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INTRODUCTION

Today's fascination with the past seems universal and limitless. The idea of revisiting the past as a way to shed light on our present and understand certain human behaviours is a fashionable trend in many areas of our contemporary world. Looking back at different historical periods has engendered rapt enthusiasm among a really wide and diverse audience, ranging from local vintage collectors to worldwide known filmmakers and writers. In the literary field, there is a long list of prolific writers who intend to explore various aspects of different historical periods, either to bring a broader understanding of many of the unanswered questions left behind in the past, or to cast light on certain aspects rendered invisible by the universally accepted accounts found in history books. However, these aspects, which were pushed aside and doomed to oblivion because they were considered irrelevant by the dominant culture, did exist and played a part in the historical configuration of these periods, even if they are now hidden under other more salient chapters of history. Consequently, it could be argued that, like the different layers of a palimpsest, the stories relegated to the margins of history occupy the lower layers and demand to be heard and emerge from the underground, sneaking into the upper layer of the palimpsest occupied by the dominant historical events. Indeed, these terms, and its derivatives, will become basic pillars of my PhD thesis and will reappear on several occasions throughout these pages. The metaphoric use of the palimpsest is particularly relevant in that many contemporary writers tend to focus on particular individual stories of usually ignored, outcast

characters. Among others, although not exclusively, we can find the voices of women, immigrants, homosexuals or coloured people, whose stories have been either relegated to the footnotes of history, silenced or simply erased. By locating the action in an earlier historical period, these novels establish a confrontation and continuity with past and present, thus positioning themselves at the centre of attention for many contemporary readers. Apparently, the wish of these writers to revisit the past fulfils a twofold objective. Either it allows them to fantasise with the lost past and hold on to the nostalgic notion that any past time was better than the present; or it leads them to criticise certain aspects of the past from a secure and comfortable distance, assuming that the errors committed in earlier periods no longer exist. However, a perceptive reader will realise that the comments about the societal and cultural conditions of the past by these historical fictions not only serves to praise or criticise them but also to cast light on contemporary society. This latter point is precisely the most significant aspect of contemporary historical novels, as once the attitudes of certain characters in relation to notions such as sexuality, gender, or freedom of speech are analysed from a relational perspective, it is possible to trace the evolution and permanence of the problems of the past in our own present. In these novels, many of the comments on the period corresponding to the lowest layers of the metaphoric palimpsest, will turn out to be the most revealing and gripping, since they can actually cast light on our present-day socio-cultural conditions. This relational interpretation may be compared to Walter Benjamin's understanding of history as a "constellation" (263) since, as he forcefully argued, the task of the contemporary historian is to establish

meaningful connections between different previous catastrophes, so as to grasp the single catastrophic constellation formed by all of them, by looking back, like Paul Klee's Angelus Novus, from a contemporary perspective (257). Undoubtedly, historical fictions address different issues, depending on the writers' interests, professional careers and backgrounds. Among the great number of contemporary writers of historical fiction could be mentioned those of the Irish-Canadian Emma Donoghue (1969), the British Jane Harris (1961), the Canadian Esi Edugyan (1978), the acclaimed British Hilary Mantel (1952), the Indian-born Canadian Rohinton Mistry (1952), the North-American icon Toni Morrison (1931-2019), and last but not least, the Welsh author Sarah Waters (1966), whose work is the subject of this thesis. As already mentioned, one of the most significant commonalties in the agendas of many of these contemporary historical writers is the wish to give voice to those individuals and groups silenced by history and bring them into the spotlight. In fact, as Susana Onega explains, "Benjamin's outlook on history can help us explain why, from the 1990s onwards, British writers of historical fiction, including Sarah Waters, started giving preferential attention to the representation of what Silvia Pellicer-Ortín has described as 'alternative versions of some of the darkest episodes of our recent history'" ("Imagining" 3). A relevant aspect of this interest in the recuperation of the erased histories of outcast groups is the fact that, in the last decades, an increasing number of writers are deliberately portraying characters belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, with the aim of highlighting the need to focus on their obscured and silenced past. Writers like Peter Ackroyd (1949), Neil Bartlett (1958), Alan Hollinghurst (1954),

Jeanette Winterson (1959), or Sarah Waters give priority to such historically silenced voices with varied but equally relevant purposes. As Waters herself acknowledges, "many of them with an eye on the past, seemed to show grand narratives being prised open and made to reveal —or forced to accommodate— feminist stories, queer stories, lost stories, radical stories" ("Electric Time" n.p.). Although their main agendas, in style and worldview differ in many respects, they all share —together with many others— a wide knowledge of canonical literary works as well as of literary theory. Many of them have at some point combined their creative writing career with academic works such as teaching literature and creative writing or writing for a scholarly audience. This grants them a wide perspective on the diverse ways in which literature can be approached and understood, as well as on the main interests of both the academia and the general public. Within the academic sphere, these multi-layered and usually intertextual works, beg scholars to study them from many different thematic and theoretical perspectives. In fact, in some cases, it is by reading academic works about a concrete novel that the researcher can discover some of the key historical and theoretical sources these writers were consciously using and (in)directly referring to while creating their fictional works.

Such is the case of Sarah Waters's three neo-Victorian novels, which are the object of study of this PhD Thesis. A widely read, popular writer, Waters is also an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the writing of academic publications, ranging from narratological approaches and neo-Victorian studies, to queer and feminist studies and gender politics theories. As Andrew Davies puts it, "that's one of the best things about [Sarah

Waters]: like Jane Austen, she bears repeated readings, and you always get something extra each time" (viii). The important number of critical works on Waters's neo-Victorian fictions could lead to the thought that it might be impossible to find something new to add to the state of the art. However, this idea would in fact limit the real possibilities of analysing her work. If anything, I believe that with this thesis I can contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the already existing research on her neo-Victorian fictions. My main starting hypothesis is that the complexity of her writings allows contemporary readers not only to empathise with the Victorian characters and their life experiences, but also to read these novels from an up-to-date perspective, unveiling contemporary questions related to issues such as gender and sexuality, especially in relation to the feminist and lesbian communities. As Georges Letissier explains, "Waters' major interference with the popular genre consisted in altering its ideological message, by promoting a form of progressive sexual politics within a traditionally conservative form" ("Hauntology" 34). I will try to prove that thorny debates of the past can be revived and discussed from our current socio-cultural perspective, mainly to give voice to existing realities that were and still are disregarded by our mainstream heteronormative society.

The publication of Waters's first two novels —*Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999)— brought Waters to the spotlight of the "lesbian writer" canon. However, in a review of the third, *Fingersmith* (2002), Julie Myerson asserted that she "hesitate[s] to call it [the novel] lesbian, because that seems to marginalise it far more than it deserves" (Myerson n.p.). In the same vein, Jane Perry, in another review of *Fingersmith*, insisted that this

label "doesn't remotely do justice" to it (Perry n.p.). In fact, I would dare to extend this statement to the three novels, as each of them addresses more concerns than just those referring to sexy and passionate lesbian love stories. Waters's three neo-Victorian novels have often been described by reviewers as "lesbo Victorian romps" (Anonymous "Desire" 2002, "Hot Waters" 2002, Patterson 2006), that is, as neo-Victorian novels combining two literary traditions: "the thoughtful historical novel and lesbian fiction" (Llewellyn, "Breaking" 196), and, as Onega recalls ("Queer Reading" 2), according to Llewellyn, Waters herself used this label to describe them ("Breaking" 196). However, in a series of interviews with authors shortlisted for the Booker Prize held by *The Guardian* in 2019, Waters told the interviewer that she liked lesbo Victorian romps, but felt ready to move on to other periods and styles. Then she added: "I like the romps, too. (Actually, only Tipping is a romp: why, oh why, did I ever allow the phrase 'lesbo Victorian romp' to cross my lips?) But having done three novels of a similar style and setting, I thought it was time for a change." (in Anonymous, "Desire" n.p.). Her description of the neo-Victorian trio in an earlier interview is a good starting point for the understanding of the rationale underlying these novels:

> 'The books have grown out of each other,' says Waters. '*Tipping the Velvet* [a euphemism for cunnilingus] was my attempt to write a Victorian-style novel telling a very lesbian story in a way that was half-authentic but half-anachronistic too. *Affinity* is the most genuinely historical book and an attempt to capture the authentic

Victorian lesbian voice. *Fingersmith* is a pastiche of the whole sensation genre, a gothic melodrama like Wilkie Collins [there are clear parallels with *The Woman in White*] and Mary Elizabeth Braddon — fantastic novels that spiral out of control and are often quite transgressive, if only in the way they destabilise the reader.' (in Anonymous, "Hot Waters" n.p.)

As this quotation makes clear, in her first three novels Waters situated the action in the same period and delved into the same topics from various thematic and stylistic perspectives as if she were trying to find the approach to history that would best reveal the hidden side of Victorian society. This is the reason why I find it necessary to devote the first chapter of this dissertation to the figure of Sarah Waters. I will begin by providing some biographical notes and will go on to explain how her career as a fictional writer naturally followed her previous steps in the academia. I am especially interested in identifying and exploring the different labels critics have used to pigeonhole Waters and her works, in order to bring some light into the complex position she occupies within the contemporary panorama of British literature. The multiplicity of labels attached to Waters provides a referential frame for the three novels under analysis, as her ideology, her main influences, and both her personal and academic backgrounds are fundamental to understand her work. After that, I will devote some pages to justify the use of the palimpsest metaphor as the main methodological and theoretical perspective for the analyses of the three novels. I have opted for this methodological tool, combined with specific works on, among others,

history, gender and sexual politics, because it specifically offers the possibility of building a bridge between past and present issues and, as I will try to prove, because the theorisation of this metaphor is also very helpful to bring to light different realities that are still overshadowed and considered marginal subcultures.

Then, I will carry out a close-reading of each novel, devoting one chapter to each of the three neo-Victorian novels. Each chapter begins with a narratological analysis, especially focusing on the type of narrator, the point of views and perspectives used for constructing the story-lines in the novel, and its narrative structure as a whole. Given that my starting hypothesis is that Waters's works tackle past issues while simultaneously sparking a completely new debate on relevant topics of our present-day world, I then go on to analyse one central thematic aspect of each novel. I focus on these selected thematic aspects in detail, presenting a historical review and evolution of each from the Victorian Era to the present, delving into the debate that these topics still generate, as my ultimate aim is to see how Waters's representation of key issues considered immoral or illegal in the Victorian Era cast light on the same or similarly controversial issues in our contemporary age. I intend to explore salient concerns about the construction and representation of gender, the lesbian body, identity and female desire that may contribute to empower the ongoing social movements taking place nowadays. In the first novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), I focus on London West End theatres' life and gender (de)construction, and on the queering process concerning identity performance and identification. The analysis of the second novel, *Affinity*

(1999), deals with women's physical and psychological imprisonment — trapped either in jail or by the reality of spinsterhood and the stigmatisation of mental illnesses—, paying special attention to the ghostly quality usually associated to the lesbian community. In the third novel, *Fingersmith* (2002), I focus on the secrecy of issues such as pornography and female sexual pleasure, tackling this thorny and unsolved debate both from the Victorian and the contemporary standpoints. By so doing, I wish to demonstrate that the three neo-Victorian novels contribute —although it is not their exclusive task— to the construction of different aspects of a freely self-defined and mature lesbian body. Given that each of the novels engages in a conversation with a specific matter for which no consensus today exists, I delve into those debates in detail. In order to reach these concealed topics, I have recourse to the metaphor of the palimpsest mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, as defined by Sarah Dillon in *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2013). As I will attempt to demonstrate, the theorisation of this metaphor is extremely useful for the analysis of complex and multi-layered novels, like Waters's neo-Victorian fictions. Besides using the palimpsest to unveil the ultimate significance of each novel, its metaphoric use equally serves as an instrument to prove that history is always under construction, and that the past and the present inevitably affect each other. One of my most relevant aims in reading these self-consciously engaged texts from a relational perspective is to show how the past and the present reshape one another, and how present and past issues follow a continuum that makes them interdependent and inevitably intermingled. In other words, I will attempt to show that, while the Victorian protagonists

narrate their life stories, contemporary readers may explore their misfortunes and circumstances from their own twenty-first-century standpoint by relating them with the corresponding contemporary controversies. Echoing Marie-Luise Kohlke's words, I will try to prove that "[g]enuinely neo-Victorian works, then, seem obliged to acknowledge both their recycled 19th-century and contemporary contexts and to duly reflect on the present *in tandem with*—rather than *at the expense of*—the past" ("Lures" 2; emphasis in the original). In summary, the ultimate aim of the dissertation is to unravel, through the analysis of the recurrent motifs in the historical narratives, the existence of a continuum between past and present concerns on thorny issues related to human nature.

A final justification for the writing of this thesis is that, although, as I have already mentioned, numerous scholars have analysed Waters's *œuvre*, and although I am totally aware of the limitations of this, I am determined to offer a comprehensive and the most up-to-date reading of these three novels. I believe that this kind of literary productions can be of great help when trying to explain certain topics the vast majority of the population still perceives as taboo or is not even aware of their existence. Indeed, one of the things I was most drawn to the first time I read Waters's novels was the connections I could establish with certain issues that exceeded the realm of literature, and how by reading these works I started questioning certain attitudes we can still find in our world concerning diverse socio-cultural aspects. I firmly believe that by reading and analysing literary fiction we can reach insights that go beyond the literary world, and may contribute to the process of opening our minds towards a more pluralistic and egalitarian

society. As Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir famously argued, in the post-World War era literature and the arts in general must be "engaged" with social and political issues, thus developing an active role in helping us think big and light the fuse on different socio-cultural realities that are asking to be heard.

CHAPTER I
THE AUTHOR IN CONTEXT: MEETING SARAH WATERS

Sarah Waters, born on 21st July 1966 in Neyland (Pembrokeshire, Wales), is the award-winning author of six novels to date: *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002), *The Night Watch* (2006), *The Little Stranger* (2009), and *The Paying Guests* (2014). As Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble have pointed out, Waters's creativity is characterised by a "curious intermingling of passion, crime, sensationalism and social injustice" (141). At present, she is a widely recognised writer: "Sarah Waters is one of the most successful and best-regarded literary authors currently working in the United Kingdom, and she enjoys both huge popularity and glowing critical reviews in this country and beyond" (Kaye Mitchell, "Reception" 1). As a consequence of the good reception of her works both by the general public and the academia, she has been shortlisted for numerous awards and won several ones. Claire O'Callaghan gathers them up in a recent book on Waters's complete *œuvre*, entitled *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (2017):

> Waters has been recognized as one of Granta's 20 Best of Young British Writers (2003). She was named Author of the Year at the 2003 British Book Awards and Writer of the Year at the annual Stonewall Awards in 2006 and 2009. She is an elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. All of her novels have won literary prizes. *Tipping the Velvet* won the Betty Trask Award (1999), *The Mail on Sunday/*John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (2003), *The New York*

Times Notable book of the Year Award (1999) and the Lambda Literary Award for Fiction (2000). *Affinity* was awarded the Stonewall Book Award (2000), Ferro-Grumley Award for Lesbian and Gay Fiction (2000), The Somerset Maugham Award for Lesbian and Gay Fiction (2000) and the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award (2000). *Fingersmith* won the British Book Awards Author of the Year (2002) and the Crime Writers' Association Ellis Peters Historical Dagger (2002). *The Night Watch* received the Lamba Literary Award (2007), *Fingersmith*, *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger* were all nominated for the prestigious Man Booker Prize of Fiction, and *Fingersmith* and *The Night Watch* were also shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction. *The Paying Guests* were shortlisted for the Bailey's Prize in 2015. (15)

Moreover, in June 2019 Waters was awarded the OBE (Order of the British Empire Award) for services to literature in the Queen's Birthday Honours. In her acceptance speech, she said: "Writing is, by its nature, a very solitary pursuit: you spend most of your time as an author hidden away. So to receive this kind of very public honour is a huge thrill. I'm absolutely delighted, and a little bit dazed" (Waters, *Website* n.p.). In summary, her works —from the first to the last— have fascinated a large number of readers. Steadily, her career as a writer has developed along a secure path, becoming a global benchmark that trespasses the British frontiers and reaches the general reader worldwide.

Her popularity has been increased by the fact that some of her fictional works have been adapted for the television and the theatre. *Tipping the Velvet*, *Fingersmith*, and *The Night Watch* were adapted by Sally Head Productions for BBC. *Affinity* —perhaps her most acclaimed work and the one that has received several foreign awards— was also adapted by Box TV for ITV. A further adaptation for the stage was that of *The Night Watch*, its premiere taking place at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, on 19th May 2016, and the play being on show until 18th June 2016. Three years later, in 2019, this theatre production was on tour through the United Kingdom, gathering critical acclaim all around. More recently, *The Little Stranger* has been turned into a film by Potboiler Productions, adapted by Lucinda Coxon and directed by Lenny Abrahamson. It was released on 21st September 2018 in the United Kingdom nationwide (Waters, *Website* n.p.). The adaptation of her works to different media proves not only her undeniable value as a writer, but also her capacity to reach a wider audience that may thus encounter Waters's re-imagined past in formats other than literature and become acquainted with her commitment to certain social and political issues.

In order to understand how she writes and her reasons to do so, we shall first provide an overview of Waters's personal and professional career before becoming a full-time writer. She studied a BA in English Literature at the University of Kent and an MA at Lancaster. After that, she worked in different libraries and bookshops before taking up her postgraduate studies at St Mary's, London. She completed her PhD thesis in 1995. Finally, before becoming a full-time writer settled in London, she was for a time

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Associate Lecturer at the Open University, and she has also been a tutor of Creative Writing.[1] It was during the writing of her PhD —a process that she describes as "solitary" and as "the perfect training for writing fiction" (HiBrow)— that she developed a growing interest in Victorian London. This, together with the inherent possibilities of fictionalisation of this historical period, led her to venture into writing fiction after completing her PhD. Her dissertation, entitled *Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present*, offers a detailed portrayal of lesbian and gay historical fiction and, more concretely, of lesbian writing from the late Victorian Era to the last decade of the twentieth century. Evidently, this research provided her with a wide knowledge of literary theories. It also allowed her to investigate and become acquainted with the main literary but hidden canon of feminist, queer and lesbian writing, something that would prove essential for the writing of her own fiction, as can be gauged from many of her intertextual references. It makes sense, therefore, that when she set to writing her first fictional work, she would decide to focus on a concrete lesbian prototype located in a historical past that she was very familiar with, as a way of creating her own contribution to the lesbian canon. Indeed, Waters is recurrently asked why, as a writer, she likes to travel back in time. Her answer is that *Tipping the Velvet* was inevitably born out of her PhD, and that her career as a fictional writer naturally followed her previous steps.[2] Waters herself has recognised that

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[1] This information has been gathered from Sarah Waters's official website and from the British Council Contemporary Writers webpage.

[2] "I get asked this all the time and so you'd think that I'd have some brilliant answer, wouldn't you? But I can only really answer it by referring to the shape that my writing career has taken, which is that it all grew from *Tipping the Velvet*, which itself grew from a

one of her aims when writing *Tipping the Velvet* was to produce something she could identify with that suited her better than what she had previously read:

> I read a lot of lesbian fiction as probably lots of people here in the 90s. It was part of my coming out process. [...] Lots of them weren't great [...]. It really didn't matter. It was tremendously exciting that they were there at all. [...] With my modest ambitions I thought there's a place for me in the lesbian canon. (Smart n.p.)

Her modest project went much further than Waters thought at first. A project that started as a wish to write "better" lesbian fiction evolved into labyrinthine narratives with an extraordinary thematic richness. As a consequence, to consider Waters exclusively as a lesbian writer satisfies neither the writer nor the critics, who, like myself, are conscious of the complexity of Waters's *œuvre*, for it is this complexity that makes her such an outstanding figure within academic spheres. Although I do not intend to pigeonhole Waters and her work in just one group, I think it is quintessential to acknowledge the different traditions and sources that inspire her in the creation of her own fiction. This will help us ratify her complex position within the current literary panorama.

PhD thesis that I was writing about lesbian and gay historical fiction, and I finished by wanting to write a lesbian historical novel of my own." (Armitt 120).

1.1. Queer Literature and Lesbian History

As anticipated in the Introduction, and as can be deduced from the first peeps into Waters's self and world, one of the most significant and recurrent motifs in her first three novels is the recuperation of the marginal stories disregarded by history books, mainly, those about female homosexuality. Given her academic and personal interest in lesbian fiction, it seems adequate to start by categorising Sarah Waters as a lesbian writer. Virtually, the protagonists of all her neo-Victorian novels are homosexual women struggling for visibility, individual action and self-fulfilment within the constraints of a heteronormative and patriarchal society, even if later on, as is the case in *The Night Watch*, she places homosexual men and women on the same footing as non-normative heterosexual couples and political dissidents. As O'Callaghan aptly puts it, "her subjects, primarily (though not exclusively) female, and often lesbian, are united by their shared resistance to patriarchy and to heterosexist ways of being" (*Politics* 3). The main recurrent *topoi* in the first three novels are the physical and/or psychological imprisonment of Victorian women by familial and social structures and the erasure of so-called "indecorous" women, that is to say, lesbian women who fight against mainstream society in different circumstances. What is more, Waters openly acknowledges her homosexuality and is perfectly aware of the importance of her lesbian readership, but also of the growing interest of a wider audience.[3] Consequently, as Jerome de Groot explains, her novels "work backwards and forwards, commenting upon contemporary lesbian

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[3] As one *The Guardian* interviewer puts it: "She is aware that she has to satisfy both her loyal lesbian audience and a new, broader fan base, but in reality the only way to do that is to forget about it. 'I don't want to second-guess what either audience wants. All I can do is write about whatever grabs me'." (Anonymous, "Hot Waters" n.p.).

identity and the workings of sexuality in modernity" (62). Indeed, the publication of her first two novels —*Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*— pigeonholed her as a lesbian writer, a label that she readily accepted. As Pauline Palmer points out, "while claiming several different authorial identities including 'historical novelist, woman writer or just a writer', she [Waters] argues that 'it makes sense to call me a lesbian writer in the sense that I am a writer who is lesbian—and also a writer for whom lesbian issues are there at the forefront of what I'm doing'." (72). Waters admits being influenced by, and following the trail of iconic lesbian writers such as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, Mary Renault, Marguerite Yourcenar, Ellen Galford or Isabel Miller (in Armitt, "Interview" 121).

Although generationally Waters would be the successor of the world-famous lesbian writer Jeanette Winterson, their styles are frequently described as opposed and representative of two different, even contrary, lesbian literary traditions. As Onega argues, "unlike Winterson, who is placed in the 'posh' and 'exotic' lesbian genre associated with Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes and Daphne du Maurier, Waters insists on the unexceptionality of herself and her work" ("Marginal" 153). In the same vein, Llewellyn opts for differentiating both writers: "Waters is both political and postmodern with a small 'p'; she is not interested in the ambiguity and androgyny to be found in Winterson's work and its often ahistorical approach" ("Breaking" 209). Waters herself has recognised in an interview that she does not think she has many points in common with Winterson, and that perhaps the reason why they are sometimes listed

together simply is that they are the only two recognised contemporary British lesbian writers. In her own words:

> When I was first published a couple of reviewers were keen to put me in the bracket, but I thought 'it's just we're the only two lesbian writers they can think of'. I don't think I've got much in common with Jeanette Winterson at all, and I'm sure she'd feel she hasn't got much in common with me. […] I like her work, but we haven't got similar agendas […] she's much more in a modernist tradition, which I don't feel part of. (in Armitt, "Interview" 121)

As already stated, one of Waters's main achievements is her skilful manipulation of past and present, creating a continuum that allows her readers to trace back some hidden parts of history while critically assessing contemporary cultural and political issues, especially in relation to the lesbian community. Her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, is considered to be ground-breaking in this respect as it portrays the coming of age of its young protagonist, focusing on themes —especially those related to sexuality and gender— that may attract a readership from the lesbian community as well as from the general public and the academia; and recurrently making use of an erotic and picaresque style that will also be found in *Affinity*. Therefore, queer theories, especially those addressing homosexual women's concerns, lie at the core of her writings. In the chapters devoted to the analysis of the novels, I will attempt to demonstrate that Waters is totally aware of the

academic writings being published while she was writing her novels, and that specific academic works are fundamental for an in-depth analysis of her fictions. When she is asked about the "academic market," Waters willingly acknowledges this aspect of her work:

> I've always brought to the books I've written the sorts of issues I know literary departments are interested in talking about: class and gender, sexuality, and playing around with literary tradition. The books lend themselves well to being analysed, I suppose, because I write them with my old literary critical background somewhere still in my head. (in Armitt, "Interview" 125)

Together with these, her own interests are clearly focused on the past, more concretely on the recuperation of the lesbian tradition of writing she became familiar with while writing her PhD.

Evidently, within such a wide and heterogeneous community, not all the groups gathered in the LGBTQ+ acronym share the same agenda. As could be expected, depending on their life journey and cultural development, each group opts for different targets. For instance, gays and lesbians are quite apart from each other, as although they share a similar past of suffering, marginalisation and stigmatisation, their respective situations have been addressed differently by history and present different sets of challenges.[4] As Emma Donoghue aptly remarks,

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[4] Waters herself is aware of this difference: "But while the interests of lesbians and gay men have often coincided in their quest for historical precedent, history itself has appeared to offer them an unequal balance of resources for the fulfilment of such a project." (Doan and Waters 12).

Gay historians have had access to a mass of evidence, particularly court records, on the networks, clubs and cruising grounds that formed a subculture for male 'mollies' in the eighteenth century. Because there was no British law against lesbianism, and because documents by and about women have never been preserved with the same care as those used in men's history. (9)

While different figures —ranging from Ancient Rome and classical Greece to John Addington Symonds, considered to be the father of queer history— present a particularly rosy picture concerning homosexual men's history, "early lesbian fantasists Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney understood the search of lesbian originals to centre on a single, highly-charged figure — Sappho of Lesbos" (Doan and Waters 13). Given this reductive departing approach to lesbian history, contemporary lesbian writers may take historical fiction as their opportunity to fill in the historical gaps left by their erasure and bring to the fore and dignify this alienated figure. In this respect, as Letissier points out, "Waters inaugurated a new way of coming to terms with the past, by maintaining a balance between the historical imagination and a constant faithfulness to a degree of factuality" ("Hautology" 34).

Sarah Waters, together with Laura Doan, have written a chapter significantly entitled "Making up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History" (2000), where they explore in detail the location of lesbian genealogy within historical parameters, the absence of references and the urgent need to trace back and recuperate lesbians' history and lineage. As they note: "For as long as 'homosexuality' has been

available for meaningful deployment, commentators have traced its history, identifying traditions of same-sex love for purposes of diagnosis, censure, celebration, defence or apology" (Doan and Waters 12). In this chapter, they also examine the way in which the literary genres that are relevant to them and their peers are nowadays facing certain challenges. Thus, they wonder:

> On what terms does history appeal to a lesbian writer and how is the past negotiated in lesbian literary production? Should the popular novel be a site to recuperate the names and lives of 'suitable' or famous lesbians of the past, or is it better approached as a starting-point to invent a 'history' haunted by the present and understood to take its authority from the imperatives of contemporary lesbian identities? Should we read lesbian historical novels as 'performative' rather than 'descriptive' texts — as indices to the myths and fantasies through which lesbian culture is maintained and reproduced? (Doan and Waters 13)

What is questioned here from a theoretical perspective is put into practice by Waters in her novels. On the whole, she may be said to engage in a double task: on the one hand, she writes new "descriptive" texts meant to recuperate lesbians' neglected past and give them their well-deserved space in history; on the other, she confers on the novels a "performative" aspect, as she openly acknowledges when she says that she invents the stories to convey her own ideas and that she is not trying to imitate already existing myths to legitimate them.

In their chapter, Doan and Waters present the names of various lesbian writers absolutely devoted to this performative task, such as Caeia March, Ellen Galford, Penny Hayes and Sarah Aldridge, whose work is described as "speculative or reconstructive" (13).[5] Sarah Waters herself can be included in this list. As she recognises, if compared with records exploring male sexuality, "what we have of lesbian history really are just fragments and hints. [...] lesbian history, of course, is much more elusive, which is frustrating for a historian, but for a historical novelist it's actually a bit of a gift, because it means you can feel in the gaps" (Smart n.p.).

In summary, the essential question that reverberates in Waters's fictional and non-fictional works is: "What is it with queers and history?" (Waters, "Out and About" 313). The answer to this question is provided by Doan and Waters in the following terms: "historical fiction has been rehabilitated for queer consumption alongside romance, crime and science fiction; lesbians may now indulge the serious pleasure of repossessing their own lost histories" (13). Still, for all her central concern with bringing to light the erased past of lesbian women in general, Waters often opts for the portrayal of a concrete kind of female characters: those leading subdued lives in confined environments, which does not mean that Waters creates utopian homosexual characters that are to be pitied above everyone else. Rather, as Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan note,

> her fictions […] articulate the persistent challenge that feminist
> endeavour present to women. Freedom, happiness and the

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[5] On this, see also Waters's "Out and About: Lesbian and Gay Fiction" and *Wolfskins and Togas*.

resolution of feminist concerns are rarely granted easily to women in Waters's novels, [even if] hope and the possibility of change are often (though not always) found in her trademark ambiguous endings. (4)

The English writer Robert McCrum adds an additional perspective on Sarah Waters when he notes that "she moves in a circle of contemporary women writers such as Stella Duffy, Ali Smith, Charlotte Mendelson and Joanna Briscoe" (McGrum n.p.). All these women authors belong to a concrete generation of UK writers, and share a common background in lesbian and feminist politics. Although their works are very different, they have significant traits in common. For instance, Waters shares with Stella Duffy a resistance to categorisation as they do not wish to be bond to the conventions of a single genre; like Waters, Ali Smith tackles individual problems and stories to cast light on universal truths; and all of them write about women's issues. Therefore, they may be said to represent the feminist and/or lesbian cultural tradition of fiction writing in the 1980s and 90s.

Given the centrality of lesbianism in her writing it is necessary to highlight Waters's especial treatment of the queer subject and of queerness in its broadest sense, as it constitutes an indelible mark in her writings. In her fictions, the concept of queerness is used not only to refer to the sexual orientation of the characters, but also in a more encompassing sense, to signify the way in which they understand and interact with the world. It is important, therefore, to clarify the way in which the word "queer" will be employed along this dissertation. The term has undergone a profound

evolution since its coinage. Originally meaning "strange" or "peculiar," it came to be used pejoratively to label those people with same-sex desires or relationships in the late nineteenth century. In the 1980s it began to be used by queer activists like the members of Queer Nation, in New York, as a deliberately provocative and politically radical alternative to the more assimilationist branches of the LGBTQ+ community. Since then, the term "queer" ceased to be used pejoratively and as a mark of shame. In its wider present acceptation, it is employed to designate non-normative sexual and gender minorities, even positively in mainstream culture, for instance, in TV shows.[6] Thus, although the term "queer" has been and still is rejected or considered controversial by those critics and theorists who disagree with its current significance,[7] in this dissertation, I will consider the word "queer" in line with Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele's definition, as "an umbrella term for people outside the heterosexual norm, or for people who challenge the LGBT [...] 'mainstream' [or also as] a way of challenging norms around gender and sexuality through different ways of thinking or acting" (7).[8] In other words, I understand it as a term that encompasses all the genders, sexualities, identities and desires labelled as non-normative and include the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Since Waters's works deal

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[6] Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele offer a very good summary of its evolution in their highly educational graphic novel *Queer: A Graphic History* (2016). As they explain, the word dates back to the sixteenth century with the original meaning of "strange or illegitimate." It was during the nineteenth century that the politician Robert Owen used it meaning "odd" and the term could still be found with the same meaning along the twentieth century in, for example, the works of Arthur Conan Doyle. In the year 1894, the word "queer" was used pejoratively for the first time (8-10).

[7] For a detailed explanation of the evolution and implications of the term, see Annamarie R. Jagose's *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996). For a more updated debate on the same issue, see the Introduction to Mimi Marinucci's *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory* (2010, xi-xv).

[8] We should also bear in mind that the word "queer" has not only multiple meanings but also different grammatical categories as it can be used as a noun, an adjective or a verb, as Barker and Scheele observe: "Queer theory generally sees 'queer' as a verb. Queer is something that we do rather than something that we are (or are not)" (14).

mainly with homosexual women, the word "queer" will also be used more concretely to refer to lesbians, although I do not intend to restrict its usage solely to this concrete community.

As could be expected, the emergence of the LGBTQ+ community and its historical, social and cultural (r)evolution in the twentieth century questioned well-established theories and sparked a shift within academic circles. Various theories —some coexisting and complementing each other, while others colliding with and diverging from each other— arose simultaneously, started to be developed and gained force, some of them becoming standard works of reference in academic circles.[9] Some others are still under construction, since new terminology is constantly developing alongside the evolution in the ways of understanding the world and ourselves in relation to this phenomenon. Paralleling what occurs with the term "queer," the definition of queer theory is rather problematic. On the whole, all queer theories overlap to a certain extent and have some tenets in common, mainly the resistance to categorise people in a reductive way. Therefore, they question and challenge historically-grounded binaries such as gay/straight or male/female. They also seek to demonstrate that the socio-cultural context and the different power relations determine our understanding of certain "categories" or identities.[10] For this reason, as with the word "queer," I endorse the broadest understanding of queer theory in the course of this thesis, in line with Judith Butler and Sarah Salih's description of its emergence as "a coalition (at times an uneasy one) of

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[9] The above-mentioned graphic novel, *Queer: A Graphic History* (Barker and Scheele 2016), provides a clear and organised kaleidoscopic summary of multiple theories, ranging from the very beginning of the feminist movement and the birth of queer theory to contemporary approaches developed in more recent decades.

[10] On this, see Barker and Scheele (2016).

feminist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories, which facilitated and informed the ongoing investigation into the category of the subject" (8). Nowadays, the (r)evolution of queer theory is unprecedented. We are witnessing the birth of diverse and heterogeneous groups that share some ideas but also differ in others, especially in relation to their main demands, since each group may face different types of discrimination and problems. Hence, to support this all-encompassing understanding of the term, especially for the analysis of the first novel, I will draw on the theorisation of the processes of "queering" and "being oriented" carried out by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). Ahmed delves into the theorisation of the way in which non-normative bodies —meaning non-normative sexualities and identities— relate to space and how, in turn, these bodies are shaped depending on the orientation —or direction— they follow. As she puts it, her book offers "a model of how bodies become oriented by how they take up time and space" (5), an idea that is very helpful for the analysis of certain characters in Waters's fictions. Ultimately, we should bear in mind that the word "queer" —as well as the most ground-breaking theories arising in this academic field— is in constant change and evolution, and can also be considered a kind of palimpsest, as Sarah Dillon suggests in *The Palimpsest*, where she offers her specific interpretation and theorisation of it. In Jagose's words, "it is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics" (1).

1.2. The Aesthetics of Pastiche: Feminism, Intertextuality and Further Influences

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, even if Waters's lesbianism is a predominant feature of her work, it cannot be considered alone, as it is not Waters's sole interest. Alongside with the "lesbian" or "queer" label, Waters is usually addressed and labelled as a "feminist writer" (Palmer; Costantini; O'Callaghan, *Politics*; Onega, "Representing"), a label that Waters herself, referring to Philippa Gregory's Wideacre trilogy, considers very powerful: "[this trilogy] first illuminated for me the breathtaking feminist effects that could be achieved within the format of the sensational historical genre" (Anonymous, "Desire" 2002). In the case of her neo-Victorian novels, most critics agree that the author who has influenced Waters most is Angela Carter. According to Jones and O'Callaghan, "both writers share an awareness of a tradition of women's writing that is informed by literary theory" (12) and, what is more, at the heart of their feminist agendas lies "an emphasis on women's drive to self-knowledge" (Jones and O'Callaghan 12). However, the similarities are far more reaching as a simple reading of the novels would show that Waters shares with Carter the main tenets of anti-censorship feminism, something that I will explore in detail when analysing *Fingersmith*, using Carter's *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1979) as the main reference and starting point for the analysis. This shows that Waters is perfectly aware of the literary tradition of feminist's writing. And that she situates her work within a specifically female tradition, as she constantly acknowledges the influence of certain female authors, such as Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf,

Charlotte Perkins Gilman or Elizabeth Taylor, among others. As Kaye Mitchell explains, "[t]he question of Waters' relationship with feminism runs through the critical reception of her work. Undeniably, each of her novels engages with issues of gender politics in some manner and each evinces a feminist interest in women's lives, bodies, histories and relationships" ("Reception" 10). Now that feminism is in its fourth wave, or rather has moved beyond the conceptualisation of its evolution in terms of waves to a more inclusive and intersectional type of feminism, aware not only of sexual, but also of racial, geo-political, economic and cultural discrimination, it makes sense that feminist writers should deliberately chose to travel back in time to find the roots of feminism. Behind this gesture can be perceived both the contemporary writers' attempt to pay tribute to the first feminists, and the desire to illuminate the past in order to bring some changes to our present. Given the importance of all these aspects of her work, it may be concluded that Sarah Waters's acknowledged interest in lesbian writings, queer theories and feminist politics are equally predominant in her works. As Jones and O'Callaghan argue,

> a fuller understanding of Waters's engagement with contemporary feminisms requires the exploration of her work from different perspectives: situating her work within the tradition of feminist women's writing; contextualising her novels as in dialogue with the concerns of previous (and particular) feminist moments and theories, especially those of the second wave [...] and exploring

how her work speaks to current and/or ongoing feminist

movements and concerns in the twenty-first century. (12)

In their edited collection, *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms* (2016), Jones and O'Callaghan, with the collaboration of other renowned academics in the field, explore the relationship of Waters's works with feminism, acknowledging the diversity of women writers' standpoints, proposals and enquiries. In its three sections, corresponding to the first three waves of feminism, this compilation of essays provides well-argued analyses of the novels published by Waters so far, in relation to contemporary feminist theories and scholarly literature. However, as soon as we delve into the different chapters, we come across diverse queer theories that might be understood alongside feminism, as they coexist in Waters' writings and cannot be considered alone. Since feminism and queer studies apply in significant and equally valid ways to her *œuvre*, I consider that the most suitable approach to her works would be a combination of both. Critical approaches like those provided by texts such as Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor's *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (1997) or Mimi Marinucci's *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory* (2010), would perfectly work for Waters. Weed's metaphoric assertion that we are used to finding queer and feminist theory "on shelves located side by side or back to back" (viii), offers a suggestive starting point for the consideration of Waters' works as, in them, different feminist and queer theories collide and mix up, working hand by hand. Waters takes advantage of her wide academic knowledge and makes ample use of

different queer and feminist approaches, without giving preference to any of them. This is one of the issues Baker and Scheele explore in their work. As they argue, although "historically, there have been tensions between queer theory and some forms of feminism because each has engaged with gender and sexuality differently" (138), there is much to be gained if different theories are put to work together (139), an idea I fully agree with.

As a university scholar, Sarah Waters has a wide and in-depth knowledge of worldwide literature, its history and evolution. As Kaye Mitchell explains, her "knowledge of the past is largely mediated by, as well as communicated through, literary genres and forms" ("Reception" 7). This knowledge is reflected both in the variety of generic and thematic influences and in the richness of intertextual allusions to canonical and popular works detectable in her novels. Armitt perfectly illustrates this aspect of her work in her contribution to a volume of collected essays on Waters and feminism:

> Waters is ahead of us in the games she knows we want to play with her works, laying out before us in fictional form the pre-existing theoretical concepts for which she knows we are searching. After all, it seems hard to believe that Waters could have written *Tipping the Velvet* without knowing Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990); unlikely that she could have written *Affinity* without being familiar with Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84); improbable that she could have written *The Little Stranger* without reading Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993); indeed all three cited in her PhD. ("Teasing" 30)

Together with these, reviewers of Waters's writing have found what Kaye Mitchell describes as, "numerous literary influences and comparisons […] ranging from Victorian writers like Dickens and Wilkie Collins, to postwar novelists such as Denton Welch and Elizabeth Bowen, and contemporary authors including Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood." ("Reception" 3). This is the reason why various reviewers and scholars recurrently describe her *œuvre* as a "pastiche" of diverse elements, genres and styles (Dennis, 2008; Geli, 2018; Llewellyn, 2007; Kaye Mitchell, "Reception" 2013; Turner, 2017), something that Waters also seems ready to admit: "I think there's always an element of pastiche in my novels, in the sense that I want to write in a form, in an idiom, that seems to me to belong to the period, whether it's a first person or even a third person voice" (in Dennis 47).

