



Universidad de Valladolid

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

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**The Subversion of the Victorian Woman in
Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith***

Ariadna Cabañas López

Tutor/Tutora: Marta María Gutiérrez Rodríguez

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to prove the subversion of the figure of the Victorian woman in Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith*. *Fingersmith* follows the story of two women tangled in a web of lies and manipulations that will ultimately fall in love with each other in the process. Lesbian representation in literature is especially worthy of recovering and elevating, since it is lacking as opposed to the amount of literature that the gay community can claim from the Victorian period. Following the research from different critics in the background of the Victorian era, gender roles, feminism and lesbian fiction we will analyse how Sarah Waters female protagonists fit into their theories and if they, in fact, succeed in subverting the stereotype of the Victorian woman.

Key words: Neo-Victorian, Victorian, Feminism, Lesbian, Women, Novel

El objetivo de este estudio consiste en probar la subversión de la figura de la mujer victoriana en la novela neo-Victoriana *Fingersmith* o *Falsa Identidad* de Sarah Waters. *Falsa Identidad* es la historia de dos mujeres envueltas en una trama de mentiras y manipulaciones que se acabarán enamorando en el proceso. La representación lésbica en la literatura es digna de ser recuperada y elevada, ya que es escasa en comparación con la cantidad de literatura victoriana que puede ser reivindicada por la comunidad gay. Continuando con la investigación de diferentes críticos especializados en la era victoriana, roles de género, feminismo y literatura lésbica analizaremos cómo los personajes femeninos de Sarah Waters encajan en sus teorías y si, en realidad, la autora consigue subvertir el estereotipo de la mujer victoriana con éxito.

Palabras clave: Neo-Victoriana, Victoriana, Feminismo, Lesbiana, Mujer, Novela

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. A LOOK INTO VICTORIANS, FEMINISM AND LESBIANS	3
2.1 The neo-Victorian novel	3
2.2 Gender roles	6
2.3 Lesbian fiction.....	11
3. <i>FINGERSMITH</i>, A STORY RECOVERED	16
3.1 A different kind of Victorian.....	16
3.2 Subverting gender roles.....	17
3.3 Sue and Maud: a lesbian experience	21
4. CONCLUSION	27
5. BIBLIOGRAPHY	28

1. INTRODUCTION

LGBTQIA+ issues are especially relevant today, but sometimes rendered invisible when they are a matter of the past due to the laws and taboos, even though people from the queer community have always existed. Thus, finding representation, or trying to recover recollections of it in some way, even in the realm of fiction, will always be relevant to the present LGBTQIA+ movement, as it is part of its story, a story that was not given much thought or material back then. Our period of focus will be the 19th century, also known as the Victorian era. In this period, which had Queen Victoria as the model, women's personalities were limited to be either good or bad and they were relegated to the private sphere of the home. In addition, they were expected to be passive, and their experiences were far from being the main point of focus or concern in a men-dominated society. What condemned women to the inferior role also condemned them to adhere to a compulsory sexuality, which meant that anything other than man and woman was unacceptable, not to mention the notion of women enjoying their sexualities at all. Using this period as the main setting, but many years later, is Sarah Waters. Waters is the author of six novels, three of which are set in Victorian England. She has been named author of the year in four different occasions, and her main field of study is lesbian and gay historical fiction. Her novel *Fingersmith*, which is the focus of this study, forms part of the neo-Victorian tradition. *Fingersmith* tells a raw lesbian story full of false appearances, manipulation and ultimately, love. It follows "Sue Trinder" and "Maud Lilly", two women who not only navigate their sexuality and fall in love with each other, but also a society that has trapped them, with the common goal of being set free.

The main objective of this study is, thus, to analyse how these two female protagonists subvert the image of the Victorian woman. For this, we will settle a background on the Victorian era and the Victorians, which will set the space to the Victorian novel and how it reflected that society of the time, and most especially, the separated gender roles. Lastly, we will draw attention to lesbian fiction, its roots and themes, and its contribution to the lesbian experience. Once the background has been settled, we will move on to *Fingersmith*, the novel itself. Through this novel, we will see if and how Sarah Waters fits into the Victorian and

neo-Victorian tradition and what she achieves with her narrative strategies. More importantly, we will focus on her shift on gender roles and if and how she succeeds in subverting them. Our final focus will be on the main protagonists of the novel, Sue and Maud, their lesbian experience and if and how it contributes to the subversion of Victorian stereotypes.

2. A LOOK INTO VICTORIANS, FEMINISM AND LESBIANS

2.1 The neo-Victorian novel

Part of the thing of it is making it seem like it's authentic. ... to imagine a history—to imagine the sort of history that we can't really recover. (Waters 2002)

As Marie-Luise Kohlke, the founding editor of the *Journal of neo-Victorian Studies*, explains neo-Victorianism supposes the “the afterlife of the nineteenth century in the cultural imaginary” (Kohlke 1), that is, a contemporary reimagining and expression of the Victorian era. The term Victorian, however, is quite broad, so it is possible to attribute it to every work that takes place during the period of Queen Victoria’s life (1819-1901), the duration of her reign (1837-1901), or the 19th century in general.

The neo-Victorian novel shows concern with the past of the Victorians. However, the way that concern is expressed through a literary work varies from author to author and can be manifested in many different ways. In her work *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative. The Victorians and Us*, Louisa Hadley differentiates several methods in which a neo-Victorian novel might engage with the Victorian Past:

[1] some texts draw on the conventions of a Victorian genre ... [2] others position themselves in relation to a specific Victorian intertext ... [3] Other texts choose to engage with historical figures from the nineteenth century ... [4] Then there are those novels that create fictional characters and events as a way to explore issues that were central to Victorian culture. (Hadley 4)

However, it is not possible to understand neo-Victorian fiction outside of the realm of historical fiction, since it is a type of fiction that is both Victorian and contemporary. Historical fiction is defined “as much by the period it evokes as by the period it is written in” (Hadley 6) and therefore, works created during the same period will differ from one another depending on the period each of them is evoking. This leads historical works to adopt what Louisa Hadley establishes as a “dual approach”, a concern with both the present and the past, and a “dual plot structure”, in which novels explore events that occur in both the historical

period and the contemporary era. This is particularly notable in screen adaptations of neo-Victorian works, which can cause the erasure of the historical distance between the present and the past and therefore, place the Victorian protagonists “out of history”.

