history’s veracity by alternating the autodiegetic narrations of Henri and Villanelle, two historically excentric and irrelevant characters who offer their own subjective versions of Napoleon’s imperialist campaigns. Therefore, Henri’s and Villanelle’s accounts of World History would fit into what Lyotard called *petit récits* or historically insignificant “little narratives.” However, their life stories offer valuable new perspectives on official history, because, after all, history is just a multiplicity of stories constructed by means of the same narrative devices. Thus, Henri tells readers how easy it is to invent stories about oneself—“I made up stories about m[y relations]: They were whatever I wanted them to be” (Winterson, *The Passion* 11) — but also about historical events: “nowadays people talk about the things [Napoleon] did as though they made sense. As though even his most disastrous mistakes were only the result of bad luck” (3). And he insists on the truth value of his own version of history: “It was a mess [...] / I’m telling you stories. Trust me.” (3).

In keeping with the intense self-reflexivity of *The Passion*, both narrators make recurrent use of the second-person singular pronoun “you” as addressee in expressions such as: “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (3, 13, 43, 74, 172), which enhance the fictional nature of the narration; or also in direct questions to the reader such as: “do you ever think of your childhood?” (26). These direct addresses, so characteristic of postmodernism, break what is commonly referred to, in theatrical terms, as the fourth wall, thus, reinforcing the metafictional straining of the readers’ willing suspension of disbelief.

Another characteristic element of historiographic metafiction is the combination of history with fantasy. According to Judith Seaboyer, “from story to story, history is juxtaposed with tales of goblins and of humans who have animal-like or superhuman attributes” (495). Henri’s Irish friend, Patrick, the defrocked priest, is one of those characters who illustrate the book with “stories about Ireland, about the peat fires and about the goblins that live under every hill” (Winterson, *The Passion* 42). Moreover, the description of Venice as an ever-changing city, as a sort of magical location with a labyrinthine construction, conveys this fantastic element as well. In the second chapter, “The Queen of Spades,” Venice is described as “[t]he city of mazes. You may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route.” (51). The fantastic, mythological, magical, and legendary atmosphere that surrounds the city is ever-present throughout the novel. Describing it, Villanelle says: “rumour has it that the inhabitants of this city walk on water. That [...] their feet are webbed [...] / This is the legend” (51-52). Villanelle’s legendary story is rationally implausible. However, the reader eventually learns that the legend is real, for Villanelle herself has webbed feet and can walk on water.

1.2. Feminism

While Henri is a French young man struggling for maturation in the wholly patriarchal world of Napoleon, Villanelle and watery Venice provide a counterpart to it. Villanelle is bisexual. She has sexual relations with partners of both sexes and, while working in the casino, she enjoyed “dressing as a woman in the afternoon and as a young man in the evenings” (Winterson, *The Passion* 67). This bisexuality is not only displayed in her sexual drives, but also in her physical condition. The fact that she was born with webbed feet, a specific characteristic of Venetian boatmen, suggests that she is female

and male at the same time. As Seaboyer argues, “[Villanelle] apparently identifies with both feminine and masculine subject positions [thus] contradicting the Lacanian framework within which one either ‘is’ or ‘has’ a phallus” (497). Similarly, Susana Onega interprets Villanelle’s bisexuality as a “deconstruction of the patriarchal binary” (Winterson 198). Therefore, it may be argued that, by characterising Villanelle as bisexual, Winterson is offering readers a new alternative to the traditional characterisation of the hero in a male-centred society that responds to what Onega, drawing on Hélène Cixous (1975), describes as “an embodied recognition of plurality, fluidity and coexistence of masculinity and femininity within individual subjects” (Winterson 97). Moreover, the feminist dimension of *The Passion* can also be seen at the narrative level. Just as Villanelle’s sexuality responds to Cixous’ definition, so Villanelle’s narrative discourse may be described as an example of what Cixous calls *écriture féminine*, “a type of writing specifically meant to deconstruct binary oppositions such as man/woman; self/other; active/passive, etc., on which patriarchal ideology is based” (Onega, Winterson 112)