For all this, Waters's formidable literary knowledge is shown not only in the numerous intertextual references in her works but also in more relaxed contexts. For instance, when, in one of her many interviews, she was asked to select six literary works that she would launch a party with, she gave the following revealing answer:

> What an interesting idea! They probably would be things like *The Talented Mr Ripley*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hide*, *Great Expectations*, *Jane Eyre*, something by Angela Carter, maybe *The Bloody Chamber* [...] and maybe something by Muriel Spark, I'm going through a bit of a Muriel Spark phase at the moment, so something like *Memento Mori*. That would be a good combination, 'cause

you've got the nineteenth century, all the sort of satisfactions of the

solid nineteenth-century fiction with sparking Carter [...] something

a little bit more nimble and allusive. (in HiBrow n.p.)

When Waters is asked to list her ten favourite books ever, her

selection usually includes some of the titles mentioned in the interview

above —such as *Great Expectations* (1861) or *The Bloody Chamber*

(1979)— together with others like *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) by

Patricia Highsmith, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, *Rebecca* (1938)

by Daphne du Maurier, or *My Secret Life* (1888), an anonymous multi-

volume collection of a gentleman's erotic memoirs located in Victorian

England, which prefigures the *topos* of pornography in *Fingersmith*.[11] Thus,

this quotation foreshows some of the topics that permeate her works: the

relevance of a Dickensian style with the Victorian Era as the perfect

background, the predominance of feminist issues she indirectly points to by

mentioning Carter, and her clear appeal for mystery, secrecy and gothic

elements.

1.3. Neo-Victorianism: Waters's Revisiting of the Past

In order to situate Waters's novels in their proper context, it is also

necessary to highlight that history is another key element in her works. As

Kaye Mitchell points out, "Waters' novels are ripe for critical analysis

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[11] The full list of Waters's favourite books found on One Grand Desert Island Books ("Top Ten Books") includes the following titles: *Great Expectations* (Charles Dickens), *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë), *Rebecca* (Daphne du Maurier), *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Angela Carter), *The Persian Boy* (Mary Renault), *Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories* (M. R. James), *My Secret Life* (Anonymous "Hot Waters"), *Wideacre* (Philippa Gregory), *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Patricia Highsmith) and *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm* (Brothers Grimm).

because of their ambitious and insightful use of historical material and popular genres." ("Reception" 5). As far as the historical context of her novels is concerned, Waters has so far portrayed two main historical periods: The Victorian Era and the aftermaths of the First or the Second World Wars. Waters was not alone in her task, as her interest in history forms part of a widespread fascination for the past that flourished in the Western world, including Britain, during the postmodern period, and is still alive today, permeating various facets of our cultural productions. As Jean-François Lyotard argued in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), one of the salient elements of the complex change of sensibility that brought about the break with modernity in the 1960s and 70s was a generalised loss of faith in the overarching "metanarratives" (*grand récits*) (xxiv) of the dominant culture that provided total explanations of human nature, freedom, progress and history. As Linda Hutcheon famously argued in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), one of the main effects of the problematisation of Hegelian world history and its levelling to the discursive category of writing, is the emergence of historiographic metafiction, a new kind of self-reflexive historical novel that neatly expresses the contradictory ethos of the postmodern condition. Although, in principle, postmodernist writers submitted every historical period to exploration and revision, the first British historiographic metafiction, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969),[12] was set in the Victorian Era, and other writers of historiographic metafiction soon showed a preference for this period as well, in striking contrast to their

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[12] On the emergence and development of this trend in Britain, see Susana Onega, "British Historiographic Metafiction in the 1980's."

modernist predecessors. As Kate Mitchell notes, "in 1918 Ezra Pound coined the term 'Victoriana' as a way of pejoratively characterising the Victorian past: 'For most of us, the odour of defunct Victoriana is so unpleasant [...] that we are content to leave the past where we find it'." (1). Waters may be said to partake of this postmodernist preference for the Victorian Era as in her first three novels and, as already stated, the ones selected as analytical corpus for this dissertation, she revives and explores the society that lived under the reign of Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901). Further, not only is this historical setting more and more frequently used by British fiction writers and, consequently, analysed by academic scholars, it is also becoming visible as part of popular culture, in different media and audio-visual industries. Indeed, as Cora Kaplan admits, "the fascination with things Victorian has been a British postwar vogue which shows no signs of exhaustion" (*Victoriana* 2). Just to name a major global example, in streaming platforms such as Netflix or HBO we can find multiple films and TV series that provide parodic or even grotesque adaptations of, or variations on canonical Victorian works, such as *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), *The Crown* (2016), or the most recent one, *The Nevers* (2021), not to mention what is probably the best-known and discussed TV series within academic circles, *Penny Dreadful* (2014). Further, the Victorian past is becoming a mainstream tendency even in vintage markets, which offer all kinds of second-hand products with a ragged and shabby Victorian look. Matthew Sweet describes this attitude to the Victorians as a form of sentimentality:

the expression of a desire to go back to the past, to return to a world uncomplicated by welfare, feminism, multiculturalism […] visible on the streets in the form of faux-Victorian litter bins and lamp posts, and legible on the supermarket shelves, where tokens of the Victorian age are used to confer a bogus sense of tradition upon mass-produced food products. (228)

Another element informing this banalised version of the fascination for the Victorian past is, an unconscious yearning for the glorious times when "Britain ruled the waves," evincing the persistence of the ideology of the British Empire. According to Valerie Sanders, the confluence of all these elements would explain the magnetism exerted on the British by this era. In her own words:

The Victorians are now paired with almost anything from our own period: other worlds and cultures, aesthetics, space, race, architecture, cities, shopping, emotions. Seeing the Victorians as 'more like us', as modern, self-conscious, anxious and sexually aware; as driven by consumerism, and possessed of serious misgivings about domestic stability or imperial expansion, makes them sound much more like us than they did twenty years ago. (1296)

In the literary field, this fascination for the Victorian past is best expressed in the emergence, since the 1980s, of a genre that has been

variously termed "neo-Victorian," "post-Victorian," "retro-Victorian," or even "faux-Victorian" fiction. This wide diversity of terms responds not only to the plurality of approaches and readings of the different works but also to the intrinsic complexity and elasticity of the genre.

In fact, Mark Llewellyn, perhaps one of the most influential scholars in the field, has explored in detail the dangers and difficulties we can find when addressing the Victorians and the neo-Victorians, particularly those posed by the limitations of terminology, given the interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity of the study field and the differences between the two historical periods:

> In contemporary culture's repeated return to the Victorian past, we may also be witnessing an attempted return to a sphere of multi-disciplinarity, and approaches to the nature of history and the individual trapped within its narrative, which are newly opened up by re-thinking and re-visioning that past. ("What" 170)

Another key strength that characterises this trend is the complexity of the Victorian period in terms of the great number of topics and the multiple ways of approaching them, offering a wide panoply of literary representations. As Sanders notes, "the famous Jamesian term 'loose baggy monster' to describe the Victorian novel also seems to summarise the range of research possibilities within the period: all of which makes it difficult to play the prophet and predict a clear direction for Victorian literary studies

over the next five or six years." (1293). Although Sanders's statement was written in 2007, I believe that it is still applicable to neo-Victorian fiction.

This above-mentioned complexity and elasticity of the term is echoed by Andrea Kirchknopf in an article aimed at defining the genre, when she wonders:

> Is it *Victoriana, Victoriographies, retro-, neo- or post-Victorian novels* we encounter when we read rewritings of the Victorian era? Shall we adhere to the already well-rehearsed term *historiographic metafiction* or simply call them all *historical novels*? Could we categorise them as adaptations, prequels or sequels of Victorian texts, disguised as nineteenth-century novels, but in fact postmodern variations of them? ("(Re)workings" 59; emphasis in the original)

The different terms and suffixes added to the already complex term "Victorian" draw special emphasis on different ideological discourses depending on what each critic takes to be the most suitable context for its categorisation and analysis. As Letissier aptly remarks, "the paradox of these novels lies in the insoluble tension between their endeavour to historicise fiction by reverting to a landmark era, and in the meantime, the possibility to come to any definitive version of the past" ("Dickens" 111). A good number of scholars have tried to justify different approaches by tackling the strengths and weaknesses of each notion. For instance, in her article "(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions,

Terminology, Contexts" (2008), Kirchknopf offers a dense and thorough analysis of all these prefixes and options, finally opting for "post-Victorian" as the most suitable. She argues that this is the most appropriate term to express both the influence of postmodernism in the rise of the genre and the interdisciplinary nature of the texts ("(Re)workings" 66). This choice is further discussed in her book *Rewriting the Victorians: Modes of Literary Engagement with the 19th Century* (2013), where she focuses on revisions of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, through the well-known notion of "rewriting" and refashioning the Victorians' past. Her position is that, although the term neo-Victorian is the one preferred by most critics, there are multiple problems in its usage, mainly because of its broad and consequently unsatisfactory connotations (30).

By contrast, Samantha J. Carrol, in her article "Putting the 'Neo' Back into Neo-Victorian: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction" (2010), draws the emphasis on the genre's favouritism towards concrete and biased feelings such as nostalgia, which prevent the novels from being sufficiently objective. As she argues, this leads to a "failure to fulfil postmodern benchmarks" (172). Besides, Kate Mitchell, in her book *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterlives* (2010), identifies neo-Victorian fiction as "a subgenre of historical fiction" (3), and justifies this identification in the first and second chapters of the book. Starting from Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction (27), she provides an encompassing overview of the main purposes of neo-Victorianism and the implications of dealing with

this genre. Indeed, many critics agree with this idea and have addressed Waters as a writer of historiographic metafiction, displaying postmodern traits (see Boehm, 2011; Onega, 2017; O'Callaghan, 2017; Kate Mitchell, 2010).[13] As Katharina Boehm explains, "the experimental narrative structure and rich intertextual references of these novels define for many critics [...] some of the main traits of postmodern historiographic metafiction" (238). According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction seeks to dismantle the prevailing humanist differentiation between historical fact and fiction. Here it is important to highlight that, as Hutcheon notes, fiction does not try to substitute reality or be a scientific recreation of facts, but is, like history, treated as a discourse on reality that offers the possibility of constructing our own version of it, just as valid as any other (40). As she argues, historiographic metafiction "refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (93). Although Llewellyn recognises that "it has become useful to think in terms of 'historiographic metafiction'," he thinks that "[i]t would be an over-reading to identify Waters' work with such a label" ("Breaking" 196). Still, he implicitly acknowledges the self-referentiality of neo-Victorian fiction when he argues that "the 'neo-Victorian' is *more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. [...] [It] must in some respect*

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[13] Still, there are critics, for example, Katharine Harris, who believe that Waters's works respond to a neo-historical aesthetics. According to Harris, neo-historical fiction "acknowledges the inevitable failure of narratives about the past but —in contrast to its postmodern predecessor, historiographic metafiction— simultaneously and contradictorily works to create coherent stories about it that recognise their own limitations even as they attempt to overcome them" (194).

be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery,

and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-*

Victorianism 4; emphasis in the original).

Bearing all these considerations in mind, I have decided to use the

term neo-Victorianism in this dissertation in accordance with Kohlke's

definition of the term "neo-Victorian" "in the broadest possible sense"

("Mining" 21), understood as an umbrella term

> indicating cultural and critical practice that re-visions the
>
> nineteenth-century and its latter-day aesthetic and ideological
>
> legacies in the light of historical hindsight and critique, but also
>
> fantasy—what we *want* to imagine the period to have been like for
>
> diverse reasons, including affirmations of national identity, the
>
> struggle for symbolic restorative justice, and indulgence in escapist
>
> exoticism. (21; emphasis in the original)[14]

According to this definition, by revisiting and rewriting the past, neo-

Victorian fiction grants the possibility of providing a more nuanced and

imaginative version of certain historical events. By presenting the reader

with multiple realities, and having in mind Llewellyn's last quotation —

which I consider fundamental for my own analytical perspective— neo-

Victorianism gives back a voice to a wide range of silenced characters, who

are now allowed to speak for their own, and present their individualist

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[14] For further discussion on what should be addressed as neo-Victorian fiction, what criterion is generally used to identify this genre, and the underlying problems and subsequent limitations, see Kohlke's chapter "Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal" (2014).

versions and visions of history. As a consequence, the task of looking back to the past must lead to the unearthing of certain aspects of the Victorians so as to provide a different interpretation from the previous one. As Louisa Hadley aptly explains, "neo-Victorian fictions seek to both reinsert the Victorians into their particular historical context and engage with contemporary uses of the Victorians which efface that historical context" (6). By so doing, writers engage critically with issues of the past, with a special focus on the treatment of gender, race, sexuality and/or social class distinctions and discrimination. Besides, as Kohlke asserts, "the 'cakes' neo-Victorianism offers up for consumption resort to a variety of ingredients by way of generic modes, ideological and theoretical approaches, and adopted/adapted voices through which the nineteenth-century past is re-imagined for present day audiences" ("Adaptive/Appropriative" 171).

In terms of thematic election, there is a wide variety of topics that writers may decide to explore depending on their main interests and purposes. Their "longing for cultural memory" makes writers undertake the commitment to bring up varied socio-cultural discourses of our present day world (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, 2014; Hadley, 2010; Llewellyn, 2008). Echoing Hadley's idea that the audience can understand the figure of the Victorians as "strange yet familiar" (54), Waters addresses certain concerns that can be related to the interests and identity politics of her twenty-first century readers, especially —although not exclusively— to those of women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. The lesbian community may easily identify with many of the stories and conflicts covertly presented in

the novels, as they will be able to relate them with some of the issues thwarted in their own daily lives. As Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham argue, neo-Victorianism offers the possibility of "looking backwards to the Victorian period while simultaneously exploring uncharted territories in contemporary fiction, providing nuanced readings and interpretations of the Victorian age and our own contemporary period." (xxv).

It is undeniable that, over time, the Victorian Era brought a gradual introduction of many crucial developments in terms of urban life, transportation, industry, and many social changes.[15] However, broadly speaking, the discourse on sexuality did not evolve at the same pace. Although the critic Steven Marcus acknowledged the existence of some sexual "others" in his well-known book, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-nineteenth-century England* (1966), and although Sweet admits that the notion of homosexuality already existed in the Victorian Era (xii), homosexuals, particularly lesbian women remained invisible, their existence being considered even an impossibility. By being erased from history, these women were doomed to inexistence. As explained above, Waters is perfectly aware of this fact, and she will employ neo-Victorianism as the weapon to dismantle the socio-cultural and moral codes that sanctioned the imprisonment of women for what was considered to be improper behaviour. This would explain why, as Mari Hughes-

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[15] Mathew Sweet sums up this development very well: "Blame them [the Victorians], or thank them, for the suburban housing estate. For the fax machine. For the football league, political spin-doctoring, heated curling tongs, vending machines, the electronic iron, the petrol-driven car, feminism, the London Underground, DIY, investigative journalism, commercially-produced hardcore pornography, instantaneous transcontinental communications, product placement, industrial pollution, environmentalism, fish and chips, X-ray technology, sex contact ads, paper bags, Christmas crackers, junk e-mail (by telegram, but still just as annoying), global capitalism, interior design and Sanatogen — the stuff that surrounds us in the early twenty-first-century world, both the good and the bad." (xii).

Edwards notes, "the neo-Victorian fiction of Sarah Waters suggests that all its women are in prison, either physically or psychologically" (133). By focusing on those imprisoned women and the lost past of the so-called indecorous Victorian women, Waters's fiction becomes part of "a wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of rewriting history, from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalised" (King in Carroll, "Rethinking" 135). In this sense, her novels may be said to respond to the need to fill in those gaps left by Victorian history in a way that best suits her necessities. In other words, her historical fictions are driven by a "narrative politics and narratological impulse to create histories of pluralistically gendered and sexed terms" (Llewellyn, "Breaking" 209). Waters is perfectly aware that her rewriting of history from the margins of patriarchal society may have important consequences for contemporary readers. As Mariaconcetta Costantini puts it, the possibility of filling those historical gaps imaginatively, as Waters constantly repeats, "also increases her awareness of the relevance that reconstructing the past can have for the present" (31). This idea leads to the last point I want to make. We should bear in mind that neo-Victorian fiction does not try to imitate or reflect Victorian life exactly. As Hadley puts it, "critical accounts need to be aware of both its contemporary and Victorian contexts," because, if it were otherwise simple "fascination [...] often results in the erasure of the historical specificity of the Victorians" (6). Similarly, Sweet, in the Introduction to his book, *Inventing the Victorians* (2001), argues that it is quintessential to distinguish the mythical aspects of travelling back in time from reality, and that we need to move beyond the

well-established respectability/immorality dichotomy that has always characterised the Victorian Era (ix). Indeed, neo-Victorian fictions must not be understood as mere pictures of the historical past but as imagined recreations, allowing the authors to provide their own versions of it. As Llewellyn explains,

> What the neo-Victorian represents, then, is a different way into the Victorians [...]. This is not contemporary literature as a substitute for the nineteenth century but as a mediator into the experience of reading the 'real' thing; after all, neo-Victorian texts are, in the main, processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions. ("What" 170)

This is precisely what Waters consciously does, as she acknowledges when she is asked about her election of a Victorian setting for her first incursion into the world of fiction. The relief she felt when finishing her PhD thesis allowed her "to use some info[rmation] I found on the internet about the naughty 90s, about the lesbian and gay underworld of Victorian London […] to be able to use that but make things up, bring things to life, and actually *fill in the gaps*" (Smart n.p.; emphasis added). As I will attempt to show in the following sections, Waters puts into practice this awareness about the possibilities of taking some literary licenses and the action of re-inventing the past in her neo-Victorian narratives.

CHAPTER II
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: READING WATERS'S NOVELS BY MEANS OF THE PALIMPSEST METAPHOR

As already noted, the common thread that runs through the entire dissertation is the notion of the palimpsest as theorised and adapted to the analysis of queer fiction by Sarah Dillon. The possibility of using its great potential as a metaphor renders the theory of the palimpsest an effective tool for the analysis of such labyrinthine and multilayered literary productions as Waters's neo-Victorian fictions. My objective is to maximise the potential of the palimpsest metaphor in order to make it as adequate as possible for the analytical purposes established for each chapter. Metaphorically speaking, this approach may be said to act as the backbone of the thesis but combined with more specific theories for the analysis of the various topics selected from each novel: namely, the notions of gender and identity as theorised by Judith Butler, lesbian's invisibility and the ghost effect as explained by Terry Castle, and the debate on pornography and feminist politics. Given that the figure of the palimpsest will be used recurrently as the main tool to fulfil one of the most important requirements of neo-Victorianism —namely, the wish to revisit and re-imagine the Victorian past as a way of projecting a critical image of today's society—, I will provide a detailed explanation of its origins and effects, so as to understand the way in which Sarah Dillon interprets it. First of all, it is important to trace back its origin and understand where its metaphorical meaning comes from. As Onega and Kohlke explain,

In the Middle Ages, the scarcity and expense of writing materials and the deterioration of already used papyrus, scrolls or parchments led to recycling, a practice already prevalent among the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans […]. The usual method — to erase the original inscription by chemical means and write a new text over it — largely ended with the fifteenth-century introduction of the printing press in Europe. […] The medieval monks were never to know that their method of erasure was imperfect and that, eventually, ghostly traces of the erased text would reappear as reddish-brown rusty remains intermingled with the new text, revealing the document as a palimpsest. (n.p.)

Nor did those monks know that this writing method would evolve —passing through the minds of numerous philosophers and writers who added their own standpoint and contribution— into what Dillon describes as "a consistent process of metaphorization of palimpsests from the mid-nineteenth century (the most prolific period of palimpsest discoveries) to the present day" ("Reinscribing" 243). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the primary or denotative definition of "palimpsest" is "a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another." However, as Dillon notes, according to its secondary or connotative definition, it also means "a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This connotative definition of the

palimpsest is Dillon's starting point for the development of her theory. In the first part of her book, Dillon describes the birth and historical use of the term, emphasising its "process of metaphorisation from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day" (*Palimpsest* 1). The word "palimpsest" was first used in this broader figurative sense by Thomas de Quincey in his essay "The Palimpsest" included in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845). As he explained,

> the traces of each successive handwriting, regularly effaced, as had been imagined, have, in the inverse order, been regularly called back: the footsteps of the game pursued, wolf or stag, in each several case, have been unlinked, and hunted back through all their doubles. (de Quincey 142)

Here, de Quincey matched the figure of the palimpsest with the function of memory and the impossibility of completely forgetting. He points out how all those traces of handwriting become woven and cannot be understood without relating them to each other, something that, as I will attempt to demonstrate, also happens with the final message Waters's novels wish to convey. His ultimate aim was to respond to the rhetorical question: "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain?" (de Quincey 144). As this question suggests, de Quincey compared the way in which "everlasting layers of ideas, images, [and] feelings [constantly fall] upon [the] brain softly" imitating the structure of a palimpsest, so that every new piece of information that is incorporated into our brain "seem[s] to bury all

that went before [even if] not one has been extinguished" (de Quincey 144). As Dillon explains, relying on de Quincey's interpretation, by "coupling 'palimpsest' with the definite article 'the' (for the first time in a non-specific sense), de Quincey's essay "*inaugurated* —that is, both introduced, and initiated the subsequent use of— the substantive concept of the palimpsest" (*Palimpsest* 1; emphasis in the original). As Dillon further explains, after de Quincey, we can find additional examples of the figurative application of the term by other writers at different moments in history. In the second chapter, entitled a "Brief History of Palimpsests," Dillon presents a wide corpus of the different thinkers and writers who have used the term "palimpsest" or interpreted it for the structural analysis of cultural artefacts from de Quincey to Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette. Here, however, as Brecht de Groote notes, it is important to bear in mind that, if we understand the palimpsest as a "trope for memory and absolute origins, it [directly and unequivocally] invokes the name of Thomas De Quincey" (110), even if he acknowledges that "another Thomas, Thomas Carlyle, holds a clear lead over his contemporary and long-time literary partner in arms in his 1830 essay 'On history' [...] as does Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1828; as do Shelley, Plutarch and a whole array of others" (110).

Dillon places her own contribution to the theorisation of the concept after Gérard Genette's path-breaking study, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (1982), the work that, according to de Groote, provides "the final and most momentous step in Genette's development of an intertextual and diachronic reading, an evolution that led him further and further away from his previous rigorously synchronic structuralism" (113). As Dillon

observes, in this book, Genette explained the difference between the adjectives "palimpsestic" and "palimpsestuous": "palimpsestic" refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest in its original sense, while "palimpsestuous" describes the structure emerging as a result of that process: the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script, and the "type of relationality" arising from that process (Dillon, *Palimpsest* 4).[16] In other words, "palimpsestic" refers to a layering of textual strata requiring a vertical reading aimed to unearth the hidden layers covered up by the most recent (or upper) layers subsequently added to the text. By contrast, a "palimpsestuous" or relational interpretation begs for a horizontal reading of the surface text, meant to establish the way in which the lower and the upper layers inform each other and become inseparable, thus creating a whole new meaning that differs from those of the individual layers. These two terms designate, therefore, two different types of reading:[17] while a palimpsestic reading seeks to unearth the hidden message of the subtext, a palimpsestuous reading begs for a relational interpretation capable of revealing the complex meaning of a text in constant evolution and change, consequently, yielding new and unstable shades of meaning. As de Groote makes clear, "the palimpsestuous metaphor operates on a number of levels, but the most foundational of these is its ensuring the viability of a 'lecture

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[16] However, as de Groote makes clear, "[a]s Genette indicates (Genette 1982, 556-557), the adjective was in fact invented by Philippe Lejeune [...]. As Dillon notes, Genette does not mention an exact source, his reference is to a pastiche of Roland Barthes published two years before *Palimpsestes* (Dillon 2011, 4). Barthes had used the concept of the palimpsest in 'La mort de l'auteur' (Maniquis 2011, 310), referencing Baudelaire's translation of the de Quincey, *Les Paradis artificiels* (Barthes 1984, 65)" (130). Appositely enough, this kind of multiple citations points to the palimpsestuous quality of the palimpsest itself.

[17] De Groote also highlights this difference, explaining that the unique term "palimpsest," "divides against itself between two very different meanings, one figurative or metaphorical, and one literal or material" (111-12), which he matches respectively with the terms palimpsestuous and palimpsestic.

génétique' (Genette 1982: 557) between different textual layers and between different layers of remembered experience" (121). This last remark is particularly relevant for the different analyses I will carry out, as the historical context and the ongoing evolution of certain aspects of the past inevitably shape their current status. In addition, Dillon makes use of a third word derived from the original definition of "palimpsest": "palimpsestuousness." She understands this terms as "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation" that enhances "the distinctiveness" of the various layers in a palimpsest, "while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence" (*Palimpsest* 3). In other words, this term begs attentive readers to unveil the ultimate message of a piece of writing and, at the same time, matches one of the main tenets of neo-Victorian literature, namely, that even if the Victorian past seems far away, we can still relate to some of the issues they dealt with. Besides, as Onega and Kohlke point out, Arias and Pulham's description of neo-Victorianism as "a form of revenant, a ghostly visitor from the past that infiltrates our present," and their assertion that neo-Victorian fictions "open up multiple possibilities for re-enactment, remaining and reinterpretation," (xix) implicitly establish a palimpsestuous relationship between the Victorians and us (n.p.).

Given the different aspects revealed by each approach, I consider that the best option to establish the final significance of the novels is to combine the vertical and the horizontal readings. While the palimpsestic or vertical reading can help contemporary readers bring to light the marginal voices covered up by the surface text through what can be described as a

process of reading between the lines, horizontal reading can establish the meaning arising out of the relationship between the two layers of the palimpsest, thus making the narrative of the past fit into our present-day world, and allowing us to connect it to some of our social and cultural problems. In other words, and I retake here de Groote's above-mentioned distinction between the metaphorical and the literal meanings of the palimpsest, it can be said that, in this thesis, the optimal results are expected to be obtained by the combination of both. Finally, the complexity of this combination and the perspective given by the concept of "palimpsestuousness" ideally lead readers to question how and to what extent this historical past can modify our present acts and assumptions. In this sense, it can be stated that kind of relational reading begged by Waters' neo-Victorian novels can also be said to respond, as briefly advanced in the Introduction, to Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of history as "a catastrophe in permanence" (Onega, "Imagining" 3). As Onega explains, "Benjamin's shocked realisation that Enlightenment historians had been unable to predict the atrocities of Nazism, led him to abandon the sequential interpretation of historical events in cause-and-effect terms in favour of a relational interpretation, aimed at granting significance to past events from his own present perspective" (3). As already exposed, this is one of the main aims I wish to accomplish with my own analysis. In this respect, it can be said that I will be adopting the role of angel-as-historian[18] as Benjamin proposed in *Illuminations* (1955):

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[18] As Onega aptly points out, by "comparing the historian's backward glance to that of the angel in Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus', Benjamin argued that it is the very act of looking back that allows the angel to see 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'" ("Imagining" 3).

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now." (263)

By exploring the passing of time as a constellation, historical events acquire their ultimate significance in the present. It can be asserted, therefore, that Benjamin's relational and non-linear interpretation of the different chapters of history has a palimpsestuous quality itself.

Dillon recognises that Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar employed the metaphor of the palimpsest in *The Madwoman in the Attic* to establish the hidden meanings in the works of nineteenth-century women writers such as Hilda Doolittle, Jane Austen, or Emily Dickinson. She explains that they focused on the structure of the novels, "understood in the palimpsestic terms of layering and superimposition, suppression and oppression" (Dillon *Palimpsest* 103). According to Dillon, their analytical system perfectly responds to the main task of feminist criticism: the need to "uncover and bring to light the suppressed women's narratives concealed within these texts" ("Reinscribing" 256). Thus, these writers' critical work provides a feminist antecedent to Dillon's own idea of coupling the "palimpsest"

metaphor with queerness. In Chapter 7, "Queering the Palimpsest: H. D.," Dillon undertakes an in-depth analysis of Hilda Doolittle's work *Palimpsest* (1926), aimed at demonstrating that the metaphor of the palimpsest can be "queered" in order to address issues such as sexual identity and gender identification. Referring to "Secret Name," one of the short stories in Doolittle's book, Dillon argues that "it prefigures two of the key components of contemporary queer theory's deconstruction of the binary gender system: queer sexuality and the performativity of gender" (*Palimpsest* 117). Both topics are extremely relevant for this PhD Dissertation. Dillon's queering of the palimpsest metaphor opens up a new critical perspective on the analysis of novels in which the "queer" component is omnipresent, such as those of Sarah Waters. As Dillon forcefully argues,

> The palimpsestuous coupling of queer and the palimpsest draws attention to both the queerness of the palimpsest and the palimpsestuousness of queer, not just as both these terms are applicable to descriptions of identity, but also as they can be extended [...] to queer traditional understandings of history, identity, temporality, metaphor, reading, writing, sexuality and textuality. (*The Palimpsest* 125-26)

As could be expected, this type of argumentation and theorisation may also unleash some counterarguments. For instance, Brecht de Groote, in his article "The Palimpsest as a Double Structure of Memory: The Rhetoric of

Time, Memory and Origins in Thomas De Quincey and Thomas Carlyle"
(2014), focuses on the blank space created by Dillon between the terms
palimpsestic and palimpsestuous. He argues that certain explanations
provided by Dillon lead to "insufficiently exorcised lapses" (130), and he
tries to fill them up by analysing de Quincey's and Carlyle's *œuvre*. Indeed,
this article offers an insightful and fairly comprehensive framework of
different critics' interpretations of the palimpsest previous to that of Dillon,
especially in relation to de Quincey's path-breaking idea of the palimpsest
of the mind and the understanding of its role in the process of remembering
and forgetting. Both Dillon and de Groote explore Gérard Genette's above-
mentioned *Palimpsestes* and coincide on the idea that Genette's greatest feat
was "to raise the palimpsest to the dignity of the single paradigmatic text.
All 'lecture relationelle' (p. 556) is henceforth modelled on its graphic proof
that writing is forever superimposed onto earlier writing" (de Groote 113).
Then, de Groote, on the basis of Maniquis's interpretation of de Quincey's
palimpsest,[19] makes especial emphasis on the circular structure of the
palimpsest: "what the palimpsestuous project names is not a linear retrieval
of the past but a disguised sample of circular logic. Circles certainly feature
heavily in palimpsestuously inclined assessments of the palimpsest" (119).
Ultimately, one of the main discrepancies between Dillon and de Groote is
that while the former argues that we should consider the palimpsest as
"involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and
entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other"
(Dillon, *Palimpsest* 4), the latter highlights the palimpsest *tournure*, that is

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[19] Once again, this multiple citations allude to the complex and palimpsestic nature of the
palimpsest itself. In this case, de Groote relies on Robert M. Maniquis, who also reads the
palimpsest of the mind and provides his own explanation (see Maniquis 1985, 109-139).

to say, its "turn, or reversal that operates in two directions [...] each attempting to the total erasure of its competitor" (de Groote 128).

In summary, given the analytical possibilities granted by the palimpsest metaphor —together with all its variations and its coupling with queerness— I will have recourse to it as the main methodological perspective, acting as a the unifying thread of the different chapters in the thesis. Following Dillon's theorisation, described in her own words as "metaphoric coupling" (*Palimpsest* 5), I will try to create a palimpsestuous relationship between the different layers of Waters's novels by "coupling" a predominant topic of each novel with further and specific theoretical works that match that main issue when addressed from a contemporary perspective. I will bear in mind Dillon's assertion that "the concept of the palimpsest is not only determined by, but structurally *embodies*, this historicity of critical terms *and* their perpetual openness to critical and imaginative reinscription — an openness that is necessary for the exposure, affirmation and reworking of that historicity" ("Reinscribing" 259; emphasis in the original). I will also bear in mind Onega's reminder that "the fact that Waters' construction of […] fictional constellation[s is] focused from [the] marginal perspective of non-normative or dissident characters has an added ethical value [in] that, besides providing an unprecedented outlook on contemporary history, it constitutes an act of restitution of their lost memories" ("Imagining" 11).

In order to do this appropriately, I will first delve into the historical past of each topic —that is to say, I will go back to the first and older layers of the palimpsest and analyse them in detail— with the aim of correctly

tracing its origin and evolution, then moving forward in time to the present —now focusing on the most recent and newer layer of the palimpsest— in order to establish the current situation of such topic. By uncovering the hidden layers of meaning in Waters's texts, I hope to bring to light the many apparently non-existent controversies covertly addressed in her *œuvre* from a contemporary standpoint, aimed at demolishing a set of cultural inequalities still persistent in today's society that impede the achievement of a totally equalitarian future society. As Dillon makes clear, "[t]he palimpsest has not drifted into the past and never could. In its persistent figurative power and its theoretical adaptability it determines how we view the past and the present, and embodies within itself the promise of a future" (*Palimpsest* 9). Therefore, what I will try to do from now on is to put into practice the rhetorical question de Quincey asked in 1845:

What would you think, fair reader, of a problem such as this,—to write a book which should be sense for your own generation, nonsense for the next, should revive into sense for the next after that, but again become nonsense for the fourth; and so on by alternate successions, sinking into night o blazing into day. (de Quincey 141)

In order to answer this question, I will try to firstly demonstrate that nineteenth-century historical novels may revive in the twenty-first century and make perfect sense. Then, I will add my own reading, that is to say, a new palimpsestic layer to the previous layers that, as we shall see, already

exist in the novels. Dillon's final conclusion is that the palimpsest should remain open, always ready for new inscriptions, in line with the openness embodied in a real palimpsest. In agreement with this, this project will also hopefully demonstrate that history, understood as a massive palimpsest constituted by multiple layers added over the centuries, is, like Benjamin's single catastrophe in permanence, a constellation of moments of danger in a constant process of accretion, change and evolution, its ultimate interpretation lying in the backward perspective cast on it by the contemporary beholder. What this means is that, while the past inescapably and inevitably shapes our present in multiple spheres, our individual and collective actions are also forging the past and the future.

CHAPTER III
TIPPING THE VELVET: FROM MALE IMPERSONATOR TO DRAG KING

Tipping the Velvet was published in 1998, more than 20 years ago, and it is undeniable that present-day discourses on sexuality and gender identity differ very much from those at the moment of writing the novel. As already explained in the Introduction, this novel was born as a result of Waters's doctoral research. Therefore, it was created to imaginatively fill in those gaps in literary history left by the omission of homosexual writing during the years covered by her research. When asked about how she planned its writing, she has recognised on several occasions that her main objective was to write a kind of literature that could amend the lack of lesbian writings. As the attentive readers would be able to recognise, in order to achieve this aim, Waters had recourse to a variety of queer and/or sexual politics theories that helped her to trigger new ideas and to question well-established notions within our cultural parameters. On its publication, the novel received a considerable number of gleeful reviews. While some described it as "a sexy and picaresque romp" and suggested that it inaugurated a genre of its own: the "bawdy lesbian picaresque novel" (Steele in Kaye Mitchell, "Reception" 1), others claimed it as "the continuation of a lesbian literary tradition" (Mitchell, "Reception" 1). Recently, Waters has commented on the diversity of responses it provoked in the following terms:

> *Tipping the Velvet* has sometimes been credited with having founded a new genre; in fact, lesbian and gay authors had been producing

lively historical fiction for ages before I came along, and I would never have written *Tipping* at all if I hadn't first been a fan of novels such as Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*, Ellen Galford's *Moll Cutpurse* and Chris Hunt's *Street Lavender* and *N for Narcissus*. (Nor, importantly, would those books have been available to me without the heroic gay and feminist small presses and bookshops of the era.). ("Electric Time" n.p.)

A year after its publication, Mel Steel asserted that "Sarah Waters' first novel, [...] proved her to be a talented, elegant and hugely entertaining writer" (n.p.). Twenty years later, her talent remains incontestable. In all her fictions, Waters skilfully intertwines romance stories full of passion and mystery with more transcendental topics. She compels readers to go beyond her own fictional world, described by Steel as a "sexy, irrepressible romp through working-class Edwardian music hall," and investigate further to uncover less overt issues that trigger numerous questions about our behaviour and the understanding of the world that surrounds us. Yet another outstanding feature of her work is that Waters deals with homosexuality and sexual relations in surprising ways. As the journalist Claire Allfree aptly points out, "[n]o novel before or since has had the same crossover appeal as Waters's lavishly detailed, erotically charged debut" (n.p.). As could be expected, at the core of her writings there lies her bold and fresh way of portraying homosexual women's lives and grant visibility to their romantic interests. In the "Foreword" to Kate Mitchell's edited volume of essays on Sarah Waters, written by Andrew Davies, we read: "Sarah, she told me, had

never expected her [first] book to be displayed on any shelves except the gay and lesbian section" (vii). However, the reception of the novel went much further than expected, and the general public's acknowledgment of her role as a writer seems to have no expiry date. Even after the publication of three more prize-winning fictional works, Palmer categorically asserted that *Tipping* "is the most playfully exuberant of Waters's four novels. While treating serious issues of sexuality and class, it does so with humour and an attractive lightness of touch" (73). Perhaps the most salient aspect of this first novel is that, regardless of how many years have gone by since its publication, its capacity to trap readers has not abated.

The protagonist of *Tipping the Velvet* is Nancy Astley, a provincial oyster girl born in Whitstable in 1870. She is expected to make a living in the family business, get married to a kind man and live a contented life. However, in one of her visits to the theatre, she meets the male impersonator Kitty Butler and, after falling in love with her, decides to leave her home town and follow her to London, thus initiating her quest for maturation. Once in London, Nancy will start to realise that there is a whole new world of sexual possibilities that opens up a new perspective on her identity. This realisation will lead her to start questioning certain social assumptions about gender in the Victorian period. The next stage in her maturation process begins with the break up with Kitty. Without financial support, Nan will try to make a living through prostitution, first walking the streets of London, then as the sexual servant of a wealthy lady, and finally as a charwoman. It is particularly after running away from Kitty that she will challenge, as we shall see, different aspects taken for granted within the heteropatriarchal

matrix. Each stage in Nancy's quest will be reflected in every possible sense, from the most visible and external, to the most significant and deeply repressed.

Generically, *Tipping the Velvet* has often been classified as a queer *Bildungsroman* (Antosa 37; Jeremiah 132; Weiss 53), with Nancy Astley as autodiegetic narrator. The story is told from an emotionally-filled perspective as the purblind protagonist's feelings inevitably impregnate the way in which she perceives reality and her life story. As she repeatedly makes clear from the very beginning of her narration, Nan recalls her story in retrospect: "Even now, two decades and more since I put aside my oyster knife [...] when I see it in my memories […]" (Waters, *Tipping* 6). Taking advantage of the uncertainty afforded by this type of first-person narration, Waters plays with the reader by increasing ironic tension. The story is set in England in the 1880s and 1890s, during Nancy's youth, but Nan-as-narrator recalls her youth in retrospect approximately from the 1920s, adding important information about some key aspects of the Victorian Era. For example, at the beginning of Chapter Eleven, she refers to Diana Lethaby, the wealthy lady she worked for as sexual servant, in the following terms: "In that summer of 1892 she would have been eight-and-thirty —younger, that is, than I am now, though she seemed terribly old to me then, at twenty-two" (251). Consequently, Nancy might be, at least, in her forties in the narrative present. This means that when she is narrating her life story she is no longer in the Victorian Era, but somewhere at the beginning of the twentieth century —in the 1910s or 1920s most probably— that is, in the Edwardian Era. Thus, by providing these pieces of information, Waters not

only enhances her readers' desire to know what happens next but also helps them situate the story and narrative time in history. In some of the most intriguing parts of the story, Nancy makes several explicit metacomments on the difference in knowledge between her young and her mature self, which work both as realism-enhancing frame-breaks and as prolepses adding suspense to the narration, such as the following: "I could not know how soon we would collide, nor how dramatically" (91); or: "I did not think this then, of course" (148). With respect to this, some poignant comments on the practices of the Victorian period become especially interesting. Waters will use them to criticise the contemporary readers' assumption that certain cultural taboos or behaviours belong in the past, while in fact they are perhaps closer to us as than we may think. As Antosa argues, this results in what she describes as a "transtextual exploration that conceives and confronts the nineteenth century as the cultural matrix of present-day culture" (32). In the following sections, I will try to highlight these aspects, drawing special attention on the notion of gender and the way in which the protagonist dismantles gender constructions that hampered non-normative people in the past and, worryingly, still hamper us in our contemporary world. Even today, gender and sexual politics seem to be, on many occasions, at the focal centre of public perception and remain more alive than ever. In relation to this, and with the aim of justifying the tenet of neo-Victorian literature that past and present are not so far apart, I will finally try to prove that Waters's rewriting of the Victorian *topos* of the female-to-male music-hall performer involves a transformation of the protagonist both on

and, especially, off stage, into a drag king, a twentieth-century form of transvestism.

