



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

REVISIONIST VICTORIAN FEMININITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SARAH WATERS

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Abstract

Sarah Waters is a proficient Welsh lesbian writer. Her novels focus on the challenging lesbian practice during the Victorian era. The female characters in her novels at a crucial point, yearns for female accompaniment which gradually turns into a sexual relationship. Waters in her novels concentrates on the female characters who seek comfort in their own gender. Against the backdrop of the feminist critical history of the Victorian novel, Waters reinterprets Victorian literary and cultural gendered paradigms and realigns the understanding of the common tropes of Victorian womanhood. Waters' deconstruction of the Victorian femininity is shaped by twentieth century feminist criticism. Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002) encounters with the female protagonists of the Victorian period. This paper explores the unusual, queer sexualities in the selected novels with the aim of illuminating similarities in the Victorian and contemporary feminist criticism.

Keywords: lesbian, Victorian, queer, womanhood, feminist criticism, paradigms, femininity.

Feminist criticism has acknowledged the nineteenth century feminine novelistic tradition since 1970s in influential books such as Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine* (1992). The result was the construction of a certain type of a Victorian feminine poetics that was in accordance with the central feminist issues of late twentieth century. Self – assertiveness, anti – patriarchal rebellion, artistic and personal independence seemed to be the noticeable characteristics for female authors and heroines in Victorian fiction. Works like Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* were read and taught as perfect specimens of the Victorian feminine anger at patriarchal oppression. Neo – Victorian fiction has capitalised on these feminist studies of Victorian literature, featuring gender in particular construction of femininity as a principal concern.

Sarah Waters' novels firstly reappraise female queer relationships in the context of Victorian period through the lenses of our cultural and historical knowledge and assumptions. A second characteristic is the intrinsic intertextuality of the trilogy. Waters evokes familiar Victorian places and scenarios known from classic novels by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, such as the prison, the madhouse, the music hall or the London underworld. Focussing on the aspirations and conflicts of her lesbian protagonists, Waters explores the positions, spaces and opportunities for agency and the desire for love of these previously doubly – marginalised women unrecognised in Victorian society, and unrepresented in Victorian fiction. Thirdly, all three novels are first – person narratives that can be grouped under the heading of the female artist novel or novel of development.

Against the backdrop of the feminist critical history of the Victorian novel, Waters reinterprets Victorian literary and cultural gendered paradigms and realigns our understanding of the common tropes of Victorian womanhood. Waters' deconstruction of the Victorian femininity is shaped by twentieth century feminist criticism. Waters hold on to enough atmospheric details of plot, protagonists and site that her novels appear thoroughly grounded in established nineteenth century cultural discourses and literary conventions. Avoiding simple imitations by slightly shifting and twisting established critical norms and literary representations, Waters deconstructs some well – established feminist myths and gear towards a new view of Victorian womanhood. This chapter will examine the trilogy's intertextual reassessment of Victorian ideologies. It also deals with Waters' imaginative engagement with feminist criticism by investigating the gendered Victorian tropes and stereotypes such as female confinement, domesticity, female friendship, the unmanageable woman and the woman writer. This chapter also looks at how Waters revisits classical Victorian novels and genres, challenging the concepts of popular culture.

A significant feature of Waters' trilogy is the thorough intertextual involvement with the Victorian iconography of femininity and its interpretations by feminist criticism. Revisiting stereotypical and heteronormative images such as the Victorian spinster, sisterhood and mother – daughter relations, she reminds the cultural and class – informed constructedness of womanhood. The heroine of *Affinity*, the spinster Margaret Prior, exemplifies “the neurasthenic Victorian woman. She is middle – class and the archetypal Gothic heroine; frail, pallid, nervous; prone to blushes and fainting fits” (qtd. in Parker 9). Just as the Victorian writer had been confined in the house of her father, Margaret lives like a convict subjected to the control of her widowed mother. Margaret's sister Priscilla, she does not comply with the norms of reproductive sexuality in marriage but, as a spinster, remains a disturbing presence in the parental home. Her unsympathetic mother drugs her every night with laudanum and sneers at her intellectual aspirations as a writer: “You are not Mrs. Browning, Margaret – as much as you would like to be. You are not, in fact, Mrs. Anybody. You are only *Miss Prior*. And your place – how often must I say it? – your place is here at your mother's side (252 – 253).”

