



# Reading Between the Lines: Exploring Foreground, Background and Viewpoints in Winterson's Narrative.

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**Abstract-** The novel *Sexing the Cherry* which is selected for analysis is written by British writer Jeanette Winterson. She is known for her innovative narrative style and bold explorations of gender, sexuality, myth and identity. In this research paper the researcher will analyse a passage from Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the cherry*, by applying Wolfgang Iser's reader-response literary theory. The passage will be analysed through the lens of Iser's hermeneutical concepts like foreground and background and wandering viewpoint. The analysis will demonstrate how Winterson's narrative compels the reader to join in the process of meaning-making. The paper argues the reader's meaning making process is actively structured because of the nonlinear narration, temporal fluidity and the mythic-historical layering occurring in the narrative. The paper will discuss how the foreground and background contrast each other and will study its effect on the reader's interpretation. The readers are prompted to move between perspectives, times and continually revisit interpretations because of the mechanism of the wandering viewpoint. The paper will shed a light on how the narrative destabilizes a fixed perspective and demands the reader's participation in stitching together multiple vantage points. By employing Iser's theoretical framework, the paper asserts that there is a continuous negotiation between the immediacy and distance which the reader has to undergo in order to reach meaning/s which are open to multiple interpretations.

**Keywords-** Reader-response theory, Hermeneutics, Foreground, Background, Wandering Viewpoint.

## I. Introduction

The author Jeanette Winterson has written many books where she reflects on her childhood and sexuality. The novel *Sexing the cherry* resists a linear narrative convention which includes mythical reworkings. The prose is known for temporal fluidity where the fiction challenges the binary oppositions like that of male/female, history/story, reality/fantasy and the writer questions the fixed notions of identity. It blends the history with fantastical elements where there is also presence of philosophical reflection layered in prose style. The novel blends intellectual inquiry with emotional intensity which is an important facet of postmodern fiction. Because of its narrative complexity the novel invites a reading experience where the role of reader becomes crucial in construction of meaning.

*Sexing the Cherry* is a postmodern, genre-blending novel in which the writer mingles the history, myth and fantasy to explore the aspects of gender and identity. The novel is partly set in 17th century England during the Puritan era and the other time frame is that of the timeless modernity. There are two central figures in the novel namely Dog



Woman who lives on the margins of society and has adopted a boy. She resists social and religious constraints with bold defiance. The other character is Jordon, who is the boy Dog Woman raises. He is a dreamer and a traveller. He loves to explore the world and go beyond the limits of his world. The narrative moves between realism and fantasy as Jordan travels across seas and through strange lands. In one section the text reimagines an alternate version of the twelve dancing princesses by giving each princess her own voice and fate which subverts the gender expectations. The narration in the novel is non-linear and lyrical. Time shifts between past and present which creates a sense that identity and desire transcend time. These qualities make it a perfect piece for analysing it through Wolfgang Iser's lens.

Iser posits that meaning is not fixed within the text but it is a product of the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. Iser's concepts of foreground, background, wandering viewpoint and theme and horizon provide a theoretical framework for examining how does a reader navigates through the gaps present in the text, the shifting perspectives and the implied meanings. The paper explores how Winterson's narrative strategies deliberately disrupt the passive reading and encourage the reader to ask questions to the text. The foreground composing of the vivid physical descriptions draws the reader's immediate attention while the political unrest, personal longing and social critique these elements emerge subtly as the background. The shift in the perspectives in the narrative while reading the passage between observation to personal reflection and finally to indirect commentary, compels the reader to adapt his perspective continuously.

## II. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative theory driven research grounded in reader-response criticism. The primary source is Wolfgang Iser's theoretical book *The Act of reading* and the novel *Sexing the cherry*. This research will use Iser's concept of foreground, background and wandering viewpoint as the primary analytical lens through which the excerpt from the text will be analysed. The researcher has selected this excerpt because it showcases the tension between what is said explicitly and what is implied in the text and it becomes challenging for the reader to reach to a stable interpretation as the foreground and background interact with each other. The reader has to juggle between the distinct viewpoints present in the selected section and form a provisional interpretation to take the reading forward. A close reading of the given excerpt will be conducted. The analysis is subjective and will vary according to reader's perspective and experience.