3.1. The Limits of Gender and Performativity: A Point of Departure

When analysing *Tipping the Velvet*, one of the most recurrent topics delved into by critics is Waters's conceptualisation of gender and its reflection in Nancy's performances from the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This theory was originally presented in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and then reshaped and clarified in subsequent works. As Helen Davies explains,

> Butler's theories have had an enormous cross-disciplinary impact upon gender studies and her work has already received considerable attention in the field of neo-Victorianism, particularly in relation to the theme of cross-dressing/drag performance. In this respect the novels of Sarah Waters, specifically *Tipping the Velvet*'s world of male impersonation, have emerged as particularly ripe for Butlerian readings, foreshadowed by the quotation on the cover of the 1999 paperback edition of *Tipping the Velvet* which reads 'Imagine Jeanette Winterson on a good day, collaborating with Judith Butler to pen a Sapphic Moll Flanders.' (9)

First of all, it is important to bear in mind that, as Weiss remarks, in the Victorian period "cross-dressing was not an uncommon practice and that, as such, it has become a frequent motif in contemporary post-Victorian

fiction, where it is used as a gender blurring tool" (53). Therefore, the fact that the novel brings into action this theoretical perspective does not come as a surprise. The whole novel revolves around Nancy's transvestite performances, both on and especially off-stage. As the connection seems straightforward, many different scholars such as Cheryl A. Wilson, Lin Elinor Petterson, Claire O'Callaghan, or Helen Davies, among others, have explored —to a greater or lesser extent, and with different emphases and critical perspectives— this issue in several book chapters and scholarly papers. For instance, Cheryl Wilson, who agrees with the main ideas on performativity and applies a Butlerian theoretical framework to her reading of *Tipping the Velvet*, asserts that "Nan learns that gender and sexuality are social constructions that can—and sometimes must—be performed. Nan's experiences reflect Judith Butler's arguments about performativity and gender" (296). Similarly, Petterson, who also takes Butler's *Gender Trouble* to explore the multiplicity and constructedness of both Nan and Kitty's social performances (Petterson 18), believes that Nancy's theatricality and impersonation "emphasises the fluid dimension of gender" (71). O'Callaghan readdresses this issue in one of her latest published books, where she highlights how Nan "emphasizes the spectrum of gender trouble that cross-dressing instigates" (*Politics* 25). However, in *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (2012), Helen Davies shows a more critical perspective on the use of performativity theory, as well as a judgemental reading of Butler's main ideas. As is suggested by the title, in her book Davies intends to analyse certain neo-Victorian novels from the perspective of ventriloquism, a

metaphor that, as she acknowledges, is primarily based on Butler's ideas on performativity (20).[20] However, she shows a certain objection towards the overuse of Butler's theory when reading neo-Victorian samples, on the reflection that "the dominance of Butlerian understandings of gender performativity in neo-Victorian fiction runs the risk of muting Victorian voices all together" (11).[21] What is more, she does an against-the-grain analysis of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, highlighting some inconsistencies in her theorisation. Her main point is that Butler "does have a tendency to slide between the linguistic connotations of the 'performative' and the theatrical metaphor of 'performance' without accounting sufficiently for the tension between the terms" (25).[22] Davies then puts forward another theoretical problem: if Butler asserts that the constructedness of gender is inevitably linked to social and cultural factors, how will the subject manage to appropriate a concrete gender and use it to subvert the existing norms within the pre-existing regime? (26). For all this, however, David makes clear that, in neo-Victorian literature, "there is a tendency to perceive 'gender as performance' as having unequivocally subversive and/or liberatory

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[20] Davies does not delve into the fluidity of genders and the "gender trouble" Nancy causes with her impersonations and disguises, but rather focuses on how "Butler's theory of performativity/performance can actually be elucidated by thinking ventriloquially about the tension between repetition and subversion, constraint and agency" (20).

[21] As Davies goes on to argue: "Such an approach would reveal a desire to make the Victorians speak for 'us', to position Victorian precursors in the role of dummies to be manipulated and voiced to suit contemporary concerns. Although this is certainly a way of perceiving the neo-Victorian impulse to 're-voice' the past, it is not productive and returns to that image of neo-Victorianism *endlessly* talking to itself. Rather, what I aim to demonstrate in this study is the ways my ventriloquism metaphor — initially conceptualized via Butlerian performativity — can aid us in exploring neo-Victorian fiction, but that current understanding of 'performativity' also potentially act as a barrier to re-articulating Victorian texts." (11; emphasis in the original).

[22] Davies further develops this idea to criticise the following assertion written by Butler: "my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related." (*Trouble* xxvi).

implication for neo-Victorian texts which engage with the construction of gender roles" (10).

After summarising the variety of critical perceptions on this matter, I will highlight the aspects of Butler's ideas on performativity that I consider most relevant for the analysis of Nan's character and the interpretation of her transvestite performances from a twentieth-first century perspective. While it is clear that there are different outlooks on Butler's works and theories, it is undeniable that she changed the way we perceive, understand and approach topics such as sex and sexuality, language, and gender. As is stated in the Introduction to *The Judith Butler Reader* (2004), edited by Sarah Salih and Butler herself,

> If we were to approach someone working in the critical theoretical field with the question 'Who's Judith Butler?' their reply might contain the words 'queer theory', 'feminist theory' and 'gender studies'. Probe a little deeper, and you might hear 'gender performativity', 'parody' and 'drag', concepts and practices with which Butler has come to be widely associated. (1)

Indeed, as explained in the Introduction to this thesis, many of these concepts are recurrently found next to Sarah Waters's name as well, and, as the writer herself has made clear on several occasions, her knowledge of different theoretical approaches was fundamental while writing this first novel.

Starting from Simone de Beauvoir's path-breaking contention that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295), Butler explains that what is relevant about de Beauvoir's argument is that the mere act of considering "woman" as a concept involves the existence of ideas under construction (*Trouble* 45). Further exploring de Beauvoir's theory, Butler adds: "one acquires a given set of cultural and historical significations, and so comes to embody an historical idea called 'woman.' Thus, it is one thing to be born a female, but quite another to undergo proper acculturation as a woman" ("Gendering" 254).[23] Consequently, women can neither be given a concrete definition nor ascribed clear connotations, and the notion of "woman" itself cannot be easily grasped. Only by turning gender into an evolving and changing concept, can we fill in this void with different performances in varied ways. As Butler puts it: "As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means" (*Trouble* 45). Hence, the definition of gender is a complex issue that has been a matter of debate for decades and that is now more vibrant than ever. In fact, both de Beauvoir and Butler agree on the idea that gender is not something we "are," but rather something we "do." From Butler's perspective, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (45). This idea of embodying a concrete gender by means of acting out in a certain way would

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[23] For a more detailed explanation of de Beauvoir's famous phrase and its philosophical implications, see Butler's chapter "Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution" (1992).

work as the foundational concept for her well-known performativity theory. We should also take into consideration that this first influential work was published in the 1990s, and that, consequently, concepts have and still are undergoing significant changes and continuous evolution. More significantly, in the last decade, this has become a very popular issue within feminists, LGBTQ+ members, and minority groups. Butler herself has recognised that her own thoughts have evolved since she first published *Gender Trouble.* As she states ten years after its original publication, in the Preface to the 1999 edition, "it is difficult to say what performativity is not only because my own views on what 'performativity' might mean have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticisms, but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations" (xv). In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler answers many of the critics' questions that arose after the publication of her first book, and she expands on some incomplete queries. Later on, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler acknowledges that she wrote *Gender Trouble* from a very different standpoint to the one she held when rethinking and rewriting the same topic. As she makes clear, she did not have an established position within the academia and her main two aims while writing it were, firstly, "to expose what I took to be pervasive heterosexism in feminist theory"; and secondly, to "try to image a world in which those who live at some distance from gender norms, who live in the confusion of gender norms, might still understand themselves not only as living liveable lives, but as deserving a certain kind of recognition" (*Undoing* 207). Butler also recognises that she wanted to "disturb—fundamentally—the way in which feminist and social

theory think gender, and to find it exciting, to understand something of the desire that gender trouble is, the desire it solicits, the desire it conveys" (207). Even so, as a point of departure it is fundamental to bear in mind Butler's first definition of performativity: "[It] is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (*Trouble* xv). Besides, while reading Butler's works, we should consider that, for her, gender is "always and inevitably occurring, since it is impossible to exist as a social agent outside the terms of gender" (Butler and Salih 47). As we shall see, *Tipping the Velvet* seems to reproduce in Nancy's moves every single word of this definition.

3.2. Performing Gender on and off Stage

Waters was perfectly aware of the existence and relevance of Judith Butler's influential performativity theory while she was writing *Tipping the Velvet*, and she consciously used it as the compass for her first fictional work. There is unequivocal textual evidence for this assertion. The first clear allusion to Butler's influence on Waters's understanding of gender fluidity and mutability is the naming of the male impersonator: Kitty Butler. As several critics have pointed out (Serrano Bailén, 2008; Cheryl A. Wilson, 2006; O'Callaghan, "Grisley" 2016), Waters clearly alludes to Judith Butler in Kitty's surname, thus overtly pointing to the centrality of performativity theory in the novel. Here is O'Callaghan's clear and precise explanation of Kitty Butler's complete name:

[It] combines masculine and feminine sensibilities: Kitty is a child-like, pet name, while 'Butler' is arguably both a nod towards Judith Butler and alludes to the traditional role of male servants while also referring to Lady Eleanor Butler, one half of the famous couple, the Ladies of Llangollen. (*Politics* 27)[24]

In addition to the Ladies of Llangollen, there is another important Victorian figure that should be mentioned: Josephine Butler (1828 – 1906). She was highly interested in women's education, being the first woman who ever entered the Bodleian library in Oxford, and who dared to break with the established heteropatriarchal rules by publicly addressing the taboo topic of prostitution, fighting for the defence of women immersed in that world. In Cheryl A. Wilson's words, she was "the woman who was brave enough to defend that unmentionable class of the Victorian person, the prostitute" (165).[25]

As already anticipated by Kitty Butler's name, Judith Butler's words are mimed throughout the novel, both while Kitty and Nan perform transvestite roles on stage and, more interestingly, when Nancy transgresses gender roles on the streets. In the first part of the novel, both characters bring Butler's words to life by cross-dressing on various occasions. After seeing Kitty on stage, Nancy reflects:

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[24] The Ladies of Llangollen were very well-known in literary circles, various writers of the time having written about their story. They were two Irish girls, who lived at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, and grew up being close friends. They shared their outlook on life and living together was, as it were, a matter of destiny. They escaped to the bucolic mountains of Llangollen, where they lived up to their last days. Thus, these two women are usually taken as an example of close female friendship, although for a time they were considered to be closeted lesbians. In fact, in some records of the times, we can find that they are addressed, for example, as "eccentrics." ("Ladies" 710).

[25] For more information on this historical character, see Andrew N. Wilson's "Josephine Butler" (1989).

Her figure, too, was boy-like and slender — yet rounded, vaguely but unmistakably, at the bosom, the stomach and the hips, in a way no real boy's ever was [...]. But she strode like a boy, and stood like one [...] when she sang, her voice was a boy's voice — sweet and terribly true. (Waters, *Tipping* 13)

This and other comments conveying that Kitty displays in the same performance what seem blended genuine male and female features, work to dismantle stereotypical gender binaries. Take, as another example, the following comment on Kitty made by Nan:

'When I see her', I said, 'it's like — I don't know what it's like. It's like I never saw anything at all before. It's like I am filling up, like a wine-glass when it's filled with wine. […] I never saw a girl like her before. *I never knew there were girls like her . . .*'. (20; emphasis added)

Here, for the first time, Nancy realises that her narrow-minded binary vision of genders does not hold. After their first encounter, while Nancy makes clear that she is absolutely fascinated by Miss Butler, the purblind oyster girl provides a very telling comment about her: "All at once she was the gallant boy of the footlight again" (33). This remark highlights the ease and rapidity with which Kitty "switches" from one gender appearance to its binary opposite. This, together with the fact that she —and later on, both of them— dress up every night for the show, reinforces Butler's contention on

the importance of the ritualistic repetition to enact the performance of gender (*Trouble* xv). Once Nancy works as Kitty's assistant, her manager, Mr Walter Bliss, suggests that they could improve the performances by means of imitation: "'you must both of you go about the city and *study the men*!'" (Waters, *Tipping* 83; emphasis in the original). When, astonished by the request, the girls ask him what he really means, Mr Bliss answers:

> '*Scrutinise* 'em! [...] Catch their characters, their little habits, their mannerisms and gaits. What are their histories? What are their secrets? Have they ambitions? Have they hopes and dreams? [...] You must know it; and you must copy them, and make your audience know it in their turn.' (83; emphasis in the original)

The fact that gender roles can be studied, imitated and acted out makes clear that gender is based on cultural and societal norms agreed upon by the community. As Butler questions and further asserts: "In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (*Trouble* 191; emphasis in the original). The above-quoted passage of the novel also echoes another of Butler's main tenets, namely, that there is not a copy and an original form, but just a copy of a copy, and so both, the one considered "original" and its apparent "copy," are actively performed (43). Further still, the agility to "switch" genders is reinforced by the figure of the

oyster, a symbol attached to Nancy and her birthplace from the beginning of the novel. As Nancy tells Kitty:

> You might call it a real *queer* fish — now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact!' [. . .] 'You're a bit of an oyster, then, yourself, Kitty,' [. . .] 'Why, I suppose I am, she said, 'Just fancy! I've never been likened to a fish before!' (Waters, *Tipping* 49; emphasis in the original)

This comment not only highlights gender fluidity and the apparent simple mechanisms that allow for it to happen. It also links Kitty's role as a male impersonator to Nancy's questioning of gender fixity and her upcoming evolution. In other words, although at first Kitty is the only character who enjoys this fluidity, Nancy will eventually become the perfect embodiment of the oyster's capacity to morph.

Though transvestism is a key element in this process, the repetition of different instances of clothes-switching is not the only tool Waters uses to perform it, as Nancy will also have recourse to disguise. By so doing, she provides numerous instances of "gender trouble." By claiming that gender is a social construction, something the subject ultimately does, Judith Butler is able to state that gender and sex should not be tied together. In her own words: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a

female one" (*Trouble* 9; emphasis in the original). However, in her later works, Butler is ready to admit that when gender becomes absolutely disconnected from sex "'naturally' or inevitably [...] then the distinction between sex and gender comes to seem increasingly unstable" (Butler and Salih 49). In fact, this admission of instability is one of Butler's main reconsidered statements from her first published work. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler reflects on the "slippage" between sexual difference and gender, drawing a clear distinction between sexual difference as a concept inevitably related to language and created after cultural conditions, and gender, as "a sociological concept, figured as a norm" (210).[26] In the novel, there is a notable example of this instability when Nancy dresses up as a boy to walk down the streets, later on becoming a male prostitute. Interestingly, after her first promenade in male clothing, she refers to it as her "first performance" (Waters, *Tipping* 195) taking place in the streets of London, more concretely, and coincidentally enough, in the Soho neighbourhood.[27] She admits that she had not yet realised how good her "performance" was until the moment when she was looking at a tobacconist's and a man approached her and said: "There is something very *masculine* at a tobacconist's shop — don't you think?" (197; emphasis in the original), before asking for a more private encounter. Although Nancy —in her male clothing— is at first confused, as she does not really know what is going on,

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[26] "Sexual difference is not the same as the categories of women and men. Women and men exist, we might say, as social norms, and they are, according to the perspective of sexual difference, ways in which sexual difference has assumed content" (Butler, *Undoing* 210).

[27] The Soho neighbourhood has historically been associated with theatre and nigh life, and since the nineteenth century it is considered to be one of the main entertainment districts. Indeed, the West End —the street that houses the largest number of theatres and the most important ones in London— is next to it. Nowadays, it is recognised as the greater place for the LGBTQ+ scene, and the celebrations of the Pride in London take place in this neighbourhood every year.

she then learns what the man means with his proposal, referring to it as an "astonishing exchange" (197). However, surprisingly enough, she is not uncomfortable or worried about the possible consequences, but rather pleased with the fact that she is not recognised as a woman: "any stranger looking on, I thought, would think us two quite unconnected fellows, lost in our own thoughts" (198). When the sexual encounter finally takes place, the man, who, Nancy admits, looks very much like Walter, her former agent, tells her: "Your mouth is such a perfect one — quite like a girl's" (199). However, he seems never to guess Nancy's true sex behind her male impersonation, even though he appreciates an effeminate trait in "him." The implications here are twofold: on the one hand, the notion of gender is on the spotlight again —and Waters clearly acknowledged Butler's influence— as Nancy starts having doubts about the category she belongs to. On the other, Nancy makes her customers believe that she is an effeminate boy, consequently playing not only with gender, but also destabilising sex, as her costumers seem to have no doubt that what they see and want to have intercourse with is a man. Through Nancy's actions, the readers understand that gender and sex can sometimes be performed in non-normative ways. Here, the establishment of gender, and the sex tied to it, not only lie in the inner self, but also in the external guise, that is to say, the body acts as a reflection of it: "Always ready as a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction" (Butler, *Trouble* 96). Consequently, after this episode, Nancy's questioning of the established matrix of the heteropatriarchal world she lives in is further triggered, especially once she gets to know Diane

Lethyby, as this wealthy Sapphist will open up for her a new range of possibilities and alternatives to the dictates of mainstream society.

3.3. Nancy's Performative Actions: Undergoing a Process of Queering

Besides playing with the limits of gender and sex, Nancy is involved in a process of evolution and change both physically and, in a more relevant way, psychologically. We shall not forget that Nancy was raised in a normative working-class Victorian household, and that she will soon start feeling uncomfortable with her received heteropatriarchal ideas about straightness. However, once she moves to London, her notions of the meaning of decency, correctness, and straightness will undergo constant change alongside what can be described as a process of "queering" and "orientation" as defined by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006): "Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as '*who*' or '*what*' we direct our energy and attention toward" (3; emphasis added). The highlighted pronouns are the most relevant aspects of Nancy's orientation, as she will not only experience her sexual awakening through her intimate acquaintance with Kitty, but will also feel an increasing desire to walk away from the established heteronormative straight patterns. In fact, her understanding of the concept of gender and the implicit limitations of remaining within the commonly accepted binary system, will trigger in her a further and more complex process of "re-orientation" towards a new unconventional understanding of it. Therefore, it could be argued that Nancy's quest is in itself a process of "queering." Indeed, it is the new feeling of queerness after

her crucial encounter with Kitty that makes Nancy set into question the patriarchal notion of straightness that triggers her own process of self-definition. Ahmed defines the concept of "orientation" as the movement of bodies towards certain objects (5-7). Consequently, being oriented means being conscious of the point where we find ourselves in relation to the others. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's path-breaking contention that heterosexuality is the compulsory orientation in patriarchal societies (84), Ahmed goes on to analyse the concept of "sexual orientation." She points out that, insofar as heterosexuality is considered to be the natural path to follow, only homosexuals "are" oriented, in the sense that they are the ones "who 'deviate' from what is neutral" (68-69). From this perspective, it can be stated that the encounter with Kitty sets off in Nancy a process of disorientation, as she does not understand her position with respect to her. These feelings of queerness and unbelonging are enhanced by her sister's comments. When Nan excitedly tells Alice her first impression about Kitty's performance, the physical response she gets from her makes clear that they perceive things in a different light. Nan says:

> I opened my eyes and looked at Alice — and I knew at once that I shouldn't have spoken [...]. There was a look on her face — it was not ambiguous at all now — a look of mingled shock, and nervousness, and embarrassment or shame. (Waters, *Tipping* 20)

The following day, when they go back to the theatre, Nancy only wishes to see Kitty's performance again. As she admits, "I wished, too, that I might be

alone when she did so [...] rather than seated in the midst of a crowd of people to whom she was nothing, and who thought my particular passion for her only *queer*, or quaint" (22; emphasis added).

During this process of re-orientation, Nancy realises that she does not want to marry a gentle man, and starts instead harbouring romantic feelings towards Kitty. Her unwillingness to follow the straight or heterosexual line arranged for her by her family, leads Nan to start reorienting her body towards what Ahmed describes as "the slantwise direction of queer desire" (70). Especially after moving to London, Nancy's idea of queerness undergoes a complex evolution. As Ahmed points out, "the queer orientation might not simply be directed toward the 'same sex', but would be seen as not following the *straight line*" (70; emphasis added). Indeed, the deeper Nancy ventures into this re-orientation process, the more she realises that not only the others have doubts about how to "label" her but also that "[s]ometimes I was not sure myself" (Waters, *Tipping* 195). Thus, through the very act of asking herself what category she should identify with in order to belong to a gender considered to be straight or "real," Nan destabilises the notion of a fixed reality (Butler, *Trouble* xxiv).[28] From this moment on, a wider spectrum of possibilities opens up for her, although for a start, she feels disoriented and lost. As Ahmed explains, the fact of "getting lost" can take us somewhere, and "being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn

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[28] "The body may be preoperative, transitional, or postoperative; even 'seeing' the body may not answer the question: for *what are the categories through which one sees?*" [...] When such categories come into question, the reality of *gender* is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender, is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality." (Butler, *Trouble* xxiv; emphasis in the original).

become a familiar feeling" (7). A clear example of this is the description of her mixed feelings after the above-mentioned encounter with a client in the Soho neighbourhood:

> His excitement had stirred me to strangeness, before; his emotion, now, made me terribly thoughtful. When he turned and left the court, I remained there, trembling — not with sadness, but with a creeping kind of relish. [...] I had pleasured him, in some queer way. (Waters, *Tipping* 199; emphasis added)

Throughout the novel, Waters uses the word "queer" with the aim of raising awareness of its different meanings, emphasising its multiplicity, as this last quotation shows. Indeed, its connotative richness has become a trademark of Waters's fictions. In *Tipping the Velvet* the word "queer" —or derived forms of it, like "queerness"— appears approximately fifty times. There are numerous examples that perfectly illustrate this broader and all-encompassing meaning of the word. For instance, after sharing the stage with Kitty in transvestite performances and falling in love with her, Nancy wonders: "How could you dress like this, before a hall of strangers, every night, and not feel *queer*?" (114; emphasis added). I think this sentence is particularly revealing as, besides conveying the idea that Nancy finds the situation strange or unusual, it makes her feel weird in every sense of the word, as it puts strong emphasis on the recognition of homosexual love as a possible sexual orientation. Yet, at some points, Nancy's use of the word also raises the reader's awareness of the protagonist's refusal to fit into one

of the two parts of the gender binary, as can be read on many occasions
when she finds different situations "queer," meaning "out of the normal"
(Waters, *Tipping* 9, 118). Originally from Scottish, perhaps from Low
German, the term "queer" ("oblique, off-centre") meant "strange,"
"peculiar," "odd" or "excentric." It started to be used pejoratively against
those with same-sex desires or relationships in the late nineteenth century.
However, by the late 1980s, queer activists, such as the members of Queer
Nation, began to reclaim the word as a deliberately provocative
and politically radical alternative to the more assimilationist branches of
the LGBT community (Anonymous, "QUEERS" n.p.). Therefore, its
playfulness and flexibility allow Waters to use the word in different
contexts, usually referring to things or happenings considered to be out of
the norm, but never making explicit reference to homosexual desire.
However, we should bear in mind that, in the Victorian period, the word
"queer" was also a derogative euphemism meaning "homosexual," a sexual
orientation that was still unmentionable and thus doomed to inexistence.
What is more, in relation to lesbians, this was not even considered a
possibility and, as a consequence, sexual attraction between women was not
given any attention. However, it did exist and Waters makes readers become
aware of it through puns in all her works. For instance, when Nancy moves
to London and has to live with Kitty and some other theatre people, she
comments: "But if I were to stay with her, then it must be as she said; I must
learn to swallow my *queer* and inconvenient lusts, and call her 'sister'" (78;
emphasis added). In this sentence, the double meaning of the word is
explicit: Nancy feels "queer," meaning both strange and sexually attracted

to Kitty, although, due to Victorian constraints, this love must be hidden and shuttered, ultimately disguised as untainted sisterly love.

Besides, in accordance with Ahmed's metaphor of the straight and slantwise lines, Waters's wordplays also suggest on various occasions that Nancy will not follow the straight line, but will rather choose the slantwise —or queer— line instead. As already stated, after running away from Kitty, Nancy tries to earn a living as a male prostitute by walking the streets of London dressed up as a man. It is at this point that her performances acquire a more meaningful sense, as each of them bears further connotations. On one occasion, when she decides to use a rented room to change clothes, Nan makes a revealing comment about the lodger: "I think she was never quite sure if I were a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out his frock" (195). The ambiguity of her looks points to an identitarian in-betweenness that Nancy comments on later on, when she wonders whether she is a woman or a man. She realises that she has elements of both genders while, at the same time, she feels as belonging to none. Therefore, a central aspect of the novel is the process of construction of Nancy's identity as a human being in a world that seems increasingly queer for her, in all senses of the word. For example, when, after leaving Kitty, Nancy is looking for a place to stay, she comes across a sign with the following advertisement: "Lady Seeks Fe-Male Lodger" (211). Her answer could not be more revealing: "There was something really appealing about the Fe-Male. I saw myself in it — in the hyphen" (211). Her identification with the hyphen leaves no doubt that she thinks of herself as queer, due both to her sexual orientation and, more significantly, to the way in which she

understands her gender, her body and, by extension, her world. As Ahmed explains, "bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects, such that they acquire their 'direction' and even their tendencies as an effect of this 'tending toward'." (86). Unsurprisingly, Butler's voice is echoed here once more. While struggling with the notion of gender, Butler inevitably associates it to the body, as it is through it that the performance ultimately acquires its real meaning: "the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects" (*Trouble* 12; emphasis in the original).

Echoing the disorientation Nancy undergoes during her process of sexual discovery, she finds the world around her stranger than ever and begging to be understood and clarified. As Ahmed explains, "disorientation is a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are. Such losses can be converted into the joy of a future that has been opened up" (20). Nancy admits that, after the success of her first transvestite performance in the street, she decided that becoming a male prostitute could help her improve her situation: "Thus easily — as easily, and fatefully, as I had first begun my music-hall career — thus easily did I refine my new impersonations, and become a renter" (Waters, *Tipping* 202). It is at this stage that she begins to realise that a so-called "girl" can take different forms besides the one she had known until that moment. To her own surprise, what struck her at first as rather odd will become more and more customary for her: "How has my sense of the world been changed, since then!" (200). In relation to this, there is a very telling comment that

must be given some attention. Although it is a long extract, it is worth quoting it in full:

> I looked into the crowds that passed me by on every side. There were three hundred, four hundred, perhaps five hundred men there. How many of them were like the gentleman whose parts I had just fingered? Even as I wondered it I saw one fellow gaze my way, deliberately — and then another. Perhaps there had been many such looks since I had returned to the world as a boy; but I had never noticed them or grasped their import. Now, however, I grasped it very well — and I trembled again, as I did so, with satisfaction and spite. I had first donned trousers to avoid men's eyes; to feel myself the object of *these* men's gazes, however, these men who thought I was like them, *like that* — well, that was not to be pestered; it was to be, in some queer way, *revenged*. (201; emphasis in the original)

This passage —it is essential to keep the words in italics as in the original— makes several significant points. First of all, it highlights one of the main ideas Butler reworks several times, namely, that the final step to become gendered is made by and within society. As Butler clearly explains,

> The particular sociality that belongs to bodily life, to sexual life, and to becoming gendered (which is always, to a certain extent, becoming gendered for *others*) establishes a field of ethical

enmeshment with others and a sense of disorientation for the first-person, that is, the perspective of the ego. As bodies, we are always for something more than, and other than ourselves. (*Undoing* 25; emphasis in the original)

As already stated, the disorientation mentioned by Butler is one of the main arguments developed by Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*. As she convincingly argues, no matter how oriented or disoriented we might be, consciousness is ever present, and so, it is "intentional: it is directed toward something" (27). In Nancy's case, even if her experimentation with new aspects of life makes her feel out of place, it also triggers new thought-provoking ideas. Consequently, she progressively establishes a new life path, which moves further and further away from the straight line from which she departed. The fact that she admits that her male disguise was first aimed at avoiding the gaze of men is also an obvious feminist critique of heteronormativity. As Petterson explains, referring to female transvestism, "the gaze becomes feminized due to the fact that they are women under their disguise, and through the feminization of the gaze power relations become reversed" (77). However, the definitive twist comes when Nancy realises that the male gaze still operates within the world of men, even though in a different way or with distinct implications. The most relevant fact here, as far as the main topic of this chapter is concerned, is the final italicised word: *revenged*. Nancy realises that the real aim of her cross-dressing is to take revenge on all the cultural and social impositions, both regarding gender and sex, that she has been forced to endure. As Weiss points out, Nancy "rejects

the standard division of gender and its stereotypes, but at the same time she conforms to them and uses them for her own ends" (58). Thus, while Butler distinguishes the categories of man and woman from the idea of sexual difference (210),[29] Waters goes a step further in destabilising these concepts with the aim of challenging the heteronormative and archaic world represented by Nancy's birthplace, where labels —especially those concerning gender and sex— are presented as fixed and universal categories. She proves that gender is indeed performative and can easily disrupt society by using simple artefacts such as cross-dressing. Conclusively, it proves, echoing Butler's words, that "sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect or express sex" (*Trouble* 152). Indeed, Nancy recognises that she is satisfied by the attention she gets from men, as she becomes aware of how easy it is to impersonate one concrete gender in the eyes of society, once more, dismantling the fixation of genders, and, by extension, its assumption over sex.

3.4. From Male Impersonator to Drag King: Reading the Novel from a Twenty-First-Century Perspective

During the Victorian period, the male impersonator became a relevant music-hall figure both in Great Britain and the United States. The type of gender-crossing that was permitted and became a popular form of entertainment by the end of the nineteenth century was that acted out by male impersonators (Wood 307). This prototype is central to the novel, as it

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[29] "Women and men exist, we might say, as norms, and they are, according to the perspective of sexual difference, ways in which sexual difference has assumed content" (Butler, *Undoing* 210).

triggers Nancy's questions about gender and sexual assumptions. As Elaine Aston explains,

> The dominant ideology of Victorian and Edwardian England, supported the conservative image of women as 'angels of the house': as beautiful, chaste, domestic creatures. However, stereotyped femininity did not go unchallenged, and among those dissenters who promoted an image of 'unwomanly women' were the male impersonators of the music hall, who, in male guise, assumed values of the 'dominant' sex and undermined them, with satirical lyrics and a parody of male mannerisms. (247)

The popularity of male music-hall impersonators conveyed a persistent cultural association of female transvestism with lesbianism. For all their variety, if one had to choose, Nancy would definitely belong to the group of "unwomanly" satirical male impersonators arising as a sign of resistance to heteropatriarchal conventions (Torr and Bottoms 118). As already stated in the first section of this chapter, the fact that the narrator sets her story in the 1890s but recalls it in retrospect approximately in the 1920s, allows us to take into consideration the evolution of the role of women with regard to society along these decades. It is important to highlight that the idea of "woman" shifted in significant ways from the late Victorian to the Edwardian period, giving rise to the path-breaking notion of the "New Woman" at the turn of the twentieth century. As Andrzej Diniejko explains,

> The term "New Woman" was coined by the writer and public speaker Sarah Grand in 1894. It soon became a popular catch-phrase in newspapers and books. The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. The New Women were not only middle-class female radicals, but also factory and office workers. (Diniejko n.p.)

The development of this figure brought about the first changes in terms of women's relationship with the world. Especially relevant in the previous quotation are the words "emancipated, independent and self-supporting" as they perfectly convey the main characteristics of the New Woman. Nancy is associated with this figure at the end of the novel, particularly after she moves away from Kitty and her theatre life, and later on, when she gets to know different political movements. Her assumption of this new female role can help twenty-first-century readers predict an evolution from Victorian male impersonator to contemporary drag king performer.

In order to justify this assertion, I will carry out a palimpsestuous (or vertical) reading of Nancy Astley's body and performances, meant to bring to the fore the entwined textual relationality resulting from the process of conflation of the different nineteenth and twentieth-century layers that constitute Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian fiction. With this aim in mind, I will interpret Nancy's behaviour through the lens of the author and our twenty-first-century perspective. The fact that the concept of "drag king" was not

popularised until the 1990s (Escudero-Alías 58), reinforces the consideration of *Tipping the Velvet* as an example of neo-Victorian literature, since, as Rosario Arias forcefully argues, neo-Victorian fiction "textualises concerns with (mis)representations of the past, often revisiting and revising the position allocated to those who have been underrepresented" (87).

In order to make sense of Nancy's evolution, it is necessary to highlight the different stages she goes through, especially after running away from Kitty and walking the streets in male guise. Her intimate relationship with Kitty inaugurated Nancy's experience of romantic attachment and sexual attraction for another woman, something that led her to acknowledge that homosexuality was a real possibility. However, after her first heartbreak, her decision to start working as a male prostitute, as already explained in detail, destabilises certain received notions, tied not only to sex but also to gender, that she had so far taken for granted. It was during this time that she was spotted on the streets of London by Diana Lethaby, a Sapphist lady, and offered the possibility of living together. At her place, Nancy will become acquainted with surprising objects and situations that, as I will now explore, make her discover more possibilities as far as sexuality is concerned, and that lead her to engage differently in transvestite performances, thus further changing her mind about the fixity of genders. By submerging herself in this Sapphist underworld, Nan discovers that there are more women like her; women who enjoy their homosexuality, and who, for instance, enjoy role-playing and drag as a way of deconstructing what is socially accepted as straight and "normal"

behavioural patterns. However, the story does not stop here, as Nan is expelled from this house because she is surprised having sexual intercourse with another servant, Zena, and Diana Lethaby cannot stand this act of betrayal. After that, the final step in her maturation process —and one of the most important in relation to the main topic of this chapter— takes place at Florence Banner's house. As readers soon learn, the Banners are high in the local labour movement and Florence works in a charity helping poor families. Nancy's chance encounter with her becomes fundamental for her ultimate personal self-definition. The first time they see each other, Nancy is dressed as a man, smoking in the dark of the balcony of her rented room in Mrs Milne's house in Green Street, and Florence, who is celebrating the lodging of a poor family in a nearby house, comes out for fresh air to the balcony opposite Nancy's. The second time, Nancy, dressed as a woman, meets Florence, also by chance, in the street and tells her that she is the person that gave her a start in the balcony. Florence takes this lightly and, when Nancy asks her to meet again, she invites her to attend a lecture on "The Woman Question" in the Athenaeum Hall (Waters, *Tipping* 226). They do not make an appointment after that, since Florence tells Nancy that she is leaving London for a new job in a hostel at Stratford, but when Nancy becomes homeless again, she decides to look for her and finally finds the place she worked at, "a house of friendless girls" (343). After some time, Florence accepts Nancy as a kind of flat mate, and it is during this period that Nancy finally feels at ease with her true identity, both in terms of gender and sexual orientation. She starts being more flexible about clothing, and becomes acquainted with some political movements related to the

Labour Party and the Socialist Guilds that Florence is fighting for. The discovery of their political activism helps Nancy reaffirm her social role. In the gathering of "all the guilds and unions of East London, [meant] to fill Victoria Park with socialists" (439) that closes the novel, Nancy encounters again all the important women in her life, including Kitty, Zena and Diana Lethaby, thus rounding off her maturation process. At this stage, her transformation is so complete that she tries to teach Ralph, Florence's brother, to deliver his speech without reading it as she used to do in her theatrical performances. When Ralph, who is very nervous, is hooted by the crowd in the middle of his speech, Nancy picks it up where he had let it falter and delivers the paper herself (456). Although it was not planned that way, Nancy, who had learnt the speech by heart while teaching Ralph, delivers it perfectly, being totally confident and self-assured, having nothing to hide anymore. Nancy herself is aware of her transformation as, while she is talking with Zena, she proudly states: I'm all changed now" (449).

Taking into consideration the various stages in Nancy's process of queering, it becomes evident that she could hardly belong to either of the binary categories established by heteropatriarchal normativity. Just as gender identity is consciously constructed in transvestite performances, so Nancy's problematisation of her female identity by confronting it with a performed male identity, creates a tension that is never resolved. We return here to Judith Butler's key point: the "repeated stylization of the body" (*Trouble* 45) mentioned in the first part of this chapter. Therefore, by receiving and normalising the opposite gender's practices, while taking into consideration the environmental and social background in which the

performance takes place, masculine and feminine elements are confronted with the aim of defying their limits and the established dichotomy between them. This entails the creation of an ambiguous, in-between, queer identity, perceived as puzzling by everyone who experiences or perceives it. As already noted, what triggers this puzzlement in her understanding of gender identity is the the hyphen Nancy sees in the advertisement of the room to hire ("Fe-male"). Another clear example of this ambiguity is the episode in the balconies when Florence thought Nancy was a man. In their second meeting, when they encountered each other in daylight, Florence asked Nancy if she was wearing trousers to spy on people from the balcony. On hearing this, Nancy is afraid that Florence "might take me not [only] for an impertinent *voyeur*, but [also] for a fool" (Waters, *Tipping* 223), and feels the need to justify the reasons for so doing because she perceives Florence as a possible harmless new friend at a moment when she had deliberately "quit the business of hearts and kisses" (225).

The same gender problematisation underlies contemporary drag king performances. As Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms explain, in a drag king performance, "far from being easily distinguishable, the theatrical/artificial and the everyday/real exist in a fluid, mutually informative relationship with each other" (31). Sarah Waters herself has recognised in interviews that, in her fictions, she seeks to "make some really neat links between things happening in society and in contemporary culture" (in Dennis 45). Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that, although Nancy's story takes places in Victorian times, the same feelings of unbelonging are experienced

nowadays by various minority groups that feel pushed aside and silenced due to various sexual, gender or racial issues.