In keeping with this, the novel presents Napoleon as a symbol of Western patriarchal society. He has the defining traits of an Emperor or, in Thomas Fahy’s terms, a “coloniser-king” (96). At the beginning of the novel, Napoleon is described by Henri sitting in front of a globe “holding it tenderly with both hands as if it were a breast” (Winterson, *The Passion* 2). Fahy interprets this scene as evidence that “Winterson presents Napoleon as feminizing unconquered territories on the globe, conflating uncolonised territories and the woman’s body—both objects to be violated” (96). One of these colonised territories is the city of Venice. Yet, the city itself seems to resist Napoleon’s attempts to subdue it. As Henri notes, “where Bonaparte goes, straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised.” (Winterson, *The Passion* 121). However, he

admits that “not even Bonaparte could rationalise Venice” (121). In this sense, Villanelle and Venice may be said to stand for Winterson’s feminist values as a counterforce to patriarchal imperialism.

1.3. Intertextuality

A salient feature of postmodernist fiction is intertextuality. According to Julia Kristeva, who coined the term in 1966, texts are not self-contained systems with a fixed meaning, but rather “an intersection of textual surfaces” (65), so that there are always other texts in a text (Martínez Alfaro 268). *The Passion* presents several instances of intertextuality. The last two chapters, “The Zero Winter” and “The Rock,” respectively allude to T. S. Eliot’s “zero summer” (“Little Gidding” 214) and to the rock in *The Waste Land* (“What the Thunder Said” 76-77) and *The Rock* (1934). Eliot wrote “Little Gidding” in 1941, in the midst of the Second World War and used the word “zero” to make symbolic reference to those difficult times, but he granted it positive connotations by joining it to the word “summer” and describing it as “midwinter spring,” thus associating it with ideas of rebirth, fertility, life, the completion of the annual cycle, etc. Conversely, in *The Passion*, Winterson calls the third chapter “The Zero Winter.” Therefore, the pessimism already suggested by the word “zero” is reinforced by the word “winter,” which is precisely the season preceding spring and usually related to death, despair and the end of the annual cycle. Winterson may have used this title for this chapter for several reasons. On the one hand, its setting is Napoleon’s awe-inspiring campaign in Russia during the winter season. By that time, Europe was a wasteland (Eliot). And this campaign coincides with Henri’s highest point of disappointment with Napoleon. As he puts it, referring to the Russian peasants: “I had been taught to look for monsters and devils and I found ordinary people” (Winterson, *The Passion* 113).

Another instance of Winterson's intertextual indebtedness to Eliot can be found in the title of the fourth chapter, "The Rock." In lines 331-332 of part five of *The Waste Land*, entitled "What the Thunder Said," "the rock" stands as a symbol of barrenness, infertility, death, lifelessness, the lack of spiritual relief: "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road" (76). Meanwhile, in *The Passion*, Henri is imprisoned in the madhouse of San Servelo. He has turned mad after killing the Cook, his former master and Villanelle's husband. The madhouse is located on an isolated rock bathed by the salty sea, that is, on an infertile wasteland. Hence, Eliot's and Winterson's rocks convey the same pessimistic and apocalyptic idea. However, Henri is about to give this rock a new meaning since one of his plans during his incarceration is to grow "a forest of red roses" (Winterson, *The Passion* 172). This project opens up an optimistic perspective on his bleak situation that contrasts with the pessimistic mood previously created. To grow a garden symbolises life, fertility and rebirth.

The title of the novel, *The Passion*, provides another remarkable example of intertextuality. Besides its association with human passion, it alludes to Jesus Christ's sacrificial passion, that is, to what in Western cultures is known as the "original" passion. As Susana Onega has pointed out:

The definite article in the title transforms Winterson's third novel from 'a parable of passion' into 'a retelling of *the* passion', that is, into a novel 'about the way in which every trajectory of passion is inevitably a repetition of what our culture knows as the 'original' passion. (Winterson 55)