Fingersmith is the most overtly intertextual novel, that it is anchored to two central Victorian novels: Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837 – 1839) and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859). The heroine Sue Tinker's autobiographical account begin not only with a visit to a stage version of *Oliver Twist* as her first memory, but the following plot is grounded in a Dickensian social context of thieves, forgers, pickpockets and impostors. The novel begins with Susan's first memory as a five – year old. She was rented out by her foster – mother Mrs. Sucksby, who runs a baby farm. She sends an older girl and Sue to go begging and pick – pocket at the theatre during the performance of *Oliver Twist*. When the performance reaches its climax and Bill Sykes kills Nancy with a club, Sue takes it for real and understands this scene as the fundamental principle of “how the world was made up: That it had bad Bill Sykeses in it . . . and Nancys, that might go either way”(7). remains a passive and silent victim, Sue's narrative unfolds the physical and mental constrictions of the madhouse, the cruel regime of surveillance, torture and abuse, and turns into a story of resistance and escape. Laura apparently succumbs to

the cruel body discipline, never gains courage and has to be rescued by her sister. The escape from the madhouse in *Fingersmith* marks a turning point in Sue's story where she is no longer instrumentalised and kept under control, but becomes an independent woman in the recovery of her fortune.

Sketching female companionship and sisterhood as a powerful bond, Victorian writers showed how women could gain at least some degree of independence from patriarchal restrictions and a certain measure of control over their lives. The Victorian motif of sisterhood is a most intimate form of a female relationship which opposes the oppressive norms of society and allows women to define themselves as caring and loving individual is a common theme in many nineteenth – century texts. The debunking of the Victorian ideology of femininity through the re – imagination of the trope of Victorian sisterhood in the image of the lesbian couple is complemented in *Fingersmith* and *Affinity*. The shift from the consolidating model of sisterly love and socially destructive dynamics of female homosexual desire is a major aspect of Waters' revisionist approach to Victorian femininity. In *Fingersmith* Susan and Maud's relationship is complicated by the fact that, far from being selfless as well as powerless victims, both are ambiguous characters by defrauding each other. They put their material greed and survival instincts above emotional bonds and culturally produced norms of supportive female behaviour. Her protagonists are doubly – marginalised women in terms of gender and sexual orientation. Their stories are largely coming – out stories in which young women find their identity and emotional and sexual fulfilment in the relationship with another woman.

In *Fingersmith*, Waters sketches a writer who has no artistic ambitions but is able to turn her childhood experience of abuse into a profitable journey. She draws on the well – known market economy of Victorian pornographic culture, dependent on male producers and consumers and the commodification of the female body. The story revolves around Maud Lilly and her uncle, a pornographic bibliophile. The uncle's library is the centre of pornographic knowledge, a discourse of male power of which Maud is the victim. Dressed up as a doll and a reader of pornographic texts to her uncle's male friends, she is staged as the object of the men's illicit desire. Contrarily, she performs as the epitome of Victorian femininity: cool and detached, passive and passionless, subordinate and obedient to her uncle's orders. It is revealed later that Maud, far from remaining a helpless victim, makes good use of her erotic knowledge by becoming a successful author of pornographic novels. By shifting the object of desire into a homosexual frame, Maud fundamentally redresses the imbalance of the male pornographic discourse and transforms it into an expression of her own desire for Susan.

