

Essay on trauma, history and truth in the passion

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* is a novel which explores the complex nature of the manner in which humans react to trauma and how it affects their perception of what the truth is as well as how this truth continually changes throughout one's personal history. The themes of trauma, history and truth are omnipresent throughout the novel and combine together to shape the destinies of the two protagonists; Henri and Villanelle.

Henri in *The Passion* suffers from the trauma of having partaken in the Napoleonic Wars, and witnessing the deaths of many comrades and friends due to the frivolous whims of the dictator Napoleon. The resultant hatred and disappointment in Napoleon a man he used to worship, becomes a pivotal influencing factor in his future decisions and eventual state of madness and it is the cumulative effects of each of these traumatic events which leads to Henri's eventual disposition the first of which he notes in his journal as " July 20th , 1804, 2000 men were drowned today" (Winterson 24).

Like Henri, the character of Villanelle in *The Passion* is also a slave to her trauma's, but in her case it is the trauma of having her heart stolen which seems to reign supreme in her mind rather than other more disturbing events which one would presume would be attributed greater significance. Villanelle's desires and actions throughout the novel are deeply influenced by her tryst with a wealthy female in which she views herself as a helpless pawn at the mercy of the woman, the fact that this woman has made her feel vulnerable is considered by the character to be far traumatic than her ruthless sexual exploitation by unscrupulous men. As the character herself explains

" Whoever it is you fall in love with for the first time, not just love but be in

love with, is the one who will always make you angry, the one you can't be logical about. It may be that you are settled in another place, it may be that you are happy, but the one who took your heart wields final power."

(Winterson 145)

Henri, who is essentially horrified at Napoleon's decision to conduct battle practice

During a severe storm which results in the losses of lives of many of his fellow soldiers reacts by continuing to blindly follow Napoleon. " No one said, Let's leave him, let's hate him. We held our bowls in both hands and drank our coffee with the brandy ration he'd sent specially to every man." (Winterson 38).

Villanelle's reaction to being rejected by the woman she loves in favor of her husband was also tantamount to repression as she decided to immediately succumb to the patriarchal institution of heterosexual marriage with an individual she is thoroughly repulsed by and accepts his offer of travelling the world to escape from the object of her desires. " She loved her husband. I decided to marry." (Winterson 96).

While the retrospective narrative of Henri is highly critical of the naivety and love he used to hold for Napoleon, he readily admits that the love and admiration at the time was real. The ambivalent response to the trauma that he endures and his blind subservience to Napoleon, results in his desertion from the army. However this in itself is not cathartic as the trauma's of war are replaced with the trauma of being rejected by Villanelle. He manages to repeat the same mistakes that he made with Napoleon which was blind subservience despite significant warning signs. His willful ignorance of the

truth about the two individuals that he perhaps loves the most in his life torments until he is finally able to break free of both bonds. Henri's denial of the truth is different from that of Christopher's in that Henri's continues to act in the manner in which he does despite being aware of the truth and it requires several traumatic incidents for him to alter his behavior.

Villanelle's perception of the truth is greatly influenced by the mystical and properties which she assigns events that are traumatic. Beginning with the odd nature of her feet, to the disappearance of her biological father and including her encouragement of Henri to physically retain her heart, trauma for Villanelle is rationalized using mythical stories which are entirely logical to Villanelle.

The sense that truth and history are highly dependent on the particular biases of an individual and society and how these biases and perceptions change over time pervades throughout the novel. Henri's love for Napoleon is embedded into him by a priest who is tasked with educating the boy on religious matters and is strengthened by French society which is having a love affair with Napoleon. That Napoleon is a great man is a historical truth for Henri, until his personal history begins to unfold and this truth begins to change. He recognizes that others may believe in a truth that is different to his own versions, specifically in terms of the Russian peasants that love the Czar, which Henri attributes to their unique environment. The idea that the truth and understanding of history changes over time in societal sense is also portrayed in the novel through the growing unpopularity of Napoleon amongst the French towards the end of the book, the love affair with

Napoleon begins to end when the French grow weary of repeated wars and begin to view Napoleon as a fallible human being.

Works Cited

Winterson, Jeanette. *The passion*. New York: Grove Press, 1997. Print.