Onega adds that the presence of "the definite article in the title, gives the life stories of the protagonists a representative, archetypal character" (55). The archetype alluded to is none other than Jesus Christ, the hero of the *New Testament*, a text with

which the novel presents several parallelisms. For example, in the second chapter, at the crucial moment when Villanelle meets at the Casino a mysterious Venetian lady, nicknamed The Queen of Spades and falls in love with her, she wonders: “how could anything so passing be so pervasive? / But Christ said ‘Follow me,’ and it was done” (Winterson, *The Passion* 68), thus comparing their relationship to that between the apostles and Jesus Christ. But the clearest parallelism with Jesus Christ is provided by Henri. In the first chapter, while he is in Boulogne, witnessing the massive loss of French men on the British Chanel, Henri was convinced by Patrick to attend mass on New Year’s Eve. Carried by the quiet holiness of the church, he decided to take communion and had the strange feeling that the drowned men were putting the blame on him:

I took the wafer [...] and it burned my tongue. The wine taste of dead men, 2,000 dead men. In the face of the priest I saw dead men accusing me [...]. I gripped the chalice, though I could feel the priest try and take it from me.

I gripped the chalice.

When the priest gently curled away my fingers I saw the imprint of the silver on each palm. Were these my stigmata then? Would I bleed for every death and living death? (Winterson, *The Passion* 46)

As his mention of the stigmata makes clear, Henri had the extraordinary perception that the drowned men were asking him to stop Napoleon from sending more men to the slaughterhouse by assuming a sacrificial role comparable to the role assumed by Jesus Christ’s in atonement for the sins of humankind.

Henri had been brought up by his devout mother and by the village priest, a staunch supporter of Napoleon: “For years, my mentor, the priest who had supported the Revolution, told me that Bonaparte was perhaps the Son of God come again” (15). The

priest also told him that: “the Revolution would bring forth a new Messiah and the millennium on earth [...]. Christ said he came not to bring peace but a sword, Henri, remember that.” (16). This remark may be interpreted as evidence that the new *Messiah* was Napoleon Bonaparte, but as the episode in the church makes clear, it is Henri who is called to undertake this role. The fact that Napoleon is capable of sacrificing thousands of soldiers every day without giving it a thought responds to the figure of Jehovah, the awe-inspiring and jealous god of the *Old Testament* that can only be appeased by the sacrifice of his own son. Henri’s passion for Napoleon, like that of the priest and the French people in general, has this element of worship in it. As the priest tells Henri: “He’ll call you [...] like God called Samuel and you’ll go.” (17). Just as Villanelle must follow the Queen of Spades, so Henri will follow Napoleon. But Henri’s and Villanelle’s quests are not the only ones described in biblical terms, as Thomas Fahy notes: “many characters experience Christ-like suffering, such as the prostitute who like Christ ‘lost consciousness at thirty-nine (lashes)’.” (99).

2. METHOLOGICAL APPROACH: THE HERO’S QUEST

As we have seen, *The Passion* has clear postmodernist features. It combines historical settings and personages with self-reflexivity (historiographic metafiction); it is highly intertextual; and it endorses a feminist ideology. A common tenet of postmodernist critics like Elisabeth Wesseling is that postmodernist literature “has inherited the critical attitude of the modernist, shorn of its mythical and metaphysical elements.” (98). However, Susana Onega has already analysed *The Passion* from a Jungian perspective, thus demonstrating that this is not so. This dissertation will also approach the novel from a mythical perspective as its purpose is to demonstrate that the mythical element is still present in postmodernism, more specifically, in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion*.

To do so, I will analyse Henri's physical and spiritual journey throughout Europe, from the perspective provided by Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth, as presented in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was an American anthropologist and one of the earliest and most influential authorities in the study of comparative mythology. In 1949 he published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a colossal compendium and comparative analysis of the different stages in the journeys undertaken by the heroes of virtually all mythic traditions in the world. His aim was to prove the archetypal nature of this journey, which is not only physical but also spiritual. As Campbell states, the spiritual side of the individual hero's quest is often expressed in the form of dreams: "Dream is the personalised myth, myth the depersonalised dream" (14). The association of dreams to the unconscious enhances the psychological and spiritual aspects of the myth. Thanks to the deeds and achievements that such a quest entails, the mythical hero provides his community with the so-called "boon" (148) or elixir that "may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds." (167). This renewal represents the knowledge acquired along the journey and can be considered as a personal overcoming of one's fragmented self. The purpose and actual effect of this type of quest myths or legends of the primitive tribes and civilisations was "to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life." (6). In other words, the aim of the archetypal journey is to help a young and purblind quester — like Henri — to overcome the different stages in his process of maturation, to understand the role he has to play in life and to unify his fragmented self. The idea of the quest is present in *The Passion* from the very beginning. Winterson herself has acknowledged

that: “the journey or the quest, which is the search after the Self [...] marks the shape of all my work without exception” (*The World* 233-34).