Dana Shiller, a critic who specialises in neo-Victorian studies, distinguishes two possible strategies in which authors might approach their neo-Victorian novel in terms of the way it engages with the past. On the one hand, it is possible for authors to either create texts in which the main objective is to imitate Victorian conventions and revive them or create and reimagine Victorian novels and retell them using a new and different perspective (Schiller 540). On the other hand, some authors might be more concerned with Victorian subjects and adopt a more postmodernist approach in the way they make use of style and tone (Schiller 558).

Thus, it is logical to wonder about the origins of the genre, and the reason it became so popular. Some critics, such as Aleksandra Tryniecka, mark its origin in the 1960s, with the publication of novels such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, which offers a retelling of *Jane Eyre* (1847) with the woman in the attic as the protagonist (Tryniecka 257). However, others, such as Kate Mitchell, place the peak of neo-Victorian fiction between the late 1980s and early 2000s, marked by the publication of *Possession: A Romance* by A. S. Byatt in 1990 (Mitchell 9).

As to why it became so popular, it is only possible to speculate. However, while Victorian fiction offers more quality in terms of narrative, it is also highly limited and repressed in terms of themes, or so it seems when compared to present literature and themes that would have been considered taboo back then, such as sexuality or feminism. To counteract this mentality, in *Inventing the Victorians* (2001) Matthew Sweet proposes a different type of narrative regarding the Victorian era, a narrative that establishes it as the beginning of the modern society (Sweet 10). Neo-Victorian fiction, then, not only serves the purpose of merely returning to the Victorian era in order to adopt its aesthetic out of sheer fascination, but neo-Victorian fiction is also aware of its past, it revives its protagonists with

a purpose, and might even “self-consciously comment on the political and cultural uses of the Victorians in the present” (Hadley 14).

However, as it has been mentioned, neo-Victorian fiction is not free from criticism, and the evocation of the past has provoked a response related to the way in which the neo-Victorian novel blends the present and the past, since some novels might depict characters whose opinions or behaviours are more closely related to the period in which the novel is written, as opposed to the period in which it is set. In historical fiction, it is important that the personality of the characters adheres to the period they belong to and that their psychology is historically accurate, leaving the contemporary ideals of the writer’s period aside and maintaining what is called “historical specificity”, which leads us to introduce two types of approaches: historiographic metafiction (Mitchell 3) and faux-Victorian fiction (Mitchell 10).

Historiographic metafiction is a postmodernist approach established by Linda Hutcheon and characterised by its rejection of presenting contemporary ideals and beliefs onto the past, asserting in this way the specificity of the past event. It has a critical, parodical tone as it questions the past, since past events are “facts” that we know through texts and the facts created by other people which, thus, do not entail necessarily the whole truth of what happened (Hutcheon 3).

In *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, Kate Mitchell establishes faux-Victorian fiction as those novels that “are written in the Victorian tradition that refuse to self-reflexively mark their difference from it in the characteristically parodic mode of historiographic metafiction” (117). They do not only imitate Victorian traditions but reimagine and expand on them. Mitchell proceeds to suggest what she believes is the main strategy that a neo-Victorian novel might use to evoke the Victorian era. It is possible that they achieve their evocation through simulation, imitating stylistic and formal properties of the Victorian novel without drawing attention to the date of its production, which can be achieved “through the use of distancing devices like contemporary frames or an intrusive, ironic narrator” (Mitchell 118). The faux-Victorian novel imitates the past, as opposed to the

ironic distance of historiographic metafiction; it never draws attention to the present, and it is anchored by references to the time (books, slang, etc.), which makes it recognizable. Instead of historical accuracy, the faux-Victorian novel is more concerned with offering a glimpse into a history we cannot recover. In fact, Mitchell also suggests that the faux-Victorian novel is highly reliant of the “mnemonic power of literature”. Faux-Victorian fiction enters the space created by Victorian fiction itself; it enters its memory in order to revise and extend it (Mitchell 121).

Going back, then, to the question as to why is the neo-Victorian novel so popular, it is possible to establish that the new perspectives provided by the passing of history, in addition to the rich quality of the Victorian tradition, has inspired authors to expand on these traditions and create a new corner in history in order to tell their stories, some of which were not possible to voice at the time.

2.2 Gender roles

The “good girl” is rewarded for her behaviour by being placed on a pedestal by patriarchal culture ... What’s wrong with being placed on a pedestal? For one thing, pedestals are small and leave a woman very little room to do anything but fulfill the prescribed role. ... For another thing, pedestals are shaky. One can easily fall off a pedestal, and when a woman does, she is often punished. (Tyson 2006)

Before a more modern attempt to look and analyse literature from a feminist perspective (through the violet glasses, as we know it today) rose in the 1960s and resisted the male point of view of androcentric texts, all literary works adhered to the universal standard that also ruled culture – that of the white male author. Culture has always been essentially patriarchal, and so literature also fell under its influence: literary works were written from the point of view of white male authors and thus, only described the white male experience, which was considered the standard, and everything that fell outside of it, such as the works of female authors, was not considered part of the literary canon. It is notable the number of Victorian women writers, such as the Brontë sisters, that were forced to use male

pseudonyms in order to publish their works so they could be recognized under the patriarchal lens (Brontë 112).