### **The excerpt from the text *Sexing the cherry* to be analysed by applying Wolfgang Iser's concepts of Reader response theory:**

"It must have been in about 1640, when Jordan was something close to ten, that he met John Tradescant on the banks of the boiling Thames. It was a summer so hot that a housewife never had to lay a fire for her roasted pig; all she need do was tether it in the yard for an hour. For myself, the wafts of heat regularly assaulting me seemed to come from the very doors of Hell, and I am sure that on Judgement Day those who are not on the side of the angels will feel this same scorching on their faces and toes as a foretaste of their torments to come. I could scarcely step outside without sweating off me enough liquid to fill a bucket.



These waterfalls took with them countless lice and other timid creatures, and being forced to put myself often under the pump I can truly say that I was clean. 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness,' said a Puritan passing by. 'God looks on the heart, not a poor woman's dress,' I retorted, but there was no stopping his little sermon, which he gave with his eyes rolled back as piously as a rabbit's. It is true that the ferment in the city is due not only to the heat, but also to the King seeming to turn Papish on us, and Parliament being in uproar, and Cromwell with his lump-shaped head stirring it and stirring it. Jordan had got up early one morning to sail his boats and I had promised him an apple after my duties with the dogs. Squinting against the light I set off to find him and saw him in the distance sitting on an eaten-up jetty, a gentleman beside him. I hurried myself, thinking it might be some smooth-faced rascal set to chivvy him away.

As I got closer Jordan waved to me and the gentleman stood up and bowed slightly, which pleased me a good deal, and said his name was John Tradescant. Then he gave a little pause and said, 'Gardener to the King.' He was a good-looking man in his thirties, and he gave no sign of fear that the wormy jetty might dissolve at any moment, with my weight swaying it as a crow would a wren's house. He asked me if I cared to sit down, and I took pity on him and trod back on to the bank. He squatted a while to fiddle in his bag and came out with three peaches. One he offered me, and one he gave to Jordan, who held it in both hands as though it were a crystal ball. 'I grew them,' said Tradescant. 'You are eating from the King's tree.' And then he bit into his and spurted the juice right over himself. Cautiously I bit into mine, but in a more ladylike fashion. Jordan did nothing, and I had to remind him of his manners. Tradescant told me he had been walking the length of the river from Putney to Mermaid Dock, troubling himself with a problem. He had seen a little boat sail by and was so enchanted by its easy passage that he forgot his melancholy and relived in his mind his own days of adventure on the seas. For years, until 1637 when his father died, he had sailed to exotic places collecting such rare plants as mortals had never seen.

These he housed in his father's museum and physic garden at Lambeth. On his father's death he was forced to return from voyaging in Virginia and take up the family post of gardener to the King. He liked it well enough, but sometimes he felt hollow inside, and on those days he knew his heart was at sea. 'A man must have responsibilities,' he said. 'But they are not always the ones he would choose.' 'Indeed not,' said I, 'and for a woman the Devil's burden is twice the load.' As Tradescant had stood on the bank watching the boat, his body like stone, his mind racing, Jordan had come running by, shouting encouragement to his little ship. His eyes were for his business, not on Tradescant's thighs, and in a moment the two of them were flat down on the bank and Jordan was torn between the terror of being walloped and the possibility of losing his boat. As it was, Tradescant hauled him up, rescued the vessel and took the two of them to sit down on the jetty, where I found them."

(Pg No 12-13) Jenette Winterson *Sexing the Cherry*.

**Applying Iser's concept of foreground and background to the above passage and examining the effect of its interaction on the reader's interpretation process.**

According to Wolfgang Iser foreground consists of the aspects which are salient, immediate, striking or thematically charged which captures the reader's attention while the aspects that form the background are habitual, assumed, culturally sedimented and



historically stable. As the reading progresses the foreground and background interact with each other causing the gaps to open and expectation are arisen, where now the reader has to negotiate between what the text makes explicit and what it leaves implicit. The elements which stand out, are immediately noticeable and emphasized by the narrative are the foregrounding elements in the literary text. In the above passage the sensory details and description form the foreground.