3. ANALYSIS OF THE HERO’S QUEST IN *THE PASSION*

3.1. Circularity

According to Campbell, the hero’s quest is divided into three main stages: Separation, Initiation and Return (23). Put together they constitute the “monomyth” or archetypal structure of the hero’s quest. Its structure is represented in the form of a circle, thus making clear that circularity is one of its basic features. *The Passion* reproduces this circular structure by using different narrative devices. The reader is given precise information about the dates in which the events took place. Henri’s account of events begins in 1797, the year in which he joined the army, and finishes on “New Year’s Day, 1805” (Winterson, *The Passion* 50). Significantly, Villanelle’s narration, which begins in Chapter Two, is framed within the same dates but for different reasons. It begins in 1797 as well, but for her this is the year that marked Napoleon’s invasion of Venice, her home town. Likewise, her narration ends on “New Year’s Day, 1805” (82). The fact that Villanelle’s dates are the same as those of Henri points to circularity because her narration takes readers back to the previous episodes narrated by Henri on the same date. The readers also encounter expressions that reappear once and again throughout the novel, and which have the same effect as the repetition of dates. As Onega points out, “[Villanelle and Henri] often use the same words, expressions and refrains, share the same or complementary thoughts and do the same or similar things.” (Winterson 57). While Onega sees this similarity in their narrations as “striking” (57), Seaboyer refers to the sentences they repeat as “somewhat gnomic lines echoing uncannily back and forth between Henri’s and Villanelle’s narratives” (494). Some of these are the

following: “will you kill people, Henri” (Winterson, *The Passion* 6, 83); “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play” (47, 70, 79 and *passim*); and the most remarkable of all: “I’m telling you stories. Trust me.” (3, 13, 43, 74, 172). Moreover, Winterson enhances circularity by calling various characters after Tarot cards: Villanelle’s first love is nicknamed “The Queen of Spades,” the Cook, “The Jack of Hearts,” and Bonaparte is referred to as “The Emperor.” When the major arcana of the Tarot are spread they are usually arranged in “the shape of a recumbent eight [...] symbolizing the ever-recurrent circularity of the hero’s quest” (∞) (Onega, *Circularity* 204). Therefore, the characters’ names point to the archetypal nature of the journeys of the protagonists. As Onega argues, “Henri’s and Villanelle’s parallel life quests begin separately, intertwine with each other after their apparently chance encounter, and eventually diverge” (204).

3.2. Title and Epigraph

The title of the novel already implies the idea of the quest. Jesus Christ, the protagonist of “the passion” in the *New Testament*, is an archetypal quester, his life was the great quest of the hero/god/*Messiah* of the Christian religion, a quest that many other heroes/gods all around the globe — Mohammed, Gautama Buddha — have undertaken or experienced according to the lore of their different communities. After the title, another element that adds to the idea of the hero’s quest is the epigraph:

You have navigated with raging soul, far from the paternal home, passing beyond the seas’
double rocks and now you inhabit a foreign land.