The term "drag" is appropriate to describe Nancy because, as Butler already explained in *Gender Trouble*, "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (187). Drag performances prove that gender originates by means of different cultural mechanisms. A drag king, understood in Maite Escudero-Alías's sense of the term, is a "weapon of self-representation and self-expression" (3). This phrase may be said to encapsulate Nancy's main motivation throughout the novel, as she revolves around masculinity and femininity in order to find the embodied expression that better suits her sense of self. As Escudero-Alías explains with reference to the masculine/feminine dichotomy in the late twentieth century, approximately from the 1970s onwards, the feminine gender was already tied to socio-cultural factors that situate it in an inferior position with regard to the masculine gender: "there were indeed two realities corresponding to two distinct gender identities [...]. The difference between the masculine and the feminine culture would be that feminine culture was still a counterculture in the sense that it had not yet reached cultural visibility and social value" (20).[30] Historically, femininity has been considered apt to be performed as it is the "counterculture" of masculinity. However, the performance of masculinity sets out several problems, as this

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[30] As Escudero-Alías explains, "right from the decade of 1970s, almost all feminist branches (i.e. socialist-Marxist feminism a.k.a. egalitarian feminism, US feminism a.k.a. cultural feminism, French feminism a.k.a. feminism of difference, and lesbian feminism) have emphasized that whereas sex is a given, fixed and natural category, gender is a social construct, precisely structured on the basis of a stable sex, of genital and reproductive sex" (18-19).

part of the binary resists performativity. Judith Halberstam describes this problem as the "asymmetry of male and female impersonation" (233), something that Nancy herself experiences, as I have already pointed out. As Halberstam makes clear, drag is, above all, a way of exposing "the structure of dominant masculinity by making it theatrical and by rehearsing the repertoire of roles and types on which such masculinity depends" (239). Likewise, for Del Lagrace Volcano —an internationally recognised photographer and tireless LGBTQ+ activist, sometimes self-described as "part-time gender terrorist" (Prosser n.p.)— the answer to the question of what is a drag king is crystal clear: "Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity" (Torr and Bottoms 1). Notwithstanding O'Callaghan's categorical assertion that "Nan is not a drag artist, which differs from male impersonation in that for drag artists the overt parody of gender provides the very point of the act" (*Politics* 25), I would venture to maintain that the novel actually asks readers to set them side by side. Nowadays, drags do not imperatively use parody and there is a wide variety of subcategories within the world of drag kings. Besides, the performance of drag kings should not be considered merely an entertaining activity as "it also demonstrates how leisure can be used as a site of political transgression and resistance" (Shaw 2006 qtd. in Barnet and Johnson 686). In the same vein, Steven P. Schacht argues that "just [from] their appearance, one could easily mistake several of them to be 'real' men if one was not told otherwise" (82), so that parody is not detected. What is more, already in the late 1990s, Halberstam provided the readers of *Female Masculinity* (1998) with a list of different types of drag kings depending on

their performances and styles, including some subcategories in which parody was not even considered, thus making clear that it is not a fixed category (246-55). Accordingly, it could be stated that there are as many types of drags as performers, or even, that some performers may identify differently across time, as they evolve and discover further consequences of performing as drags. Taking this into account, it may be argued that Nan's entire process of self-discovery and self-definition is comparable to that of a drag king. Indeed, Sarah Waters herself has said of Victorian performers such as Vesta Tilley and Hetty King that "they just look like drag kings," and she has recognised that she wrote the novel at "a time in which the lesbian community [...] seemed to be becoming a bit more playful [...]. There was a lot about drag kings around" (in Kaye Mitchell, "Interview" 130).

Yet another element Nancy shares with drag kings is the power she attributes to naming in the construction of identity. Nancy Astley's repeated changes of names already point to the analogy between gender performance and identitarian fluidity. The performative aspect of naming is highlighted by the evolution of her name from a traditional female name —Nancy and Nance— to Nan, a shortened, more neutral and gender-ambiguous form. Our protagonist is addressed as Nan for the first time by Kitty, when she wishes to call her in a more familiar and affective way (Waters, *Tipping* 36). However, the most important change comes when Kitty and Nancy's success on stage demands that they are renamed as a duet. The moment itself is significant as Nancy admits that she wants to keep the "Nan" part "since Kitty herself had re-christened [her]" (125), meaning that she

considered the name "Nan" as the symbol of her sexual awakening. Then, someone else came with the surname "King" and they all seemed to like it. By re-christening Nancy Ashley as "Nan King" not only her sexual awakening but also her gender hybridity are brought to the fore. As Antosa notes, "it is no accident that Nancy's entrance into the world of performance is a rite of passage that she experiences when she is 18" (43). According to Butler, "it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings" (*Undoing* 20). Therefore, the fact that the gender-ambiguous name of Nancy's music-hall persona marks her entrance into adulthood, effectively opens up the possibility of disrupting the commonly accepted, normative gender binary. Needless to say, this combination offers greater opportunities to perform a fluid version of the self, in which not only the binary male/female opposition is made explicit, but also begs for the acknowledgement of a wider gender spectrum. In the following pages, I will attempt to demonstrate that the fact that her surname is "King" effectively links her with the central figure of this part of the chapter: the drag king performer.

Obviously, both physical appearance and the image projected to the external world are fundamental in order to perform as a drag king. As I pointed out in the previous section, when she cross-dresses, Nancy passes off as a man and nobody seems to notice it. She is able to play with the external gaze at will, except when Mrs Diana Lethaby stops her carriage by her side and says, catching her eye: "any gent who could bring such a sense of drama to the staging of an encounter [deserves some attention]" (Waters,

Tipping 232). However, Nancy's greatest surprise takes place when she realises that the person who is inviting her for a ride is a wealthy woman and not a man, as usual. Interestingly, Nancy's spontaneous reaction is to try and clarify that she is not a man —"Believe me, I haven't got what you are after" (233)— to what Diana answers: "On the contrary, my dear. You have exactly what I'm after [...]. You, little fool [...] get in" (233-34). The fact that Diana picks out Nancy's performance straight away, in spite of the realness of her disguise, clearly points to the existence of covert alternative subcultures in which this activity was more common than Nancy naively thought. After that, Nancy starts discovering a whole world of Sapphists gathering in the hidden and dark parts of the city. And here, it is important to highlight, as Torr and Bottoms note, that "long before female-to-male cross-dressing began to be associated with 'inversion' or lesbianism, it was recognized as a sign of resistance to the norms of patriarchal economy" (118). This is precisely the role assigned to Mrs Diana Lethaby in the novel, as she acts both as the representation of another existing reality for women in the Victorian period and as a catalyst for the rise of thought-provoking ideas in Nancy.

After their first encounter, Nancy moves from her hired room in Mrs Milne's house to Diana's mansion, significantly called "Felicity Place." As Antosa notes, it is at this stage that Diana renames Nancy as "Neville King," thus, granting her a symbolic rebirth (46), as Nancy herself acknowledges: "She had created me anew: the old dark days before were nothing to her" (Waters, *Tipping* 251). This new stage in Nancy's life quest will further destabilise the heteropatriarchal system presented at the beginning of the

novel. For instance, the first time Nancy goes to a ladies Club as Diana's partner a woman in the lobby expresses her shock to another one: "Mrs Lethaby, I can't speak for the ladies; but some might consider this a little — irregular" (271). Diana's answer could not be clearer: "we are all here for the sake of the irregular" (271). This irregularity may be said to characterise the daily performances of these Sapphist women. Barnett and Johnson's words make perfect sense in this context: "As a term, drag performer warrants unpacking [...]. The second half of the term, performer, points to the theatrical component of drag. Whether staged or not, drag takes on characteristics of theatrical performance since it requires the performer to assume a different persona, aesthetic, and attitude" (678-9). This is exactly the panorama Nancy witnesses when entering the Club:

> There were about thirty of them, I think — all women; all seated at tables, bearing drinks and books and papers. You might have passed any one of them upon the street, and thought nothing; but the effect of their appearance all combined was rather queer. They were dressed, not strangely, but somehow distinctly. They wore skirts — but the kind of skirts a tailor might design if he were set, for a dare, to sew a bustle for a gent. Many seemed clad in walking-suits and riding habits. Many wore pince-nez, or carried monocles on ribbons. There were one or two rather startling coiffures; and there were more neckties that I had ever before seen brought together at an exclusively female ensemble. (Waters, *Tipping* 272)

Read palimpsestically, the mixture of all these different styles and costumes, reinforces the idea that every drag performer can make individual choices regardless of the common motif behind the collective act of performance. In this case, the variety of styles and costumes could be understood as the break of heteronormative rules and the expression of a more fluid sense of self, untied to normative clothing and constructions. In Nancy's own words: "But all performers dress to suit their stages, I recalled. And what a stage was this — and what an audience!" (272).

As the relationship between Diana and Nancy becomes more personal and intense, Diana gets tired of seeing her dressed in "basic" male suits and orders Nancy —deliberately addressed in ways such as "Diana's *caprice*," "this *freak*," or "*her* boy" (278-79; emphasis in the original) that reinforce her in-house role as that of a performing artist— to dress up in more playful costumes: "it was part of Diana's mystery, to make real the words that other people said in metaphor or jest" (280). In all cases, her costumes praise female power by impersonating mythical figures traditionally associated with artfulness and monstrosity by patriarchal culture (see Gilbert and Gubar 34), such as an Amazon, Salome or Medusa (Waters, *Tipping* 281), but always incorporating typically male attire or a mixture of both. As in a drag performance, this blend is used to dismantle and mock the rigidly oppositional normative structures, so that "incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity" (Halberstam 236). The most playful and transgressive episode related to clothing takes place when Diana celebrates her birthday fancy-dress ball, explicitly inviting "*Sapphists Only*" (Waters, *Tipping* 307; emphasis in the original). In this masquerade

party, clothing and certain complements acquire a symbolic role. As Antosa notes, "Diana creates an environment in which most Sapphic icons are evoked, from Marie Antoinette to the Ladies of Llangollen and Queen Christina of Sweden. The masquerade becomes the occasion in which the Victorian lesbian community can playfully celebrate its own genealogy" (47). Perhaps one of the most remarkable costumes Nancy wears to please her mistress is the one she calls "Hermaphroditus": "I was a Hermaphroditus. I wore a crown of Laurel, a layer of silver grease paint — and nothing else save, strapped to my hips, Diana's Monsieur Dildo" (Waters, *Tipping* 281). This costume fits some of the main characteristics of the drag king, as it "expressly performs maleness by self-consciously hyperbolizing the signs of masculinity" (Escudero-Alías 61), in this case, Diana's secret dildo, which acquires especial significance in this part of the novel.

In a fairly significant way, genitalia become one of the main points in question, as they are the body parts marking the distinction between binary genders that should be hidden —in the case of breasts— or incorporated with some prop or artefact —as happens with the penis. This is an important issue, both in the novel and in the case of drag kings. In their performances, drag kings recurrently incorporate a fake penis, generally a dildo. As Escudero-Alías points out, "[d]rag kings rely on this device not only because the dildo signifies certain lesbian sexual practices, but also because of its parodic phallic appropriation as a substitute for the male penis" (182). Nancy becomes acquainted with this prop when she becomes Diana Lethaby's sexual servant. In Diana's house, the dildo appears as a

central part of their sexual encounters (Waters, *Tipping* 241-42) and it reappears again as a fundamental emblem during the intercourse between Zena and Nancy (320-22). During the exclusive Sapphist party, the dildo also acquires a remarkably important role as this prop is used to mock the need of a male partner in sexual practices and proves, once more, that gender is something that can be performed and questioned. This questioning is also a salient aspect of drag king performances: "the queerly sexy appeal of drag king performance is difficult to articulate, but it clearly has much to do with the layering and blurring of gender registers" (Torr and Bottoms 129). What is more, together with the performance of masculinity, the use of the dildo by drag kings expresses another form of sexual symbolism that could be described as "the curiously tangled nature of drag king eroticism" (Torr and Bottoms 118).

As already pointed out, the non-fixity of the notion of drag king allows performers to change their outer guise over time, in consonance with the internal growth and self-acceptance of their inner self. This makes perfect sense by the end of the novel, when Nancy decides to wear man's clothes to do the cleaning of Florence's house. The following is perhaps her most revealing statement about gender performativity and the role she decides to play:

> I kept my hair short. I wore my trousers, as I had planned, to do my housework in — at least, for a month or so I did: after all, the neighbours had all caught glimpses of me in them, and since I had become known in the district as something of a trouser-wearer, it

seemed rather a fuss to take the trousers off at night and put a frock

on. No one appeared to mind it. (Waters, *Tipping* 406-407)

In this case, we could even say that Nan is performing a different role, that of a drag butch; that is, the role of "a masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender expression" (Halberstam qtd. in Escudero-Alías 61). This change enhances even more the fluidity of Nancy's understanding of gender. Here, masculinity is taken as a part of herself and is performed in a more "natural" way, substituting simple parody for a more significant meaning: "the trousers reflect her character, as she is still a tom-boy, but this time without the splitting of her identity or creating of performative alter egos" (Weiss 60). Besides, dressing as a man is for some women a way of exploring further sexual identities as homosexuals, something that can be fostered by the figure of the drag butch. As a contemporary performer known as Drag King Julien points out, "part of being a lesbian for me was getting out of a narrowly defined gender identity and being able to explore a much more complex identity in terms of gender and that's part of what the drag king thing is too" (qtd. in Escudero-Alías 100). This is especially remarkable by the end of the novel, when Nancy is involved in political activism, as her daily performance, including clothing, becomes in itself a statement. A clear example of this is the above-mentioned episode in which she deliberately decides to clean the house wearing trousers, either merely as a question of comfort, or, more interestingly, as a part of her self-definition process. What is more, this remarkable episode also reflects that Nancy is aware and fond of being able

to teach the neighbours to become familiar with women wearing trousers, as at that time it was extremely weird to see a woman dressed like that in the day light and in working-class neighbourhoods, even if some decades later it become more frequent and even fashionable. Consequently, the evolution of Nancy's performance as well as the fact that she feels totally comfortable wearing trousers, points to the fluidity of gender and its entire dependency on deliberate performance. MilDred, a New York drag king, describes this fluid sense of self in the following terms: "I'm not a butch or femme. I can be one way one day and another way another day" (qtd. in Escudero-Alías 87). As for Nancy, there are numberless comments on how she feels and which label should she "wear" at some determined moments. Both Nancy and MilDred locate themselves in a variety of positions, rejecting the idea of belonging to just one group and identifying with a fluid persona, willing to explore further possibilities. As Nancy explains, it was after her first performative experience walking down the streets of the Soho that her attitude to cross-dressing changed. The more she ventured into this activity, the bolder she became: "The success of that first performance made me bold [...]. For on every visit I found some new trick to better my impersonation" (Waters, *Tipping* 195). Another very telling comment can be read at the end of the novel, when she arrives at Victoria Park during the Workers' Rally. Before going there Nancy had doubts about the "etiquette" that would best suit her for that occasion, and she decided to wear a skirt instead of trousers. However, when she sees some other women, she describes them as "trousered toms" (417), and realises her mistake: "I had breached some tommish etiquette, coming here in short hair and skirt" (418). Her next

comment to Florence clarifies that her fear of being observed and judged because of her clothing was only tied to her previous narrow-minded heteropatriarchal thoughts: "To think […] that I might have worn my moleskins after all" (417). This and similar comments suggest that Nancy dares to explore the infinite possibilities of cross-dressing, so that, through her life journey, different labels can be effectively applied to her.

For all their differences, Nancy's cross-dressing in Victorian fashion and the contemporary figure of the drag king are comparable in that they embody transgression and explore alternative gender configurations drawn by similar motivations. I retake here Nancy's words, as they may act as the summary of the last steps in her maturation process: "I, of course, had spent five years in hiding from that history, denying that I had ever been her, myself. I am Nan King. It was the truth, and yet I felt like an impostor" (419). She is evidently referring to her previous stage in life when she earned a living as a male impersonator, but if we read this sentence palimpsestuously, it becomes the perfect closure for Nancy's journey. As with other new coinages, "drag king" is a term under continuous evolution just as each performative experience proves unique and singular, especially during this present decade, as the visibility of drag kings —although it has not yet reached the magnitude of drag queens— is being progressively mainstreamed. According to Torr and Bottoms, this phenomenon "suggests a complex exchange of desires between queer margins and the cultural mainstream" (117). In other words, even if there is still a long way to go in the process of granting visibility to the great variety of non-normative realities and of encouraging people to think out of the heteropatriarchal

matrix,[31] the acknowledgment of the drag king figure in popular culture may be said to culminate the process of perceptibility of the difference between the normative male/female binary and the equally valid forms of femininity experienced by Nancy.

3. 5. Nan and Chris: Two Rebellious Women Fighting for Visibility across the Centuries

To close this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate that Nancy, the Victorian character, is not so far from our contemporary culture, by comparing her with a global singer, the French performer Héloïse Letissier, who seems to be the twenty-first century embodiment of Waters's Victorian protagonist. Letissier's first artistic name (Christine and the Queens) was partly a tribute to a Drag Queen Club in London where she found her way and felt safe enough to express her true self. In an interview with Alexandra Pollard published in November 2018, she still showed her gratitude towards the Drag Queen community for teaching her what femininity is really about.[32] On the occasion of the release of her second album, also in 2018, she reinvented her artistic persona and shortened her name, wishing to be simply addressed as "Chris." This switch of names already establishes a clear parallelism with Nancy: behind the shortening of their names is the desire to express their real selves and their capacity for evolution. In various articles and interviews, Héloïse Letissier has described her deliberate

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[31] As Halberstam explains, "despite multiple images of strong women (such as bodybuilder Bev Francis or tennis player Martina Navratilova), of cross-identifying women (Radclyffe Hall or Ethel Smyth), of masculine-coded public figures (Janet Reno), of butch superstars (k. d. lang), of muscular and athletic women (Jackie Joyner-Kersee), of female-born transgendered people (Leslie Feinberg), there is still no general acceptance or even recognition of masculine women and boyish girls" (15).

[32] "She's said before that she learned how to be a woman from the drag queens she met" (Pollard n.p.).

change of name from Christine to Chris as the creation of an *alter ego* of her first *alter ego* (Empire, Pollard). As she explains, her earliest artistic choices were already a form of "*constructing identities*, but I was just trying to please other people [...]. With Christine, it's just about trying to please myself and to be myself" (in Pollard n.p.; emphasis added). As this comment suggests, the French performer's internal growth and self-acceptance are somehow reflected on the outside. In fact, she has developed this idea further on various occasions. As she explained in an interview appositely entitled "Christine and the Queens on reinventing herself as Chris," "I think of identities as constructions. I think every choice we make, every day, is a slight construction" (in Anonymous "Christine" n.p.). She has also often recognised that she has changed through time, both physically and mentally, and has perfectly explained this fearless evolution as, for example, in an interview with Raisa Bruner:

> I love Christine, and I am Chris. [...] I see it as a *theatricality*, but it's also a way for me to be more honest. It's actually way more raw and honest than sometimes who I am when I go out regularly. The nickname is a way to address the idea that I'm getting a bit more comfortable, and I'm apologizing even less. I can address everything with more strength. (in Bruner n.p.; emphasis added)

Although this comment conveys Christine's ideas, it could easily fit into Nancy's discourse. Her use of the word "theatricality" is by no means accidental. Christine's name is repeatedly accompanied by words such as

"performance" and "theatricality" in various interviews and articles. And this, together with the notion of the construction of identities, leads immediately to the notion of gender as performance addressed in the first part of this chapter. In fact, with the publication of Christine's second album, and her refashioning as a more gender-neutral, sometimes described as androgynous persona (Ugwu n.p.), Chris brings into action some of Judith Butler's theoretical statements, being perfectly conscious of the implications this has in our contemporary social context.[33] As she explains, "'I see theatre everywhere' [...]. 'We're all kind of performing a version of ourselves every morning by choosing the clothes and how we appear [...]. You get to shape your own new ways of existing and how you want to address things'" (in Solomon n.p.). These lines echo some of Butler's most representative ideas, and put into words Nancy's actions in the novel. Both women, the real and the fictional performers, demonstrate that gender can be performed, first of all, through renaming and clothing. Indeed, this is precisely what Nancy notices while walking down the streets in male outfit to earn a living as a male prostitute. She admits: "My one regret was that though I was daily giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience" (Waters, *Tipping* 206).

Like Nancy, Christine usually puts together the concepts of performativity and the "feminine" as a way of demonstrating that femininity can be expressed in dissonant but equally valid and effective ways. As she told Conrad Duncan in an interview, "I became really interested in working

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[33] Chris has recognised that, through the influence of her father, who is a university scholar, she discovered Butler's ideas, and felt identified with her discourse: "I had the chance to grow up in a family where people were really curious and open-minded, and I think my parents gave me tools really young to conceptualize that. [...] When I was 15 years old, I read Judith Butler and the idea that gender is a performance" (Them).

with a femininity that could revolve around patriarchal, macho codes." (in Duncan n.p.). As Duncan further explains,

> Letissier, who has spoken positively about gender fluidity previously (and identifies herself as pansexual), notes she feels almost more feminine with the character. 'The idea was to try to make it so obvious that it was just a set of codes we are given because if I try to use the macho-aesthetic as a woman, it's *showing how much of it is theatre*.' (Duncan n.p.; emphasis added)

By admitting her conscious decision to play with the concept of femininity and ponder on how it could or could not be performed, Christine acknowledges that her predominant interest is

> [to explore] classic masculine theatrics [with the aim of] disrupting them slightly by choosing them as a woman, because, what does that mean if I'm actually embracing the parades of masculinity as sometimes guys could choose to embrace the parades of femininity? Just to expose the theatricality of it. (in Anonymous "Christine" n.p.)

In their search for different ways of being feminine, both Héloïse Letissier and Nancy feel the need to explore new scenarios in terms of sexuality and sexual attraction. Letissier admits that, by choosing her second stage name, she felt "empowered through it [...]. As a young woman, I'm

going to choose my narrative. I do want to appear like this on stage. I do want to work my sexuality like that." (in Anonymous "Christine" n.p.). By choosing her narrative, she means that she is totally free to be attracted to whoever she may find sexually appealing. Besides, Letissier is a great supporter of the idea that sexiness and attraction are not tied to the established canon: "classically, a woman is always sexualized in one way in today's society [...]. I'm just trying to exist differently. *I think sexiness can be lots of different things*" (in Davis n.p.; emphasis added). The same goes for Nancy as, together with the process of discovering her homosexuality, she recognises that she feels more attracted to Kitty when she herself dresses up as a boy: "I seemed to want her more and more, the further into boyishness I ventured" (Waters, *Tipping* 124). Through this and similarly subtle comments, Waters manages to convey the multiple forms of attraction towards diverse people in ways that do not respond to the stereotypes accepted by the majority of the population within the still dominant heteropatriarchal matrix. By so doing, Waters is also contributing to dismantle the simplicity attached to lesbian relationships in the past, when they were pigeonholed within a single pattern. As Halberstam points out, "such a presumption also funnels female masculinity neatly into models of sexual deviance rather than accounting for the meanings of early female masculinity within the history of gender definition and gender relations" (46).

Other related key aspects shared by Nan and Chris are their physical appearances and stylistic choices, particularly their haircuts. This apparently innocent aesthetic aspect becomes especially remarkable in both processes

of self-growth. Nancy's haircut clearly marks a change in her perception of gender and its malleability. There are different instances in the novel that clearly highlight the symbolic value of Nancy's haircut, for example, at the moment when, after an outstanding performance on stage, she acknowledges having "found her vocation" (Waters, *Tipping* 123). She says: "in those few, swift minutes I had glimpsed a truth about myself, and it had left me awed and quite transformed" (123). It is after this revelation that she decides to change her name and also to have her hair cut (123). Her own reaction to her overall change of look is not to "squeal" as the hairdresser said her female customers usually did after having their hair cut. On the contrary, she "only smiled to see the transformation he had made" (124). What is more, Nancy recognises that she blushed when she saw herself, not out of embarrassment but rather due to a kind of newborn excitement: "I had blushed because my new, shorn head, my naked neck, felt saucy" (124). Similarly, Chris moved from having long brown hair to wearing a really short hairstyle. After having her hair cut, different people started misreading her stylistic choice based on gender and sexual stereotypes, ignoring the fact that it actually was the last-minute decision of a photographer in a shooting session.[34] As she explained:

> It [the haircut] gives everyone a different lecture. Just the fact that I
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> affirmed something a bit more ambivalent, everyone is like, is she

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[34] Letissier tells the complete story of her haircut in the CBC Radio interview. She explains that the photographer's comment was triggered by her manifesto, an eight-page declaration explaining in detail who she really was and how she felt at that moment (in Anonymous "Christine" n.p.).

transitioning? Is she a dude? Actually, it's just me working a *different way to be feminine*. It's just a haircut. (in Heaney n.p.; emphasis added)

The same misconception is found in the novel. When Nancy sees a woman with short hair for the first time, she reflects: "If I had ever seen women with hair as short as hers, it was because they had spent time in hospital or prison, or because they were mad" (Waters, *Tipping* 12). This comment leaves no doubt about the biased reputation of such a hairstyle. Yet, for both women, the loss of their long hair seems to have a liberating effect. As Chris explains, when the photographer told her: "I think your hair shorter would even give more justice to the character you are talking about," she confessed that she had always wanted to have her hair cut, but was afraid to do so (in Anonymous "Christine" n.p.). Nancy has a similar reaction. She uses a telling simile to express the feeling of liberation brought about by her haircut: "toms grow easily sentimental over their haircuts, but I remember this sensation very vividly — it was not like she was cutting hair, it was as if I had a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades, that the flesh had all grown over, and she was slicing free" (Waters, *Tipping* 405). These comments leave no doubt that haircutting is a liberating act for both females as well as a way of feeling totally honest and secure about their true inner selves.

To conclude, and not surprisingly, the word "queer," which, as we have seen, is rather noticeable in Waters's novel due to its constant repetitions and its malleable meanings and implications, also appears

frequently in different articles about Héloïse Letissier's music and life style. As she points out in the interview with Bruner, "[t]he whole idea of queer culture, the queer aesthetic, queer geography is to question a norm in reaction to a society that feels narrow [...]. There are many things to do with queerness… that should be universal" (in Bruner n.p.). These words express Letissier's feelings and emotions both on stage and when she is asked about her personal thoughts and preferences. Additionally, Letissier and her interviewers have also used this word to describe her as gender-queer (Cragg 2016; Ugwu 2018). Ultimately, her increasing international recognition (she was even invited onstage by Madonna) has contributed to the growth of a performer who "h[olds] up as an artist indelibly queering the mainstream" (Pollard n.p.). Her artistic persona grants visibility to different non-normative identities in agreement with the current requests of the LGBTQ+ community regarding the deepening of our understanding of all the meanings coexisting in the acronym. Christine is doing at present the same that Nancy did when she dared to deliver Ralph's political speech in front of an immense crowd of people with different degrees of attentiveness or ideological similarity, or when she ventured to do the household chores wearing male trousers with the windows wide open so that everyone in the neighbourhood could see her. Both women, under their specific circumstances, may be said to contribute to pave the way for a worldwide acceptance of non-normative sexualities and the validation of a major statement about the fluidity of human identities.

CHAPTER IV

AFFINITY: THE LESBIAN GHOST: FROM PANOPTICAL OPPRESSION TO EMPOWERMENT

The reviewer Jenny Turner uses the terms "Frissony," "pastiche" and "lesbo-Victorian" (n.p.) to characterise *Affinity* (1999). These are words that, as pointed out in the Introduction, Waters herself uses to describe her fictional works in general. Waters's second novel was published just one year after the first. As Kaye Mitchell explains, *Affinity* was fully praised by fellow novelists like Julie Myerson or Adam Mars-Jones, who found its plotting "dazzlingly convoluted" (Kaye Mitchell, "Reception" 2). As Turner notes, in *Affinity* Waters continues the path initiated in the first novel. Like *Tipping the Velvet*, it is "always rich in feeling, and clever, and precise" (n.p.). Undoubtedly, this novel presents numerous aspects worth commenting on, ranging from the fact that it is a historical novel to its ultimate meaning and apparently hidden contemporary message. As de Groot reminds us: "As a form, the historical novel raises significant questions about representation, and the choices made by both author and reader in interrogating and understanding the world." (57). The formal and thematic complexity of historical novels in general, and of *Affinity* in particular, is the reason why numerous scholars, whose analyses will be used as starting points for my own, have studied the novel from different angles and perspectives.

Affinity is set in the Victorian London of the 1870s. In agreement with the socio-cultural, political and scientific intricacy of the decade, the

novel presents a really complex panorama in which some of the best-known *topoi* of Waters's fiction are easily identified. As Rachel Carroll notes,

> On the one hand, *Affinity* is a historically grounded and plausible reconstruction of marginalized women's histories: the spinster, the spirit medium, the working-class servant. [...] The past is then experienced both through the framework of revisionary feminist historiography and through the past's own conventions of representation; the novel's attempt to reconstruct a "lost" past is qualified by a consciousness of the ways in which the meanings of the past change with every attempt to "return" to it. ("Rethinking" 143)

It is clear that, in this novel, Sarah Waters made conscious choices when employing several devices to portray a concrete kind of Victorian female characters: those leading subdued lives in a confined environment. As in *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters focuses on the lost past of indecorous Victorian women, the type of women whose stories will never appear in a history book. What is more, echoing my contention that one of the most relevant aims of neo-Victorianism is its contribution to the understanding of the contemporary reader's present, Costantini argues that, in *Affinity*, "distance allows her [Waters] to fill in the historical gaps imaginatively. But it also increases her awareness of the relevance that reconstructing the past can have for the present" (31). Evidently, Waters's interest in lesbian writings remains a predominant feature in her second work. As we shall see,

Terry Castle's seminal work, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), provides some of the main theoretical clues for the understanding of how lesbians are represented in *Affinity*.

The novel's generic allegiances are also easily traceable. As Tatiana Kontou points out, "Waters uses the sensation genre, prison narratives and spiritualist memoirs to create a kind of counter-history, the antithesis of 'great lives' and 'great works' of men" (172). By choosing the topic of ghosts and spirits and situating it at the centre of the plot, Waters may be said to be rewriting history from the margins of patriarchal society and giving voice to the lesbian community that did exist but was invisible in the nineteenth century, as both spiritualism and homosexuality were subjects relegated to the dark margins of Victorian society.

Sarah Waters's second novel deals mainly with the complex personal and social relations of three women: Margaret Prior, Selina Dawes, and Ruth Vigers. Set in the streets and buildings of Victorian London, it tells the story of Margaret Prior, an upper-middle class lady who is still living with her mother. Pinpointed as a spinster, since she is already 30 years old and is not married, Margaret sees how her brother Stephen and her sister Priscilla are making a life of their own while she is forced by filial duty to take care of her widowed mother. After the death of her father and the unfortunate ending of the secret relation she had with Helen —when she decided to marry Margaret's brother— Margaret becomes so unhappy that she attempts to commit suicide. To free herself from the oppression she suffers at home she becomes a Lady Visitor at Millbank prison, where she will meet the working-class spiritualist, Selina Dawes. After several encounters, Margaret

starts feeling attracted by this mysterious inmate, her fascination towards her growing unstoppably. As readers eventually learn, Selina will use her charm to escape, both from prison and from England with her real true love, the unnoticed lady's maid, Ruth Vigers. Indeed, this invisible woman will play a crucial role in the novel. She becomes the perfect embodiment of the central topic of this chapter: the figure, in Castle's words, of the "apparitional lesbian." With her ghostly presence, Ruth manages to establish links with both protagonists, since she works as a lady's maid first for Selina's patron, Mrs Brink, and then for Margaret, without ever drawing the attention of the ladies. As Onega points out, her invisibility is enhanced by the fact that, while Margaret refers to her as "Vigers," Mrs Brink (and also Selina), calls her "Ruth" ("Invisibility" 134). Thus, readers are unable to realise that she is the same person until the end of the novel, after the final trick on Margaret has taken place. This deceptive technique of addressing the same person by the use of different names, one representing the familiar and the other the formal address of maids, is probably one of the great achievements of Waters, used primarily to increase the tension and maintain an uncertainty that will only be clarified at the end of the novel, when the reader gets to know, through Margaret's voice, the importance of Ruth's role in the whole process of deception and treachery. This strategy is enhanced by a relevant formal feature of *Affinity*, namely, the fact that it is an epistolary novel alternating entries of two diaries: one written by Margaret and the other by Selina. Though theoretically this narrative structure allows readers to have two different perspectives on the events, in fact, as I will explain, they are not exactly the same, as the diaries refer to

two different times and belong to different nineteenth-century types, and this inevitably has certain consequences in the construction of the plot.

However, before delving into the content of the novel, we must devote some lines to the role of the readers, especially in relation to the form of the novel, particularly the fact that the texts readers are handling are diaries. As we shall see in detail in the first part of this chapter, real readers are supposed to be located on a higher ontological level with respect to the fictional characters, as we apparently have access to the whole picture while characters are living the story from their personal perspectives and have more information gaps. The most problematic issue here is that, in this case, Ruth Vigers, the invisible lady's maid, is also a fictional reader of Margaret's diary-which further complicates the plot. Readers of *Affinity* are intruders in the sense that we have access to Selina's and Margaret's diaries, normally meant to be read only by the writers themselves. However, we are cheated, like Margaret, as we are granted quasi-simultaneous access to the two women's unrelated diaries, written at different times and places, as each entry is juxtaposed to each other, or as Kim Brindle puts it, "lie side by side, ostensibly in unequivocal view for the reader" (69). As a result, we get from the very beginning what we think to be an accurate panorama of what is going on, only to discover at the end of the novel that we have been duped. Echoing the metaphor of the palimpsest, the reader is thus forced to start reading again in order to put together the different story lines so as to gather a truly relational, palimpsestuous reading of the novel.

Bearing in mind the thematic and formal richness of *Affinity*, I will pay special attention to its narrative form and its implications, particularly

the way in which it conveys some of its most ground-breaking themes, drawing on the notions of confinement, oppression and invisibility — understood both literally and metaphorically— as the main leitmotifs around which the novel develops. Imprisonment and invisibility are constantly mentioned central topics of the novel. This fact is reflected in the narrative technique, as the diary is a quite confined and private type of writing, in which the ideas of the characters are allowed to run free. At the same time, however, these ideas are enclosed in the darkness of one's room, belonging to no one but its writer and remaining invisible for the rest of the world. In this sense, the concrete form the novel takes is crucial for the creation of suspense and mystery, as well as for conveying the idea of the oppression Margaret suffers. Another form of oppression that is omnipresent in the novel, that of Selina and the other inmates of Millbank, is symbolised by the structure of the prison, built on the pattern of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. This panoptical structure, as we shall see in detail, cuts out any possibility of freedom and secrecy, since those interned in it are doomed to be constantly watched and controlled. As a result, they are bound by a system of rules without alternatives. Another salient theme of the novel that adds complexity to the *topos* of absolute confinement is spiritualism and the séances that appear in *Affinity*. Relating spiritualism with lesbianism, these socially criticised practices hide a whole world of sexual discovery and possibilities of trespassing on mainstream rules. The analysis of this aspect of the novel will lead to the last part of the chapter, in which I focus on the ghost effect concerning lesbianism as a hidden but predominant topic of the novel. Paralleling the analysis of *Tipping the Velvet,* the ultimate objective

of this in-depth analysis will be to build a bridge between past and present in order to understand how some problematic issues of the past are still reverberating in our present-day world. More concretely, in this chapter, the main topic discussed from different angles will be the invisibility of the lesbian community. With respect to this, I will seek to demonstrate, by analysing certain passages of the novel through the metaphor of the palimpsest, that some poignant comments do not only affect people living in the past but are still painfully significant in our contemporary society. In other words, I will try to prove that Waters also criticises contemporary society's behaviour, in this case, concerning the invisibility of the lesbian community.

4.1. The Juxtaposition of Two Narrative Voices: The Implications of Writing a Story in the Diary Form

The fact that *Affinity* is written in the diary form cannot be dismissed. As the Russian Formalists postulated once and for all, form and content are inseparable, and so I will begin by analysing the form as a preliminary for the analysis of the content of the novel and the ideology it conveys. As Brindle notes, "[t]here is a ubiquitous presence of fictional letters and diaries in neo-Victorian fiction" (65), and Waters has decided to follow the trend. As Trevor Field demonstrates in *Form and Fiction in the Diary Novel* (1989), there are numerous novels that can be ascribed to this genre. Here, it is essential to highlight that the notion of diary novel is, in itself, problematic. As Gerald Prince notes, "the diversity of diary novels is, of course, remarkable: *La Symphonie pastorale*, *Doctor Glass, The Diary of a*

Rapist, *Diario de un solterón penitente*, *La Nausée* are all considered to be diary novels and yet differ not only in themes and intentions but also in structure, in narrative syntax, in the formal devices they favor and exploit" (477). Because of this wide range of works, and although this is not the main focus here, this could be another issue worth discussing. Different critics seem to disagree on the exact historical moment in which the diary novel as a genre was born, as on numerous occasions this kind of works are indistinctively addressed as epistolary novels and the characteristics of each are not clearly defined. As Johannah King-Slutzky explains in "Go Read Alice: The History of the Diary Novel" (2014), while some critics trace the diary novel back to the seventeenth century, others consider that the beginning of the genre did not happen until the beginning of the nineteenth. According to King-Slutzky, it was in the year 1989 that Gerald Prince finally coined this term (n.p.). She makes special emphasis on how "diaries changed suddenly in the 19th century" (n.p.), when, for the first time in history, "diaries became popular outside the spiritual or administrative contexts" (n.p.). King-Slutzky also recalls that women's diaries were not usually published unless there was some gossip interest related to a famous man, and were considered second-class and badly written (n.p). However, in order to avoid making this issue excessively twisted, we should bear in mind Field's warning that "the word 'diary' must be defined in such a way as to make it an identifiable unit without denying it the freedom of form which real diaries have always enjoyed" (6).

As explained above, in the case of *Affinity*, the reader has access to two different narrative voices, as it alternates the diaries of Margaret Prior

and Selina Dawes. This gives the impression of providing a more complete picture of what is going on, as one diary supposedly complements the missing information of the other. However, the impression is more illusory than real. As Onega notes, "instead of addressing each other and thus creating a space of mutual understanding, Margaret's and Selina's narrations take the form of journals, that is, of privately written daily records of their respective experiences, occurrences and observations, meant to be read only by themselves." (Onega "Invisibility" 130-31). As Onega further explains, diaries usually reflect the characterological traits and provide the author's perspective on the events narrated. Thus, Margaret Prior, a well-educated and clever lady, employs her journal to express her most repressed feelings and emotions, while by contrast, "Selina's journal is extraordinarily laconic and factual, evincing an illiteracy that responds to her humble social position" ("Invisibility" 133). The development of the action wholly depends, therefore, on this difference, itself a formal echo of the socio-cultural gap between the well-meaning and gullible Lady Visitor and the picaresque medium and scheming convict. Indeed, Selina's entries, much shorter, succinct and factual than those of Margaret's diary, show her working-class background, as they belong to "the type of pocket diary or memorandum created in the eighteenth century for women to keep track of daily observations and cash expenditures" (133). As such, they "serve as a counter-narrative to Margaret's version and vision" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, "Mirrors" 186).

Margaret's diary is written in the year 1874 and Selina's in the years 1872 and 1873. This temporal difference undermines the apparent

alternacy of the entries and limits the readers' perspective, mostly on that of Margaret, thus creating multiple gaps of necessary information, which are only partially complemented by Selina's diary, as the two diaries do not focus on the same events. However, I think it is essential to point out that, as Armitt and Gamble make clear, the two diaries share a state of "mutual dependence derive[d] from the fact that, without its partner, each of the two narratives lacks closure" (152). This leads them to conclude that the two narrations stand in what they describe as a palimpsestic relation: "At first, there is an *apparently equal* relationship between the two journals: each is superimposed one upon the other to create a sort of palimpsest" (152; emphasis added). Although Armitt and Gamble qualify the relation of the two diaries as "palimpsestic," the fact that they depend on each other to make sense suggests that the total understanding of the plot can only arise from a "palimpsestuous," or relational reading of the two narrations. Focused from this relational perspective, Selina's deceptive and laconic narration creates a sense of suspense as it provides diffuse clues the readers must unveil if they are to understand what is wrong about Margaret's perception of reality. What is more, from this relational perspective, the intermingling of the two voices reveals what Costantini describes as "some contradictions of a disharmonious age, which waved between punishment and transgression, prudery and sensation, moral strictness and class privileges" (17). For all their difficulty of interpretation, Selina's entries are the ones that provide the readers with the main clues for the understanding of what is really going on. Many of the hidden clues that go unnoticed in a

first reading and come to the fore in a second are, indeed, those that provide key points for the understanding of the plot.