The oppressive summer heat is foregrounded in a grotesque and comic terms through the statements like "a housewife never had to lay a fire for her roasted pig," and "sweating off me enough liquid to fill a bucket." These exaggerations from the authorial voice grabs the reader's attention, offering humour but also building a vivid physical setting. The images are created in the reader's mind through hyperbolic sensory description like the heat of summer is described as apocalyptic. These images create an immediacy that overwhelms historical distance as the reader feels the narrator's embodied experience. The next foregrounding element is the narrator's subjective voice where her witty and irreverent tone stands out where her perspective becomes the primary experiential filter.

The next foregrounding moment is the meeting with the character John Tradescant and the dialogue surrounding the peaches. His title, "Gardener to the King" and his act of sharing fruit from the royal garden highlights the literal and symbolic meaning. Similarly, his physical grace and Jordan's crystal-ball-like wonder are sensorially vivid foreground elements. The last foregrounding element is the emotional tension caused by the Tradescant's longing for adventure on the one hand and the narrator's weariness and Jordan's innocence on the other hand where these personal textures invite empathetic interpretation.

All these foregrounding details pulls the reader into immediacy where the world described feels lived, comic and idiosyncratic. These attention-grabbing portions shape the reader's expectation about the character and the situation.

Running beneath the vivid action is a dense but not over arching background of the political ferment, religious anxiety and social hierarchy. The first backgrounded element in the passage is the political instability where the King is described as turning Papish, the parliament is in uproar and the character Cromwell is stirring it. These details are not narrated but present ambient conditions in which the story is taking place. The next background is a society which is highly religious and judges morally where the Puritan's cliché sermon "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" hints at a culture of moral surveillance. The last element that forms background in the passage are the class tensions where the narrator's reaction to Tradescant's bow, the contrast between a king's gardener and the working women and her joke about a "poor woman's dress" form part of the social backdrop.

All these backgrounding elements give the highly personal scenes a historical frame, but the narrative does not dwell on them. They remain implicit, which requires the reader to bridge the gaps by supplying the knowledge of what he knows about the social condition of 1640 England.



According to Wolfgang Iser meaning arises not from isolated content but from the tension between what is highlighted and what is merely implied. In this passage the tension works on several levels. As the personal experience is foregrounded in the presence of a politically charged background the reader interprets or senses a certain level of irony as a life persists and goes on amid a looming revolution. The ordinary foreground makes the extraordinary background feel more ominous because of the contrast. The next tension occurs between the foreground where Tradescant's peaches and gentleness is highlighted against the background of his royal affiliation. The moment of sharing peaches is intimate, sensory and foregrounded, but his quiet line "Gardener to the King" gives the background of royal authority into the scene.

The reader feels the discrepancy between human warmth and political alignment where meaning emerges in the space between hospitality and hierarchy. Later in the passage, a tension is created by the foregrounded narrator's voice and the unstated danger lurking in the background. The narrator's comic tone, accompanied by her jokes and her earthy self-presentation gives the reader a sense of vitality, but the political background of religious suspicion and rising conflict creates a subtle pressure where the reader infers risk. The reader perceives that her lightness is a strategy of survival amidst these unspoken threats. Lastly, reader experiences pathos as interaction between Jordan's innocence takes place with the instability present in the adult world. Jordan's preoccupation with his toy boats presents a world of childhood innocence. But running parallelly this world is a world on the verge of civil war, religious fragmentation and social upheaval. While reading this passage, the reader recognises the background and interprets innocence as temporary, where it will soon be reshaped by history.

Because of the blanks present, the reader is required to fill those by reconstructing the historical moment comprising of the Puritan culture and civil unrest. The reader has to infer emotional undercurrents through Tradescant's melancholy and the narrator's defensive wit. Finally, the reader has to bridge the disparate registers of the comic domesticity versus the national crises. The oscillation from the sensory immediacy to political implication forces the reader to continuously recalibrate meaning.

Because of the interaction between the foreground and background, the overall effect on the reading experience is that a double vision of history is crated in the reader's mind as the reader experiences 1640 not as abstract "context" but as something lived, through sweat, peaches and Puritan nagging. The reader senses a foreshadowed upheaval as the foreground warmth is shadowed by background instability which prompts anticipation and unease from the reader's side. The reader gets a humanized view of major events where Tradescant's complaint that "a man must have responsibilities" resonates more deeply because the background invites the reader to interpret this as a political as well as personal remark. Lastly, because the intimate encounters are foregrounded against the background of national crises, the text activates the reader's inference-making ability and builds multidimensional characters.