Medea

These words correspond to Euripides' tragedy, *Medea*. As Onega points out, they are uttered by the Chorus to Medea and "allude to how Medea renounced family and home for Jason's sake when she helped him and the Argonauts run away with the Golden Fleece." (Winterson 56) Thematically, the epigraph is doubly connected with the novel. On the one hand, it makes reference to what Onega describes as the "all-consuming passion to possess something unique" (56): Jason is obsessed with possessing the Golden Fleece, and Medea "Jason's heart" (56). It is in order to fulfil their respective consuming passions that these mythical characters undertake their quests; and this is precisely what happens to Henri and Villanelle, as they undertake a parallel quest across Europe prompted by their passions, in Henri's case, for Napoleon and, in that of Villanelle, for the Queen of Spades. In fact, many characters in the novel have a passion of their own. For Napoleon, it is to master the world. He is ready to sacrifice thousands of men in his consuming desire to invade the whole of Europe, especially Russia and England. Like that of Henri, Napoleon's passion will eventually take him to a rocky island isolated from the rest of the world. For Patrick, it is that of finding the treasure hoarded by the goblins (Winterson, *The Passion* 42-43). For Henri's mentor, the priest, his passions are Napoleon and the Virgin Mary: "The priest carried a drawing of Bonaparte next to his drawing of the Blessed Virgin" (16). And for The Queen of Spade's husband, who was always travelling to remote lands, it is the Holy Grail (72). The archetypal nature of his quest also enhances the mythical component of the novel as do Henri's words when he says: "Not all men are as fortunate as Ulysses" (88).

3.3. Henri's Self-fragmentation

A salient aspect of Henri's personality, attributable to his upbringing, is his self-fragmentation. He was brought up by a pious mother who did not love her husband —

“She [Henri’s mother] wanted to be a nun. She hoped I would be a priest” (Winterson, *The Passion* 8) — and a priest who taught him to play cards and love Napoleon. In the first chapter, Henri recalls a day his father offered him his shaving mirror but he refused to look at himself in it because it offered him “only one face” (27), preferring instead to look at himself in a copper pot because it reflected “all the distortions of his face” (27). As Onega argues, he thus missed the opportunity to round off his Lacanian “mirror stage” phase (Winterson 60). According to Jacques Lacan, in order to develop the individual “I,” the child undergoes different stages. The Lacanian “mirror stage” is all about the process of self-recognition. The child is with an adult, normally his father, and looks at itself in a mirror; the child does not recognise its own image yet, he confuses it with that of the adult. Then, he acquires the notion of reflection and, after it, the notion of his own reflection as different from that of the adult. This process ends up with the child taking the figure of his father as his “Ideal I” and understanding that one day he will have to substitute him, in order to become the new father. Henri never identified with Claude, his father. As Seaboyer suggests, what is remarkable about this episode is that he “construct[ed] his mirror self out of an image associated with domesticity and the feminine” (501); that is, with the reflection provided by a cooking pot instead of his father’s shaving mirror. This interpretation suggests that Henri is suffering from a strong Oedipus complex that interferes with his normal maturation process. Onega defines this episode as “crucial” (Winterson 61) since “if [Henri] is to mature he will have to find a substitute ‘ideal-I’ figure” (61). This represents an early failure in his process of individuation. Henri tries to compensate for this lack by taking Napoleon as his ideal-I. He wishes to become like him and is ready to follow him wherever he goes. As Onega notes (Winterson 61), in fact, when Henri tells about his passion for Bonaparte he uses Lacanian mirror-stage imagery:

When I fell in love it was as though I looked into a mirror for the first time and saw myself [...].
 And when I had looked at myself and grown accustomed to who I was, I was not afraid to hate
 parts of me because I wanted to be worthy of the mirror bearer. (Winterson, *The Passion* 166)

3.4. Henri's Life Journey

Henri was fragmented from the early stages of his life and, therefore, in need of undertaking a quest for physical and spiritual maturation. According to Campbell, the hero's quest presupposes the existence of two worlds: "the world of common day" (211) and "the region of wonder" (23). Jesus Christ is a perfect example of what Campbell referred to as the "Master of the two worlds" (196) for he descended to hell, came back to earth to save humankind, and ascended to heaven. The proof that Henri is a mythical quester is that he is free "to pass back and forth across the world division" (197). His world of common day is the village where he was born. It represents the comfort zone where he was happy with his mother, Georgette. He always recalls his homeland/village and his mother in a nostalgic and even painful mood: "I was homesick from the start. I missed my mother. [...] I missed the everyday things I had hated" (Winterson, *The Passion* 5). On the contrary, the "region of wonder" (Campbell 23) is the European fields he crosses while involved in Napoleon's attempt to conquer England and Russia.