On the whole, Selina's writings focus on her spiritualist séances and are apparently quite cryptic in style, as the second entry written by her (on 2 September 1872) perfectly demonstrates. As already pointed out, her entries are written two years before Margaret's story, and so function as the perfect complement required to open the readers' eyes and increase their empathy for Margaret's naivety. Indeed, one of the qualities of the diary novel is that it makes easier for readers to identify with its fictional author. It seems that personal accounts must be real, since they are writings addressed to oneself and are therefore devoid of cunning or duplicity, for there is no point in lying to oneself. As Field explains, "quite apart from facilitating a suspension of disbelief the journal form is particularly well suited to create a positive belief on the part of even the least willing reader" (54). In this case, Margaret presents herself as a really naïve character, willing to believe Selina's tricks, and completely honest in her rendering of what she thinks to be the truth of the events she is living. Even if we, as readers, are in a privileged position with respect to the characters, we can be led to believe in Margaret's romantic love story, and we can also be bewitched by Selina and Ruth's spiritualism and end up seeing ghosts only because we want a happy ending for poor Margaret. A good example of this can be found in the following comment, if interpreted metaphorically: "They have left me sitting in the *dark*, with only *the light from the window* to *write* by" (Waters, *Affinity* 1; emphasis added). This is the second sentence in Selina's first diary entry, indeed, a very telling one, highlighting

the significance of the concept of darkness. Metaphorically, it may be applied not only to Margaret but also to the readers, who find themselves utterly in the dark about the real events. In a first reading of the novel, the reader remains in this dark place till the end, when Selina and Ruth's final treachery on Margaret is unveiled. In the interview with Kaye Mitchell, Sarah Waters provided a significant metaphor for the understanding of her fictions in general and *Affinity* in particular when she remarked that "people often stand in windows in my books, looking out — which means, of course, that then there's potential for them to be observed, too […] it's to do with houses and spaces being an extension of subjectivity." (in Kaye Mitchell, "Interview" 138). Given that, in the case of *Affinity*, we are having access to two private journals, we can say that we are standing in the window as intruders. The only thing we can do is to trust that the light coming from Selina's and Margaret's windows while they are writing their stories will be enough to make us see the truth. However, the window metaphor can also be misleading. Even if, at the beginning, both Margaret and Selina seem to be reliable narrators, we progressively discover that the light coming from Margaret's window is not the right one, and that, in the process of writing, she is completely misreading what surrounds her. As Brindle intelligently points out, "[i]t is perhaps this 'cloistered' narrative atmosphere that encourages readers to collude with Margaret's confessional text and imagine her illusory love story" (68).

In "Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*" (2010), Brindle provides an illuminating approach to the novel by exploring the function of the gaze —which will be tackled in the following

section— in combination with the diary form. She brings to light how "unseen letters escape the panoptic principle to drive both the plot and the actual love affair that plays in the shadows and sub-text of the novel" (65). As she suggests,

> the gaze and the diary work in tandem to demonstrate who reads, who writes, and who interprets and distributes textual power. The panoptic principle of the gaze is juxtaposed with the privacy of the diary to raise questions about textual manipulation and power within the author/reader relationship. (77)

As Brindle goes on to explain, the diary acts as Margaret's main medicine (Waters, *Affinity* 70), never forgetting that this is not Margaret's first diary, but that she had already written and destroyed another one: "Margaret begins her second diary with the express purpose of avoiding the pitfalls of her earlier destroyed text: namely not to succumb to that derided and clichéd formula, 'journal of the heart'" (70). However, we should question whether she achieves this purpose. It is true that Margaret herself recognises that she wants to write a different kind of journal: "I mean this book to be different to that one. I mean this writing not to turn me back upon my own thoughts, but to serve, like the choral, to keep the thoughts coming at all" (70). Indeed, she has "catalogued" her visits to the prison and has "traced" (70) some paths through it, with the only purpose of rationalising everything. The result, however, is nothing but total failure since, throughout the novel we can appreciate how she is constantly expressing her feelings, her writing

being a reflection of her broken-heart despair, as is made crystal-clear, for example, in her last entry, when she admits that she is "terribly weary" (350).

One of the facts closely associated to diary novels is that their writers do not usually provide long explanations about themselves since, as Field explains, if they are writing only for their own sake, there would be no need for extended details (97). However, one of the advantages of *Affinity* is that, since we hear two different voices, we can find several clarifying descriptions, especially about Selina, as Margaret provides many details about her that do not appear in her own diary. Thus, from their vantage position, the readers are able to create a more accurate picture of Selina, and what is more important, a more encompassing idea of the general background to the action. The contrary happens in the case of Margaret due to the fact that Selina's entries are written long before they meet each other. The readers do not get a full picture of Margaret, especially as far as physical appearance is concerned, as Margaret only uses the diary to record her preoccupations so that it acts as a mirror of her inner self. Indeed, the psychological depth of Margaret's diary allows Onega to describe it as a "healing narrative" ("Invisibility" 17). Although the diaries play a central role in the unravelling of the plot, it should not be forgotten that there is a third main character who is not allowed a voice, regardless of her importance for the plot. As Kontou rightly points out, readers never have access to Ruth's voice, as all the information is mediated through Margaret and Selina's writings (190). However, drawing on Castle's notion of the "apparitional lesbian," it can be stated that Ruth uses her ghostly powers

from the shadow, and is paradoxically located "at the centre of *Affinity*" (Kontou 190), although her perspective is not granted to the readers.

When analysing *Affinity*, not only the form is important, but also the act of writing itself, as it reveals certain aspects of the personalities of the diary writers, particularly of Margaret's inner anxieties and desires: "For the lonely, isolated individual, mentally barricaded behind a rampart of pages even if not physically locked away, the journal does become the most intimate part of existence" (Field 148). As anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, as far as intimacy is concerned, Margaret really believes that her diary contains the most intimate sphere of her life and also that it is only read by herself: "I said that *that* book was like my dearest friend. I told it all my closest thoughts, and it kept them secret […]. And where can I say it, except here?" (Waters, *Affinity* 111, 220; emphasis in the original). However, even if, as Prince argues, "writing is a very private matter intended to remain very private" (478), this privacy will be violated by her lady's maid, Vigers, when she takes advantage of her job to act as a panoptic observer. In this sense, the diary itself may be said to function symbolically as the equivalent of Selina's prison, a confining place for Ruth's observation of Margaret.

Echoing this, Margaret's process of writing has been interpreted in two opposed ways. Some critics argue that, by writing, Margaret is locking herself up: "The diary rather than a liberating device, actually becomes another disciplinary tool because, like the gaze, it internalises the punishment" (Llewellyn, "Queer?" 208). By the same token, Brindle believes that "[f]ar from achieving power through authorship, Margaret

becomes both a ghost-writer and her own gullible reader" (70). Yet, bearing in mind Onega's contention that Margaret's diary is a healing narrative, and drawing on Foucault's idea that "one writes to become other than what one is" (in Ruas 182), as well as on Judith Butler's notion of performativity explained in detail in the previous chapter, I would dare to argue that Margaret is writing herself by expressing who she really is. In the diary, she lets free her most sincere and true feelings and she performs the way she feels she ought to act, regardless of Victorian constraints and standards of morality. In other words, even if she cannot escape her particular prison, she is free to imagine her real self while she is writing. One of the clearest examples could be the sentence: "I thought that I could make my life into a book that had no life in it — a book that was only a catalogue, a kind of list" (Waters, *Affinity* 214). By means of writing, characters like Margaret are allowed to "explore questions of sexuality, gender politics and power" (Kaye Mitchell, "Reception" 11). So, by writing about Selina's love and the possibility of finally achieving happiness together, she becomes the creator of her life story. Following Butler's main idea in *Gender Trouble* that performativity is not a single act but rather a repetition that will lead to the naturalisation of, in this case, her true feelings (xv), it may be stated that Margaret is "performing" herself. Thus, the act of writing becomes a guarantee for Margaret to be free as she herself expects: "That is the last time I shall quote, like this. For from the moment Selina comes to me, I shall *live*!" (Waters, *Affinity* 316; emphasis in the original). What is more important, we should not forget that her act of writing allows the closeted lesbian lady to express her real self, the one Victorian society would

condemn as improper, queer, and even mad. The self-conscious element in the process of writing[35] is made absolutely visible in Margaret's entries, which constantly make reference to the fact that she is creating a piece of writing: "I thought, If I may not talk about my visit, then I can certainly sit and write about it, in my own book…" (29); "I feel not at all like writing tonight" (59). Even more significant is the fact that, in the last entry Margaret states: "This is the last page I shall write. All my book is burned now" (348). Significantly, this is the only entry without a date, an omission that may allude to her tiredness and apathy and to her intention to commit suicide —something we can only infer—, or else, to her wish to put an end to her imagined life story by burning the book and start a new life no matter how. Moreover, Margaret's words and the speculations we, as readers, create around its possible meanings, point to one of the key aspects of fictional diaries. As Field remarks, "the diary, in fiction as in real life, will comment on events *more or less as they happen*." (6; emphasis added). At the same time, as Field makes clear, writing a diary is an act of re-writing, in the sense that the writer recreates past events by commenting on them. As Margaret explains in her first diary entry, "Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began and where it ended" (7). In other words, Margaret is carefully recording the past events of her life, while simultaneously fictionalising them by projecting her naiveté and romantic feelings on the sheer facts. Clear examples of this are her interpretation of the magic appearance of the word "truth" that she believes to be written with blood on Selina's arm

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[35] As Field notes, "the personal diary itself is a type of writing which tends to make people self-conscious." (129).

(167), or the episode, when, during one of her visits to Selina's cell, Margaret sees a "smear of white [...] from the streaming walls [that was not lime but] wax" (187), and immediately believes that it is a smear left by the wax hand of Peter Quick that she had seen in the library of Mr Hither. Selina uses tricks like these to lead her to believe that they had been carried out by the spirits, but readers are eventually provided with a rational explanation. These examples respond to Foucault's above-mentioned contention that writing a diary is writing the self, precisely what Margaret attempts to do. It could be said that the diary is the only place where she feels absolutely free from scrutiny, although in fact she is not: "I thought, If I may not talk of my visit, then I can certainly sit and write about it, in my own book…" (29). This sense of privacy and freedom is painfully ironic as, unknown to her, Margaret's diary is read twice: not only by Ruth Vigers, but also, implausibly, by the readers, as she has confined it to the fire. In summary, even if Margaret could feel free while writing, she will remain imprisoned by her own words in the pages of her diary.

Finally, dates are another inherent aspect of diary novels deserving attention. As Field explains, dates are "the most obvious mimetic device of all, [even though] they are not in fact a necessary condition of the diary novel" (7). Fields also argues that, when feeling lonely, late night hours are the most appropriate moment for the writing of a new entry. This fact coincides with Margaret's practice, as she always writes at bed time —"I am writing by candle-light" (Waters, *Afffinity* 116)—, before, during or after taking her medicine: "It is half-past twelve. […] Now I am too tired to write — but too restless, I think, to sleep just yet" (30). As I have argued before,

the diary form may easily create a certain willingness in the readers to believe its writer's words, but in this case, Margaret's truthfulness is set into question by the fact that she is sometimes under the effect of drugs, which she takes for her insomnia ever since her first suicide attempt. As already noted, the last entry Margaret writes, which is the only one that does not provide a date, is especially remarkable. The despair she feels when she discovers the truth, together with her farewell letter —significantly addressed to her first true love, Helen— point to an impending second suicide attempt, perhaps a successful one this time, even if the text does not offer total closure. However, the lack of date undoubtedly points to Margaret's mental shock and imbalance caused by Selina and Ruth's betrayal. Margaret is "so terribly weary" (350) that she cannot even "say what time it is" (348). Not only is she probably under the effects of drugs such as laudanum or a kind of morphine that she takes on her own: the terms she uses in her goodbye letter also suggest that she may be suffering from some form of temporary madness. In this letter, once again, Margaret expresses her desire to stop writing: "I am likely never to be obliged to write a second time" (315); and she describes her decision to commit suicide as "giving up a life, to gain a new and better one" (216), thus suggesting that she can only expect to lead a happy life in the other world. However, this is perhaps the clearest example of Margaret's self-delusion.

4.2. An Apparently Inescapable System of Surveillance: The Structure of Foucault's Panopticon and of Millbank Prison

One of the main settings of the novel is Millbank Prison, or Millbank Penitentiary, originally known as the National Penitentiary. Built in Millbank, Westminster, London, on the riverside of the Thames, it opened in 1816 and closed in 1890. The largest prison in London, it served for some time as a holding facility for convicted prisoners before they were transported to Australia. Due to its prominence in the novel, this setting must be taken into account, since it presents important clues for the understanding of the novel.[36] Thus, in this section, I will carry out a meticulous study of the building. Sarah Waters herself recognises that she feels attracted towards certain institutions such as workhouses or prisons: "There's a kind of kinkiness to it, which has really appealed to me" (in Dennis 45). Since the novel is set in the Victorian Era, this prison was built according to Jeremy Bentham's design of the panoptical penitentiary that was later on studied by Michel Foucault as a governmental mechanism for exerting power and punishment on the population. In the novel, the structures of power and control are clearly perceptible, not only within the penitentiary system, but also, and more disturbingly, outside Millbank, since, as I will try to demonstrate, the whole Victorian society seems to behave according to panoptical tenets. More concretely, this system of

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[36] As Ariadna Serrano Bailén explains in her book *Historia e identidad sexual en las novelas de Sarah Waters* (2008), "el psiquiátrico o la prisión son sitios de especial consideración en estas novelas por dos razones: por un lado, estos son espacios influyentes en la identidad de los personajes. Por otro lado, […] la autora escribe sus obras a partir de su propia investigación, por lo que por su significación opresora son esenciales en su trabajo" (15). [the psychiatric centre or the prison are places of especial relevance in these novels for two reasons: on the one hand, these spaces influence the characters' identities, and on the other, Waters writes her novels after having done her own research, reason why, given their oppressive significance, they are essential for her work. (my translation)].

constant scrutiny will be examined in relation to Margaret's constant and unmitigated oppression due to her sexual orientation. Central to this structure of constant scrutiny and surveillance is the act of gazing. Therefore, it is fundamental for the understanding of the panoptical system that is omnipresent throughout the novel. As Brindle remarks, "configurations of the 'gaze' are repeated more than one hundred times throughout Waters's novel" (81). Indeed, the novel draws a whole game of control and surveillance in different ways. Therefore, this part of the chapter will focus on how power relations are depicted in *Affinity*. In order to do so, some ideas explained by Foucault related to the panopticon will be studied in relation to the novel, as well as some of the most important points explored by Laura Mulvey on the use of the gaze in the film industry. Taking into consideration the fact that one of the main strengths of this penitentiary system was the implementation of power and control, we can advance the hypothesis that the main characters in the novel stand in a similar relation. As I will explain in more detail, there is between Margaret and Selina a relation of power and control in which Margaret will be completely trapped, even if, after all, it is Ruth Vigers who truly controls everything and everyone in a silent but really efficient way. Together with her, Margaret's mother, Mrs Prior, is also constantly controlling Margaret, and submitting her actions to constant scrutiny. Consequently, the gaze plays a fundamental role in several encounters and between different characters with Margaret, always, as its object.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault explores the birth of the modern prison. Drawing on Bentham's

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penitentiary structure, he describes the panopticon as an "enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point" (*Discipline* 197).[37] Foucault provides a concrete and minute description of the layout of Bentham's panoptical building, in words that are worth quoting in full:

> at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a condemned man […]. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately […]. Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls

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[37] The description is very detailed, making clear that vigilance is omnipresent: "enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead — all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (Foucault, *Discipline* 197).

prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is

seen, but he does not see. (*Discipline* 200)

Significantly, the first diary entry written by Margaret provides a

detailed description of the building of Millbank Prison. Some of the

sentences she employs to describe it perfectly match the above definition of

the panopticon. The influence of the design of the building on the inmates is

directly alluded to by Mr Shillitoe, the director of the prison, when he tells

the new Lady Visitor: "you will see the logic of the design of it" (Waters,

Affinity 10). Margaret describes the place as "not charming. Its scale is vast,

and its lines and angles, when realized in walls and towers of yellow brick

and shuttered windows, seem only wrong or perverse. It is as if the prison

had been designed by a man in the grip of a nightmare" (8). Margaret gives

further details of the things she saw when walking the corridors for the first

time as Lady Visitor. She admits that "the organization of the prison, of

course, is so peculiar I soon grew lost" (9); and she describes the building as

formed by a series of pentagons in whose middle there is a "hexagon-shaped

building" (9). This is, of course, the central tower where the matrons have

their rooms: "the tower is set at the centre of the pentagon yards" (10). At its

the top there is a "bright, white, circular room, filled with windows" (10).

The clearest instance of a reference to this panoptical structure comes next,

when Margaret writes:

it was impossible, on entering that room, not to long to walk at

once to one of its curving windows and gaze at the view beyond it

> […]. Now, was that not a very marvellous and terrible sight? […]
> There was all the female gaol before me; and behind each of those
> windows was a single cell, with a prisoner in it. (11)

The awfulness of the institution is enhanced by the fact that Miss
Haxby (the governess or principal matron at Millbank) is called "the Argus
of the gaol" (11) by Mr Shillitoe. As is well known, Argus was a
primordial giant whose epithet, *Panoptes* ("all-seeing" from Ancient Greek:
Ἄργος Πανόπτης), led to his being described with multiple, often one
hundred, eyes. He is the perfect watchman as he keeps some of them open
even while asleep. Miss Haxby's epithet is rather accurate as the inmates of
Millbank could never escape her gaze. For all this, however, as Armitt and
Gamble point out, "though working with such historical source material in
Affinity, [Waters] deliberately skews the relationship between historical fact
and historical fiction, and by extension, truth and knowledge" (142). As
they argue, the appearance of Millbank in such a predominant position,
"carries a greater narrative significance" (143), an argument that will prove
essential for the main purpose of this chapter.

One of the main ideas in Foucault's analysis of the panopticon in
Discipline and Punish is that power is something ubiquitous; that it exists
not only in some buildings where hundreds of people can be easily
controlled, but also in society at large, even in its most private circles.[38] By
the same token, it can be stated that, in *Affinity*, the panopticon is not only a

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[38] "Bentham dreamt of transforming [barracks, schools, workshops and prisons] into a
network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert, running through
society without interruption in space or time." (Foucault, *Discipline* 209).

tool for punishing and correcting prison inmates, but can also be easily found in regular Victorian homes. As already pointed out, Margaret is controlled not only by Selina —and, more cunningly, by Ruth, both inside and outside the prison— but also by her mother and, more generally, by the upholders of the widespread moral standards ruling society. Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst argue that "home spaces are a private and secure location, a locus of identity, and an area where inhabitants can escape the disciplinary practices that regulate the body in the public sphere" (qtd. in O'Callaghan "Domestic" 123). However, this view is untenable in Margaret's case, for her home is another kind of prison, perhaps her tougher one, with her mother placed at the central tower, and so, acting as a kind of ward,[39] as we shall see in the next section of this chapter.

4.3. The Role of the Gaze in the Construction of the Novel's Societal Panopticon

According to Foucault, the gaze is one of the most important features of the panoptical system as, in it, "[i]nspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (*Discipline* 195). As Foucault further explains, in Bentham's panopticon those in control possess the powerful weapon of the gaze, which works without interruption, "induc[ing] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). This comment can be applied both to Millbank and to the Priors' house in Cheyne Walk, as the novel presents not only a panoptical

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[39] As Foucault explains, "[t]he panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen." (*Discipline* 202).

prison, but also a societal panopticon.[40] Some scholars have studied this issue in depth as, for example, Mark Llewellyn and, as we have already seen in relation to the diary form in the previous section, by Kym Brindle. In his article "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" (2004), Llewellyn provides a thorough study of the panopticism in the novel, both in prison and society, and offers a detailed analysis of all the different "crimes" a woman such as Margaret could commit in Victorian society.

Furthermore, in relation to the notion of power, we have to take into account Janet Semple's warning that "power is visible but shrouded, unverifiable and disindividualized. Those subject to power have no knowledge of it, no control over it, but are themselves the subject of knowledge and control" ("Defence" 115). This assertion is perfectly applicable to Margaret, since she is absolutely blind towards what is really happening, and she falls so deeply in love with Selina that she finds herself in an uncontrollable state of romantic longing: "Now I have more freedom than I ever had at any time in my life, and I do only the things I always have. They were empty before, but Selina has given meaning to them" (Waters, *Affinity* 304). As a result, Margaret becomes the main target of Selina and Ruth's elaborate plot. Still, as Llewellyn argues, "Margaret's higher social status allows her to occupy the role of observed and *observer*, and *displace her punishment onto others*, voyeuristically examining Selina through the cell door" ("Queer?" 211; emphasis added). Even if this

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[40] As Bailén explains, "su efecto [panóptico] es trasladado a todos los ámbitos de la sociedad, incluso al privado, transformando la mirada en el principal elemento de castigo para el ciudadano" (95) ["its panoptical effect is transferred to all the areas of society, even to the private spheres, transforming the gaze into the main punishing element for the citizen." (my translation)]

assertion is undoubtedly true, by falling in love with Selina, Margaret enters a game in which she loses the control of her gaze both as a weapon and as a defence mechanism. At the end of the novel, she will be completely trapped, although, ironically enough, her naivety makes her believe that she is the one in the role of observer, as Llewellyn suggests. What lies at the core of this game is Selina's trickery on Margaret. On many occasions, Selina makes Margaret believe that she is in control, when in fact, she is the one pulling the strings of Margaret's mind and affects, and pushing her towards the plan schemed by Ruth Vigers, the puppet-master moving the strings of their plot.[41] Thus, the assertion that, "sight is affirmed as a primary key to knowledge" (Armitt and Gamble 144) will be refuted as the plot develops. We must never forget that Margaret is under observation everywhere, absolutely tied to the conventions and scrutiny of middle-upper-class Victorian society. As already stated, she is also observed by her mother at their own house, the place where she is supposed to feel safe and secure. The same scrutinising feeling arises from the "sharp, odd look" (Waters, *Affinity* 200) her mother constantly displays on her, thus becoming the ward of the house/prison. Margaret is absolutely conscious of her mother's control, as she proves when she decides to lock the key-hole of her room:

> it is possible to be careful, even with the chloral in me — that she
> might come and press her ear to the panels of my door, she would

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[41] As Brindle argues, "Vigers becomes the super-reader in a mediated tripartite relationship. She constructs her own network of surveillance to read, write, and inspect text, with Margaret's diary thereby becoming the key medium in her elaborately coordinated fraud" (78).

not hear me. She might kneel and put her eye to the key-hole. I have stopped it up with cloth. (224)

Another relevant aspect —and a central one for Bentham's panopticon— is the fact that criminals were considered a different kind of beings —"another order of men"— not even fully human (Semple, *Bentham's Prison* 29). In fact, and drawing on the premise that Margaret is also controlled at home, not only Selina is an incarcerated criminal but also Margaret, whose life is comparable to that of women secluded at home under house arrest. She is both a thirty year-old spinster —something regarded at the time as disgraceful— and a closeted lesbian, thus doubly marginalised from the perspective of mainstream Victorian society. What is more, she attempted to commit suicide, a crime that would have condemned her to gaol as a criminal, were it not for her status as a lady. In Llewellyn's words:

> Margaret and Selina are thus both criminals in society's eyes and are punished for breaking cultural taboos, for being unacceptably *different*. Although the difference is never explicitly named, women who do not conform are by definition monsters and must be watched and restrained to enforce conformity upon all women. ("Queer?" 209; emphasis in the original)

At the same time, however, Margaret is different from Selina and the other prison inmates. As Miss Ridley, one of the matrons of Millbank

Prison, ironically confides to her: "they [the inmates] are not like you and me, miss […] the sort of women who pass through here! They hold their lives very cheap…" (Waters, *Affinity* 62). Similarly, while the members of Margaret's family are listening to her stories about the prison, Helen, making clear the social inferiority of prison mates, tells her: "but you cannot mean really to *befriend* these women? They must be thieves, and — worse!" (32; emphasis in the original). For all this, Margaret seems to have no escape from the accusing gaze and so, "as panoptic object, under vigilance by family, staff, and doctors, it is unsurprising that Margaret seeks private communion within the confessional pages of her private diary" (Brindle 70). Sadly enough, as readers eventually realise, even what Margaret believes to keep absolutely private is also being gazed at. What is more, Margaret will also be controlled at Millbank. At first, she believed that her visits to this prison were freeing her from the control she has to endure at home[42] — "I would rather sit with the prisoners at Millbank than sit with Priscilla now. I would rather talk with Ellen Power, than be chided by Mother. I would rather visit Selina, than go to Garden Court to visit Helen" (Waters, *Affinity* 176)— but, as we know, she will eventually discover that she was wrong. In the prison, Selina will act as her main "ward," although, as is discovered later on, Selina is in her turn a puppet of Ruth Vigers. Besides, once Selina's final trick has taken place, Margaret will be looked at suspiciously by everyone working at the prison, and they will harshly interrogate her as if

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[42] This idea has been exposed by Bailén, who believes that Margaret's freedom is only momentary: "[una] situación de reclusión y vigilancia constante en su propia casa que le provoca la necesidad de acudir a Millbank, donde, por un momento, creerá sentirse más libre" (37). ["[a] constant situation of seclusion and vigilance in her own house that provokes her the need to go to Milbank, where, at least for a moment, she will believe she feels freer." (my translation)].

she knew what was going on: "When I appeared with Miss Crave they turned their eyes on me; and one of them — Mary Ann Cook, I think — made a gesture" (324).

In relation to the power of the gaze, one of Laura Mulvey's main ideas exposed in her seminal work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999), can be useful to understand what happens in *Affinity*. She explains that the female image has been used in films so as to maintain the dominant patriarchal order. Although *Affinity* is a narrative fiction —and one portraying a homosexual relationship—, the same idea can be found: the female image, in this case Margaret's, is constantly looked at in order to maintain the system as it is thought to be correct, especially by her mother. Margaret feels constantly scrutinised by society for the same reason, and she is really conscious of it.[43] For example, when Selina asks her for help with the escaping plan, Margaret says: "We would be cast off, by society" (Waters, *Affinity* 274). Further, Mrs Prior's opinion about Margaret's ill health is firmly based on the general belief that spinsterhood is unnatural. Thus, she openly blurts out: "you [Margaret] wouldn't be ill like this […] if you were married." (263). Even more telling is the moment when Mrs Prior addresses Margaret as "Mrs Anybody" and adds: "You are only *Miss Prior*" (253; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, Margaret is kept under control by the drug treatment her mother provides her with in order to cure her from her depression, something she will later on do on her own: "and then, more laudanum, or chloral again, or morphine, or paregoric — I never tried that" (349). Thus, in *Affinity*, "Waters illustrates how nineteenth-century

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[43] "Margaret is forced to confront the fact that each look she receives not only within the walls of Millbank, but at home or in the street, is a judgmental gaze, surmising her status and in some senses acting as an aspect of her punishment" (Llewellyn, "Queer?" 207).

domesticity reinforced normative moral imperatives to ordain strict sexual mores. Waters achieves this by paralleling the Victorian middle-class home as analogous to a prison" (O'Callaghan, "Domestic" 125).

As the novel develops, Margaret and Selina's relationship becomes more intense and intimate, as becomes evident from the different instances when they look at each other. Perhaps, one of the clearest examples of Selina's control over Margaret can be found in the episode of the locket with Helen's hair that Margaret wears around her neck. After Margaret loses it and is unable to find it anywhere, the locket suddenly appears at home as if it was a trick of the spirits. After this uncanny experience, Margaret realises that she is being watched by Selina even in the privacy of her bedroom: "her eyes are open, and she is looking at me" (Waters, *Affinity* 117). These words close the diary entry of that day, implying that the image of Selina watching her is still resonating in Margaret's mind. As their relation advances, Margaret becomes more and more trapped within Selina's spiritualist tricks. Such is the case when Selina talks as if she were Margaret's deceased "Pa," producing in her an unbearable feeling of horror:

> When she looked at me now it was a kind of horror, as if she saw it all […]. She looked at me, and *her* eyes had pity in them! I could not bear her gaze. I turned away from her and put my face to the bars. When I called to Mrs Jelf, my voice was shrill.[44] (88; emphasis in the original)

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[44] Since Selina "knows Margaret's secrets, [she] succeeds in inverting the power balance by turning *her* pitying gaze upon Margaret" (Brindle 73; emphasis in the original).

In her essay on visual pleasure, Mulvey exposes the notion of scopophilic desire as a form of pleasure arising from the act of "looking itself" (835). This is exactly what happens in the final encounter between Margaret and Selina, when Selina undresses and Margaret can do nothing but stare at her beauty. This pleasurable act of looking is made even more explicit with Margaret's comment: "Still I gazed at Selina, not speaking — hardly breathing I think" (Waters, *Affinity* 310), thus acknowledging that she is absolutely hypnotised by Selina's body. Margaret makes another comment that is worth highlighting while Selina is getting undressed for her: she says that Selina "kept her face turned from me — as if it hurt to have me gaze at her, yet she would suffer the pain of it for my sake" (309). This voyeuristic aspect of Margaret's behaviour brings to mind Mulvey's association of voyeurism with sadism. If, as Mulvey explains, sadism is "a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat" (840), it can be stated that, in this episode, Margaret seems for a moment to be in control of the situation. In fact, this would be one of the few occasions on which she is allowed to have the role of powerful observer. As Beth Newman remarks, "the gaze can serve to destabilize the viewer as well as to confer mastery, especially if the gazer is caught looking by another subject who sees the gaze and perceives it as an expression of desire" (1034).

4.4. Avoiding Surveillance: Darkness, Invisibility and Rebellion

Contrary to the belief that no one could ever escape from the well-organised panoptical structure of Millbank or avoid its wardens' scrutinising gaze, Selina will manage to do both with the help of Ruth Vigers. As a rule, those

who are in control of the gaze exert power over the inmates, while those being looked at can do nothing to avoid being under constant scrutiny. However, Vigers's double position of invisibility as a maid and as a lesbian works paradoxically to grant her overall control over the complex plot. As Heilmann and Llewellyn explain, "while from her first visit to Millbank Margaret is aware of and sensitive to the panoptical gaze — a gaze which she realizes is also, increasingly, turned on her, both at home and in the prison — she never considers the potential dangers of the maid's gaze" ("Mirrors" 189). Echoing this description of Millbank, Margaret explains: "at the side of each gate, there is a vertical iron flap which can be opened any time the matron pleases, and the prisoner viewed: they call this the 'inspection'; the women term it *the eye*" (Waters, *Affinity* 23; emphasis in the original). The fact that the eye is written in italics reinforces the unavoidability of the surveillance, the fact that no one can possibly escape the gaze, in this case, of a matron. However, even if, in Foucault's system, it would seem impossible to escape from the panoptical gaze in Millbank Prison there is a place where the inmates can indeed avoid it: the dark cell. Margaret implicitly acknowledges so much when she reaches this part of the prison: "Beyond the bars there was darkness — a darkness unbroken, so intense, I found my eyes could make no purchase on it" (181). The dark room is pregnant with symbolism. None of the inmates wants to be locked up in what Margaret describes as an underground, chilling place at the heart of the panoptical structure:

> We took a passage […] which, to my surprise, led away from the
> wards, towards the heart of Millbank — a passage which wound
> downwards, via spiraling staircases and sloping corridors, until the
> air grew even chiller and more rank, and vaguely saline, and I was
> sure we must be below the level of the ground […]. They [the
> walls] were not whitewashed, like the walls above, but rough,
> unfinished, and quite glistening with damp. Each was densely hung
> with iron — with rings and chains and fetters, and with other,
> nameless, complicated instruments whose purposes I could only,
> shuddering, guess at. (179)

Miss Haxby explains its function later on when she acknowledges that "[t]he darkness is the punishment" (182). Entering this tomb-like, pitch darkness has explicit connotations of non-existence since, once in the darks nobody looks at you, and so, you do not exist anymore. However, as we have seen, it is precisely this apparent non-existence and the marginalisation provided by her social status that allows Ruth Vigers to freely move and take symbolic hold of the central tower of the panopticon. In Brindle's words: "Vigers's social invisibility allows her to disappear completely beneath the radar of Margaret's narrative: she is the 'faceless gaze'" (76). This interpretation reverses the traditional assumption that Ruth's social position automatically renders her powerless. Though she is virtually invisible through most of the novel, there are some little hints in Selina's diary that justify this reading. As Selina remarks in one of her entries, "all the time Ruth sits and watches [...]. Ruth only watches, with her black eyes"

(Waters, *Affinity* 174). Mulvey points out that Freud "associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a *controlling and curious gaze*" (835; emphasis added). This idea can be easily applied to the way in which Vigers gazes at Margaret at different points in the novel, turning the latter into her main object of scrutiny. She controls Margaret to the point of having access to her innermost feelings and thoughts through the reading of her diary. As Margaret accurately puts it when she finds out this violation of her intimacy: "I seemed to see the smears of Vigers' gaze upon the pages" (Waters, *Affinity* 348). As she reflects, "once or twice she [Vigers] has come to my room and gazed *strangely* at me […]. I have seen her looking *curiously* at the lock upon the velvet collar" (305; emphasis added). While she was working as Mrs Brink's maid, Ruth appeared suddenly behind Selina, "like a ghost" (119), giving her a shock. As Onega notes, given "our contemporary association of spectrality with lesbianism, Selina's words add an ironic element to the invisibility of well-trained maids that sets into question the dominant Victorians' assumption not only of their social humbleness and innate female humility but also of their heterosexuality." ("Invisibility" 137). At the same time, Ruth Vigers can also be equated with an inspector since, according to Foucault, "an inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning" (204). After becoming Margaret's lady's maid, Vigers is given a room in the attic of the Priors' house —in the most undesired and, significantly enough, darkest area of the house— which automatically recalls Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's canonical work, *The*

Mad Woman in the Attic (1979). Therefore, it is easy to associate Vigers with liminality, madness, and also spectrality, as Bertha Mason, the madwoman in Rochester's attic, is taken for a ghost by Jane Eyre. However, it is precisely the attic, the most marginal and dark place in the house, which allows Vigers to control Margaret from a literal and symbolic higher position. The paradoxical nature of Vigers's room brings to mind Newman's contention that "discourses and representations are not likely to function as monolithic, total systems in which a single aspect (however powerful) cancels all internal resistance to or questioning of the status quo" (1038-1039). In fact, it is precisely in this room that the most passionate and secret encounter between Selina and Ruth take place, thus breaking the stiffness of the Victorian rules of decorum: "She had had Selina here, above my head. She had brought her past my door, and up the naked stairs — all while I sat, with my poor shielded candle. All while I waited through the long hours of the night, they were here, lying together" (Waters, *Affinity* 341).

The description in the novel of the architectural form of the panopticon is not, therefore, only meant to explain how Millbank was designed. It also serves the symbolic purpose of reflecting the invisible though effective system of surveyance of Victorian society at large. This assertion is validated by the fact that it is only by the very end of the novel that Margaret finally discovers that it was Vigers who had always been controlling her. Although Mr Shillitoe refers to Millbank as "quite a little city!" (9) —meaning that it is a self-enclosed space where everything is under the control of the central tower's vigilance— there is in fact, as we have seen, an area, the dark room where the inmates can escape this gaze.

Similarly, outside the prison, we find that the attic, the inhospitable room employed to keep domestic servants and madwomen, can be used paradoxically by Ruth Vigers, a member of the menial class, to deprive the lady she works for of money, name and lover. Thus, the novel demonstrates that, despite the overwhelming control exerted by Foucault's panopticon and the normative Victorian society, there exists the possibility of using their most fearful instrument of punishment (the dark room) or discrimination (the attic) as places for rebellion; and that the very invisibility of the menial class can also be used as a most powerful weapon against the constraining Victorian conventions. At first, Margaret perceived darkness as something inscrutable, but by the end of the novel, she realises that she has learnt to distinguish its various shades: "darkness was different for me now. I know all its *depths* and *textures*" (Waters, *Affinity* 304; emphasis added). Her remark conveys a cautionary warning to readers, since what is hidden at the bottom of this pitch darkness is Vigers's controlling gaze.

4.5. Fighting back Lesbian Invisibility with Ghosts: Spiritualism and Homosexual Desire

This part of the chapter focuses on a relevant aspect of the novel that allows me to analyse it both from a historical and a contemporary perspectives: the relation between spiritualism, stigmatised lesbian desire and closeted homosexuality. From a historical frame of reference, spiritualism was a form of empowerment for working-class women in Victorian society, as it

provided them with a "job" —indeed, one of the few accessible to them[45]—

and a certain degree of freedom to interact with other women relegated to a

marginal position for various reasons. One of the uses of this interaction,

which included middle-, upper-middle and upper-class women, was the

facilitation of erotic and lesbian encounters. In order to analyse this aspect

of the novel, I will draw mainly on two studies. The first, Alex Owen's *The

Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in the Late Victorian

England* (2004), provides a thorough and in-depth analysis of Victorian

society in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, focusing on different aspects related

to women and spiritualism. Among others, Owen's explanations about

women's power and influence, the transgression of conventional gendered

attitudes, or the process of materialisation of spirits provide illuminating

insights into some of the most intriguing episodes of the novel. The other

study, already mentioned on several occasions, is Terry Castle's canonical

work, *The Apparitional Lesbian*. This study provides some subtle references

to the status of lesbian women in contemporary society that can be applied

to the reading of *Affinity*, and will therefore help me in the task of building a

bridge between the apparently disconnected Victorian and contemporary

historical periods. Castle's famous concept of the "apparitional lesbian"

facilitates the assimilation of the ghosts and spirits that appear in the novel

with lesbianism. While in the nineteenth century spiritualists were

considered social outcasts, the same could be applied to lesbians in present-

day society. As Castle argues:

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[45] As Kontou explains, "many lower-class women became professional mediums as an
alternative to the tedium of service." (187).

when it comes to lesbians […] many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them. The lesbian remains a kind of "ghost effect" in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot — even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen. Some may even deny that she exists at all. (2)

Indeed, lesbians are still denied the necessary freedom to express themselves. Openly expressing their feelings and speaking up their minds about their sexual orientation may on uncountable occasions have shocking negative consequences. As Castle goes on to explain, when dealing with lesbians "[o]ne woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is exited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized" (34). Echoing this, the existence both of spirits and lesbians is constantly denied in the novel. As poor Margaret acknowledges, she herself is becoming the ghost of what she used to be: "My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost!" (Waters, *Affinity* 289). It is precisely on this "ghost effect" that I shall now focus, with the aim of analysing the representation of lesbianism in the novel. As Kontou argues, Waters "open[s] up a viable space for the realization of lesbian experience and desire" (181), although there is not an explicit reference to lesbians — something that, in fact, would be an anachronism. Instead, the reader will confront numerous examples of ghostly appearances and references to spiritualism as a metaphor for homosexual presence and relations. It is important to bear in mind, as O'Callaghan remarks, that "the novel's early

1870s period setting correlates with the precise date that Foucault identifies as the genesis of modern sexuality" (*Politics* 48).

First of all, it is necessary to analyse the condition of women in Victorian society and the treatment they received according to its standards of morality. As Owen explains, "the pervasive figure of the Victorian perfect lady, [was that of] a quiet, delicate, submissive creature, a self-sacrificing wife and natural mother" (7). Thus, since Margaret is not married at the age of thirty, she will be a spinster in society's eyes. Accordingly, her correct place in the world would be to remain at home, acting as a companion to her widowed mother: "And your place — how often must I [Mrs Prior] say it? — your place is here, at your mother's side" (Waters, *Affinity* 253). As far as the notion of spinsterhood is concerned, "[t]he pervasiveness of the feminine ideal simply indicates how strongly concerns about social class interacted with gender roles and expectation" (Owen 8). For instance, when Margaret decides to go to the library of the British Museum two years after her father's death, she writes: "The others, who do not know me, call me 'madam' now, I noticed, instead of 'miss'. I have turned, in two years, from a girl into a spinster" (Waters, *Affinity* 58). This comment has further relevance since, as Rachel Carroll explains, visiting the library on her own "suggest[s] an autonomy at odds with the femininity defined in relation to the service of masculine needs" ("Becoming" n.p.). Moreover, side by side with the image of the perfect lady, Victorian society also created "a discourse concerned with female depravity, bestiality, and rampant sexuality" (Owen 6). The extreme opposition of these two images clearly marks the difference between an upper-middle-class lady and a

working-class woman. When Margaret visits Millbank for the first time, social differences are rapidly brought to the fore. Mr Shillitoe openly qualifies them according to normative rules: "Villainous women, society has deemed them; and society has passed them on, to Miss Haxby and me, to take close care of them" (Waters, *Affinity* 11). In the Victorian Era there were strict moral codes and social groups and statuses whose boundaries seemed impossible to break or trespass. However, as is shown in the novel, the behaviour of different women is rather similar regardless of their social status, even though with different consequences. The most evident example of this is Margaret's first suicide attempt. She did something that was considered a crime punished with imprisonment.[46] However, unlike other inmates of Millbank, her social status prevented her from going to prison, a fact that Margaret herself finds odd: "Don't you think that queer? That a common coarse-featured woman might drink morphia and be sent to the gaol for it, while I am saved and visit her — and all because I am a *lady*?" (256, emphasis in the original).

