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Representations of space and sexuality in Sarah Waters's Novels

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian Era may be seen as a real 'age of madness' because after all, the study of the human mind was definitely established during that time, since new branches of medical science, psychology, neurology and sexology defined new type of disease (for example mental conditions such as hysteria) and new patients as Anne-Julia Zwierlein points out. Those 'new patients', in fact, no longer fit the old cliché of the dehumanized raving lunatic, they were, instead , proper Victorian ladies, a fact that both shocked and fascinated Victorian society. As Elaine Showalter writes, the appealing madwoman gradually displaced the repulsive madwoman, both as the prototype of the confined lunatic and as a cultural icon (Showalter). This strange 'appeal' of the madwoman can also be observed in the era's cultural representations, especially its literature, from Collins' 'Woman in White' to the ghostly 'Miss Havisham' of Dickens, the images of deranged and deviant women seem to haunt the great English novels.

Insanity and madness also appears in contemporary Neo-Victorian fiction, for example in Sarah Waters' lesbian version' of Victorian gothic and sensation fiction, her 2002 novel 'Finger smith' in which the two female protagonists both become enmeshed in a complex plot, scheming to send each other to the madhouse.

This example of female mental illness in Victorian era is represented in Waters' novels through the depiction of 19th century space and sexuality focused mainly on three heterotopias: the theatre, the women's prison and the private madhouse.

Waters emphasizes structural failure in her representation of these spaces, by permitting her illegitimate characters to occupy other sites, including the home.

Waters's work is chiefly concerned with the sexuality of her protagonists. Space is not usually central, however it has a high impact. For example, some critics discuss the lesbian identity of Nancy Astley, the heroine of 'Tipping the Velvet', as it is depicted against the backdrop of 19th century London..

Keywords: *space, sexuality, gothic literature, faux-Victorian, historiographical metafiction, hysteria, identity, self and otherness.*

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INTRODUCTION

Waters's representations of female sexuality in these texts are intimately linked with the rooms, houses and institutions her characters inhabit. Each novel looks at one prominent Victorian space: the theatre or music hall in *Tipping the Velvet*, the women's prison in *Affinity* and the private madhouse in *Fingersmith*. Each text shows that the characteristics of these spaces are not confined to their precincts but are instead far-reaching, and affect sites such as the Victorian home. Waters's characters move between these spaces and eventually beyond them, in their attempts to find ways to express their lesbian sexuality.

Tipping the Velvet, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* are all tales of "other Victorians" in "other spaces."1 The prostitute and brothel, and the hysteric and madhouse, have traditionally been presented as the only bodies and spaces in which non-procreative models of sexuality were "tolerated" during the nineteenth century [1]. What Waters, like Foucault, explores through her novels is the idea that "other Victorians" and "other spaces" were in fact all around. Waters centres her narratives around/in/through what Foucault calls "other spaces." Foucault labels institutions such as prisons or psychiatric hospitals—established to contain society's nonconformists—"heterotopias of deviation" [2]. In contrast to utopias, these heterotopias are real as well as unreal in that they have become the place of those deemed placeless [2]. The inhabitants of these heterotopias are those who are somehow "other." Heterotopic institutions of deviance are spaces that supposedly contain and isolate people with abnormal desires in an attempt to spare society from "their infernal mischief" [1].

Waters's depiction of nineteenth-century space and sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* focuses on three heterotopias: the theatre, the women' sprison and the private madhouse. Waters emphasises structural failure in herrepresentation of these spaces, by permitting her "illegitimate" characters to occupy other sites, including the home. The permeability of these spaces affects sexual expression in all three of Waters's novels (not only in *Affinity*, in which it is most obvious). This permeability is accompanied by a post-Foucauldianrealisation that heterotopic spaces are in fact potentially everywhere. Foucault claims to be interested in heterotopias because they "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations they happen to designate" [2]. By exploring the "elsewhere" spaces to which illegitimate sexualities were exiled during the Victorian period, Waters suggests that "other Victorians," like "other spaces," could exist anywhere, not just in hidden interstices.

Most studies of Waters's work are chiefly concerned with the sexuality of her protagonists. Space is not usually central to these analyses; however, a number of critics have noted its impact. Susan Alice Fischer and Stefania Ciocia discuss the lesbian identity of Nancy Astley, the heroine of *Tipping the Velvet*, as it is depicted against the backdrop of nineteenth-century London. Paulina Palmer, in her discussion of *Affinity*, notes the way in which "entrapment in the domestic sphere" is a prominent feature of lesbian representations in gothic literature.

Placing Waters

To represent the past from the lesbian periphery, however, is not Waters's only aim. She also wants to write a satisfying story in the tradition of great Victorian novels. Sarah Broughton reports Waters's opinion that "if she wanted to write a story about a lesbian who was an axe murderer, it would be because of her interest in exploring that one particular incident and its ramifications rather than from any deep-seated need to create a representational character" (8). Waters's agenda, it seems, is multi-faceted. She wants to explore and represent lesbianism at the same time as providing her reader with a "good" story.

Waters recognizes a "special affinity" between women or, more specifically, lesbian writers and historical fiction (176). The historical novel allows women to rewrite past fictions and representations that have traditionally been male-dominated from different female perspectives. The way in which postmodern writers of lesbian historical fiction actually manipulate the past, however, varies.