The Call to Adventure is "the first stage of the mythological journey" (Campbell 48). In Henri's case it begins with his decision to become a soldier, for it implies leaving his village and mother, and entering the war zone. He joined the army in 1797, so this date marks the moment of "separation" (23). At the beginning, he wishes to become a drummer so as to get close(r) to Napoleon, his Ideal-I figure. This is his main goal in life. However, his initial wish to become a drummer was frustrated when a recruiting officer offered him a walnut and asked him to crack it between finger and

thumb. Henri failed to do so and then offered the officer the same challenge but, as Henri states, “[h]e coloured up and had a Lieutenant take me to the kitchen tents” (4). This apparently amusing episode is rather significant, as it constitutes the “blunder” (Campbell 42) that initiates Henri’s adventure as it marks the point when he became a scullion. This was a necessary step in order to meet Napoleon and so, to reach what he believed was his destiny. Though frustrated in his expectations, he kept his “head high enough because [he knew that he would] see Bonaparte himself” (Winterson, *The Passion* 7).

Once he is taken to the kitchen, Henri meets his new master, the Cook. From a Campbellian perspective, the Cook can be interpreted as the threshold guardian. Before crossing the first threshold, the hero must face the custodian that guards it. This is a necessary step so as to enter the new sphere: the “zone of magnified power” (Campbell 64). “Such custodians [stand] for the limits of the hero’s present sphere or life horizon. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown and danger” (64). In a sense, this is what the Cook represents to Henri: “There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat and conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark” (211). This shadow presence is the Cook for beyond him is the darkness of the Napoleonic fields of war and the whole “road of trials” that is awaiting him (81). A mythical hero faces this guardian and defeats him, and by doing so, acquires or conciliates his powers. In what may be interpreted as a misled attempt to help him mature, the Cook takes Henri to a brothel. The teenage boy had never had any sexual encounter or experience before, and he did not know what to do, how to act, or what to say: “My companions brayed and whistled and shoved the wine down their throats [...]. I wanted a cup of water but I didn’t know how to ask” (Winterson, *The Passion* 13). Out of his maternal comfort zone, Henri behaved like a child in an adult place. When he was

left alone with one of the prostitutes, he mumbled a few words “hoping she’d realise that [he] didn’t know what to do” (14). Meanwhile, the Cook was mistreating one of the prostitutes in front of all the companions he had brought with him, including Henri. It is precisely at this moment that Henri starts “thinking of porridge” (14), something that recalls home, his mother. His association of the Cook’s semen with the porridge his mother made in the copper pot (26) where he liked to see his face reflected is overwhelming. He felt a strong urge “to go to him and ram his face in the blanket until he had no breath left” (14), but, paralysed by shock as he is, Henri is unable to act. The brothel scene is, then, a “traumatic experience” (Onega, *Winterson* 71), signalling “the original trauma Henri has to overcome if he is to mature” (71). It is the shock provoked by this scene that “caused Henri to suppress similarly reprehensible sexual drives in himself and to project them onto the cook, thus bringing about the fragmentation of his ego and shadow” (71). His failure to defeat the beast (the Cook) with his hands or accomplish heroic deeds shows Henri as an antihero.

A few days later, Bonaparte visited the camp unexpectedly. That day the Cook was so drunk that nobody could awake him, and Henri was asked to take him away. However, Napoleon himself caught him and Domino red handed and, while they were trying to give the Emperor some sort of explanation, Bonaparte chose Henri as his personal cook: “then Bonaparte turned to me. ‘You’ll see great things [...]’. Captain, see to it that this boy waits on me personally” (Winterson, *The Passion* 19). Henri had been chosen, and the Cook, his former master, was fired from the camp. Thus, Henri ends up acquiring the beast’s powers: he becomes the new cook.

Thereafter he is ready to enter the wilderness, to pass from his “present sphere” (Campbell 64) to a yonder zone of “unknown and danger” (64): the European fields of war. By so doing Henri crosses what Campbell calls “the first threshold” (64). His new

destination is Russia. He has embarked in the so-called road of trials. This stage represents the “process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past” (Campbell 84). Yet, Henri is trapped in the Oedipus complex, and is not a true hero, as he does not seem able to “survive a succession of trials” (81) and defeat all the opposing forces he encounters along the road. As a member of the French army, Henri takes part in dreadful battles such as “Ulm and Austerlitz. Eylau and Friedland” (Winterson, *The Passion* 83). However, he does not face the road of trials as a mythical hero would for, as Villanelle later notes, he spent eight years in battle “without so much as wounding another man.” (157).