Margaret's use of the word "queer" in this quotation implicitly adds lesbianism to the list of social crimes committed by women and punished differently according to the social status of the criminal. Throughout the novel, both Selina and Margaret make repeated use of the word "queer" and other key words with a strong connotative wealth. This technique —which is, as I have explained in the previous chapter, one of Waters's trademarks— allows Waters to use the word "queer" in different contexts, usually referring to things or happenings considered to be out of the norm,

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[46] Another example is the case of the inmate called Jane Samson, who tried to commit suicide by taking laudanum: "Took it seven times, and the last time a policeman saved her. They sent her here, as being a nuisance to the public good." (Waters, *Affinity* 23).

but never making reference to homosexual desire. As Carroll rightly points

out,

> The term queer is employed extensively and in keeping with late-
> nineteenth-century usage to denote the odd, the peculiar, and the
> strange, ranging from the quaint to the devilish. It is used both of
> Millbank prison and of spiritualism to evoke a sense of unfamiliar
> and unaccountable impressions. ("Rethinking" 143)

The connotative richness of this word can be appreciated in the following

episode. During a séance, Selina tells Miss Isherwood, one of the young

ladies attending it: "The things that happen in this room will sound *queer* to

the ears of insensitive people" (Waters, *Affinity* 261; emphasis added). What

is literally stated in this sentence is that the spiritualist practices that take

place in the séance room would sound queer —that is, strange, awkward,

odd— to those who know nothing about it. But for the contemporary reader,

the association of queerness with homosexuality is unavoidable. Therefore,

it conveys both senses as strange and as homosexual, thus adding to the

sense of liminality and spectrality of lesbianism.

Another relevant term which in a first reading may go unnoticed and

turns out to be clogged with meaning is the word "pal." When it is first

introduced to the reader, it is understood just as a word used to refer to

friendship in prison jargon: "This is a place for 'palling up', as the creatures

call it; yet no-one has made a pal of *her*. I believe they are leery of her" (42;

emphasis in the original). However, as we learn later on, "pal" is the word

used to refer to the lesbians of the time. Since in the Victorian period the word "lesbian" or other terms to describe female homosexuality did not exist,[47] pal was used to refer to female relationships, making reference to friendship or sisterhood, but with sexual connotations. However, this sexual behaviour was thought to be an effect of the profound solitude women experienced in prison, thus denying the existence of homosexual desire as such. As one of the matrons, Miss Manning, explains to Margaret:

> White and Jarvis [two convicts] are notorious in the gaol as a pair of 'pals', and were 'worse than any sweethearts'. She said I [Margaret] would find women 'palling up' like that, they did it at every prison she ever worked at. It was the loneliness, she said, that made them do that. (67)

The matron's words echo Castle's contention that, when dealing with romantic love between women, real sexual attraction was not "allowed" and was rather interpreted as some kind of sisterhood bond. This assumption was based on the general belief in the Victorian period that, unlike men, women were naturally asexual, and so, that there was no room for women's desire. Indeed, Miss Manning's interpretation of the convicts' sexual behaviour is representative of what Castle describes as the Victorian assumption that "lesbianism is simply another form of female 'homosocial' bonding, blandly analogous to 'the bond of mother and daughter […] the bond of sister and sister, [or] women's friendship" (11). The next comment

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[47] Castle brings to the fore that, although "*lesbian* and *homosexual* may indeed be neologisms, [...] there have always been *other* words — a whole slang mob of them — for pointing to [lesbianism]" (9; emphasis in the original).

provided by Margaret on this subject is, once again, revealing: "I have heard them talk of 'pals' before, and have used the word myself, but it disturbed me to find that the term had *that* particular meaning and I hadn't know it" (Waters, *Affinity* 67; emphasis in the original). By writing the word "that" in italics, Margaret is adding an extra layer of meaning to the word "pal." Indeed, it could be said that she notices that she could be addressed as such, since she fits into the description provided by the ward.

As already contended at the beginning of this chapter, one of the most powerful images *Affinity* offers the reader is that of the ghost as a metaphor for lesbian desire. According to Bailén, Waters's first three novels go back to the Victorian period in order to rewrite the history of the homosexual and feminine subjects that have always been excluded from mainstream discourse (18). These novels are also meant to help readers understand how lesbians are perceived in contemporary society. In fact, retaking Mr Shillitoe's words about villainous women quoted in the previous section, we can find a parallelism between outcasts and lesbians. Given the strict moral codes and stark division of social classes in the Victorian Era, those being imprisoned were catalogued as evildoers. Significantly, Castle applies the same idea to the condition of lesbians in the twentieth century: "the woman who desires another woman has always set herself apart (if only by default) as outlaw and troublemaker […]. As soon as the *lesbian* is named […] she is dehumanized" (5-6; emphasis added). Here, we could change the word "lesbian" for "prison inmate" and the result would be the same. When women cross the threshold of Millbank Prison for the first time, they undergo a cleaning process, that is to say, they have their

clothes and possessions removed, they have their hair cut, and they are given uniforms that totally dehumanise them. The only thing given to them is a label that condemns them as convicts. A similar comparison could be established with maids who, even if they are not evildoers, belong in one of the lowest social classes. Thus, the fact that Ruth Vigers is presented both as a lesbian and as a servant is significant. As Selina lets us know, the way Vigers makes her first appearance in the novel is very telling: "She had come quietly, not like Betty used to come but like a real lady's maid, like a ghost" (Waters, *Affinity* 119). This ghostly description implies that, although usually unnoticed, a lady's maid is always present. As we have seen, this ghostliness allows Ruth Vigers to have access to some of the creepiest and most private details of Margaret's life and, of course, to act as the perfect "medium" between her and Selina. After discovering the final treachery, Margaret expresses her despair in terms that conflate bonding with bondage: "you [Selina] have the last *thread* of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it?" (351; emphasis added). This thread, in the most obvious way, makes reference to the special connection Margaret felt she had with Selina, which in turn points to her hope of achieving romantic love. At the same time, however, I would dare to suggest that this romantic longing for love could also be related to Vigers, since she has ensured her bondage to Selina by giving her all the valuable information about Margaret extracted from the lady's diary. As Kontou notes, "the servant could bring the private world to public attention" (190), and although Selina is not exactly embodying the public sphere, she belongs to a circle other than the private one. Also in relation to marginality, Vigers can be equated with the

inmates at Millbank (all of them being considered society's outcasts) and so, she can become, together with them, one of the most unseeing but dangerous and powerful ghosts. There is a moment when Margaret hears some footsteps in the gaol but is unable to see anything. So, she thinks that "[t]hey might be ghosts!" (Waters, *Affinity* 20). But then she adds: "And then they were terribly real" (20). Therefore, if we set Vigers on a par with the inmates, we could say that she also plays this ghostly role, as has already been explained. As Armitt and Gamble point out, "the whole truth belongs to the socially invisible: the 'deviant', the servant and the criminal classes" (158). This premise lies at the core of *Affinity*'s power of subversion, and Ruth Vigers perfectly fits into it.

The interpretation of this aspect of *Affinity* requires taking spiritualist séances into consideration as they provide valuable information about gender transgression and women empowerment. As Owen argues, in the Victorian period, "[t]he spiritualist séance struck at the very heart of this normative definition [of orthodox femininity], exposing the conditional nature of femininity and redefining acceptable limits to intimacy and pleasure" (218). This attack on orthodox femininity is made visible in Selina's narration of the séances she held in the house of her protector, Mrs Brink. In one of them, which is, probably, the most explicit sexual encounter described in *Affinity*, we can read how Miss Isherwood, the young lady attending the séance, is made to believe that she is meeting the spirit Peter Quick, while she is actually in the hands of Ruth Vigers. Speaking through Selina, Vigers obliges Miss Isherwood to unclothe the medium and touch her naked body (Waters, *Affinity* 262). As Onega points out, in her

deposition Selina presents such practices as "the removal of 'certain articles of clothing', 'the laying on of hands', and a certain amount of '[r]ubbing and shampooing' (145)" as part of a healing practice based on sexual magic, meant to alleviate "certain indispositions and complaints [… s]uch as weakness, nervousness and aches" of (hysterical) ladies like Madeleine Silvester, who "were spiritually sensitive […] but needed their powers developing (145). ("Invisibility" 137). Thus, under this healing cover, all kinds of Victorian moral codes of behaviour and proper sexuality could be safely broken up and transgressed.[48] This routine comes to a dramatic end during the séance in which a fifteen-year old American lady, Madeleine Silvester, has a nervous breakdown after she is grossly touched and violently abused by Peter Quick (137-40). This episode leads to Mrs Brink's horrified discovery of the fraud and her death of a heart attack soon after, and ends with Selina's impeachment and condemnation for improper behaviour. Waters's description is based on historical data. Accounts of the Victorian Era prove that private spirit séances were indeed used to facilitate homosexual encounters between women. This would be the real reason why women usually removed their clothes. As Miss Silvester reports: "when she [Selina] came out she had removed her gown and was dressed only in her petticoat. Then she said that I must do the same" (140). Moreover, women were empowered through spiritualism, since it allowed them to take control over their sexuality and freely fulfil their desires. As Kontou explains, the relationship that Selina and Vigers-as-Peter Quick establish during the séances can be described as "a ghostly version of heterosexual coupling"

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[48] Owen explains that "a critique of sexual *mores* was never overtly on the agenda but séance behaviour drastically subverted accepted ideas of decency and womanliness" (40).

(182). They freely give vent to their sexual desire, especially Vigers, who is in command of everything. Indeed, her superiority is suggested by her way of addressing Selina, as can be gauged from the latter's comment: "and Ruth looked at me once and nodded. 'Good girl,' she said." (Waters, *Affinity* 195). This treatment of Selina, which could be equated to that of a master talking to a servant or a pet, reverses their positions in real life, as Selina is obeying her maid's orders. As Selina's subservient role makes clear, even if women obtained power through spiritualist practice, there was also an element of female passivity at the core of spiritualism as the medium was always in trance when the appearance of a spirit took place: "The possessed woman was inert, inactive, never responsible, mesh[ing] perfectly with contemporary views of and attitudes towards women" (Owen 233). In one of the séances, Selina explains that Peter Quick had told her that she ought to be "a servant of the spirits" (Waters, *Affinity* 261) and he orders her to repeat the sentence "*May I be used*" (261; emphasis in the original), thus enforcing her passivity. In fact, this sentence acquires further significance at the end of the novel, when Peter Quick —who we do not yet know is being skilfully played by Ruth Vigers— says that he has the power to use whoever he wants (261). Significantly enough, the last sentence of the novel contains Ruth's warning to Selina: "Remember [. . .] whose girl you are" (352). This sentence demonstrates that Ruth is the one and only master puppeteer, not only of Selina but also of Margaret. Once Margaret realises that Vigers has always been in the middle of her relationship with Selina, she becomes aware of it: "there might as well have been Vigers at the gate, looking on, stealing Selina's gaze from me to her" (342). She also acknowledges that

Selina and Ruth will be able to perform their true sexuality, contrary to herself, who is doomed to remain in her "dark cell" forever. Thus, Margaret recognises her failure and admits the triumph of the maid:

> There had been no trickery on Vigers' part — only a sly and dreadful triumph. She had had Selina here, above my head. She had brought her past my door, and up the naked stairs […]. But then, the passion was always theirs. (340)

4.6. Lesbian Invisibility Then and Now: Does the Metaphor of the Colour Red still Apply?

As O'Callaghan aptly points out, while *Tipping the Velvet* delved into the notion of gender and its performative possibilities, *Affinity* "prompts similar questions regarding sexuality and sexual identity" (*Politics* 47). Echoing this, critics have usually focused on the various Victorian discourses on sexuality that can be found in *Affinity*, for example, Llewelyn in his above mentioned article "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999)" or Kaplan in *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007). O'Callaghan also offers an insightful analysis of *Affinity* in the chapter of *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* entitled "A Journal of Two Hearts? Lesbian Identities and Politics in *Affinity*" (2017, 47-74), where she focuses on the portrayal of lesbian subjectivity, explaining how the structure of the novel "replicates this polarized approach towards the category 'lesbian' so that Waters can offer her own perspective on the matter" (*Politics* 51). However, I have found no

research on the possibility of carrying out an updated reading of the novel from the perspective of our own socio-cultural worldview, favoured by the use of the palimpsest, especially focusing on the role of lesbians and their presence or absence in today's society.

As already anticipated and explored, the novel provides many instances as well as word puns in which the topic of lesbian invisibility becomes central, especially through the metaphor of ghosts. Many of them, if read as a kind of palimpsest, are really revealing. To start with, I will devote some lines to the subtle references in the novel to the myth of the androgyne as described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (189a–193d), a story that is considered to be the origin of Platonic love or, as Selina puts it, of a person's "affinity" between soul mates. In this myth, the figure of the androgyne is a human being composed of four legs, four arms and a single head with two faces. Those bodies could be completely male, female, or present both male and female genitalia. Zeus split the androgynes into two as a punishment for their ungodliness, thus condemning them to long for and wander in search of their soul mate or perfect half, who could be either a man or a woman, for the rest of their lives. As Onega has pointed out, it should not be forgotten that Aristophanes was the author of some of the funniest comedies in antiquity, so that Plato may have intended him to speak in jest. In any case, Aristophanes's preposterous description of the androgynes "entails an impoverishment of the *pure myth* of androgyny or Hermaphroditism, which […] is a divine attribute enjoyed by many a Greek deity, both male and female." (Onega, *Winterson* 112-13; emphasis in the original). Ironically, however, this myth has been used by different

philosophers and theologians to explain the existence of a perfect spiritual match. Thus, in the mid-eighteenth century "Emmanuel Swedenborg […] established a theory of correspondences between earthly and spiritual life, one aspect of which was the proposition that every man and woman had a soul mate, or spiritual affinity" (Owen 35). As this quotation suggests, what is most relevant about Swedenborg's doctrine is that his theory of correspondences or affinity has a double earthly and spiritual bind. As Hugh B. Urban notes, this duality is based on Swedenborg's belief that "carnal love is holy because it is 'the first step on the ladder to the true love of God'" (qtd. in Onega, "Invisibility" 137). At present, Plato's story of the androgynes still permeates our popular culture with the so-called myth of the half-orange or the longing for the perfect soulmate that seems necessary or compulsory to achieve full happiness. The evocation of these myths in the media or in different socio-cultural artefacts wrongly strengthens the idea that we are cut in half and cannot be completely fulfilled without the missing half, thus reinforcing a wrong understanding of human relationships as romantic and dependent. In *Affinity,* Selina is the character who most directly makes reference to the myth:

> We have been cut, two halves, from the same piece of shining matter […]. But my spirit does not love yours — it is *entwined* with it. Our flesh does not love: our flesh is the same, and longs to leap itself. It must do that, or wither! *You are like me*. (Waters, *Affinity* 275; emphasis in the original)

Selina explains to Margaret that the spirits themselves wonder about the sex of their guides: "'Are you a man or a lady?' But the guides are neither, and both; and the spirits are neither and both" (210). When Margaret responds that a world without any sex distinctions would be a world without love, Selina replies: "'It is a world that is *made* of love' […] we will fly to someone, we will all return to that piece of shining matter from which our souls were torn with another, two halves of the same" (210). Her response is representative of the tenets of Spiritualism, "a loosely organised radical movement, often tied to social and racial reform, with strong affinities to feminism and the doctrine of free love" that arose in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century through "the influence of Swedenborg and the new interest in the occult, séances and mediumship" (Onega, "Invisibility" 138). Also in agreement with this doctrine, when Selina deals with spirits, she asserts that "in the spheres there are no differences" (Waters, *Affinity* 191) between men and women, thus arguing for equality between the sexes. In fact, Selina demands a change in the way men and women are conceived in the eyes of Victorian society so as to allow their world to evolve towards a more equalitarian understanding of gendered issues. As she tells Margaret:

> it was doing the same things always that kept us 'bound to earth'; that we were made to rise from it, but would never do that until we *changed*. As for *women* and *men*, she said — well, that was the first thing that must be cast off. (Waters, *Affinity* 209, emphasis in the original)

Although literally Selina is referring to the spiritualist community within the Victorian context, these words can be metaphorically applied to present-day society as well. As Llewellyn suggests, this possibility works "to highlight for astute readers the very contemporary (and un-Victorian) nature of the text" ("Queer?" 213). Although for open-minded contemporary readers, the urge to make explicit the idea that love should be unbound by any constraints, could be interpreted as a thing of the past, the current rise of conservative and right-wing parties and ideologies throughout the world, as well as the dramatic increase of homophobic aggressions on an almost daily basis, grant Selina's discourse an unexpected actuality.

Lastly, I would like to focus on one concrete example that will hopefully allow me to bring some light on the present-day situation of the lesbian community. I am referring to the complex story that Mr Hither — one of the employees at the Association of Spiritualists who is in charge of the library— tells Margaret about the colour red. He tells her that she has to imagine that the vast majority of the population had a condition of the eye that would prevent them from seeing and identifying the colour red. Then, he asks Margaret to imagine herself suffering from this eye condition, so that, "when some special people […] told [her] of [that] marvellous colour — [she] would think they were fools" (Waters, *Affinity* 225). Mr Hither then goes on to explain that the whole society would agree with her. And then, one day, when red becomes visible to her: "You will want to hide your eyes, at first, in wonder and fear" (225). Mr Hither is trying to explain the difference between the vision of spiritually gifted people and materialist sceptics. However, the invisibility of the colour red may also be read

metaphorically and palimpsestuously as the refusal to acknowledge the existence of various forms of sexual desire outside normative heterosexual. The whole paragraph is aimed at making this metaphoric meaning evident:

> 'Then,' he went on, 'a morning comes and you awaken — and your eye has corrected itself. Now you can see pillar-boxes and lips, poppies and cherries and guardsmen's jackets. You can see all the glorious shades of red — crimson, scarlet, ruby, vermilion, carnation, rose … You will want to hide your eyes, at first, in wonder and fear. Then you will look, and you will tell your friends, your family — and they will laugh at you, they will frown at you, they will send you to a surgeon or a doctor of the brain. It will be very hard, to become aware of all those marvellous scarlet things. And yet — tell me, Miss Prior — having seen them once, could you bear ever to look again, and see only blue, and yellow, and green?' (226)

This discourse functions as the perfect metaphor to conceptualise the idea that lesbians, or, more generally, those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, may be considered "fools" by those who do not belong to it and, by extension, by those who do not believe in the possibility of feeling sexual desire towards the same sex, or are unable to understand and respect it. What is more, this metaphor was true not only in the nineteenth century, because if we read it palimpsestuously, it perfectly applies today. This is, indeed, the reason why, as Castle asserts, "given such murderous

allegorizing, it is perhaps not surprising how many lesbians in real life have engaged in a sort of self-ghosting, hiding or camouflaging their sexual desires or withdrawing voluntarily from society in order to escape such hostility" (7). In fact, this can also be seen in the character of Helen, who after having a relationship with Margaret, prefers to hide her emotional scars and marry Margaret's brother Stephen in order to comply with Victorian standards of morality, thus condemning herself to affective and emotional imprisonment. As Bailén argues, Helen is yet another victim of society, since she is unable to accept the fact that she is different from what is perceived as "normal" (40). Selina alludes to this problem when, discussing Helen's behaviour with Margaret, she remarks:

> You think she has *evolved* — but is it that? To have done what everyone does? She has only moved to more of the same. How clever is that?' […] But people, I said, do not want cleverness — not in women at least. I said, 'Women are *bred* to do more of the same — that is their function. It is only ladies like me that throw the system out, make it stagger. (Waters, *Affinity* 209; emphasis in the original)

With remarks like this, Waters poignantly introduces comments about society and women that make readers think about society, not only in the past but also in the present, so that "the transgressive quality of same-sex love makes this exploration more meaningful" (Costantini 34). By the same token, the fact that Selina "prefers the spirit people, who do not judge her, to

those who have only laughed at her 'misfortune'" (Waters, *Affinity* 84), can also be read metaphorically. Although literally, these "spirit people" are ghosts, metaphorically they can be said to refer to lesbians. In general terms —though this could surely beg for further discussion— those individuals belonging to liminal social groups would be more open-minded and would not judge anyone on the grounds of his or her sexual condition.

A priori, it is widely believed that feminists favour the lesbian community. However, some fervent feminist historians have dismissed the importance of homosexual relationships, so much so that some have even denied their existence. In this sense, this branch of contemporary feminism may be said to share the eye complaint suffered by Victorian society, what Castle describes as a "morbid refusal to visualize" the existence of lesbianism (11). Waters is undoubtedly conscious of it as she incorporates some comments in the novel on this issue. For example, referring to Selina's imprisonment, Mr Hither tells Margaret that "[t]here were many spiritualists, I am afraid — and some of them the very people who had most celebrated her successes! —who turned their backs to poor Miss Dawes, when she stood most in need of their good wishes" (Waters, *Affinity* 134). Selina herself is aware of this behaviour:

> She [Selina] said she had had many friends, and they had liked to call her a 'martyr to the cause' — but only at first. For she was sorry to say that there were jealous people, 'even in the spiritual movement', and some were very glad to see her brought low. Others were only frightened. In the end, when she

> was found guilty, there was nobody to speak in her behalf…
>
> (Waters, *Affinity* 85)

As these comments suggest, even within spiritualist circles, with their early feminist ideals and, by extension, within contemporary feminist organisations, which are thought to have a more evolved and open-minded and all-inclusive mentality, we can find that certain issues can become "a 'rag-tag affair' to non-believers," in Mr Hither's words (131). That is to say, they can be considered fearful and/or negligible for those who deny their existence. O'Callaghan explains this with reference to Margaret and Selina's relationship when she argues that the novel "reproduces lesbian-feminist ideology by highlighting its engagement with homophobia (repression and oppression), the expression of new forms of feminist consciousness, refusal or elision of lesbian identity within heterosexist culture" (*Politics* 61). At the core of both the spiritualist circles' rejection of Selina and the feminists' rejection of lesbianism there is a question of difference, as suggested by the metaphor of the red colour-blind eye. It is precisely this difference —and the lack of knowledge about it— that can make spiritualism, and also lesbianism, a problematic issue. As a result, this becomes one of the most significant aspects of the novel, as with all these metaphors and hidden meanings, it creates a profound critique of the situation of lesbians not only in the past, but also, through its palimpsestuous implications, in the present. Indeed, nowadays there is a newborn term that is gaining great presence especially within the LGBTQ+ community, which is used, precisely, to highlight the "ghost effect" that the

different members of such community still struggle with: "queerbating." Broadly speaking, this term is used to refer to those cultural manifestations —especially in the context of mainstream audio-visual or literary productions— in which some kind of queer romantic relationship is insinuated but never openly portrayed. As with the presence of ghosts, there are hints for those who are willing to "read between the lines"; but same-sex romances, especially lesbian relationships, are very rarely openly depicted. As O'Callaghan aptly puts it, "returning to the question of portraying 'lesbian,' then, this term, unlike queer conception of sexual subjectivity, is gender specific" (*Politics* 67). Although they are never shown in the main shelves of bookshops or public libraries, if we rummage around in book fairs and libraries we can find anthologies or autobiographical writings that may help deconstruct this imposed silence on homosexual women's stories. Just to name an example, I recently came across: *Locas y perversas: Voces bolleras* (Arroyo Pizarro et al. 2020). In this anthology, fifteen queer authors belonging to three generations of Spanish-speaking writers portray different lesbian stories aimed at empowering them. As we can read in the blurb of the book, this kind of collaborative works —although they are presented as fictional short stories— offer a mosaic that leaves behind the fatalistic view of lesbians as perfidious figures only available for the enjoyment of heterosexual males.

Another consequence of queerbating is that homosexual women are constantly infantilised and deprived of sexual desire and explicit sexual scenes. This results in the "ghosting" of their eroticism, as lesbian sexual encounters are frequently suggested but hardly ever taken to the forefront.

This queerbating phenomenon is not only visible in mainstream socio-cultural artefacts, but also (and worryingly) in academic circles as well. After having done research on the subject for five years, the most important thing that needs to be highlighted is the difficulty to find scholarly works on this specific subject. The relatively limited scope of the state of the art confirms that the ghosting effect Castle theorised in the 1990s does not only belong to the past and that the palimpsestuous reading of neo-Victorian novels like those written by Sarah Waters is more pertinent than ever, as lesbian invisibility does not only belong to fiction but can be constantly witnessed in real life. Evidently, there are numerous essays, books and PhD theses focusing on lesbian writers and historical figures that have led the way in giving voice to different realities and gaining visibility and a proper social space. However, if we try to look for more concrete aspects of society, relating more with social and political aspects (and not only within literary circles or the arts in general), the scarcity of resources on the lesbians' struggle for acknowledgment and visibility within our contemporary parameters is a reality even today. It is true that there are certain academic works regarding very specific issues, such as Jo Harrison's article "'It's None of my Business': Gay and Lesbian Invisibility in Aged Care"; Sarah Lamble's "Unknowable Bodies, Unthinkable Sexualities: Lesbian and Transgender Legal Invisibility in the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Raid"; or Larry Gross's book *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (2001). However, as far as lesbian invisibility in today's socio-cultural contexts is concerned, scholarly information is practically non-existent. If any, we can encounter personal

accounts and individual stories focusing precisely on this fact and highlighting the need to keep on giving visibility to some of the letters of the acronym LGBTQ+, as the treatment of all of them is not egalitarian. For instance, there is an article entitled "Why Are So Many Lesbians Invisible within The LGBT Community?" written by the business strategist and speaker Jenn T. Grace, in which she talks about this problem from her personal experience.[49] This proves that there is still a long way to go in this respect, and that perhaps people belonging both to academic and non-academic circles, especially the youngest generations, need to develop new research perspectives. A good example of this is Cristina Domenech, a PhD candidate from the University of Málaga, who is currently doing research on historical literature from a queer perspective. In 2018 she became viral on Twitter due to a thread in which she explained the story of two women who were involved in a romantic relationship based on the true story of a trial that took place in Victorian Scotland.[50] The important fact of this is that it allowed her to publish *Señoras que se empotraron hace mucho* (2019), a non-academic book, as she herself has classified it, in which we can read about numerous women who were forced to "ghost" their romantic stories along different centuries (from the seventeenth to the twentieth century). In 2020 she published a second book, *Señoras ilustres que se empotraron hace mucho* (2020), where she delves into the lives of famous women such as Sappho, Virginia Woolf or Frida Kahlo, very-well known historical figures

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[49] Jenn T. Grace has developed a whole publishing business around this idea in her webpage, with the main aim of giving voice to all those silenced women who still feel isolated.

[50] The whole story can still be read on her twitter account (@firecrackerx) and different media picked the story up and published a summary of it, as for example, the national newspaper *El País*, in an article written by Pablo Cantó (2018).

that are nowadays being reinvestigated by many scholars in order to grant their sexual orientation the importance it deserves. This is not to say, of course, that there is no academic work on these illustrious women, as we can find numerous studies on them. What is relevant is that they are now being democratised so that a broader and more general public has access to their life stories. As in the case of Waters's neo-Victorian novels, the outreach of their works stems from academic circles. Their importance lies in that they make the voices of multiple silenced women belonging both to the past and the present reach a wider audience.[51]

In summary, as already mentioned, it is a complicated task to find accurate information about the situation of lesbians in society today. The isolated reports usually available can hardly help in the process of naturalising and granting visibility to plural but equally valid realities. Just to draw on a real and recent example, we can have a look at the 2021 festivities in Valencia internationally known as "Las Fallas". One of the most controversial "ninots" (that is to say, the gigantic figures artisans create for this special occasion) was entitled *Trencant barreres* ("Breaking Barriers") in which we can see two women, dressed up with the traditional Valencian costume, about to kiss. As the artist Raúl Martínez "Chuky" noted (in Collado n.p.), the original artefacts created for this festival are usually employed to portray society in a satirical but quite realistic way, and this is precisely why he described his huge piece of art as a monument of integration and visibility. He explained that this exhibition seeks to be an

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[51] I am here referring to literature, in consonance with the main focus of this Dissertation, but there are worldwide known platforms, as Netflix, HBO or even YouTube, that also participate in this democratisation process, increasingly showing a wider spectrum of equally valid realities within the LGBTQ+ community.

invitation to reflect on the reasons why certain collectives do not appear yet in the national media, in magazines or newspapers, or in these worldwide known festivities, although they are said to be a hundred percent true reflection of our society. This is just a very local but representative example of what is currently happening on a wider scale. Certainly, the conditions endured by lesbians in the Victorian period and our present times are different, given the historical distance of more than a century between both periods. Especially in recent years, many actions and steps towards equality in its broadest sense are being taken, but in the concrete case of the lesbian community —perhaps due to a double discrimination as women and as homosexual— there are still many problems that remain consciously silenced or unsolved. Thus, the research process Waters carried out in the 1990s, as well as the different research projects we, as young researchers, are currently working on, demonstrate that the metaphor of the colour red is still alive, firstly, because there are many issues that need to be given voice and granted the central position they have never been allowed to occupy before, and secondly, because the more we try to find similar stories, the more we discover that in our heteronormative society there is still a persistent blindness towards certain realities that needs to be unveiled and normalised.

CHAPTER V
FINGERSMITH: THE DEBATE ON WOMEN'S ROLE IN PORNOGRAPHY

With the publication of *Fingersmith* (2002), Sarah Waters puts an end to the trio of novels set in Victorian times. This novel may be said to elevate neo-Victorianism to its ultimate expression. According to Kaplan, *Fingersmith* is a paradigmatic neo-Victorian fiction in that it shows "that the Victorian period and its literary legacies are still able to engage and entertain today's writers and their audiences" ("Coda" 42). As could be expected, Waters continues on the path mapped out in her previous novels, centred on the Victorian *topos* of the marginal lesbian. As Onega argues, *Fingersmith* is "the culmination of Waters' sustained attempt, in her first three novels, to provide contemporary readers with an alternative representation of Victorian society in which invisible and marginalised homosexual women are made to occupy the focal centre" ("Pornography" 2). I totally agree with Kathleen A. Miller when she argues that "Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* proves to be a highly ideologically charged construction of the nineteenth-century novel for twenty-first century purposes, as she rewrites the history of the Victorian pornography trade in order to advocate a female, lesbian past in erotic literature" (n.p.). However, different critics agree that reducing this novel to the "lesbian" label is oversimplifying its real significance. For instance, Myerson "hesitate[s] to call it lesbian, because that seems to marginalize it far more than it deserves. Suffice to say, it is erotic and unnerving in all the right ways" (Myerson n.p.). Perry similarly argues that the label of "lesbian" doesn't remotely do

justice to this dark, labyrinthine and utterly engrossing novel, set in 1862 and giving more than a passing nod of homage to Dickens and Wilkie Collins" (n.p.). As in her previous fictional works, we can find in *Fingersmith* multiple influences. Waters herself told Armitt in an interview that "*Fingersmith* was very deliberately written in the tradition of the Victorian novel of sensation" (in Armitt 117). However, as the writer admitted to Dennis, she stretched this tradition to the limit: "I felt like *Fingersmith* was just crazy, was just like pantomime Victorian. I mean they all are really, but with *Fingersmith* I felt that I'd just pushed it about as far as I could go for a while, before I was carted off to the asylum." (in Dennis 50). As this comment suggests, the intertextual wealth and complexity of the novel has led scholars to focus on a variety of aspects. For instance, Adele Jones offers a very insightful and thought-provoking analysis of the novel's playful intertextual indebtedness to the work of Julia Kristeva. According to Jones, this influence is innovative as Waters does not usually employ psychoanalysis to frame her works (116). Drawing on Kristeva's idea that a text "is always unclosed and subject to re-reading, because each reading brings a new set of codes and, therefore, intertexts" (116), Jones reaches the conclusion that Sarah Waters's creation of Maud and Sue responds to Kristeva's theory of subjects-in-process.

Maud and Sue are two orphaned teenagers of the same age but belonging to different social classes, whose lives are inextricably linked by chance. Susan Trinder is a pickpocket raised by a foster mother called Mrs Sucksby in Lant Street, in the suburbs of London. Maud Lilly is a lady who lives with her lecherous uncle and pornographic bibliographer, Christopher

Lilly, in Briar House, a secluded house in the country. Susan, usually addressed as Sue, is deceived by Richard Rivers, also known as "Gentleman" by Mrs Sucksby and her gang of thieves, into participating in a plan apparently designed to trick the wealthy Lady Maud Lilly into marrying him, promising to share her and her uncle's wealth with Sue. However, Sue is also fooled by Gentleman. The plan begins with Sue becoming Maud's lady's maid and gaining her confidence so as to lure Maud into marrying Mr Rivers. After a fake marriage, Sue will end up being taken to a mental asylum, her identity exchanged for that of the "deranged" Maud Lilly after supposedly suffering a mental breakdown. At the same time, Maud is also deceived by Gentleman as he makes her believe that, after their marriage, they will share her uncle's fortune and she will obtain freedom forever. The plot becomes even more twisted when the reader discovers that the two girls were swapped by their mothers at birth, and that the master mind hidden behind this convoluted Dickensian plan is the apparently loving Mrs Sucksby, Maud's biological mother. However, her ultimate aim was to get the fortune belonging to Marianne, Sue's real mother. Heavily pregnant after having been seduced and abandoned by her partner, and persecuted by Mr Lilly, Marianne had ended up at Mrs Sucksby's baby farm, where she gave birth to her daughter and died soon after. According to the death-bed pact made by Mrs Sucksby and Marianne Lilly, the two girls were to be exchanged for each other and told the truth when they turned eighteen, when Maud would receive half of Marianne's fortune. But Mrs Sucksby's real intention was to trick both girls and keep the fortune to herself.

As in the previous novels, especially in *Affinity*, the form and content of *Fingersmith* are so closely tied together that the form itself already hides certain secrets the reader has to unravel through close-reading and the untying of the plot knot by knot, from beginning to end. This narrative complexity is, as we have seen when analysing *Affinity*, a salient feature of Waters's neo-Victorian fictions that has become one of her most remarkable trademarks. As she recognises, "the first three novels [...] got increasingly complicated, plot-wise" (in Armitt 118). The novel is narrated by the juxtaposed voices of the two protagonists. It is divided into three parts, the first and third are narrated by Sue and the second by Maud. The result is similar to that of the previous novel, that is to say, instead of situating the reader in a privileged position, it creates, in Sarah Gamble's words, a deceptive effect (43). The more we read the more we get lost in the endless twists of the labyrinthine plot. This effect perfectly shows Waters's "fondness for sending her audience up narrative blind alleys" (Gamble 42).[52] As can be inferred from the previous summary, the plot is heavily based on "particularly complex and fragmented matrilineal genealogies and narratives" (Muller, "Matrilinealism" 110). Although this is not the main objective of my analysis, it is clear that the narrative structure and its implications are one of the strongest aspects of the novel, as mother-daughter relationships are fundamental for the unravelling of the plot.[53]

In consonance with the intertwined narrative structure and the convoluted plot, the main *topoi* of the novel are equally twisted and focused

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[52] In this book chapter, "'I know everything. I know nothing': (Re)Reading *Fingersmith*'s Deceptive Doubles," Sarah Gamble offers a really illuminating analysis on the dualism and double-crossings in the novel (42-55).
[53] Nadine Muller offers an insightful analysis of this aspect of the novel.

from multiple perspectives. There is indeed a lesbian component that must be acknowledged, particularly in relation to the conventions of pornography, but Waters also draws especial emphasis on madhouses and the institutional systems of oppression. The structure of the panopticon is transferred from Millbank prison in *Affinity* to the mental asylum Sue is confined to. This building directly alludes to the methods of coercion and control over women that reigned in Victorian times, and that could be expanded beyond the walls of a psychiatric asylum. The other *topos* that is central to the novel is pornography. It becomes particularly relevant given its silence and invisibility in the Victorian period and the ongoing discussions it currently stirs up, initiated by second-wave feminists in the late sixties and seventies. More specifically, this topic is central to establish the ideology of the novel because, as Jones states, "*Fingersmith* is a celebratory narrative, emphasising the power of the role of female desire in an autonomous female subject position and the possibilities for the subversion of patriarchal discourses" (118). In other words, this novel —particularly once we reach its unexpected ending— opens up a previously unthinkable possibility for the empowerment of women by taking an active role in the act of desiring and producing their own pornographic material. Indeed, in this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the mind of Maud is shaped by the erotic books in her uncle's library that she is forced to read aloud to him and his male guests. Then, through the metaphor of the palimpsest, I will analyse the implications that pornography has nowadays and its projection on today's society, identifying the consequences this industry is currently having on the young generations. Finally, I will unravel the complicated and

polemical reception of the novel and the possibilities catalysed by its open ending.

5.1. Echoing the Panoptical Prison: The Madhouse

In consonance with the path created in *Affinity*, penitentiary institutions play a significant role in *Fingersmith*. This time, Waters opts for the madhouse, one of the most representative Victorian institutions for the control of women diagnosed as insane. This institution is especially relevant when the first plot twist is discovered: Maud changes Sue's appearance from a maid's to a lady's so as to make them look alike —"We might be sisters!" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 102). This ruse is meant to make the doctors believe that Sue is actually Richard Rivers's wife and that he has decided to intern her in the madhouse because she is suffering from some mental illness. It is important to bear in mind that in Victorian times, taking supposedly mad women to this kind of mental asylums was a common practice in order to get rid of troublesome wives.[54] Maud was raised by nurses in the same madhouse. She was told by her uncle that her mother was mad and had died in it while giving birth to her. Therefore, she had witnessing what happened in this asylum. Her memories, together with the explicit and extensive episodes in which Sue explains in detail the terrible things that happened to her at the madhouse, offer significant insights into the common practice of accusing women of madness if they did not behave according to Victorian standards

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[54] On many occasions this distress was a consequence of their little freedom, independence and lack of power that led them to depression or anxiety, accentuated by the fact that numerous doctors were easily bribed, especially by powerful men.

or as a shortcut to control their fortunes. At a certain point in the novel, Mr Rivers associates madness with menstruation:

> Have you no blood about you, to save me the pain? None of those —*courses*, that women suffer? [...] I should have thought that, being obliged to bleed, you might as well bleed to some advantage [...]. What monsters you females must be, to endure this, month after month. No wonder you are prone to madness. (293-94; emphasis in the original)

This comment, stated by Gentleman in a heated conversation with Maud, makes clear that, although madness and mental disorders also affect men, women were considered more prone to madness for biological reasons, as if they were beings of a different kind. As Elaine Showalter explains in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987), while men were confined to mental asylums because they had problems with alcohol or evinced an "irregularity of conduct," the reasons why women were sent to madhouses were that they had an "ungovernable temper," that they wanted to defy "all domestic control" or that they were unable to control their female passions (48).

As explained in the previous chapter, the panopticon became fundamental to control evildoers in Victorian prisons. This panoptical structure was progressively incorporated into other kinds of buildings such as workhouses or mental asylums with the aim of providing them with a similar capacity for scrutiny and control to that of the penitentiary. As

Showalter explains, "like other Victorian institutions —the penitentiary, the workhouse, and the factory— the reformed asylum was part of a paternalistic tradition. [...] Eating, sleeping, dressing, working, even dancing, the lunatic was surrendered to a system of benign control" (50). In *Fingersmith*, the madhouse is described as an awe-inspiring institution that no one would like to live in. This is made clear by Christopher Lilly when he categorically asserts that he saved Maud from the madhouse she was born in: "Perhaps you wish that I had left you at the madhouse, all those years ago. Forgive me: I had supposed myself performing you some service, by taking you from there. But perhaps you would rather dwell among lunatics, than among books" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 245). Thus, the madhouse is established as a controlling and punishing institution, a place Maud is not willing to return to under any circumstances.