Anna Carey claims: "One of the most remarkable things about Waters's novels is how well she captures a nineteenth-century voice… Her books feel as if they were written by a person from the nineteenth century who had somehow read a lot of twentieth-century fiction" (1). Any sense of multi-period layering in Water's (and Faber's) post-Victorian novels seems to come from the past into the future, as though the author is a Victorian who has travelled into the future and back again.

In *Fingersmith,* for instance, Waters makes use of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." There are also obvious references to Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and echoes of *Bleak House*. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Sheridan le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* and *Carmilla*, provide bleak Gothic undertones. Moreover, Waters's rewritings are not limited to Victorian texts. She also rewrites aspects of contemporary historical fiction.For example, her representation of the music hall in *Tipping the Velvet* mirrors the use Ackroyd made of the space in his novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. *Affinity* makes use of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* in revealing the panopticon as a space of lesbian desire, as well as Byatt's *Possession* with its reworking of the Victorian Spiritualist movement. And *Fingersmith* recalls Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by once again exploring the perspective of the mad woman.

Madhouses, Madwomen and the Gothic Tradition

In *Fingersmith* the private madhouse is one of the key spaces Waters uses to represent the confinement women experienced during the nineteenth century. The 1860s, the period in which *Fingersmith* is set, was the heyday of the private madhouse and the female hysteric. In response to growing number of feminine ailments during the nineteenth century, a great need arose for adequate and respectable places to house middle-class madwomen, the domestication of madness in the nineteenth century by showing similarities between the conditions in psychiatric institutions and the home, and the effect entrapment in these spaces has on female identities.

Fingersmith's narrative also recalls the tradition of sensational Victorian classics, such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which madhouse abuses are illuminated.

In *The Woman in White*, for example, Anne Catherick is confined to a private asylum so that she is unable to pass on a secret.

In *Lady Audley's Secret* the wicked Lady Audley is "buried alive" in a private madhouse despite the fact that a doctor initially says that "there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done" (377).

In *Fingersmith*, Waters uses sensation motifs, such as female madness and imprisonment, to disrupt normative conceptions of sexuality and space. These motifs, however, are not only familiar to sensation fiction; they are also common in Gothic narratives.

Spaces in *Fingersmith* are never what they seem. The madhouse can be a home, for example, whilst the respectable gentleman's manor can be the site of perversity. Mrs Sucksby and Mr Ibbs's Lant Street residence in London's Borough is no exception. Not only is this house difficult to find, located deep within a maze of twisted alleyways, it is also hard to define. A number of occupations occur beneath its roof, rendering this space,like the theatre, heterotopic. The house is a den of thieves, a counterfeiter's, a baby farm, a brothel and a madhouse with a lunatic occupying one of the upper rooms. For Maud, who is taken there after she flees her uncle's home with Gentleman, Lant Street is as imprisoning as a madhouse and works as a frightening return to origins. For Sue, however, Lant Street seems to function as a place of asylum and a home, where she was left as an orphan but raised and protected by Mrs Sucksby, who was "paid to keep [her] a month" but instead looked after her for seventeen years (12). Yet although Sue does not consciously realise it, her home at Lant Street is in some ways a madhouse where she is kept "blunt" like a troublesome lunatic (339).

CONCLUSION

In her novels mentioned above Waters represents her characters' expressions of lesbian sexuality and female identity as intimately linked to the spaces they inhabit.

Each of these ideas (theatricality, Spiritualism and madness), however, could be individually applied to the spaces and the heroines' expressions of sexuality in any one of Waters's post-Victorian novels. The theatricality Waters shows to be inherent to discourses of space and sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet,* for example, is also an intrinsic element in both *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*. Margaret's home in *Affinity* is a stage on which middle-class values are self-consciously performed and she is frequently reminded of her role: "your place is here, at your mother's side" (253). Furthermore, Selina and Ruth's material manipulation of Spiritualism in this novel is also overtly theatrical and staged. *Fingersmith* begins with Sue describing a stage production of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.

Like actors in a play, many of the characters in this novel, at one time or another, very deliberately perform a part. Sue takes on the role of a servant girl after spending many hours practicing to dress, curtsy and lower her gaze (39), whilst Maud plays the part of a naïve heiress (242). Similarly, Waters makes use of the apparitional tradition of lesbianism in all three of her novels, not only *Affinity*. Nancy frequently compares herself to a ghost whilst living a half-life with Diana in St John's Wood: "I was like a spectre" (265). In *Fingersmith* Sue and Maud move like ghosts when at Briar, and Maud, much like Margaret in *Affinity*, claims that she will "haunt" this space as "a neat, monotonous ghost" (287). Likewise, madness features in *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* as well as *Fingersmith*. Margaret's home in *Affinity* becomes a madhouse when she is diagnosed with hysteria and forced to suffer the "rest cure." In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy, like Sue in *Fingersmith*, goes mad when confined in a house after her lover betrays her, stating "perhaps I was mad" (183).

Each novel maps the progress of one or two female protagonists in their search for a space and a means to express their lesbianism. Waters's post-Victorian heroines oscillate between the institutions of the theatre, prison and the madhouse, and more domestic spaces, in an attempt to find somewhere they can be themselves. By performing, haunting and going mad, these characters navigate their way out of the spaces that restrict their sexual expression, to find and create ones that accept their lesbianism.

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