What is more, a true mythical hero finds sense out of these trials, but this is not Henri’s case either. As he keeps on moving forward Henri becomes more and more aware of the uselessness of their actions:

No one’s on your side when you’re the conqueror. Your enemies take up more room than your friends [...] we slept two or three hours a night and died in thousands every day. (Winterson, *The Passion* 83)

Hence, Henri realises that soldiers mean nothing to Napoleon, just numbers, Henri is a soldier and, therefore, a number, as a result he begins to feel disappointed with his supposed ideal-I. This period makes him progressively aware of Napoleon’s selfishness and greediness, of his lust for power, his consuming passion to conquer everything at all cost: “I think it was that night that I knew I couldn’t stay any longer. I think it was that night that I started to hate him” (89). Later on he adds: “I don’t want to worship him anymore. I want to make my own mistakes. I want to die in my own time.” (92). Onega interprets these words as Henri’s rejection of “the anonymity imposed on him by Napoleon” (Winterson 71). According to her reading, “[t]he realisation of his

own worth initiates the inward-looking movement in Henri's individuation process." (71). But, although he has fallen out of love with Napoleon, Henri has not yet matured at all: he still misses his mother and admits his "own need for a little father" (Winterson, *The Passion* 85), which is how the Russians think of the Tzar.

It is precisely during this period of realisation that Henri encounters Villanelle, the person that will drastically change the course of his journey: "When I got back to the kitchen tent, Patrick was waiting for me with a woman I had never met. She was a *vivandière*" (92). Villanelle reaffirms what Henri was already pondering in his mind, that every individual has his or her own worth. Or, in Villanelle's words, that every snowflake is different:

Then she said. 'They're all different'

What?

Snowflakes. Think of that.'

I did think of that and I fell in love with her. (93)

Henri's meeting with Villanelle could be compared to the "meeting with the goddess" (Campbell 91). This archetypal figure is defined as "the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, and the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthy and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress and bride" (91). Significantly, Henri describes her in these goddess-like terms: "this is sure: whatever [Villanelle] touches, she reveals" (Winterson, *The Passion* 134). According to Campbell, this meeting is "represented as a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Goddess of the World" (91). Such mystical marriage may be said to culminate in the episode in which Henri and Villanelle make love. When they met, Henri was still a virgin and Villanelle teaches him how to make love. As Henri narrates:

One night she turned over suddenly and told me to make love to her.

‘I don’t know how.’

‘Then I’ll make love to you’ (Winterson, *The Passion* 110)

Indeed, Villanelle acts as a teacher to Henri as she also teaches him how to row (134). Her knowledge echoes the mythical function of woman, according to Campbell:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. [...] she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. The hero who can take her as she is [...] is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world. (97)

Thus, Henri is the learner and Villanelle his teacher. But Henri cannot take her as she is. She can only offer him brotherly love, yet he wishes a partner’s love. Therefore, Henri cannot round off the mythical hero’s process. As Campbell states: “Where the Oedipus-Hamlet revulsion remains to beset the soul, there the world, the body, and woman above all become the symbols no longer of victory but of defeat” (102).

According to Campbell, the meeting with the goddess is the final test of the hero’s talent to win the boon of love (charity: *amor fatti*) (97). Echoing this, Villanelle gives Henri the boon or elixir to restore the world, to restore his inner self. This boon is the knowledge, transmitted to Henri through her metaphor of the snowflakes, of the precious value of life. After gathering this knowledge, Henri understands the uselessness of his infatuation with Napoleon and is ready to desert. After having decided to leave Russia with Villanelle, he initiates the last stage of the monomyth, the return (Campbell 167). Theoretically, this journey should lead him to France again, which was his point of departure, yet he stops in Venice. On his arrival, he sleeps for

three days in Villanelle's "quiet house" (Winterson, *The Passion* 120). For a brief moment Henri believes to have fought and defeated the past:

The past had gone. I had escaped [...]. Eight soldier years had gone into the canal with the beard [...]. Eight years of Bonaparte. I saw my reflection in the window; this was the face I had become. (136)

It is significant that he uses mirror imagery again to talk about his new face. It is as if he had matured and overcome the self-fragmentation expressed in the distortions of his face in his mother's copper pot, associated to the Oedipus phase, as if he had achieved self-unification and the completion of the monomyth. However, as Arnold J. Toybnee states: "Schism in the soul [...] will not be resolved by any scheme of return to the good old days [...]. Only birth can conquer death — the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new." (qtd. in Campbell 11). Although Henri believes that he has succeeded, destiny is about to prove him wrong. Right after having shaved his beard (a gesture that may be interpreted as evidence that he has moved beyond his earlier refusal to look at himself in his father's shaving mirror), Henri relives the same experience that had paralysed him in the past: the brothel scene takes place again, but this time it is not a prostitute the Cook is ill-treating, but Villanelle. Henri is offered a second chance to defeat his threshold guardian, his dark emanation. And this time he does act and succeeds. However, there is an element of extra-violence in his success: instead of being content with killing the Cook, he decides to carve out his heart. This is the trial that he fails, leading him to definitive fragmentation. After witnessing this episode, Villanelle thinks: "Henri is a gentle man and I wonder if it was killing that fat cook that hurt his mind?" (Winterson, *The Passion* 157). As Onega puts it: "Henri finally comprehends that the violence he had always restrained in himself and projected onto the cook in fact

formed part of himself” (*Winterson* 73). Henri then goes insane and is sent to San Servelo. There, the reader finds that Henri has not overcome the Oedipus phase yet, for he still sees the ghost of his mother, and he tries to strangle himself. As Campbell explains, “[a]ny prolonged absence of the parent causes tension in the infant and consequent impulses of aggression” (4). According to Fahy, when “the search for wholeness [...] fails, Winterson’s characters turn to art” (101) and these are precisely Henri’s plans during his stay at the madhouse. He plans to grow a garden and transform his war journals into a diary. As Onega argues, this writing activity opens up the possibility of Henri’s healing, as “by writing/recounting retrospectively [his] own life stories, [he can transform] the painful and fragmentary events of [his life] into coherent, self-healing narratives” (*Circularity* 196). The same healing potential lies behind his plan of turning the rocky island into a garden of red roses. In Onega’s words:

Similarly, from a mythical perspective, the metamorphosis of the arid rocky yard into a rose garden may be read as proof that Henri is employing his creative imagination to circle himself back to a prelapsarian world of unity and harmony and is therefore ready to start his quest for individuation again (*Circularity* 205)

4. CONCLUSION

As my reading of the novel has attempted to show, there is a wealth of mythical elements in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion*. This overtly experimental, postmodernist novel has a circular structure; its purblind hero, Henri, is compared to archetypal questers like Jesus Christ and Ulysses; and Villanelle has the defining features of the archetypal goddess. The epigraph already points to the quest as the organising principle of the novel. And there are many quests involved in it, not only that of Henri and Villanelle. In consonance with the ethos of postmodernist fiction, Henri could be

considered as a parody of the mythical hero. He undertakes the same steps a mythical hero would. However, he fails in each of them. His life could be summarised as a succession of failed trials. Henri received the boon of understanding true love from Villanelle, but he did not fight his past hard enough to control his violence and he failed in his climactic second opportunity to defeat the Cook / his dark emanation. Hence, he is not like the hero of the myths, he is somewhat more humane. Myths are closer to tales with a happy, consolatory or cautionary ending, yet life is not always so. Henri's life could perfectly have been any real soldier's life framed within the Napoleonic Wars. Yet, Winterson still offers some hope at the end of the novel. Art can save people even when everything seems hopeless. In Henri's case he draws on writing his diary and growing his garden of red roses; other Winterson characters may use, or rely on different artistic practices. However, the underlying idea is the same: Art can heal psychic wounds. We are the true heroes of our own lives, and we may make mistakes in our decisions as happens with Henri; but there is always hope.

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