Not only have women been left outside of the literary canon alongside their works, but the figure of the woman has always been subjected to the man, even outside of literature. The point of view has fundamentally been patriarchal in all areas: women are gazed upon and they are observed, and even sexualized by what is known as the male gaze, a point of view that adjusts to what we have established is the universal standard – that of the man, the patriarchal one (Tyson 1).

This leads us to what we know are the traditional gender roles that have been assigned to men and women for centuries. Under patriarchy, which is a system that privileges men through the undermining of women, the woman has had to assume the role of the patriarchal woman, that is, a woman that has internalized all the ideals of patriarchy. Patriarchy, in turn, is hold up by the assignation of traditional gender roles. These traditional gender roles establish men as the rational beings, they are physically and mentally strong, determined, and must protect and provide for their families; women, on the other hand, are the emotional ones, weak in mind and body, passive and nurturing. Gender roles have caused and justified through centuries the imbalance between the rights and opportunities of each gender: women are kept aside from positions of power, they are paid less than men (even if they are performing the same job) and are discouraged from pursuing careers in mathematics, science or engineering (Tyson 1).

Deborah L. Madsen establishes in her work *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* that radical feminism begins with the assumption that women form a “sex class” (Madsen 152), which situates women as the most oppressed class within a misogynistic patriarchal culture, and also establishes a relationship between social inequality (domination of women by men) and sexual difference (inferiority of women based on sex).

Patriarchy is, therefore, sexist. Women are placed in an inferior rank when compared to men, and the power imbalance and assignation of gender roles is justified by what Lois Tyson calls “biological essentialism” (85). This biological essentialism alludes to the biological differences between sexes, which are considered the essence that makes us men and women and that cannot be unchanged.

The feminist point of view accepts these biological differences but does not conform to the idea that they mean that the woman is inherently inferior to the man because of them. Feminism, in fact, establishes a distinction between sex (what biologically constitutes us as male or female) and gender (the cultural programming that sets what is feminine or masculine). In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says that “one is not born a woman but becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 330) through the gender differences that society uses to establish men as the superior one. Therefore, gender is not biologically constructed, but instead it is constructed by what the society dictates is masculine or feminine. Women are not necessarily born feminine, and men are not necessarily born masculine, gender is part of a social construct. (Tyson 86).

Since men have therefore been the ones interested in maintaining that position of power in all areas and keeping it from being threatened, patriarchy has used those gender roles to create a social construct that believes that women are inherently inferior to men based on their physical and mental characteristics, which fall under what is portrayed as feminine. Everything that is feminine is automatically deemed as inferior by patriarchy. Women must be feminine, frail, modest, submissive, but at the same time, patriarchy underpowers those qualities and links everything that is feminine to weakness. Femininity and being strong-willed, ambitious and intelligent are mutually exclusive in the eyes of patriarchy. In addition, patriarchy fights to maintain and enhance the feminine quality by undermining women’s confidence in themselves. Once they succeed and women, as expected, “fail” in developing their assertiveness, patriarchy uses it to feed the argument and belief of the inferiority of women.

The concept of femininity comes especially into play regarding the distinction that patriarchy establishes between the different types of women. In the patriarchal ideal, women can only fall within two categories: the “good girls” or the “bad girls”. These roles have been especially extended in Victorian literature and are more famously known as “the angel in the house” and “the madwoman in the attic” to describe those women that either adhere to patriarchy ideals or not. In addition, it has also been commonly used as a method to pit women against each other in order to facilitate the strength of patriarchy. On the one hand, the “good girl” or “the angel in the house” is the woman that is submissive, nurturing and that completely pours her whole being to the house and her husband, who enjoys and never questions her role. She must also be modest and even afraid when it comes to her sexuality and only engage in sexual activities with the purpose of procreation. On the other hand, the “bad girl” or “the madwoman in the attic” is the woman that defies gender and sexual norms, she is openly sexual, and she enjoys her sexuality (Tyson 3).

Both of these classifications do not only ignore the inherent complexities of each individual woman, but they also are in the service of the male gaze or male point of view, and his desires. They are defined by men in terms of how women respond to patriarchal ideals and it is the male voice that deems the “good girl” as the ideal one to pursue by all men since she adheres to all the qualities dictated by patriarchy and the “bad girl” as the unnatural one, the one that is not even deserving of a marriage with a man. In order to maintain this order, women are often punished and are made prisoners in their own bodies by denying their feelings and desires, they are forbidden to even leave the house or are sent to madhouses by their husbands, who have the authority, and are threatened by rape, which continues to be an exertion of power by men over women. This is exemplified by a long tradition of images of sexual torture and violence over women that continues to carry on those values in order to keep their subjugation. This is one of the reasons why in her work Deborah L. Madsen establishes that radical feminism treats gender as “a system that operates to ensure continued male domination” and, as we will see later on, “the control of feminine sexuality by males through compulsory heterosexuality”. In terms of radical feminism “gender oppression is the most fundamental form of oppression” (Madsen 153). There is a hierarchy, in which “all

meanings within society are determined in sexual terms; that is, in terms of the sexuality of the dominant group – men” (Madsen 154). What defines women as different, also defines women and their sexuality as inferior. The erotic in terms of the masculine is associated with domination, whereas the erotic in terms of the feminine is associated with passivity.