The ultimate purpose of the panoptical structure, regardless of the institution in which it was applied, was the complete control over the person imprisoned in it: "The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power" (Foucault, *Discipline* 202). In the case of the madhouse where Sue is interned, the female inmates were treated like real prisoners. Indeed, Sue herself compares the women in the madhouse with the inmates of a gaol: "Perhaps I ought to have made a mark, like convicts do, for every Sunday that came round; but of course, for many weeks there seemed no point— each time one came I thought that, by next, I should have got out" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 434). Her comment also highlights the routinely structure that they were obliged to follow. As Showalter explains,

In line with their celebration of women's domestic role, the Victorians hoped that homelike mental institutions would tame and domesticate madness and bring it into the sphere of rationality. They designed their asylums not only to house feminine irrationality but also to cure it through paternalistic therapeutic and administrative techniques. In the Victorian asylum, madness was safely managed and controlled through the arrangement of space and through daily activities and routines. (18)

The same goes for the role played by the nurses, who are constantly compared to female prison matrons (Waters, *Fingersmith* 434). We can even read some direct allusions to the fact that they once worked in a real gaol, as is the case of nurse Flew (438), thus making clear that both jobs are very similar. Especially remarkable is their rude character and the continual mistreatment they submit the inmates to. For instance, the episode in which a nurse jumps over Sue while she is lying in her bed. As she sadly acknowledges, "if I had had a floor underneath me instead of a bed, she would have killed me" (439-40). The cruellest episode is the one in which she suffers what is called "the plunge" (436), a terrible punishment used to torture badly-behaved inmates. The episode is described in full detail, making it clear that the cruelty of the nurses and the techniques applied in madhouses had no limits, thus contributing to the continuous dehumanisation of the inmates.[55] According to Foucault, "the Panopticon

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[55] "Cold water plunge. Thirty minutes [...]. What I recall most is the wooden frame they fixed me to, at the arms and legs; and then, the creaking of it, as they winched it up and swung it over the water; the swaying of it, as I pulled against the straps. Then I remember the drop, as they let fly the wheel—the shock, as they did it—the closing of the icy water

was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals" (*Discipline* 203). Echoing this, Sue is diagnosed as suffering from a "hyper-aesthetic" disease due to her exposure to literature (Waters, *Fingersmith* 423), and reduced to a mere object of study, no longer a "normal" human being. As one of the doctors who care for these women states, "I don't believe I ever saw a case so pure" (423), making clear that she is only considered an exceptional case study for them.

Another of the basic aims of the ideal panopticon, which was also applied in these mental asylums, was discipline. Together with surveillance, discipline was one of the main tenets of panopticism: "'Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power" (Foucault, *Discipline* 215). In the novel, discipline appears as fundamental, as Maud makes clear when she recalls her first impressions of the madhouse in which she was born: "Thus I learn the rudiments of discipline and order; and incidentally apprehend the attitude of insanity" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 180). As we read through the detailed narration of the various episodes of physical and psychological abuse that Sue witnessed and suffered in the asylum, it becomes evident that, regardless of the actual brutality of some procedures, these disciplinary methods were believed to function as corrective measures for misbehaved

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over my face, the rushing of it into my mouth and nose, as I tried to gasp—the sucking of it, when I spluttered and coughed. I thought they had hanged me. I thought I had died. Then they winched me up, and dropped me again. A minute to winch me, and a minute to plunge. Fifteen plunges in all. Fifteen shocks. Fifteen tugs on the rope of my life. After that, I don't remember anything." (Waters, *Fingersmith* 443-44).

ladies. In Showalter's words: "yet, one of the most appalling ironies of women's treatment in the Victorian asylum was that despite its limitations, asylum superintendents thought it offered a more tolerant, comfortable, interesting life than some women could expect outside" (98).

The structure of the building was also transferred from the initial project of the gaol to the madhouse and some of the descriptions of it are worryingly similar to that of a prison, as Sue realises after her arrival:

> I grew quiet. I was afraid I should be punched again. But I was also looking hard at the way we were taking—at the windows and the doors. Some doors had locks. All the windows had bars on. (Waters, *Fingersmith* 404)

Sue notices an architectural dichotomy in the madhouse: a clear division between the part where the doctors (or sane people) lived, and the place in which lunatics were interned: "They have got me in the place where the doctors and nurses live. Now they'll take me to the mad bit.—I think I supposed it would be something like a dungeon or a gaol" (407). By contrast, Maud was taken by Mr Lily to the madhouse after her mother's death in Mrs Sucksby's house, and she spent the first years of her life surrounded by nurses who acted as her absent mother. Therefore, she never perceived the madhouse as a prison. Instead, it is Briar that she perceives as her awful prison. She acknowledges: "I am used to grimness and solitude, high walls and shuttered windows. It is the stillness of my uncle's house that bewilders and frightens me, that first day" (183). It is precisely the

tranquillity and solitude of her life in Briar that bewilders Maud at first, as she is not used to it. Consequently, Briar will be described by her as another kind of prison, a dark and silent space that echoes the structure of a panoptical prison or institution on several occasions (87, 194, 231): "The room, in which I have passed so many captive hours I know it as a prisoner knows his cell" (263). Sue also experiences feelings of imprisonment in Briar, which she equates to the only prisonhouse she has ever known, the madhouse. The attentive reader can find numerous occasions on which Briar is personified, especially when an important episode is taking place, as if the happenings were manifestations of Briar's spirit of place: "The house has opened its mouth, and is breathing [...]. This time, however, the house seems holding its breath" (221-22). As a result, the sensation of imprisonment of the two protagonists transcends the madhouse. For Maud, Mr Lily takes her to the house as a teenager and teaches her to comply with his demands. The indecent bibliographer has no intention of giving Maud any kind of education that could be used for her own benefit. As she sadly acknowledges, "'[m]y happiness is nothing to him' [...]. 'Only his books!" (124). Drawing a parallel with the madhouse, Maud is, like the inmates, deprived of any personal agency, considered only as an object designed to serve some routinary purposes, regardless of her wishes. As a consequence, books acquire negative connotations and become the emblems of imprisonment. Indeed, Maud makes clear that she despises them: "Oh! The Books, the terrible books!" (103). The library itself is described as an imprisoning space, dark and strangely lit (186). It becomes a kind of "central tower of control" of the panoptical structure of the house. Maud's

imaginary alternative to it is a house in London "where I will find my liberty, cast off my self, live to another pattern—live without patterns, without hides and bindings—without books! I will ban paper from my house!" (239). The process of dehumanisation and objectification Maud is submitted to at Briar is taken a step further by Gentleman when he compares himself to a cobweb and Maud to a spider he will keep in a jar:

> Do you know how careful my love will make me? See here, look at my hands. Say there's a cobweb spun between them. It's my ambition. And at its centre there's a spider, of the colour of a jewel. The spider is you. This is how I shall bear you—so gently, so carefully in a jar, you shall not know you are being taken. (128)

Although Gentleman is apparently offering Maud her desired freedom, and he seems to offer the only way to reach it, what he really intends to do is to keep her trapped, using her just as a necessary tool to achieve his goal of securing her fortune.

Throughout the novel, the imprisoning quality of the house, as well as the meaning attached to the books kept in it, are constantly foregrounded: "But Briar crept on me. Briar absorbed me [...] *I shall never escape! I am not meant to escape! Briar will never let me!*" (231-32; emphasis in the original). However, by the end of the novel —and closely linked to the main topic of this chapter— the house will be completely transformed, as Maud's prison will be reshaped as her shelter. The clearest example of this shift —and the first episode that needs to be taken into account in order to have

the full picture of the ending— is Maud's destruction of Mr Lilly's library, as this is a turning point for her; it is the first step towards her liberation from her uncle's constraints and, finally, the achievement of her freedom. Before running away from Briar, she goes to the library one last time and deliberately starts gripping the books on the shelves: "I begin with *The Curtain Drawn Up*, the book he gave me first" (290). Needless to say, the fact that the first book she tears off is the same that Mr Lilly first gave her to read shows Maud's struggle for emancipation from her uncle. She acknowledged that, at first, it was something extremely hard to do, but her determination to change her life and the feelings daring to carry out this act of destruction, prove that she is right in doing so:

> Still it is hard—it is terribly hard, I almost cannot do it—to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper. I am almost afraid the book will shriek, and so discover me. But it does not shriek. Rather, it *sighs*, as if longing for its own laceration; and when I hear that, my cuts become swifter and more true. (290; emphasis in the original)

This episode, and the fact that the sigh of relief is personified by the book, encapsulates her willingness and determination to start living her own life, something that is ratified at the end of the novel.

5.2. Pornography in the Victorian Period

As is characteristic of neo-Victorian fiction, *Fingersmith* is clogged with intertextual echoes, among others,[56] of real Victorian pornographic material. In the "Notes" section at the end of the novel, Waters acknowledges that "many books provided historical detail and inspiration" for its writing (Waters, *Fingersmith* 549). Among them, she recalls having read real texts —*The Lustful Turk* (1828), *The Bagnio Miscellany* (1830), and *The Curtain Drawn Up* (1863)— to explore pornography in Victorian times (549). As O'Callaghan argues, her aim was to "(re)tract pornography's modern roots to interrogate its contentious, liberatory, oppressive, and exploitative nature and impact" ("Grossest" 562). This leads us to focus on Christopher Lilly's pornographic collection, inspired on original manuscripts that can still be consulted at the British Library in London.[57] In the "Notes," included at the end of *Fingersmith*, Waters points out that "all of the texts cited by Maud are real" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 549). Of course, the overt treatment of sexuality and the writing of explicit accounts of sexual encounters were considered improper in Victorian times, when society was ruled by the principles of decorum and the double standard of morality. It is significant in this respect that, while looking for information related to pornography in the Victorian London website,[58] texts related to pornography are classified

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[56] As Susana Onega points out, the novel makes multiple references to well-known authors and works such as Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, Or, Virtue Rewarded* or Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, which are directly mentioned at the beginning of the novel, or also Angela Carter ("Pornography" 3-4), whose influence is explained in detail in another section of this chapter.

[57] Sarah Waters herself made use of this service at the British Library to get to know them. She has explained that it felt weird to be sitting in the library reading such a kind of historical texts (Laube and Young n.p.).

[58] This extensive website created by Lee Jackson, included in *The Victorian Dictionary*, offers all kinds of information related to the Victorians, and is a really useful recourse to

in the "Crime" section. The existence in 1872 of an association named the "Society for the Suppression of Vice" does not come as a surprise (Jackson, "The Leisure Hour" n.p.). Its primordial aim was to avoid the circulation of "vicious and immoral" periodicals, and to preserve the innocence of the youngest generations, driving them away from "the corrupting influence of impure and licentious books, prints, and other publications" (Jackson, "The Leisure Hour" n.p.). Already in 1857, The Obscene Publications Act had hardened the punishments for those involved in such activities.[59] As a result, the production and consumption of pornography was categorically rejected by the most puritan part of society and regarded as something punishable.

As is well-known, Stephen Marcus's book *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964), has become a landmark for the study of sexuality and pornography in British culture. As he explains in the Introduction, this project "consists of a series of related studies in the sexual culture—more precisely, perhaps, the sexual subculture—of Victorian England" (xiv). Similarly, Liza Z. Sigel, in her book *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England 1815-1914* (2002), provides an exhaustive and thorough study of everything related to the pornography of the Victorian period, based on multiple documents and bibliographical references. She explores the ways in which pornography was produced and distributed, and how it was turned into a profitable business. As Stoops notes, other scholars dealing with this

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find original documents of the times in a wide variety of topics. See its Index at: https://www.victorianlondon.org/index-2012.htm/.

[59] "The Obscene Publications Act of 1857, passed by reluctant members of parliament largely in response to pressure from the SSV and other social purity organizations, increased penalties for publishing pornography and gave law enforcement officials additional authority to seize and destroy evidence." (Stoops 141).

topic, like Lynda Nead and Lisa Z. Sigel, "have recognised the greater role for men and women of the working and lower middle classes in the pornography trade by providing evidence that rising literary rates, the invention of photography, and the Victorian period's explosive increase in affordable publications gave a broad range of customers unprecedented access to pornography." (139). Therefore, that Sarah Waters should choose this topic as a central *topos* for *Fingersmith* is by no means accidental. As Kathleen Frederickson explains, it was during the Victorian period that pornography as a genre was consolidated. Closely related to it is the fact that "the prolific, generative, and public debates on how to identify, isolate, and contain sexuality are all hallmarks of the production of Victorian sexuality more widely conceived" (305).[60]

In "Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*: Leaving Women's Fingerprints on Victorian Pornography" (2008), Kathleen A. Miller provides a very insightful summary of the position of pornography in the Victorian period. She pays special attention to the role of Henry Spencer Ashbee and the "Cannibal Club" he was ascribed to as the major source of inspiration for the character of Christopher Lilly. Henry Spencer Ashbee, also known as Pisanus Fraxi, is widely recognised as "the first, most important, bibliographer-scholar of publications of a sexual and pornographic character" (Marcus xiii). The figure of Mr Christopher Lilly is the mirror image of this historical figure and there is concrete evidence for it in the

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[60] In her article "Victorian Pornography and the Laws of Genre" (2011), Fredrickson provides a significant overview of several representative texts related to the definition of pornography and its categorisation, especially focusing on Victorian times.

novel.[61] Mr Lilly's fictional work, entitled *Universal Bibliography of Priapus and Venus*, is described by Maud as "his great index" of pornography (Waters, *Fingersmith* 201). As Waters specifies in the "Notes" section of *Fingersmith*, Henry Spencer's real work was entitled *Index Librorum Prohibitorum: being Notes Bio-Biblio-Icono-graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books* (549). This title resonates in the novel, not only because of the similarities of titles and description, but also because of Mr Lilly's comment on the special section of the library: "These are uncommon books Miss Maud, and not for ordinary gazes" (188). This draws another intertextual connection with the real historical project. As Marcus explains, Ashbee thought that:

> such books should 'be used with caution even by the mature; they should be looked upon as *poisons*, and treated as such; should be (so to say) distinctly labelled, and only confided to those who understand their potency, and are capable of rightly using them [.] it [the *Index Librorum*] may be kept out of the hands of those for whom it is not destined'. (48-49; emphasis added)

These words seem to be replicated at Briar. Marcus's description is graphically stamped on the organisation and distribution of the library. Within Mr Lilly's huge collection of books, there is a section distinguished from the rest by the drawing of a hand on the floor that should not be trespassed upon unless Mr Lilly gives the order: "Do you see than hand

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[61] Different scholars have examined Mr Lilly's nefarious obsession (see Miller; Fredrickson; Onega, "Pornography").

beside your shoe? That hand was set there at my word, after a consultation with an oculist—an eye-doctor [.]. That hand marks the bounds of innocence here. Cross it you shall, in time; but at my word, and when you are ready" (Waters; *Fingersmith* 188). As Foucault pointed out in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), "if sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (6). This deliberate transgression is personified by Mr Lilly. Marcus's words are echoed by Mr Lilly when he tells Maud: "You think me a scholar [.]. Well, I am more than that. I am a *curator of poisons*. These books—look, mark them! Mark them well!—they are the *poisons* I mean" (Waters; *Fingersmith* 198; emphasis added). Mr Lilly is a connoisseur of all pornographic poisons and he is fully determined to make his niece know about his ambitious project and use her as his helper, but without the poisonous ideas in the books entering her mind: "I have laboured so long among poisons I am immune to them, and my aim has been to make you immune, that you might assist me" (199). However, by forcing Maud into the role of an assistant, her obnoxious uncle is turning the teenager into a benumbed and will-less object that he can use for his own benefit. As she sadly reflects, "[h]e has made me like a book. I am not to be taken, and touched, and liked. I am meant to keep here, in a dim light, for ever!'" (124). For all this, however, as the plot advances, we discover that she would do her utmost to be freed from her strange form of imprisonment. Paralleling Gentleman's metaphor of the spider, Mr Lilly wishes Maud to be trapped forever and subjugated to his will, using the books as main tools of sadomasochistic domination and

control. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that, as Onega explains, Mr Lilly's name evokes Angela Carter's association of the Marquis (her version of the Marquis de Sade) with lilies in her feminist rewriting of "Bluebeard" in "The Bloody Chamber" (1979). As she argues, "the presence of this less overt, though crucial, intertextual referent in *Fingersmith* adds an element of murderous violence against children and women exerted by dominant males under a façade of respectability that brings to the fore the sadomasochistic structure of domination and submission underlying class and gender relations in Victorian society, of which Mr Lilly's pornographic texts is the symptomatic expression" ("Pornography" 5).

This symbolism of the books and the spider enhances the power/bondage structure fostered by Mr Lilly's collection as the common trait shared by all of them is the omnipresence of male dominance and female subservience, a trait that, as I will explain in due course, is worryingly replicated nowadays.

5.3. Women and the Pornographic Business in the Victorian Period

In his article "Class and Gender Dynamics of the Pornography Trade in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain" (2015), Jamie Stoops offers an exceptional explanation about the correlation of women, class and pornography in the Victorian Era. As she explains, when pornography was produced and consumed by middle and lower-class people, women did enjoy it, and even took part in the creation of some samples. Sarah Waters has also spoken

about this. On the day of the *première* of *Fingersmith*'s adaptation for the theatre, she recognised that one of her main interests in thinking about Victorian pornography, was that, although it was largely published and distributed by men, "we do know that some women were involved in the business, and certainly I imagine prostitutes [.] and who knows what other kinds of women might have encountered pornography from time to time." (in Laube and Young n.p.). However, unsurprisingly, it was precisely the "anxieties resulting from the middle-class consumption of materials produced by women and the lower classes [that] were a fundamental part of the motivation to censor and prosecute pornography distributors" (Stoops 138). Whenever women were involved in the production process, or even enjoyed pornography as customers, they were exposed to moral judgement. Actually, this is historically tied to the etymological origins of the word pornography. As Andrea Dworkin explains,

> The word *pornography*, derived from the ancient Greek *pornē* and *graphos*, means "writing about whores." *Pornē* means "whore," specifically and exclusively the lowest class of whore, which in ancient Greece was the brothel slut available to all male citizens. The *pornē* was the cheapest (in the literal sense), least regarded, least protected of all women, including slaves. She was, simply and clearly and absolutely, a sexual slave. *Graphos* means "writing, etching, or drawing." (199-200)

Dworkin makes an important point when she remarks that "the word *pornography* does not mean 'writing about sex' or 'depictions of the erotic' or 'depictions of sexual acts' or 'depictions of nude bodies' or 'sexual representations' or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores" (200; emphasis in the original). As she further explains, "contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word's root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores, or, in our language, sluts, [.], cunts" (200). As can be inferred from this definition, pornography is ruled by power relations with women always under male dominance. This is perfectly portrayed in *Fingersmith*. As quoted in the previous section, Mr Lilly is the only person with the power to let Maud cross the threshold into the library marked by the pointing hand drawn on the floor, thus establishing from the start a power/bondage relationship between them. Maud is subordinated to her uncle's control in every respect. She becomes his secretary, but her interests and, overall, her desires or sexual appetites are never taken into account, as the only thing that matters is male pleasure and dominance. Kathleen A. Miller illustrates this idea with a brilliant metaphor: "She [Maud] becomes thin, white, and fragile like aging pages of a text. Her hands are cased in gloves, like a book's hide, in order to protect the pages" (Miller).[62]

For all this, however, as lesbianism lies at the core of Waters's neo-Victorian works, the most significant sexual encounters in the novel are those between Sue and Maud, as these episodes are used to dismantle the existing mechanisms of heteronormative pornography. As Waters herself

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[62] The significance of the gloves has been highlighted by numerous scholars. Especially remarkable is O'Callaghan's explanation in her book chapter "Beyond the 'Sex Wars': Sex, Pleasure and Pornography in *Fingersmith*" (2017, 75-98)

explains, "most of it [the pornographic material] seems to be written for a male audience [.]. But for me, one of the most interesting things was to take a piece of pornography in which lesbian desire was staged, apparently for male pleasure. Usually, a man steps in and takes over, and it's sort of a prelude" (in Dennis 44). Here, Waters makes clear that lesbian sex was, and still is, considered second-class, a simple prelude to the complete sexual act. In *Fingersmith* we can find good evidence of this assumption. For instance, one of the most telling passages takes place when Maud is asked to read out loud a very explicit lesbian sexual scene for the pleasure of her uncle and Gentleman:

> But then he has me read, one night, from a certain work . . . Richard watches, his hand across his mouth, a look of amusement dawning on his face. For the work tells of all the means a woman may employ to pleasure another, when in want of a man.
>
> '*And she pressed her lips and tongue to it, and into it—*'
>
> 'You like this, Rivers?' asks my uncle.
>
> 'I confess, sir, I do.'
>
> 'Well, so do many men; though I fear it is hardly to my taste. Still, I am glad to note your interest.' (Waters, *Fingersmith* 279; emphasis in the original)

This passage is very telling in that it illustrates opposed male reactions to lesbian pornography: Gentleman is clearly pleased but Mr Lily is not. This reinforces Dworkin's idea that the prevalence of male power is inherent to

pornography as a genre, and that these productions use the female body just as a means to achieve male superiority (24-25). However, what is more significant is Maud's reaction. It is while reading this text, which "tells of all the means a woman may employ to pleasure another, when in want of a man" (279), that she becomes aware of her lesbianism and realises that she does not need a man to fulfil her sexual desire: "And despite myself—and in spite of Richard's dark, tormenting gaze—I feel the stale words rouse me" (280). However, after this realisation she becomes worried about her feelings being overtly exposed in a book, accessible for all to reading and to the misinterpretation of her uncle and his lecherous male guests: "I am ashamed to think that what I have supposed the secret book of my heart may be stamped, after all, with no more miserable matter than this—have its place in my uncle's collection" (280). At this stage, Maud was already aware of some differences between the scenes described in her uncle's collection and reality, but now she realises that her most private sexual desires are actually stamped in these books for everyone to read. Finally, after having a passionate encounter with Sue, Maud perceives her uncle's books in a different light:

> Even my uncle's books are changed to me; and this is worse, this is worst of all. I have supposed them dead. Now the words—like the figures in the walls—start up, are filled with meaning. I grow muddled, stammer. I lose my place. (279)

Her realisation echoes one of the main tenets on the pornographic use of lesbian sex sustained by Dworkin, one of the outstanding figures of the anti-porn movement:

> The lesbian is colonialized, reduced to a variant of woman-as-sex-object, used to demonstrate and prove that male power pervades and invades even the private sanctuary of women with each other. The power of the male is affirmed as omnipresent and controlling even when the male himself is absent and invisible. (47)

This is one of the most relevant points Waters highlights and dismantles by the end of the novel when both Maud and Sue become the writers and owners of their own pornography, one no longer responding to male taste or casting a male perspective on it.

There is another episode that portrays how stereotypes about homosexual eroticism are perpetrated in pornography. While Sue is cleaning Maud's teeth, Maud has erotic thoughts: "May a lady taste the fingers of her maid? She may, in my uncle's books.—The thought makes me colour" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 256). This stream of thoughts is one of the clearest proofs we can find in the novel that Maud learnt certain sexual practices from her uncle's books, as she overtly acknowledges: "I speak not from experience of the world, of course, but from my reading merely" (214). Due to her youth and her lack of experience about sexual and emotional relationships in real life, Maud has learnt what society considers to be normative sexual practices through the pornographic material her uncle

treasures. Evidently, this leads her to mistake pornography for a real sexual relation.

However, while Maud is growing up and her body is undergoing certain biological changes, she starts realising that some descriptions in her uncle's books are not true. For example, she realises that her vulva does not look like the ones represented in the books; that her genitals, and also those of Agnes (her previous maid), have pubic hair.[63] After that, she reflects: "I understand my uncle's books to be filled with falsehoods, and I despise myself for having supposed them truths" (201). Her realisation brings to the fore the constructed nature of the porn industry, then as now. Something similar occurs when Maud has bawdy thoughts and dreams about Suky Tawdry (240, 242, 259, 279),[64] a fictional prostitute she repeatedly recalls, since her dreams serve as a catalyst to open her eyes to reality. The reason why she thinks of her is that Maud associates Sue, whom Gentleman calls Suky, with Suky Tawdry, the first time they meet: "Mrs Stiles comes first and, after a moment's hesitation, she is before me: Susan—Susan Smith— Suky Tawdry—the gullible girl, who is to take my life from me and give me freedom" (242).

The confusion of the real and the fictional lovers is added to when Maud and Sue are about to have their first sexual intercourse. Sue is

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[63] Gail Dines, in a contemporary context, offers a cogent reflection on this topic in *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality* (2010). After conducting a study in 2008 containing transcriptions of a representative number of girls' worrisome experiences with their boyfriends, she reports that many students openly admitted "how much they preferred to have a completely waxed pubic area as it made them feel 'clean,' 'hot,' and 'well groomed.'" (99), this being a direct response to the current hypersexualised porn culture. As she asserts, "I tell this story because it neatly captures on many levels how the porn culture is affecting young women's lives." (100).

[64] The fictional character of Suky Tawdry is one of the several prostitutes who was associated with the gangster Macbeth in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), written by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill.

distressed and does not know how to act. At that moment, Maud thinks: "If she were a girl in a book—! / *Girls love easily, there. That is their point. / Hip, lip and tongue*—" (281; emphasis in the original). Then she realises that although she has witnessed similar scenes on the books, she is equally unprepared for the real sexual act: "I know everything. I know nothing" (203). As we shall see in the following section, Maud's assertion and reaction transcends time and could easily fit into contemporary discourses in relation to the abrupt and disconcerting way in which young people are introduced into the world of sexuality.

5.4. Pornography Then and Now: Its Evolution through the Decades

As is widely known, the link between pornography and female rights and morality revived during the second wave of feminism that took place in the late 1960s and 1970s. One of the most controversial and relevant aspects was the sex wars, well established in the 1980s, "renew[ing] interest in pornographic politics, formal conventions and trade practices" (Frederickson 304). This led to the rise of two opposing currents, presumably based on historical and philosophical tenets. Anti-censorship feminists were in favour of the free distribution of pornography and of exploring sexuality with consent, on the consideration that these measures offered potentially liberating aspects for women. By contrast, anti-pornography feminists categorically rejected pornography on the grounds that it was inevitably tied to heteropatriarchal society, and therefore, to a

male dominated world.[65] Essentially, both positions differ in the emphasis given to the implications of sexual relationships and their social consequences. While anti-censorship feminists fight for complete freedom and equality between men and women, with the recognition of female sexual pleasure at the core of their argument, anti-pornography feminists argue that sex is tied to emotions and that the existing industry perpetuates women's subordination to men.[66] Here, it is important to highlight, as Ingrid Ryberg points out, that, "the sex wars changed the feminist landscape for good, and it is a crucial context for understanding the contemporary feminist, queer, and lesbian porn industry" (142). Yet, already in the 1980s there was a claim that these two radically opposed paradigms were and still are essentialist: "we must reject both the radical-feminist view that patriarchy has stolen our essentially emotional female sexuality and the libertarian-feminist view that sexual repression has denied women erotic pleasure" (Ferguson 110).[67] This heated debate, as O'Callaghan accurately explains, is also portrayed in the novel, as "through the portrayal of Maud and Sue, Waters shows how the simplicity of anti-pornography versus anti-censorship feminist positions creates what post-feminist scholars describe as the victim versus power feminism paradigm" (*Politics* 83).

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[65] For a complete account of these sex wars, tracing their historical roots and socio-cultural background, see Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter's *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (1995). This collection of essays traces the progress of the political landscape in the 1880s and 1890s. In chapter three of Claire O'Callaghan's book *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (2017) we can also read a very precise explanation of these wars.

[66] For a more precise enumeration of the main differences between the two camps, see Ann Ferguson's article "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists" (1984).

[67] "One of the unfortunate results of the porn wars was the fixing of an antiporn camp versus a sex-positive/pro-porn camp. On one side, a capital P 'Pornography' was a visual embodiment of patriarchy and violence against women. On the other, Porn was defended as 'speech,' or as a form that should not be foreclosed because it might someday be transformed into a vehicle for women's erotic expression. The nuances and complexities of actual lowercase 'pornographies' were lost in the middle" (Taormino et al. 14-15).

Angela Carter became a predominant figure in the anti-censorship faction, and Waters has acknowledged having read her well-known book of criticism, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, published in 1979, before Waters's writing of *Fingersmith.* As Onega explains in her article "Pornography and the Crossing of Class, Gender and Moral Boundaries in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*" (2015), Carter —together with some other feminist writers and thinkers such as Nadine Strosse, Gillian Rodgerson, Elizabeth Wilson, Lynne Segal or Mary McIntosh—, endorsed the central tenet of anti-censorship feminism, that is to say, that sexual practices can, and should be demystified and liberated from the constraints imposed by the dominant ideology ("Pornography" 5). In the "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter wrote a well-known and repeatedly quoted paragraph describing the "moral pornographer":

> The moral pornographer would be an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His [or her] business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulation of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women

that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true

obscenity as he describes it. (Carter 22)

Here, as Onega contends, the label of moral pornographer "would perfectly fit Sarah Waters, as in *Fingersmith* she projects a sadomasochistic world of total corruption and greed, reflecting the pervert sexual habits of Victorian gentlemen practiced under the cover of the double standard of morality" ("Pornography" 5). Indeed, Waters has acknowledged that, at first, what attracted her most of Angela Carter was that "feminist writers were just anti-porn, it seemed to me, and she was alone in that whole moral pornography thing she does in *The Sadeian Woman*, and I just thought it was amazing really" (in Dennis 43). Waters sees Carter's writing as referential and inspiring, even if I consider that she does not respond entirely to the anti-censorship current.

As could be expected, some new ideas running between the two extremes progressively gained force "inadvertently creat[ing] another either/or theoretical position that circumscribed the ways in which analyses of women, sex and pornography are articulated" (O'Callaghan, *Politics* 76). This is extremely important since, as time progresses, theories evolve and new ways of understanding, in this case, of the feminist and queer porn industry, may arise, as it is still under construction. As Ingrid Ryberg argues, by "focusing too much on the dividing line between cultural feminism and sex radicalism, one misses important overlaps, intertexts, notions, and features within the film culture" (142). Thus, the overall conclusion of the sex wars is that "the long history of scholarship on

pornography has complicated [and still does] the binary between exploitative pornography and healthy erotica" (Miller n.p.). I believe this middle ground is the place Waters belongs to as, by reading the novel and some of her comments on it, we can infer that she does not feel comfortable either in one or the other extreme. In Waters's own words: "I was interested in how possible it might be for women to make their own reading, to read those texts in their own kind of way, and possibly even imagining their own feminist pornographic scenarios" (in Laube and Young n.p.). Her claim is clear. She demonstrates that she is not completely satisfied with the polarisation of this binary, and as a countermeasure, she offers the possibility of creating a new and alternative form of pornography. As Emma Healey puts it: "if you could make the rules, then you could change the rules and break them too" (7). This reinforces Brian McNair's contention, expressed in 2009, that "the long history of 'porn wars' suggests that arguments about the meaning of contemporary cultural sexualisation are unlikely to be resolved any time soon" ("From Porn to Chic" 70). His prediction has nowadays become an actuality. The discussion seems not to come to an end, while at the same time new and varied points of view give rise to alternatives, new perspectives, and also unprecedented opportunities for change. This idea seems to have inspired the novel's ending, and more concretely Maud's actions. From my point of view, Waters proves that a change in the writing of pornography is possible. In *Fingersmith*, as in her previous novels, we find really explicit passages describing sexual encounters from a lesbian perspective. As she puts it: "*Fingersmith* […] deals with pornography and ultimately tries to at least gesture towards the

possibility that women could write their own porn themselves, even if I don't sort of show it" (in Dennis 43). The incorporation of pornography into her novels could also be explained as Waters's attempt to write something labelled as "feminist pornography" —as I will explore in detail in the last part of this chapter— in accordance with the evolution of this topic since the heated debates on it in the sex wars period.

One of the most significant episodes in which Waters plays the role of moral pornographer, and where phallogocentric pornographic conventions are totally dismantled, takes place when Maud asks Sue how she is supposed to act on her wedding night (Waters, *Fingersmith* 281). After that, they have sexual intercourse, Maud following the steps of what she has learnt in her uncle's books, thus replicating heteronormative behaviours. In response, Sue decides to "teach" her, enacting the role of a man as if she were Gentleman. What the reader can extract from this episode is a kind of mockery, a "queering," in O'Callaghan's words, of "heteronormative pornographic imagery" (*Politics* 85). Although this episode did not exactly follow what Maud had learnt from the books, it resulted in a passionate encounter, in which romance and love acquired remarkable importance. It is significant in this respect that, "although Maud appropriates a heterocentric pornographic framework, the scene is told from a woman-centered perspective" (O'Callaghan, *Politics* 85). This is one of the most important movements forward in what is today labelled as "feminist pornography." Therefore, it may be stated that, with this scene, Waters is recalling the beginnings of this movement, even if it is not directly linked to it. As Olivia Tarplin notes, "much of feminist porn was born from

lesbian and queer porn. Some of the biggest feminist publications were 'Bad Attitude' and 'On Our Backs' [.;] they were both started in 1984 and they were both lesbian erotica magazines" (n.p.). As Tarplin argued, "'On Our Backs' is really important because it was the first *erotica* magazine that was run by women, and it was the first magazine in the US that was *for* lesbians made *by* lesbians" (n.p.; emphasis added). This turning point is essential as, in heteronormative pornography, women's choices and desires are always neglected and hardly ever taken into account. As she further explains,

> there were a lot of lesbians in the mainstream porn at the time, but they weren't there for other lesbians. They were there for the target audience of the straight men. So having lesbians make porn for other lesbians was really important. (n.p.)

After their pleasurable yet romantic sexual encounter, Maud comments: "It seems queer in reflection, crooked and wrong" (Wates, *Fingersmith* 284). Her comment echoes one of Waters's main concerns, the need to differentiate heterosexist pornography from the new possibilities opened up by feminist and lesbian thought. Not surprisingly, the word "queer" also has a significant role in this novel, as Waters suggests by constantly playing with its double meaning, in this as in the earlier novels.[68] In *Fingersmith* Waters uses "queer" in both acceptations of the term, as previously explained, meaning both weird and homosexual, to highlight —specially for contemporary and astute readers, making use of a

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[68] In *Fingersmith* the word "queer" or its derived forms appear approximately eighty times.

palimpsestuous kind of reading— the homosexuality of the protagonists, especially when they are starting to harbour romantic feelings for each other (141, 163, 242), but also to express their oddity without referring to their sexual orientation —in such cases, making use of the nineteenth-century meaning of the word—, for example, in Gentleman's description of Maud at the beginning of the novel: "She's a queer sort of girl" (26). Sue employs the word with the same meaning to characterise Maud's world: "her world was so queer, so quiet and shut down, it made the proper word" (96). Then, making reference to their "rare" activity as pornographers, Mr Lilly tells Maud: "It will seem queer, to the eyes and ears of the untutored. They will think you tainted, should you tell" (199). Even Maud refers to herself and her work in similar terms: "We are not meant for common usage, my fellow books and I" (218). However, by the end of the novel, the massive repetition of the word "queer" acquires its final significance as it highlights Maud and Sue's evolution, the recognition of their sexuality and their wish to make a living in this unexpected and unconventional way. When Sue states: "There are no girls like me" (547), she does not simply mean that she is odd because of her enforced role as reader of male pornography. What she is stating is that she is peculiar because she is writing lesbian texts "filled with the words for how I want you." (547). This amounts to saying that she is a new kind of excentric pornography writer, a moral pornographer in Carter's terms, interested not so much in the crude representation of explicit sex as in refocusing it from an anti-heterosexist perspective.

This is where further discussion on how to label Maud's writings should be placed. I have previously highlighted the word "erotica"

employed by Tarplin in one of her comments, as this is the term some feminists encourage using in order to establish a distinction between feminist —or ethical— pornography[69] and mainstream porn. As Dana Wilson-Kovacs points out, the women participating in her case study "understood 'pornography' and 'erotica' as a pair of opposites, with erotica characterized by what porn lacks: suggestiveness and a quality of leaving room for the imagination" (156).[70] As we shall see in detail in the last part of this chapter, this is exactly what Waters does with her deliberate election of the ending in *Fingersmith.*

5.5. Reading the Novel as a Twenty-First Century Palimpsest

Paralleling the use I made of the palimpsest metaphor to analyse the previous novels, I will now attempt to demonstrate that there are passages in *Fingersmith* that easily transcend Victorian times and can adequately fit within our contemporary cultural parameters. As I have shown through the analysis of some scenes in the previous parts of this chapter, the reader can see what Maud has learnt about sex from her uncle's pornographic materials and how she should act in order to fit within heteronormative standards. Worryingly, these perturbing misrepresentations of sexual relations are

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[69] As Tarplin explains, feminist pornography also receives the label of "ethically produced porn" as "feminist pornographers really like to link the porn they make to the organic fair-trade food movement, which makes sense if you think about it. They really want you to think about where does your porn come from, who's making your porn, under what conditions is your porn made, and who's profiting from your porn?" (n.p.).

[70] Dana Wilson-Kovacs offers a thought-provoking analysis of the difference between these two terms, based on real women experiences. Her main aim is to give voice to women by making it possible for them to freely choose what suits them better. This leads her to the conclusion that, "although what is erotic and what is pornographic is regarded as a matter of private choice, this choice is clearly arbitrated through the success of previous experiences and understandings of what is culturally and socially understood as tasteful and acceptable." (162).

repeated in our contemporary culture, especially among the younger generations. When facing pornographic material, it is fundamental to differentiate those representations from real sex, since nothing portrayed in them is real, something Maud is not aware of because nobody has taught her that difference. Instead, pornography could be said to act as an abstraction that extends beyond fiction, and is nothing but the representation of a concept based on historical and gender-biased violence and stereotypes (Iglesias and Zein 59). Among its multiple negative consequences, the consumption of mainstream pornography provokes an inability to distinguish these crude fictions from reality, consequently facilitating the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. For instance, if we apply a palimpsestuous reading here, the above-described first encounter between Maud and Sue, transcends Victorian times. Reading this episode within the parameters of our contemporary culture, and due to the easy access to pornography already mentioned, everyone is supposed to know how to act during an intimate encounter. As Analía Iglesias and Martha Zein explain, we have abruptly changed from a time in which women knew nothing and did not even experience sexual pleasure to a time in which we are supposed to be born as porn stars (105). This accessibility to pornography situates contemporary youths in the position teenage Maud found herself. Although this is not my main concern here, the high expectations raised by pornography and the stereotypes enforced by it also work negatively for heterosexual men. The male stereotypes created by pornography do not help in the building of a confident and tactful male teenager. Further, many of them find these representations very distorted, both in terms of physical

appearance, and the macho attitude of porn actors. As Dines puts it: "men in porn are depicted as soulless, unfeeling, amoral life-support systems for erect penises who are entitled to use women in any way they want" (xxiv).

Evidently, there is an obvious difference between the past and the present. I retake here Muller's words: "pornography is no longer confined to a small street in London or a secluded estate in the country, but is, notoriously, only a mouse-click away" ("F(r)ictions" 129). Due to the extremely easy accessibility to the internet and mainstream pornography on a vast number of free web sites, young people can find without effort a lot of wrong, incomplete "information," based on heterosexist canons. Even more concerning is, as Emily F. Rothman argues, that "adolescents are turning to pornography for education and information about sex and that is because they cannot find reliable and factual information elsewhere" (n.p.). Besides, as Iglesias and Zein note, minors are also involuntarily consuming pornography. They do not even need to look for it, as it can easily appear in thousands of pop-ups (104). Teenagers are, on average, starting to view porn at the age of twelve, and starting to be "taught" what it means to be a man or a woman while still very young (107). As a result, they learn from the internet, as Maud did from the books, what to expect of sexual intercourse, the media "creating" non-empathic boys and girls (107) unable to distinguish these fictional representations from real sexual behaviour. Generally, an impressive percentage of teenagers have their first contact with explicit pornographic materials when they are extremely young, the same as Maud, who deliberately repeats several times: "I am thirteen as I have said" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 200), drawing special emphasis on her age

as inappropriate for those images. What is more, the detailed specification of the descriptions and images in the books creates in her feelings of abject fear: "for it seems a frightful thing that children, in becoming women and men, should do as they describe" (200). The exceptionality of Maud's education contrasts with the great number of minors in our age who start their journey towards adult sexuality through extremely crude representations that do not match reality.