The triangular narrative structure of the novel not only echoes the Victorian format of the triple – decker, it also wedges Maud's narrative in between Susan's narrative at the beginning and the end, and so the final scene. The meeting of Sue and Maud in Susan's house is told from Sue's perspective. And thus the final irony of the novel's gendered erotic discourses is revealed. The illiterate Susan is yet unable to read, so Maud once more reads pornography aloud in the library. But this time it is with an authorial voice of the writer and with the voice of the emotionally engaged lover. She reads from pages that are “filled with all the words for how I want you” (547). For Maud, her writing has no value of its own but is just a means to earn her living and ultimately a surrogate to express her desire for Sue. Ironically, the illiterate Susan's journal entry about their reunion, their touching and kissing each other, reads like the books we imagine Maud to write, only that now the purpose of the authorial voice is not the translation of sexuality into a discourse of power and capital, but into an intimate confession and promise of love. In these two narratives, Maud's fiction which she reads to Sue and Sue's first – person narrative, Waters constructs lesbian desire as a position to speak.

An equal attempt to sexual, emotional and artistic passion is the story of Nan King in *Tipping the Velvet*. Nan's career from an oyster girl to a famous male impersonator in the music hall and then a socialist feminist activist is a conventional Bildungsroman than the story of a girl who finds her true vocation not in a profession but in the relation with another woman. Nan's development is expressed in several spatial image and encounters in the urban space and her

journey in the 19th century. Strongly echoing Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Nan's story is modelled on the formula of a classical picaresque novel. She begins her life in London as a passive spectator of the city spectacle and turns into a successful music hall star. Then later, after the loss of her love Kitty, she leads a hidden existence as the kept woman of a wealthy lady with perverse inclinations. Then performs as a male prostitute in the streets of London, and is finally redeemed by her encounter with a different kind of street walker, the socialist charity worker Florence and her domestic community of women. Waters' late nineteenth century actors such as the flaneur, the streetwalker, and the charity worker interact in an urban space where the display and control of gender performance and sexuality is negotiated.

Throughout the narrative, Nan occupies a peripheral position in society and remains a self – conscious observer and role – player. This becomes particularly obvious at the end of *Tipping the Velvet*. Nan, who knows how to work a crowd from her time as a music hall star, turns her friend Ralph's disastrously delivered political speech at a socialist and feminist rally into a flamboyant success by using her theatrical skills. With this charismatic performance, Nan has finally found her place and role among a group of free – thinking socialists who fight for the rights of the underprivileged and marginalised. Even the final scene, the happy union with her lover Florence has a theatrical ring. It is in the context of her public performance that her former lovers encounter her once more so that she can finally bid them farewell and confirm her union with Florence. This move from a night life in the shadows of deviant sexuality to the final scene in broad daylight serves as a metaphor not only for the history of female homosexuality in the Victorian period, but also for the discovery and recognition of the formerly unrepresented Victorians.

Waters' revisionist approach to Victorian femininity appears far from ideologically unified and straight. She deconstructs altogether too simplistic approaches to Victorian womanhood framed in the ideology of late twentieth century feminist concerns, and ironically subverts feminist tropes of female independence by indulging in the forms of the romance plot. In Waters' diverse representations of lesbian relations – imagined, openly acknowledged and mutually fulfilling, as imbalanced and shaped by violence and domination. The ultimate ideal of all three novels seem to come to is one that is very much modelled on the heterosexual romance as represented in the Victorian sensational novel.

Waters investigates these other places where Victorian gay women found themselves voluntarily or involuntarily, she challenges the ideology of the gendered opposition between the domestic and the public space, and she points to the permeability of the barriers between them. It is in the probing, transgressive exploration of borders and in the process of questioning of orders that her heroines position themselves. Waters' revisionist explorations of Victorian myths of femininity seem to shrink from what we now perceive as the often too imperative positions of feminist narratologists of the 1970s and 1980s. In this trilogy, the feminization of fiction does not mean the repetition of old and established claims for a female voice, but rather the investigation of complex, contradictory, deviant and unresolved positions between gendered binaries.

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