Continuing with the Victorian stereotype and classification of women, and their place during the Victorian period, all of these assumptions were also true during this period, but in addition, as Lynn Abrams establishes in her article *Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain*, Queen Victoria “became an icon of late-19th-century middle-class femininity and domesticity” (Abrams 1), which settled the position of all women. The industrialization of Britain paved the way for new ways of life and work and a new vision of women. It prompted a new ideology known as “separate spheres”, which was based on the physical attributes that differentiate men and women and deem women as inferior and weaker. Women were to remain in the private sphere (the home), and men belonged to the public sphere (business, politics, etc.) The ideal female characteristics of Victorian women required them to be kind, gentle, submissive, domestic, passive and dependent; their nurturing nature, motherhood and their place at home should be enough to fulfil all their emotional needs. The worth of women in terms of marriage was also established by men: they expected women to be feminine and innocent, to stay out of intellectual conversations and to be “idle and ignorant” (Petrie 178).

Therefore, all women, either “good girls” or “bad girls” and “angels in the house” or “madwomen in the attic” during the Victorian era, are treated as objects, as the “Other”, the complement of the man; they exist, but their feelings or ambitions are of no importance, especially if they do not conform to the ideals of patriarchy.

2.3 Lesbian fiction

Is whatever defines women as “different” the same as whatever defines women as “inferior” the same as whatever defines women’s “sexuality”? (MacKinnon 137)

It was not until 1969 that the Gay Liberation Movement began when gays and lesbians protested and responded against a violent police raid at the Stonewall Inn, and it was not after a few years later, in 1974, that the classification of homosexuality was removed from the list of psychological disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (Tyson 319). However, even before and after those events, that were a turning point for gays and lesbians, there has been a long tradition in literature that has often marginalized them, not only in terms of representation, but also in terms of authorship. Gay and lesbian writers have always been part of literature, but, as opposed to straight authors, their sexuality has sometimes been excluded from the common knowledge, even if it inspired or affected a major part of their literary production, which could be, at the same time, part of that representation that has been rendered invisible.

There are many instances in literature where two characters from the same sex are in a very close relationship, but any interpretation of their affection that sees it the same as the one between men and women is excluded. This is what Lois Tyson establishes in her work *Critical Theory Today* as an “homophobic reading” (319), in which homophobia establishes a set of stereotypes towards gays and lesbians and renders them sick people, and any type of love that falls outside of the heteronormative kind as abnormal. This is because homophobia is constructed, much like gender roles, through culture, and promoted and informed, partly, by the idea that sex is not a neutral term, “it refers to male sexuality of which feminine sexuality is seen as a variant (or deviant)” (Madsen 154), which automatically erases the lesbian experience. Therefore, homophobia is also promoted by patriarchy; the idea of heterosexuality as the norm and the discrimination against anything that does not conform to it contributes to the creation of a heterosexist culture and what Adrienne Rich, a feminist and lesbian critic, refers to as “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 11). Thus, the promotion of all these ideals by culture and the pressure to “be heterosexual” can cause in the individual

what is known as “internalized homophobia”, a self-hatred due to his or her sexual orientation. Therefore, it is also important to introduce the concept of “heterocentrism”, or the assumption of heterosexuality as the default orientation for everyone, which immediately erases both the gay and lesbian experience.

For all of these reasons, gays and lesbian constitute a minority and are an oppressed group. Lois Tyson establishes two ways or views in which the gay and lesbian experience can be understood. The one that focuses on their status as a minority is called “minoritizing view” and has to do with biological essentialism, establishing that a fixed number of people is naturally born gay or lesbian, just like a number of people is naturally born heterosexual. The other way that focuses on the potential for homosexuality in all people is called “universalizing view”, and has to do with social constructionism, which establishes that all people have the potential to develop same-sex attraction (Tyson 321)

It is also important to introduce two concepts used by Lois Tyson that are closely related to the gay and lesbian experience: homoerotic and homosocial. On the one hand, homoerotic refers to erotic (although not necessarily sexual) instances or depictions through imagery of same-sex attraction or desire between characters that, in addition, have the potential to appeal to same-sex readers that might also see themselves represented. On the other hand, homosocial refers to same-sex friendships between characters that might share a bond (Tyson 321).

To conclude this section and before we shift our focus to lesbian fiction, it is relevant to draw attention to why lesbian fiction has a place in this essay, and the importance of it. Whether we are talking about the gay or lesbian experience, being part of a sexual minority carries a certain oppression on itself, as we have mentioned. There is, however, a certain nuance that is unique to the lesbian community, and that is the double oppression that comes with being both a woman and a lesbian. It is also worthy of attention the lack of representation in literature, especially during the Victorian era, that lesbian fiction had as opposed to gay fiction written by male writers (Tyson 322). However, there is one major characteristic that Tyson cleverly picks up: while feminism exclusively deals with the oppression and exclusion

of heterosexual white middle-class women, lesbian fiction deals with two issues at once: the sexism of patriarchal male privilege and the heterosexism of heterosexual privilege.

Now that we have established the relevance of lesbian fiction and its place in literature, Lois Tyson lays out two issues to consider when analysing a potential work of lesbian fiction. The first issue raises the question of what is a lesbian and what characteristics a lesbian possesses. Once we have the answer, it is time to ponder what makes a literary text lesbian or not.

Starting with the first one, a lesbian and her sexuality can be mainly defined by her sexual desire towards other women, not the act of sex itself. This aspect is relevant for two reasons: the fact that even in heterosexual marriages lesbians are attracted to women, and that women are very much capable of feeling sexual desire. However, many works of literature could not be taken into consideration if we exclusively follow the rule of sexual desire, since in 19th century British and American literature there was a variety of works in which “romantic friendships” between women were present, but because they belong to a distant historical period so different from ours, we are only able to speculate and question the actual nature of those fictional relationships. On all accounts, the 19th century period was one of invisibility when it came to women, both of their sexuality and their sexual awareness (Tyson 324).

Thus, as to not erase any lesbian women’s experience, a lesbian literary text does not have to circle around the presence or lack of sexual desire. It is in this instance, where Adrienne Rich introduces the idea of a “woman-identified woman” in which all women, but especially lesbians, take part in. Rich uses this idea to explain what she establishes as the “lesbian continuum”, a share of experiences, joy and emotional support with another woman, with or without the presence of sexual activity (325).