**Applying Wolfgang Iser's concept of Wandering viewpoint to the above-mentioned passage and analysing its effect on the reader's interpretation process.** According to Iser, wandering viewpoint is the way a reader's attention is guided through the text in shifting perspectives. The viewpoint moves across the different



character's orientations, different layers of descriptions and the different temporal or spatial positions within the narrative.

The passage orchestrates significant shifts in focus and perspective which prompts the reader to move with them. The wandering viewpoint shifts from the panoramic historical circumstance to the intensely subjective sensory experience. The opening of the passage situates the reader vaguely in about 1640 by describing a distant historical overview, but immediately plunges into the narrator's comic, sensory exaggerations of the heat. The reader's viewpoint begins with history, with Jordan's age, the year and the Thames. Then, there is a shift to embodied perceptions involving "the wafts of heat", "waterfalls", "lice".

Because of this shift, the reader's viewpoint oscillates between macro elements like the period, the setting and micro elements like the bodily discomfort. This constant resizing creates interpretive dynamism where the world is both historically distant and vividly immediate. The next shift of the viewpoint takes place from the narrator's interior monologue to the intrusion of public voices. The narrator's stream of perceptions is interrupted by the Puritan cliché "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" which is further interrupted by the politically summary of the King turning Papish, the parliament in uproar and Cromwell stirring it description. The effect on the reader's reading process is that the reader's viewpoint is pulled from personal experience to public discourse to political anxiety. The reader is pushed by the text to integrate the narrator's domestic world with the volatile civic world she lives in.

The next shift takes place from the narrator's vantage point to Jordan's distant figure and to Tradescant. The viewpoint shifts spatially as the narrator squints into the distance, the reader sees Jordan as the narrator sees him which is small, on a jetty with a gentleman besides him. As she walks, the perspective narrows and clarifies where the stranger becomes Tradescant. The reader experiences the narrator's movement from the uncertainty to approach to recognition. The reader is encouraged into gradual meaning-making as his apprehension becomes curiosity and finally relief. The next shift occurs as the narrator's evaluation shifts to Tradescant's introspective storytelling. As Tradescant starts speaking, the viewpoint enters his past- his voyages, his role as royal gardener and his into his melancholy and sense of hollow responsibility. This is not part of an interior monologue but a new focal plane within the narrator's recounting.

The effect of this shift on the reader's interpretation process is that the reader must expand the interpretive frame again to integrate Tradescant's present riverside meeting, his past adventures and his emotional conflict. The wandering viewpoint now includes a temporal shift. The last shift in the perspective is from adult concerns to Jordan's childlike perspective where the narrative now momentarily reorients itself around Jordan about his preoccupation with the toy boat, his obliviousness to adult worries and his awe at the peach "as though it were a crystal ball." Because of this shift the reader is briefly invited to adopt the child's experiential frame by refocusing the scale from worldly burdens to innocent wonder.

The text moves the reader where each shift is a cue and this movement has several interpretive consequences. Firstly, this movement in viewpoint prevents a single,



authoritative perspective from dominating the narrative. As the viewpoint continuously wanders no one voice becomes absolute and no single domain whether it is political, domestic, religious or emotional can define the reality alone. The reader has to build the meaning relationally, through synthesis rather than assertion. Secondly, because of the wandering viewpoint a layered understanding of 1640 England is created as it allows the reader to assemble a composite portrait of the political instability, religious tension, daily hardship, intimate human encounters, private emotional histories and the childhood innocence. The reader experiences the textured and nuanced understanding of the period, not a monolithic historical moment, but a lived complexity.