For all this, perhaps the most troublesome aspect of present-day sexual practices is, as some critics note (Dines, 2010; Iglesias and Zein, 2018; McNair, 2002), that our culture has undergone a process known as "pornographication" (McNair, 1996; 2002), that is to say, the "cross-over of pornography from the private to the public sphere" (McNair, "From Porn to Chic" 55). In other words, everything in our mainstream culture is sexualised, and overtly pornographic material set right in front of our faces. The phenomenon has become so inextricably tied to our cultural productions and expressions that we no longer perceive it as such.[71] As Rothman points out,

> Our problems with adolescents and sexual violence perpetration is not only because of pornography. In fact, a recent study found that adolescents are more likely to see sexualised images in other kinds of media besides pornography. Think about all those sexualised video games, or TV shows or music videos. And it could be

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[71] This has been explained in depth by, among others, the critics named in this chapter. For further detail, see Jones; Iglesias and Zein.

exposure to a steady stream of violent media that instead of or in addition to the sexualised images is causing our problems. (n.p.)

In relation to this, Maud makes a very telling observation that encapsulates the whole debate: "They say children, as a rule, fear the ghosts of the dead; what I fear most as a child are the spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 195). Interpreted as a metaleptic comment on how the stereotypes of porn can still operate nowadays, this wise remark projects the haunting spectres of the past onto us as well as onto Maud's present, thus making perfect sense at the end of the novel. At this stage, Maud is starting to create her life anew, with all her past left behind. However, the memories of the past still haunt her. In the past, she only wrote or copied what she was asked to by her uncle, without having any possibility of creating anything outside what was planned for her. However, now she is free to write whatever she wants, without following anyone's lead, and is determined not to let any spectres of the past haunt her. Indeed, at the end of the novel, she tells Sue:

Don't pity me [.] because of *him* [Mr Lilly]. He's dead. I'm alive. But I am still what he made me. I shall always be that. Half of the books are spoiled, or sold. But I am here. And look. You must know everything. Look how I get my living. (546; emphasis in the original)

Maud does not want to hide from Sue that she has herself become a pornographer as this job offers her good possibilities for making a living in a field in which she has ample expertise. Her decision foreruns the centrality of sexuality in the definition of the subject in our present age. As Feona Attwood puts it: "Sexual performance is taking on new cultural significance as a source of self-definition and a means of self-expression, allowing ordinary people to put themselves into the frame of representation, circulating a great range of expressions of sexual experience and desire than we have never seen before" (xvii). Therefore, now that we know how porn culture penetrates multiple spheres of our lives, how pornography is perceived all around the world and the consequences of its consumption, we can use this information to subvert the ideas surrounding this phenomenon. And this is, undoubtedly, good news, as it means that in our contemporary culture —now that more than ever labels are becoming more fluid and unstable— there are new possibilities for change and improvement. In Lynn Comella's words:

> A number of people, from filmmakers to scholars, have recognized the potential for pornography to serve as a medium for sex education. Robert Eberwein's comprehensive history of sex education in film and video demonstrates that since the early part of the twentieth century the technology of moving images was used as a tool for dispensing information about sex, from films about venereal disease in the early twentieth century, to safer sex education films in

the 1980s, to Betty Dodson's videos about female sexual pleasure in the 1990s. (86)

The remaining question would be, in terms of female agency and sexual freedom, to what extent can the long established phallocentric hierarchy and ideology be replaced by the authentic and effective equality women have requested for so long. That porn has entered mainstream culture cannot be denied but, as the ending of the novel suggests, where there is a will, there is a way. As Waters proves through the evolution of her characters —not only in *Fingersmith* but in her other two neo-Victorian works as well—, there is room for change, always bearing in mind that "empowerment is never guaranteed, but contingent. It is continuously fought for" (Ryberg 150).

5.6. A Palimpsestuous Reading of the Ending

Several scholars have argued that the ending is the weakest part of the novel. For example, Kaplan describes it as "ironic, but in no way punitive" (*Victoriana* 113), while Muller suggests that "Maud's liberty remains a sinister one at best. If we reconsider the already established links between women's literacy, exploitation and oppression, *Fingersmith*'s open ending becomes inherently ambiguous" ("F(r)ictions" 121). Kaplan also asserts that "the joyful reunion of two-star-crossed, cross-class women lovers switched at birth would have been more than acceptable, but the other half of the novel's happy ending, in which the slum girl brought up as a rich lady

begins a promising new career as a pornographer, would surely have been a joke too far" ("Coda" 51). Among the most radical criticism I could find while doing my research, is a recent PhD Thesis written by Rosalind Easton (2021). Coincidentally enough, she also makes use of the palimpsest metaphor to analyse *Fingersmith* but her reading of the ending of the novel is diametrically opposed to mine. By limiting her analysis to the representation of the Victorian Era, she does not take advantage of the inherent possibilities of using the palimpsest metaphor —and its derived forms— as a tool for analysing literary texts from different perspectives and times, especially in relation to the socio-cultural context, as I explained in the theoretical chapter. Briefly stated, Easton's reading of *Fingersmith* is meant to justify her scepticism "about the possibility of establishing a legitimate lesbian literary tradition in the context of a history of oppression" (108). After her analysis, she concludes that Maud or even Waters cannot "exert any influence over the ways in which their texts are read, interpreted and discursively positioned" (137), thus denying women the possibility of shaking off the straitjacketed passive role allotted to them by heterosexist and patriarchal culture. Besides, Easton draws especial emphasis on the "striking absence" of Maud's texts, as they are not included in the novel, arguing that Waters's deliberate decision to deprive readers of a sample of Maud's alternative pornography highlights the silence of the female authorial voice (146). Easton's interpretation disregards the real potential the open ending offers to women wishing to carry out an active role in the pornographic business in order to provide their own feminist, lesbian and/or female visions of pornography. She also argues that Waters's outlook on

women's writings across history —in this case, Maud's pornographic writings— is less valuable and interesting than those approved of by male scholarship —in this case, Mr Lilly's archive (141). Her argument sets Waters's feminist agenda into question as it denies her endorsement of the most important tenet of feminism from its beginning: the search for real and total equality between men and women in all aspects of life, rights and capacities.

Needless to say, there are other critics who read the ending in a more positive light, with whom I am in agreement. For instance, Onega states that "Maud's lesbian texts open up the possibility of imagining women as the active agents of their own *jouissance*, living in a more egalitarian and free society" ("Pornography" 8). Similarly, O'Callaghan points out that "Waters re-examines the connectivity between gender and sexuality in pornography, offering a re-vision of the origins of lesbian and feminist pornography that transcends its modern history" (*Politics* 77). As she notes, referring to the possibility of commenting on the sexualisation of lesbian imagery in our contemporary queer culture, "it is surprising that scholarly writing on *Fingersmith*'s conclusion has not evaluated the ending in such terms" (90). Indeed, O'Callaghan provides an excellent analysis of the role and symbolism of sex, as well as a complete overview of the different scholarly approaches to the novel. Therefore, I will draw on her outlook on the ending as the first step in direction I intend to follow. The ending offers the possibility of a new start for the protagonists, by earning a living with the production of pornography written for women by women, or, more specifically, by creating a feminist pornography meant for lesbian women,

instead of heterosexual men. Considered palimpsestuously, this ending points to the continuing heated debate on the possibility of creating a more equalitarian production and consumption of pornographic material outside the heteropatriarchal matrix. I retake here O'Callaghan's suggestion that women should write "A Porn of One's Own" (*Politics* 89), echoing Virginia Woolf's famous book, *A Room of One's Own.* As I firmly believe that there are real possibilities of bringing change to this industry, now that we have seen the main problems of mainstream pornography in our contemporary society, I will first offer an alternative view on this topic. In order to support my claim I will have recourse to a volume edited by Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimitzu, Constance Penley and Mireille Miller-Young, entitled *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (2013), which brings together the voices of academics, producers and defenders of feminist pornography. I could not agree more with Melissa Harris-Perry when, writing a review of this book, she made the following reflection:

> That the choices, experiences, and consequences of women's sexual lives became fodder for such poorly informed national 'conversations' is evidence of the pressing need for thoughtful, sex-positive scholarship which centers on women's sexual agency. [.] These essays are straightforward and informative in ways that are unfortunately rare in the multidecade feminist struggle over porn. [.] The authors do not assume that the porn industry as it exists is one essential and only possible incarnation of porn. Instead, they

assume that when feminists engage, intervene in, produce and study pornography, they can radically alter its formations and meanings. (n.p.).

Starting from this premise, I will close this chapter by highlighting the influence of Carter's outlook on pornography in the development of a feminist counter-canon, and will provide as a concrete example the life of Swedish producer and filmmaker Erika Lust, one of the main representatives of this change. Carter's above-explored book, *The Sadeian Woman*, can in itself work as a palimpsest. Many of the critical comments she provided in this pioneering work are perfectly applicable to sexual relations in our contemporary world, and more than forty years after its publication, they still make perfect sense. For instance, in the "Polemical Preface," significantly subtitled "In the Service of Women," Carter argues: "sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer" (23). The same assertion can be found in more contemporary readings. For instance, in *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality* (2010), Gail Dines explains that the answers to the many questions that arise in relation to the implications of porn in today's minds, are found in the culture that we all live in: "Porn is not something that stands outside us: it is deeply embedded in our structures, identities, relationships. This did not happen overnight, and there is a story to tell about how we got to the point that mainstream Internet porn

has become so hateful and cruel." (xxix). Evidently, the fact that certain assumptions are tied to cultural beliefs, directly points to gender roles, and more concretely, to the passive role women have historically been allotted in relation to pornography. What is more, the vast majority of women do not feel comfortable with the so-called mainstream pornography:

> Porn is lacking aesthetically, leaving nothing to the imagination and giving little room for exploration, self-discovery and reflection. It is not only that pornography is simply what the male partner invariably chooses, but rather that there are too many specific problems with it and too few ways of resolving them. Moreover, while some needs are met by pornography, there is also a widespread feeling that something other than porn would 'do it' better. (Wilson-Kovacs 156)

Before providing my own palimpsestuous reading of the ending and its implications, it is essential to highlight that I wholly agree with Taormino's view that:

> feminist porn does not mean that sex is always a ribbon-tied box of happiness and joy. Instead, feminist porn captures the struggle to define, understand, and locate one's sexuality. It recognizes the importance of deferring judgement about the significance of sex in intimate and social relations, and of not presuming what sex means for specific people. Feminist porn explores sexual ideas that may

be fraught, confounding, and deeply disturbing to some, and liberating and empowering to others. (15)

Maud's final confession that her books are "filled with the words for how I want you ." (Waters, *Fingersmith* 547) is essential to understand the possibilities the ending of the novel offers for contemporary readers. By appropriating the action of writing, Maud is freely and deliberately deciding what to write about and from which ideological perspective. Her new role as writer of pornography situates her in the position described by Simon Hardy:

The use of female authorship and first-person narration is clearly one strategy by which the pornographic genre as a whole, within which we may now include women's erotic memoirs, attempts to invoke the *real*, and to close its distance as a representational practice from the empirical reality of its object: human, but especially female sexuality. (7; emphasis in the original)

By writing what could be anachronistically labelled as "lesbian and feminist pornography," Maud is achieving what contemporary lesbian activists are pursuing, namely, a production of pornography that "challenge[s] this framing of female sexuality as intimate, nurturing, and reciprocal, and celebrate[s] sex roles and acts considered antifeminist and patriarchal" (Ryberg 142). Maud is now writing what she wants to in order to fulfil her own desires, and by extension, what some other women may

also find pleasurable. This is indeed, one of Easton's weakest points in her negative interpretation of the ending, as she takes for granted that Maud's texts will only be read by heterosexual men: "it is reasonable to argue that she [Waters] leaves a space at the novel's conclusion for the reader to reach the obvious conclusion about who Maud's commercial customers are most likely to be" (169). Thus, Easton denies the possibility of Maud's writings being autonomous (145). However, as I have previously explained, women in Victorian times did read and enjoy pornographic content. In fact, both Sue and especially Maud reproduce with their behaviour one of the main axioms of neo-Victorian literature: the rewriting of the history of pornography from the forbidden female perspective, thus dismantling the heteropatriarchal system that has always sustained it and still continues to do so. Therefore, by expressing her own, and Sue's, feelings and desires in her writings, Maud is indeed creating alternative images and iconography, something that fits with the definition of feminist porn according to Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimitzu, Constance Penley and Mireille Miller-Young:

> feminist porn uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class ability, age, body type, and other identity markers. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty, and pleasure within and across inequality, in the face of injustice, and against the limits of gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homonormativity. It seeks to unsettle conventional definitions of

sex, and expand the language of sex as an erotic activity, an expression of identity, a power exchange, a cultural commodity, and even a new politics. (9-10)

Like Ruth Vigers in *Affinity*, Maud works in the shadows, creating from her secure seclusion at Briar a new kind of writing that could break the mould of heteropatriarchal pornography. The more practical aspect Sue sees in the creation of pornographic texts is Maud's way of earning a living, and so, of creating her own autonomy and independence, now that she is no longer her uncle's prisoner. Maud performs her act of liberation at the place that was once her prison, now turned into her shelter. As Jones explains, "*Fingersmith* also repeats and foreshadows the othering of domestic space that occurs in many Waters's other novels, thus creating an intertextual chain" (119). As we have seen, after the death of Mr Lilly, Maud inherits Briar House and destroys the books that had tormented her in the past (Waters, *Fingersmith* 290). Therefore, she can now use the house as shelter and use the writing materials to create her own texts, actively deciding on how to do so, for whom and why. Paralleling the symbolic evolution of the house to her own maturation process, Maud, and also Sue, at the end of the novel, "become subjects with interiority, rather than just objects to be bought and sold" (Miller n.p.). By creating a totally different kind of erotic writings and gaining power over their own sexuality and bodies, they also change the ideological implications of the original pornography. As O'Callaghan argues, "the absence of Maud's narrative invites the imagination of the readers, encouraging them to reconsider ideas about

women's engagement with pornography and what that might mean for gender politics, while at the same time exploring the creative possibilities of the sexual, homosexual and the pornographic marketplace" (*Politics* 93).

Read palimpsestuously, Maud's ideas would perfectly match the aim of contemporary queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film festivals, such as "The Queer X Show."[72] As Ryberg explains in full detail, these cultural manifestations "playfully affirm sexuality and reinvent new representations of desire and pleasure" (142). Ryberg associates "The Queer X Show" with second-wave feminism, especially in relation to consciousness raising and the centrality of sexual pleasure politics for women, highlighting the importance of the dialogue created among women (143). As she further explains, this film culture enables their producers and consumers to focus on identification, reflection and recognition (148), notions that become as central for Maud and Sue as for contemporary audiences. In order to substantiate this assertion, I would like to end my analysis by focusing on the concrete example of the filmmaker Erika Lust, as she could also be ascribed to the category of "moral pornographer" in Carter's acceptation of the term, and, interpreted from a palimpsestuous perspective, she has very much in common with Maud in the purposes and implications of her creative work. According to Lust, "pornography is a medium like any other. It's just explicit film, showing sex without hiding the reality. But it's the creators who choose the values they show, whether it is chauvinistic or feminist porn" (in Thornton n.p.). These words could be endorsed by Waters and, by extension, as I have just explained, by Maud as well. Taking into

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[72] In her book chapter, O'Callaghan provides more examples of this kind of festivals taking place both in Europe and in the United States of America in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

account the difference between the Victorian and the present contexts, the main reasons behind Maud's decision to become a lesbian pornographer are exactly the same that Erika Lust has in mind when making her films. By creating new kinds of writing or filming and gaining power over a predominantly male business, the fictional protagonists of the novel and the award-winning real film maker are equally creating their identities, as they use their creations to give voice to their own ideas and construct their subjectivities. These women's feminist politics of pornography echoes Ryberg's contention that the "queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture can be understood as a counter public sphere where dominant notions of sexuality and gender are challenged" (148). Lust is also aware of the difficulties in representing alternative versions of pornography or of creating spaces for reflexion and questioning about women's own practices. One of Lust's main tenets is the importance of "amplifying voices [.] experiences and stories that haven't been told before in pornography" (Lust n.p.). In order to achieve this aim, she asks for the active role of women, usually banned from this business. She intends to build up a team in which the majority of workers are female, because, as she observes, "if you have more women working behind the camera, you have their voices being recognised and valued" (in Lewis n.p); and she also believes that "the range of films [is] wide so there is something for everyone" (n.p). This is another important fact, as one of the main constraints of heterosexist porn is the constant repetition of narrow-minded stereotypes.[73] This idea is present in Maud's discourse as well, as she does not want to repeat what she read in

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[73] Indeed, this is one of the main premises we can read in her website: "Represent all people equally and respectfully. Do not reduce performers to any primal feature, whether that be body shape, ability, age or ethnicity." (Lust n.p.).

her uncle's books. In summary, it may be stated that Waters's ultimate aim is not only to free her protagonists from the male-chauvinistic culture surrounding them, but also to demonstrate that there are various possibilities for women to reshape the different aspects of the mainstream sexual tradition and what has been historically understood as pornography. This aim is echoed by Lust's contention that:

> It's so important that women make films in general, and pornography in particular, because 95 percent of the films made are by men as producer, director and scriptwriter. When you analyse what is really going on in films, the woman is almost never the protagonist, but usually a vehicle for the man to get his pleasure. (in Thornton n.p.)

The remaining question would be: What is feminist porn?[74] As Taormino contends, "some say it's an oxymoron, that no porn could ever be feminist. But lots of us disagree. However, that doesn't mean we *agree* on its meaning or a standard definition" (260; emphasis in the original). From my perspective, the key criteria are the reasons for undertaking this task and

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[74] Taormino provides the following definition, with which I am in agreement: "Feminist porn creates its own iconography and is committed to depicting diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, class, body size, ability, and age. Feminist porn also challenges what constitutes sex itself and the heteronormative depictions of penis-in-vagina (or ass) intercourse as the ultimate, climactic act and everything else as some sort of inconsequential window dressing. Feminist porn moves beyond pigtail virgins, sex kittens, and hyperorgasmic nymphos, toward more complex and varied representations of femaleness and femininity, including what constitutes beauty, desirability, and sexiness. It does the same for men and masculinities, challenging the fixed, stereotypical ways in which male sexuality is depicted. Some people mistakenly believe that feminist porn is concerned only with women. We cannot fight gender oppression and attempt to dismantle rigid gender roles unless we exposure all of the fallacies of gender. The ways in which men are treated and depicted in porn must also be part of the feminist agenda." (262).

the way of doing it. In other words, not only does the content matter —as after all, adult cinema presents explicit sexual content— but also the whole process of doing it: the well-being of the actors and actresses, the female or queer perspective on its direction, production and distribution, and the representation of various forms of sexual pleasure, regardless of race, gender, age or class. Last but not least (and this is perhaps the most complicated aspect), the audience's reasons for consuming porn and their expectations need to be challenged and contested, re-educating particularly young people as the feminist movement has been doing for almost a century now. If we really seek a change —which is undoubtedly possible even if there is still a long way to go— women must assume an active role in the production of pornography,[75] especially in line with the idea of feminist pornography as a genre. As Ryberg argues, "the contemporary queer, feminist and lesbian porn film culture constructs public arenas for feminist discourses on sexuality" (144) and this is one the main aspects that we ought to highlight in discussing this issue. In line with the idea that the palimpsest is continually being reinscribed and transformed, the same may be said to happens with relatively new terminology, as meaningful dialogue is still going on and is nothing but monolithic: "like other genres of film and media, feminist porn shares common themes, aesthetics, and goals even though its parameters are not clearly demarcated" (Taormino et al. 18). As previously explained, we cannot deny the existence of easily accessible mainstream pornography, and it is sadly undeniable that pornography has become one of the most common ways of learning about sex. This is the

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[75] "Borrowing from film historian Mariam Hansen, this film culture potentially enables an alternative experimental horizon." (Ryberg 147).

reason why we need to be critical about the representations of sexuality and pornography, not necessarily eradicating it, as it is a fundamental part of the human experience, but raising women's voices to create materials with which we can feel comfortable, represented and empowered. In other words, we need to bear in mind that this should not be an individualist feat, but rather a collective and ongoing process towards the creation of a feminist pornography aimed at the expression of varied, healthy and authentic human experiences.

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to her monograph, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (2005), Jeanette King asks herself the question: "Why, in the last decades of the twentieth century, should so many women novelists have looked back a hundred years for the subjects of their fiction? [.] What, in particular, is the interest of Victorian constructions of gender and sexuality for modern feminists?" (1). This can be considered the question that aroused my interest in historical fiction in general and Waters's neo-Victorian fictions in particular, as I wanted to explore the reasons that a woman writer like her would have to travel back to the past, and the consequences of so doing.

As pointed out in the Introduction, the main aim of this PhD thesis is to demonstrate that the significance of Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian fictions goes beyond the historical context of the represented period to illuminate the present, and that the adoption of a contemporary vantage point could add interpretive nuances to them that might contribute "to expose the Victorian-ness of the world in which we live; to demonstrate that the nineteenth century is still out there, ready to be explored" (Sweet xxii). After carrying out this piece of research, I can now assert that, Sarah Waters's fictions have contributed to reduce the historical barriers between the Victorian and our own period, creating, in Walter Benjamin's words, a "constellation" (263) of past events to be interpreted relationally by the readers of the novels from our own contemporary perspective. After analysing them in detail, I can state that the three novels can effectively be categorised as neo-Victorian,

since they respond to the main tenets of this literary trend. As I pointed out in the first chapter, neo-Victorian fictions are contemporary re-engagements with the Victorians. The self-imposed task of neo-Victorian writers is to reimagine the Victorian Era and the Victorians with very un-Victorian purposes in mind. After analysing Waters's three neo-Victorian novels with this idea in mind, Waters's main aim seems clear: to rewrite certain aspects of Victorian history and culture relegated to the margins of the dominant heteropatriarchal society from her own late twentieth-century lesbian perspective. Surely, for this reason Mari Hughes-Edwards has stated that "the neo-Victorian fiction of Sarah Waters suggests that all its women are in prison, either physically or psychologically" (133). In the case of her neo-Victorian fictions, the "imprisoned" women she seeks to liberate are the so-called "indecorous" Victorian women, more specifically, the transvestite, the spinster, the spiritualist, the pornographer, and the homosexual. What I find more relevant about this is that, by focusing on lesbian and queer women, Waters is giving voice to the buried and erased lives those marginal Victorian women who have systematically been silenced by history, while simultaneously granting the visibility they still lack to their contemporary counterparts, as she triggers multiple questions both about their past and their present status in society. By assuming this double function, Waters fulfils the role of a proper chronicler as Walter Benjamin understands it: someone who does not favour some specific chapters of history —or, in other words, the most remarkable and well-known historical milestones that appear in historical records— but is more encompassing and democratic, never losing sight of the disregarded and/or silenced parts of history. As

Benjamin makes clear: "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: *nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history*" (254; emphasis added). In other words, by filling in those historical gaps in the way that best suits her necessities, Waters provides her works with what Mark Llewellyn has accurately described as a "narrative politics and narratological impulse to create histories of pluralistically gendered and sexed terms" (Llewellyn, "Breaking," 209).

As discussed earlier, nowadays, the generalised fascination with the different aspects of the Victorian past has led to a massive creation of audio-visual, literary and artistic productions that allow us to travel back in time, reimagining the lives of Dickens, the Brontë sisters, or Wilde's neighbours. While many popular recreations of the Victorian Era evince a nostalgic view of the lost imperial past or seem devised by the entertainment industry to cater for those wishing to enjoy the thrill of adventure, Waters uses a magnifying glass to explore certain aspects of the past that we wrongly assume to have been overcome. As Sweet puts it, Waters's aim is to "demolish the notion that the nineteenth century was an era best characterised by reticence, stability, sobriety and conservatism" (xxii). One of the aims of this thesis was to substantiate this assertion through a close reading of the texts, exploring the narrative and stylistic intricacies as well as the contents of the three novels, with the aim of providing the most updated and complete analysis of them possible so far. Another aim of this dissertation was to explore the processing and transformation of the past in the light of the present in order to establish the dialogue between past,

present and even future concerns in the novels or, to put it in Benjamin's terms, to pinpoint the historical "constellation" (263) created by Waters in each novel. In this respect, the initial hypothesis was that, even though Waters's novels focus on the lives and (mis)fortunes of dissident Victorian women of all kinds, when explored as multilayered palimpsests, they also give voice to contemporary concerns, especially those related to feminism, sexuality and the condition of lesbian women in our contemporary age.

In order to meet my aims, I divided this work into five chapters. In Chapter I, I set Waters in her literary and cultural context as a necessary preliminary stage to fully understand her writings and the reasons that had led her to explore certain topics from a concrete perspective. After exploring the various labels she and, by extension, her fictional works, can be, and have been, ascribed to —a lesbian, a feminist, a queer and a historical writer, among others— I conclude that she cannot be pigeonholed in a single label, as this would depreciate the richness and complexity of her fictions. She is not a writer who exclusively favours and explores one single *topos* or aspect of Victorianism but rather faces multifaceted challenges and delves into a variety of equally relevant subject matters. Waters is a widely read and very well-known writer, particularly in Britain, as well as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the writing of international academic publications. The wealth of articles, book chapters and volumes about her novels may suggest that there is nothing left to say about them. However, as I have argued, the palimpsestic structure of these three novels conveys complex reinscriptions of their meanings that allow for multiple relational readings, which was, from the very beginning, one of the main working

hypotheses I wanted to demonstrate. Indeed, this is precisely the most overwhelming power of literature. As Roland Barthes famously argued in "The Death of the Author" (1967), once published, the reader is in charge of building his or her own interpretation of the text, or rather intertext, as to Barthes, each text is a constellation of allusions, quotations and influences from earlier texts. The more complex the text is (*literature scriptible*), the better prepared and more attentive the reader (or *scriptor*) must be. In consonance with this, I tried to put into practice Dillon's idea about the constant, never-ending change and construction of the meaning of palimpsestic texts —understanding each new reading and contemplation as a new inscription begging for a palimpsestuous reading—, since theoretically each reader has the power to perceive and bring to light those layers of meaning that lie undetected in the textual palimpsest. What is more, all those earlier critical analyses of Waters's novels and the already existing bulk of neo-Victorian literature have constituted the starting point from which to find an unexplored niche to add my own contribution. In agreement with this, Chapter II is devoted to the explanation of the theoretical framework and methodology that I use for the analysis of the three novels: the palimpsest metaphor. As I explain in this chapter, the methodological tool provided by the metaphorisation of the palimpsest is complemented with more specific theories that match each of the topics of each novel analysed in the main three chapters. Therefore, the palimpsest acts as the common thread that unifies the analysis of the three novels and brings cohesion to the whole project. As Dillon argues, the transformation of the material palimpsest into a metaphor with great analytical potential

highlights "the persistent fascination with palimpsests in the popular imagination, embodying as they do the mystery of the secret, the miracle of resurrection and the thrill of detective discovery" (*Palimpsest* 12-13). It was this mystery of the unrevealed secret and the thrill of playing the role of a "literary detective" that drove me to delve into the silenced and imperfectly erased stories of women belonging to the past and carefully hidden in the lowest layers of the palimpsest, but also visibly enmeshed with our own present, if focused from a palimpsestuous or relational perspectives. In consonance with this idea, I brought up another concept that further highlights my main reason for employing this methodology: Walter Benjamin's understanding of history as a constellation, since this prism provides a relational perspective on history that matches my task of unearthing the most profound layers of the palimpsest in order to grasp the real significance of the novels from our contemporary standpoint.

Chapter III, IV and V are devoted, respectively, to each of the three neo-Victorian novels Sarah Waters has published to date: *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002). The main reasons why I have chosen these three novels are, on the one hand, that they have several commonalties: they all present outcast female protagonists, are written as first-person narrations, have intriguing plot twists, and beg for an attentive reader. On the other, these silenced Victorian stories grant the possibility of approaching them from a twenty-first century perspective, thus allowing for the confrontation of past and present and the creation of a historical constellation that will allow us to question our differences and ultimately to realise that we are not so far apart from the Victorians as we might think.

For structural reasons, the three chapters follow a similar layout. They begin with an exposition of the different examinations and critical outlooks on each novel and a literature review of what has already been said about their most remarkable aspects. The main reason for doing these summaries has been to identify their niche and carry on research on issues that have not been explored yet, specifically, on topics belonging to the twenty-first century. After that, I have analysed the structure of each novel and the relationship between its form and meaning, as these aspects are always interrelated. In the case of the second and third novels, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, this aspect becomes especially remarkable, as both present two story lines with two different narrative voices which partially overlap with each other, bestowing the narratives with various gaps and twists that the reader must unravel in order to confer meaning on them. In the next stage, I focused on one remarkable topic of each novel related to gender and sexual identity, with a clear aim in mind: to trace back the historical origins of each topic and set it within the Victorian socio-political context. After that, with the help of the palimpsest metaphor, I explored the evolution that those topics have undergone until the twenty-first century, with the major objective of casting some light on their current status in our society, both inside and especially outside the literary world, thus ultimately creating a specific constellation out of each novel.

For the first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, I focused on gender performativity as experienced by its protagonist, based on Judith Butler's ideas, primarily in *Gender Trouble*, as well as in her subsequent works, *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender*. I provided this chapter with a

detailed explanation of Butler's theory in relation to the main protagonist and, as this novel has been analysed from this perspective by many scholars, I summarised their main ideas and considered them my starting point. Then, I compared the figure of the nineteenth-century male impersonator with that of the contemporary Drag King, in order to establish possible parallelisms between them. In order for this comparison to make sense and bridge the gap between these two apparently disconnected figures, I traced the evolution of the role of women from the nineteenth century onwards, specifically focusing on gender roles and attire. Finally, I exemplified all these parallelisms with a consideration of the mainstream female performer and worldwide known singer, Christine and the Queens. After analysing the performance of both female figures, the fictional and the real, within their respective socio-cultural contexts, I came to the conclusion that they are both ahead of their times. By means of their actions —which are very similar in spite of their temporal difference— and their particular perspectives on the world, especially in terms of their understanding of gender and sexuality, both Nan and Chris struggle to overcome social discrimination, demonstrate that gender is constantly and ceaselessly performed and, more importantly, intend to prove that femininity has multiple and equally valid forms.

In the case of *Affinity* the analytical focus was placed, first, on the panoptical structure of Millbank prison as an emblem of the oppressive institutional structures suffered by Victorian women, particularly those outcast or dissident female figures from the lower social stratum. In this second novel, Waters delved both into the social discrimination tied to the

label of "spinster," often used as a euphemism for "lesbian," and into the related role of spiritualists in the liberation of women's sexual repression. Usually belonging to the working class, spiritualists were regarded as outcasts and constantly compared to prison inmates or, in Victorian terms, to evildoers. Evidently, to these different forms of discrimination we have to add that of being a "queer woman," a category that adds an extra layer of oppression to Victorian women in general but affects them diversely depending on their social status. Thus, while for working-class women "queerness" was punished with incarceration, an upper-middle class "spinster" like Margaret Prior could avoid imprisonment even after a failed suicide attempt. Together with this, I focused at length on the role of spiritualism in relation to women in Victorian times, having as a primary source Alex Owen's detailed study on those issues. This led me to the study of the ghost effect ruling the lives of the protagonists because of their sexual orientation, which is worryingly persistent in our present-day society. Drawing on Terry Castle's metaphor of the "apparitional lesbian," I analysed the paradoxical centrality of the invisible lady's maid, Ruth Vigers, and attempted to demonstrate that this "lesbian ghosting" effect has not been overcome yet, and that not only in literature but also in wider socio-cultural contexts or audio-visual productions, lesbian voices and stories are rarely heard, and their presence is still overshadowed from multiple angles.

For the third novel, the central topic —and probably the most controversial of all— was that of pornography and the role women had and still have in this business. I paid especial attention to the evil effects of Mr

Lily's training of Maud as a pornographer when she was only a child, and related this topic to the present-day consumption of pornography by the young generations. Again, in order to reduce the gap between past and present and establish the logic in the development of this topic across centuries, I devoted an important part of the chapter to trace the origins and evolution of pornography, especially in relation to the role ascribed to women, throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, I focused on the current thorny debate on contemporary pornography, as well as on the implications and consequences this business has for the young. Finally, I dared, perhaps being a little utopian, to question whether something described as "feminist" or "ethical" pornography could be a valid option within our cultural parameters, drawing on the example provided, among others, by the feminist pornographer Erika Lust. My conclusion, as far as the production and consumption of pornography is concerned, is that, after carrying out my own research, I am well aware that envisioning something described as "feminist" pornography is yet out of hand but, in accordance with my understanding of the principles of feminism —that is, on the basis of achieving total and real equality among all human beings— I wish to leave open the possibility of producing non-chauvinistic pornography, either in writing —some of which are already in the market— or in audio-visual form. This kind of pornography would allow women to enjoy their sexuality without having to meet the false stereotypes of women fostered by phallogocentric pornography.

Finally, it is now time to answer the main question that I posed myself at the beginning of this project, namely, whether I have

accomplished the task of a critical reader, which, according to de Groote, consists of encouraging the "palimpsestuous intimacy" (113) of the different layers of a text in order to extract a contemporary reading, since, as he aptly points out, "to recover these memories is to understand what shaped the present" (113). My working hypothesis was that, though separated by more than a century, the events and circumstances relating to the condition of women in general and lesbians in particular in the Victorian Era, are connected with our present in various, unsuspected ways. In other words, I believed that beneath the adventures, maturation processes of the different characters and the fictional stories of each novel, I could unearth more transcendental topics easily relatable to the two target contexts, ultimately allowing readers to question their current status. After carrying out the separate analyses of the three novels as well as of the three corresponding *topoi* that I consider to be central to each novel —the construction and representation of gender; the identitarian and bodily invisibility of the lesbian; and female desire—, I can confirm the initial hypothesis that the assumptions, attitudes and behaviour of the normative society to women that we naively think belong only to the past *can* actually make perfect sense within our contemporary parameters. I hope to have succeeded in demonstrating that it is possible to visualise this continuum between past and present if, following Benjamin's recommendation, we give up the sequential and progressive understanding of history and, like the Angel in Paul Klee's painting, look back on the past from our own present perspective, for by so doing past events will acquire a proper sense, and we will perceive the "constellation" (263) formed by the hetero-patriarchal

consideration of women, particularly lesbians, in the past and the present. The constellation thus formed allows us to state that Waters's ethical task of granting visibility to (lesbian) women is successfully accomplished, since, read from today's perspective, the three novels share a critical attitude towards the false assumptions and stereotypes tied to nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century women in the Western world, which when attentively read between the lines and interpreted palimpsestuously, can yield the complete, relational picture about them.

As mentioned on several occasions, the aspects of the novels I dealt with in the thesis are often overlooked by Western society, which continues to be overwhelmingly heteropatriarchal. The three analytical chapters prove that fiction, with its ability to engage readers both emotionally and intellectually, is a perfect medium to give voice to marginalised and silenced others and to delve into controversial topics otherwise disregarded by mainstream discourses. Unfortunately, it is undeniable that there is still a lack of concern about certain issues related with minority communities, and that a large part of the population in Britain and other Western countries is increasingly and worryingly uncritical about certain persistent inequalities, especially if we take into account the rise of extreme right-wing governments and political parties, whose populist discourses are engaging a growing number of people into evermore regressive or even obsolete ideologies. Indeed, this is another reason to justify why one of my main aims has been to explore such thorny issues that are nowadays important and relevant but do not usually receive proper attention. What could be even more challenging from our perspective as researchers is that, by facing new

challenges and social phenomena that reflect fresh realities we too are asked to assume the duty, not only of contributing to what Sweet has described as the process of "Liberating the Victorians" (222), but also to grant equality and freedom to the marginalised others of our own society, by writing and thinking critically about all of them.

From a strictly methodological perspective, I believe that my research has shown the potential of the metaphorisation of the palimpsest as a tool for the analysis of literary works —and, by extension, the possibilities it opens up for the examination of more cultural artefacts— as it has allowed me to trace back the origins of certain topics that were hidden from the eyes of society within a concrete historical framework —in this case, the Victorian era—, and then revisit them from the most updated reading position possible. From this methodological perspective, the entire research process can be summarised by stating that, throughout the thesis, I have adopted the role of literary analyst recommended by Heilmann and Llewellyn, and have "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (*Neo-Victorianism* 4; emphasis in the original).

The cover of the thesis, designed by Pablo Calahorra Garrido, is meant to provide a visual image of what I have tried to do: the sand clock symbolises the inexorable passing of time as well as the constant union of past and present. Thus, it emphasises one of the main tenets of neo-Victorianism: that we have many more points in common with the Victorians than we may think. We should bear in mind, as I explained in the Introduction, that the Victorian Era substantially changed the way of

understanding the world, and that such notions as so-called "fashion" or up-to-date objects as well as many of the heated issues that we fervently discuss nowadays have their origins and birth date in the nineteenth century. This is why we can appreciate in the sand clock multiple sand grains trickling down relentlessly, resulting in a continuous addition of new layers to the palimpsest metaphorically represented by those sand grains, as well as by the torn vintage paper in the background. What is more, we can find allusions to the three novels as those sand grains that inevitably persist in the present remind us of the main idea discussed in *Affinity*, that is, the ghost effect of past controversial issues still haunting the present. The glove covering the hand makes direct allusion to its importance in *Fingersmith*, and the little pearls decorating this glove highlight the rich symbolism of this little prop in *Tipping the Velvet*. Then, of the two female hands that hold the sand clock, the one on the upper left corner is a kind of vintage Victorian hand hidden by a glove, symbolising the apparent delicacy of Victorian women and their overshadowed position in society. This suggestion is counterbalanced by the weight, oppression and control of Victorian heteropatriarchal politics, emphasised by the upper position of the hand holding the clock. Diagonally, we see, on the right lower corner, a naked hand proudly showing her identity and taking the helm of her forebears. Its position highlights that its owner does not wish to control anyone or impose her ideas. Conversely, she wishes to embrace the learned lessons from the past, and construct new cultural paradigms in which open-mindedness, inclusion and acceptance of multiple but equally valid realities can coexist peacefully.

Having said all this, I would not like to conclude this dissertation without expressing here my personal stance as a literary critic and, by extension, as a human being, about the issues exposed. My research has "obliged" me to push my limits and to be much more critical with the society we live in and the unaccountable ideological constructions imposed on us; I would like all the barriers and limits, as well as all the possibilities, to open up a brighter future. I have learnt more than I could possibly imagine about certain still hidden, marginalised and controversial topics that are not usually mainstreamed, and have also learnt to question well-established —generally stereotyped— assumptions about them. By so doing, I have been, and still am, immersed, both as an academic and as a human being, in a process of deconstruction —understood in Derrida's sense of the term as a process of associating two apparently contradictory terms together: destruction and construction aimed at deconstructing my own previous assumptions and reassembling them in a new, more democratic way. Needless to say, from the very beginning, I have been very conscious of the vital importance of being totally deferential towards the topics I have investigated and written about, especially with those I had not dealt with before, in order to be as objective, observant and respectful as possible. Underlying this attitude is my ultimate consideration, as I have already mentioned, that fiction, in any of its plural manifestations, is a particularly suitable tool to assess critically social matters that concern us all. I cannot think of a better way to finish this thesis than by highlighting one last time that "we shall not take a single backward step," as this vogue phrase, first pronounced by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953 in the

context of racial equality, and now applied to the demand for equal rights in general, seems to be more pertinent than ever. We have the duty of contributing to give voice to the ethical demand for equality and love of every human being from our little personal room.

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