This shared experience can, in addition, reach a deeper and more intimate level. The sexual experience is, in the end, part of the sharing of joy and a direct opposition to patriarchy

and heterosexuality in terms of women denying men their bodies while bonding sexually with another woman. We can find a link between the erotic and the sharing of joy in Audre Lorde's work *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, and a clear distinction between eroticism and pornography, in which she clearly deviates the erotic as the expression of true feeling, while pornography is just pure sensation without feeling (2) that completely denies the other. Adrienne Rich also shows an opposition to pornography and its imagery as a degrading practice that creates a "climate in which sex and violence are interchangeable" (11). This denial and resistance of men and heterosexuality introduces the concept of "separatism" (Rich 325), in which lesbians distance themselves and their lives completely from all men.

If we go back to the second issue raised by Lois Tyson, and we start to wonder what makes a literary text a lesbian one, we find that she offers different options. Thus, it is possible to find different alternatives. For instance, we might find a lesbian coded narrative in a heterosexual one that has been written by an openly sexual author. It is also possible, on the other spectrum, a not openly lesbian author that has been exposed through her work. Finally, there is also the possibility to have a clearly heterosexual narrative with lesbian nuances.

In addition, Tyson establishes a set of themes or "journey" that is common and might appear in some form in all lesbian literature. This journey creates a sort of lesbian experience and follows a certain pattern. The first step of the pattern consists on discovering and awareness of one's sexual orientation with or without sexual desire. After that, the next step is to experience the newly discovered sexuality. Subsequently, there is normally a common theme of dealing with homophobia (both external and internal) and the discrimination that comes with it. Accordingly, after that, there comes a time of loneliness and alienation that is later solved by the discovery of love and an outcome that consists in building a shared life with a lesbian partner.

Along with this journey, Tyson also poses a set of cues and imagery that can set a text apart as a lesbian one and not a heterosexual one. The first of the cues is called homosocial bonding and it involves a strong emotional attachment between two female characters that “can create a homosocial atmosphere that may be subtly or overtly homoerotic” (339).

It is also possible to find lesbian “signs”. Within these signs, we can find two types, stereotypical and coded. On the one hand, stereotypical signs have been deeply rooted in a heterosexual and sexist culture, and a clear example of that is the image of a lesbian who exhibits a “masculine” appearance or traits. Coded signs, on the other hand, have been exclusively crafted and used by the lesbian community, and can be subtle lesbian imagery that heterosexual readers wouldn’t be able to pick upon.

Another type of imagery is that of the same sex “doubles”, or a narrative strategy in which two female characters that mirror each other and have parallel experiences and a similar journey, although it is not necessary for these two characters to actively share a bond together or to even know each other.

Finally, it is also possible to find transgressive sexualities. Just like we find in heterosexual texts, a lesbian narrative can embrace the experimentation of sexuality in all senses, including the most transgressive ones, such as adultery, alcohol, drugs, and other addictions. In addition, the fluid nature of sexuality and the experimentation that comes with it can push an apparent heterosexual text to leave enough room for interpretation.

Now that we have the answers to what is a lesbian and what makes a text a lesbian one, we can proceed to show how these characteristics, rules, and themes apply to Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith*, with a special attention to the two lead female characters that carry the story and their experiences.

3. *FINGERSMITH*, A STORY RECOVERED

3.1 A different kind of Victorian

After discussing all these topics, it is important to consider then, how is the Victorian era that will serve as the background for our protagonists expressed and reimagined in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*. If we take into account Louisa Hadley's methods, we can see that *Fingersmith* clearly draws from conventions and a writing style that positions it as if it belonged in the Victorian era, and it also uses its protagonists as a way of exploring issues central to that period, most predominantly, those revolving around its female protagonists, such as their physical and psychological entrapment in a society ruled and controlled by the men around them. Since the oppression of women, not only for their status as women, but also for their sexuality, is not only an issue of the past, Waters also makes use of a dual approach in her novel, since through her plot, she expresses a concern with both present and past struggles.

In addition, if we consider Dana Shiller's strategies regarding neo-Victorian studies, Waters not only imitates Victorian conventions, but she also reimagines them with a new perspective and approach in order to tell a story that did not have the space to be told back then: a thriller with two lesbian characters as its protagonists. Thus, the main point of expansion is not so much the setting, but its main characters. This is an idea however, that might draw criticism, since we not only have two lesbian protagonists settled in a Victorian context, but also female characters that do not adhere to the opinions and behaviours that were expected from them in the period they are inhabiting, since in neo-Victorian novels it is of the utmost importance that the personality and psychology of the characters is accurate or, in other words, that it has historical specificity.

In this sense, *Fingersmith* follows the rules of what Kate Mitchell establishes as faux-Victorian fiction, since not only it imitates the stylistic writing methods of the Victorian era, but also submerges itself into the period, it takes the Victorian conventions and expands on them, and tells a story that offers a glimpse into the reality of many women who did not have the opportunity to have their story showed for the limitations and oppression of the time.

To achieve this, Waters uses her protagonists “Sue” and “Maud” to subvert the expectations of the female protagonists of a Victorian novel and goes into the complexity of their minds, desires, and psychology to expand on them and give them the realistic approach and voice that other female protagonists were not allowed at the time.