Thirdly, the wandering viewpoint generates interpretive gaps that require active engagement from the side of the reader. As the viewpoint shift abruptly from the narrator to Tradescant's melancholy to Jordan's perspective and to the narrator's social position without any explanation, the reader has to fill in the motivations, social structures, emotional states and the historical context so that the reader can make sense of the passage. Because of the presence of the wandering viewpoint the reader gets to inhabit multiple experiential worlds which results in producing empathy in the reader. As the reader is placed in different modes of being from sweating and suffering with the narrator to fearing for Jordan's safety, from tasting peaches with Tradescant to sailing imaginary seas with Jordon, while all is happening in an oppressed setting of the nation, the empathy is distributed where the meaning arises not from one consciousness but from navigating among many. Lastly, the wandering viewpoint foregrounds the instability of the historical moment where the back-and-forth between mundane and momentous perspectives mirrors the period's turbulence. The instability is experienced by the reader as structural and not thematic, where the wandering viewpoint reproduces the unsettled quality of pre-Civil War England in the act of reading.

#### **Difference between Prior Interpretation and Post Iser's concepts Interpretation.**

Before the application, the reader focuses on the content of the passage and sees the scene as a historical backdrop for Jordan's development, social critique of Puritanism. Also as a scene where Tradescant is introduced as a symbol for exploration and lost desire and the representation of the gender struggle. The reader remains relatively passive receiver of the themes present in the passage. while after applying Iser's concepts the focus of the reader shifts to the process of reading and interpreting rather than the message. Meaning emerges through not only the themes but through the contrast between the grotesque foreground and historical background. The gaps are analysed from which ambiguity of authority and instability of moral judgement arises. The irony forces reader to reevaluate his understanding of religious and political discourse and there is a movement of reader's perspective across different social positions. The text does not only depict 1640's England but now it is orchestrating reader disorientation by exposing that history is constructed, it makes the reader realise that the authority is unstable and the reader is compelled to oscillate between satire and sincerity.

Without Iser's lens the reader ask themselves a question of what does the passage mean? But after studying it through Iser's lens they ask the question how does the passage produce meaning? Earlier there is focus on themes now there is focus on



reader's activation. Earlier history is viewed as a setting but later it is experienced as a background horizon. For the prior interpretation characters are just representations but later characters are the perspective-guiding channels.

### III. Conclusion

After applying concept of foreground and background, the reader becomes aware of the idea that the passage's meaning arises from the dynamic interplay between the foreground and background where the oscillation between them compels the reader to actively synthesize private experience and public upheaval, producing an interpretation in which small human gestures acquire historical weight, and large historical forces gain emotional resonance through their intrusion into daily life. After the application of the concepts the interpretive emphasis shifts from thematic content to readerly process. Before, the passage appears primarily as a vivid historical episode which is set in 1640's Britain where there are social tension present with the puritanism, monarchy and Cromwell. Besides this, there is a humorous portrayal of the Dog woman and a character-introduction scene of John Tradescant. But after viewing the passage through Iser's lens the reader becomes aware that a certain type of foreground is emerging through the exaggerated heat imagery, through narration of grotesque bodily descriptions, the ironic religious commentary and the sudden mention of political ferment.

These elements disrupt the reader's assumption that he is reading a historical narration and further develops scepticism regarding what is narrated and its objectivity. The foreground formed in the reader's mind is modified as the reading process goes on as the background forces itself on the understanding of the foreground. The background consists of the 17th century English Civil War tensions, the gender expectations as well as the protestant- catholic anxieties. The reader compares in his mind the contemporary world with the puritan world and registers the similarities and differences in the two worlds. The hierarchies between the gardener, king, Puritan and the marginal woman is viewed through the contemporary lens by the reader. thus, the passage becomes not merely historical fiction but a space where interaction between the textual cues and reader's expectation collide.

The perspective of the reader is constantly repositioned where at first it is aligned with the Dog Woman's exaggerated bodily consciousness, then shifts to religious satire, later to political unrest and maternal protectiveness. As the reading proceeds, the viewpoint shifts to the admiration of Tradescant, then to a philosophical reflection and finally to a comic scene of Jordan and Tradescant. The reader cannot stabilize interpretation in one mode whether it is historical realism or a satire, a maternal narrative or a political commentary. The destabilization of the authority takes place because of the narrative voice of the Dog Woman as her position is marginal yet central, illiterate yet philosophically sharp. While the wandering viewpoint reveals that the passage deliberately moves the reader through shifting perceptual and thematic frames. This movement between personal, political, sensory, historical and emotional domains requires the reader to construct meaning actively. The interpretive experience becomes a process of continual repositioning, mirroring the flux and uncertainty of the character's world.



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