3.2 Subverting gender roles

As it is expected of the period, both Sue Trinder and Maud Lilly are subjected to male figures in their lives; Maud to her wealthy uncle, and Sue to Gentleman (also known as Richard Rivers) who hires her services as a petty thief in exchange for money. Maud’s uncle Mr. Lilly and Gentleman are seen as the rational ones, the providers, and Maud is the perfect picture of the weak, emotional and nurturing Victorian woman that cares for her uncle; she is, quite literally, “the angel in the house”. Not only that, but Waters also brings attention to the male gaze and the way sex was fabricated to serve men’s desires in the form of the pornographic books that Maud reads aloud to her uncle and his friends, since she has been raised to be a librarian by him. Thus, both Sue and Maud form the oppressed class in terms of their social inequality (Sue being low class, a thief and in the service of Gentleman, and Maud being subjected to her uncle) and sexual difference because they are women and thus, considered inferior.

More notably, it is possible to infer that both Sue and Maud follow the “bad girl” and “good girl” roles assigned to women in literature at the time. When it comes to Sue, we can position her as the “bad girl” of the relationship between Maud and her. Sue is raised in a low economic status and has grown in the streets of London earning her money as a thief; Sue is the fingersmith that gives name to the novel and the main character of the story. In addition, in order to trap Maud, she must abandon her personality and play the role of a feminine maid to Maud.

Maud is, on all accounts and on the outside, the personification of a feminine, frail, modest and submissive young lady that, at first, experiences sexuality with the tremor and innocence that was to be expected of any woman of the time: “I have begun, in sleeping, to

dream unspeakable dreams; and to wake, each time, in a confusion of longing and fear.” (Waters 179)

She not only deals with a first approach to sex, but also with a different sexuality than what was the norm since she starts to show attraction and affection for Sue. Maud is, essentially, trapped, both physically and psychologically, in her body and in her uncle’s house. As a child, she was rebellious and passionate and consequently, was whipped and punished, forced to sew and urged to be silent, until she was submissive to her uncle and “ceased to struggle”. A metaphorical symbol of this entrapment can be found in the gloves that her uncle forces her to wear and that she longs to be free from. Moreover, she is narratively bound by the concept of compulsory heterosexuality to a marriage with Gentleman; she is denied her own sexuality and desires and she is actively kept out of intellectual conversations when her uncle and his friends gather to listen to her reading books, and, in fact, she voices her frustration to Sue when the latter brings up that Mr. Lilly actually cares for her niece: “My happiness is nothing to him,” she said. “Only his books! He has made me like a book. I am not meant to be taken, and touched, and liked. I am meant to keep here, in dim light, forever!” (Waters 79)

Maud is not, however, the only one to suffer entrapment. In the Victorian era, women were sent to madhouses, and everything that was needed as a reason was the word of a man close to them and that acted as their custodian. This is the fate Sue encounters when the ploy she played against Maud following Gentleman’s instructions turns on her. While the original plan was to get Maud to marry Gentleman and convince her posing as her maid, and ultimately send Maud to a madhouse once married in order to inherit and split her fortune, it is Sue the one that is double crossed, since from the beginning it is Mrs. Sucksby, Sue’s adoptive mother, the one that has originated the whole plan, which was to get rid of Sue for good and take Maud, her original daughter, back, along with her fortune. Sue ends up being sent to the madhouse by Maud and Gentleman under the fabrication that she is Maud’s insane maid that believes herself to be her mistress, and after the doctors listen to the word of Gentleman, she has no choice of escape until later on: “We have a name for your disease.

We call it a hyper-aesthetic one. You have been encouraged to over-indulge yourself in literature; and have inflamed your organs of fancy.” (Waters 270)

Thus, it is important to ponder on how Sarah Waters makes her protagonists defy the gender roles the Victorian period tried to impose on them. First of all, although Maud seems the picture of innocence, she lost that trait a long time ago. She was once innocent, but due to the harsh and violent behaviour of her uncle, she toughened with time and feigned innocence only on the outside. Moreover, her maid Agnes reminds her of herself, and she is violent towards her for this reason. Maud has an agenda of her own, and years to be free from her uncle, the male figure in her life. When the novel adopts her point of view, we learn that she is the one that has been double crossing Sue, our initial narrator, all along. It is true that later on we also discover that Maud is again being manipulated as well, but it is undeniable that she does not fit the dainty, naïve portrayal that we assume at first from Sue’s point of view.

In addition, Maud is also a perfect example of a woman that challenges the stereotype of Victorian women not being allowed to learn or even enjoy sex and their sexuality. Throughout the novel, Maud openly struggles with the feelings of attraction, as well as love, which start to bloom as she falls for her maid, Sue, which start to take form as she reads the explicit pornographic books from her uncle’s collection aloud and she relates them to her own feelings:

And despite myself—and in spite of Richard’s dark, tormenting gaze—I feel the stale words rouse me. I colour, and am ashamed. 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. (Waters 179)

Maud rejects ignorance in matters of sex, and asks directly to Sue to aid her, as her maid, in this matter. She asks for the knowledge that a wife will need for the wedding night when her inevitable union with Gentleman comes to fruition, and ultimately, she engages in a sexual act with her, which not only emotionally, but physically challenges the ties society

tried to instil on women; she not only engages and enjoys sex, but she also shares it with another woman.

In the same vein, Sue also subverts the expectations on Victorian women through her relationship with Maud. However, most notably, the act which we can establish as Sue's main subversion of Victorian tropes is her literal escape from the asylum using her own wits and knowledge that years as a thief has provided her.

Thus, it is possible to establish that the main defiance they pose to Victorian limitations is that they both reject being "the Other", the accessories to their male counterparts; they are both strong-willed and ambitious, each with their own agenda and schemes (Sue seeks the money of the Lilly family, and Maud her own freedom) and both take the reins of their own narrative and relationship, which we will discuss shortly. By the end, they free themselves, even from an expected heterosexual marriage, in order to pursue their own happiness and start a lesbian relationship with each other.

Finally, it is also important to highlight the role that Mrs. Sucksby plays in the novel. Seemingly unimportant at first, Mrs. Sucksby is revealed to be Maud's real mother, and even though for most of the novel we are led to believe that the main perpetrator of the whole plan is Gentleman Rivers, it is revealed by the end that Mrs. Sucksby is indeed the one that has created the complex web of events that our protagonists go through. Ultimately, it is not a man that is the mastermind of the plan, but a woman; thus, Mrs. Sucksby, if only for this reason, is important enough to mention as another of the women that subvert the role that would be expected of a character such as hers in a Victorian novel.

3.3 Sue and Maud: a lesbian experience

After discussing how Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* subverts the gender roles expected of her protagonists using neo-Victorian strategies, it is also important to delve and explore how Sue and Maud's journey through their relationship poses an opposition to Victorian rules. In order to discover it, it is essential to establish a set of issues.

The first issue consists in analysing how lesbians are represented in *Fingersmith*. After we have that answer, we can proceed to discover how their experience develops in both the private and public spheres and how they find out about it. Finally, the third and last issue consists in finding out how this discovery affects their condition, mental health, etc.

In order to answer the first issue, we must establish that what Waters does in *Fingersmith* goes further than representing the lives of heterosexual white middle-class women. She puts at the front and brings up the oppression and struggles of two lesbian women, and while one of them, Maud, is high class, the main protagonist, Sue, is low class and brought up in the streets of London. It is still notable that both of them, however, are white, which does not involve all the troubles that a non-white lesbian might go through in the Victorian era.

Taking this into account, in terms of what *Fingersmith* contributes to neo-Victorian and lesbian literature, it is notable the fact that it is actually written and brought to life by Sarah Waters, an actual lesbian, which is a type of representation that was not very common in the Victorian era, not due to the fact that lesbian writers did not exist, but because of the limitations of the time in terms of coming out.

Thus, even more important is, considering the mind behind this novel, that *Fingersmith* is openly and unapologetically sexual. It does not focus on sex, but it also does not shy away from it when the plot naturally comes to that climax. As opposed to the collection of romantic friendships represented at the time (being them real friendships or lesbian relationships masked as such), Waters uses *Fingersmith* to subvert those tropes in a

way that there is no room for speculation about the nature of the relationship of the two female protagonists. Furthermore, Sue and Maud are aware of their sexuality and desire, and act on them. This sharing of joy and passion between them also fits with Adrienne Rich's idea of the "woman-identified woman" and the "lesbian continuum", in which the women enjoy each other while excluding men from their happiness and joy.

Fingersmith is, fundamentally, homoerotic, since it follows and portrays a number of instances in which Sue and Maud bond, not only sexually, but also on a deep and emotional level. We can find this in the numerous descriptions of their walks around Mr. Lilly's mansion and gardens, or the intimacy of the gesture as Sue smooths Maud's pointed teeth:

She looked at me, then opened her mouth again and I put the thimble on my finger and rubbed at the pointed tooth until the point was taken off. I had seen Mrs Sucksby do it many times, with infants. — Of course, infants rather wriggle about. Maud stood very still, her pink lips parted, her face put back, her eyes at first closed then open and gazing at me, her cheek with a flush upon it. Her throat lifted and sank, as she swallowed. My hand grew wet, from the damp of her breaths. I rubbed, then felt with my thumb. She swallowed again. Her eyelids fluttered. (Waters 62)

Finally, in terms of representation, it is important to notice that Waters does not incorporate any stereotype of what a lesbian character might have been portrayed like during the Victorian era, since neither Sue or Maud are considered masculine or with stereotypical male traits; they both adjust to feminine Victorian standards, especially considering the context of Maud being the mistress and Sue being her maid.

Now, after establishing how lesbians are represented in the novel, it is essential to describe their experience as lesbians in a Victorian society. The Victorian era was heterocentric, and both Sue and Maud are trapped into it, especially the latter. Maud is trapped in a heterosexual courtship that will lead to a marriage with Gentleman. She, however, still feels sexual desire and affection for women, and explicitly feels aversion towards men and her future husband: "I have suffered Richard's wet, insinuating kisses upon

my palm. Her lips are cool, smooth, damp: they fit themselves imperfectly to mine, but then grow warmer, damper.” (Waters 180)

Maud reads erotic books (written by men) from her uncle’s collection in front of her uncle’s friends, and all the knowledge she has of sex and sexuality comes from these books, which makes Sue her first contact with this feeling. Maud was, however, curious about this subject since she was a child, since her uncle made her start reading these books when she was thirteen, which causes her to start inspecting Barbara, a previous maid, and paying attention to her body. Unfortunately, these books were filled with falsehoods of the female body, as they were designed by men and created to fill their fantasies. It is interesting to note that Maud knew of her desires beforehand due to those books, and feeling ashamed of them, she suffers Sue’s touch every night when, as her maid, she undresses her. In consequence, these feelings take a more solid form when Sue comes into the picture, triggered by her presence. The words of the books torment and stir her desire and in the end, she yields, asking Sue to show her, under the innocent pretence of wanting to gain the knowledge of what a married woman must do with her husband during their wedding night.

Is this desire? How queer that I, of all people, should not know! But I thought desire smaller, neater; I supposed it bound to its own organs as taste is bound to the mouth, vision to the eye. This feeling haunts and inhabits me, like a sickness. It covers me, like skin. (Waters 177)

When it comes to Sue, we learn that she had once kissed Dainty, but did not feel the same as when she kissed Maud. She kisses her to teach her, but right then she discovers her feelings as she is trying to guide her on how to court and seduce Gentleman and starts to feel a sting of jealousy when she sees Gentleman touching and kissing Maud, fearing that he might harm her, even if she tried to convince herself of the contrary:

But, here was a curious thing. The more I tried to give up thinking of her, the more I said to myself, 'She's nothing to you', the harder I tried to pluck the idea of her out of my heart, the more she stayed there.

It's like you love her, I though (Waters 87)

Both women start sleeping in the same bed, “like sisters” (Waters 57), in order to stop Maud’s nightmares, then walking arm by arm around the mansion, and progressively getting closer and closer. Thus, Sue and Maud also participate in the erotic, the true expression of feeling, not limited only to sexual desire. After discovering their true feelings and acting on them, they never feel any shame in loving another woman. They fall in love once they get to know each other and based on the things they do for each other; they stop being pieces of a plot, but complex women with a history, and they fall in love with that.

They continue with their respective plots and schemes because each of them is seeking freedom in their own way more than a lover, but they struggle and find it difficult to not tell the truth to each other, always tempted by the option of making this plot their own and join forces. Sue believed Maud to be truly innocent and naïve and did not want her to know the plot and to think of her as a villain, and always knew that if she yielded to her, she would inevitably save her.

Lastly, we must consider how this journey affects them personally, as in the public sphere, Sue and Maud’s sexuality is also a reason used to threaten them with the notion of the madhouse, were all the doctors were male and passed the deaths of other women in the asylum as strokes. Gentleman knows, and he is the one that along with a resigned Maud, puts Sue there, who is diagnosed with hyper-aesthetic disease due to reading too much. In the madhouse, Sue is bullied by the nurses in charge and abused due to her sexuality, and is completely battered by the experience: “If thoughts were hammers or picks I should have been free, ten thousand times over. But my thoughts were more like poisons. I had so many, they made me sick.” (Waters 276)

She even starts to believe that she is Maud. She takes one of Maud’s gloves with her and is obsessed with her during her stay at the madhouse and, instead of dreaming of her as

the person who had betrayed her, she dreams of her time being her maid; her feelings are complex, and Sue both hates and loves Maud.

Throughout the story, their resolve to carry out the mission and betray each other falters as they begin to develop feelings for each other, only overcome by their own aspirations of freedom:

I felt that thread that had come between us, tugging, tugging at my heart - so hard, it hurt me. A hundred times I almost rose, almost went in to her; a hundred times I thought, Go to her! Why are you waiting? Go back to her side! But every time, I thought of what would happen if I did. I knew that I couldn't lie beside her, without wanting to touch her. I couldn't have felt her breath upon my mouth, without wanting to kiss her. And I couldn't have kissed her, without wanting to save her. - Sue (Waters 93)

I could not want a lover, more than I want freedom. -Maud (Waters 153)

Thus, the guilt and a new resolve to free themselves and find each other follows Sue and Maud respectively to the asylum and to Mrs. Sucksby's home, where, in both places, using their own individual resolve, find the strength to fight and find their way to each other again.

Ultimately, both women find freedom with each other, and create their own experiences based on their love story, an instance of which we can find at the end, when it is insinuated that Maud becomes an erotic writer as she shows her words to Sue, opposing all the deceits and inaccuracies of her uncle's books: "What does it say?" I said, when I had. She said, "It is filled with all the words for how I want you...Look." (Waters 352)

With all of this into account, it would be possible to establish Fingersmith as a lesbian text written by an openly lesbian author. Not only does Waters avoid remaining unambiguous masking a lesbian narrative under the pretence of a heterosexual one, but she in fact puts the lesbian love story at the centre with all its nuances and unmistakable explicit nature. In

addition, both Sue and Maud very pointedly follow the lesbian journey that Tyson established, from the discovery of their sexuality and the bitter middle stage to the happy outcome in which they find love and build a life with each other.

Finally, it is also notable the set of cues and imagery that *Fingersmith* uses. In the relationship between Sue and Maud we can see a clear bond between two female characters, or homosocial bonding, that is overtly homoerotic, as we have previously mentioned. Moreover, Waters makes use of coded lesbian signs that are mostly subtle to the other characters, such as the long walks together, the undressing, and overall, the closeness that is part of the whole dynamic of a lady and her maid. It is also possible to establish that *Fingersmith* also incorporates the idea of same sex “doubles”, since both Sue and Maud follow similar journeys apart from their journey together. During the novel, they are ambitiously playing each other with, while not realizing that they are both being played. At some point, be it in the asylum or in Mrs. Sucksby’s home, both women find themselves trapped, and they both find release in the end, with only the thought of finding each other in their minds.

4. CONCLUSION

After this analysis, we can conclude that Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* successfully subverts the image of the Victorian woman on different fronts. What we find is a novel in which the female protagonists are constantly challenging their assigned roles and imposed sexuality. The most powerful tool Waters uses is to make it obvious and clear, in a way that both Sue and Maud physically and emotionally reject Victorian laws of marriage and gender roles by falling in love with each other and actively acting on that love; they escape the private sphere and Victorian rules by physically rejecting men and gender rules. Furthermore, even when they feel the oppression and try to fight against their feelings, it is part of the journey that will lead them to each other, and not because they are trying at any point to "fix" each other to fit into the mould in order to become perfect Victorian women. Waters does not punish them for doing so, but rewards and gives voice to a part of the population that was forced to be silent and offers the chance of a happy ending to a story that might not have had that outcome during the period it takes place in. In opposition to the male dominated society and male point of view of the Victorian era, Waters puts a lesbian couple's struggles, experiences, and the virtues and flaws of each of them at the centre. Sue and Maud are not only constricted to the stereotype of the "good" or "bad" woman, they break free of those limitations by being manipulators but also looking out for each other. They are not black or white, they are made up of shades of grey. Thus, in subverting the Victorian woman stereotype, Waters also explores the nuances and complexities of the women from that time, takes a piece of a story that could have taken place and gives it the visibility that it deserves, while preserving the narrative style and atmosphere of the Victorian era; the characters or their personalities never feel out of place, there is historical accuracy. In consequence, the subversion makes it seem real, relatable, a relationship that could have happened, and makes it find its way to us in the form of neo-Victorian fiction.

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