Sarah Waters is without a doubt one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary British writers, as well as one of the most commercially successful: her reputation as a gifted and prolific storyteller is firmly grounded in her neo-Victorian beginnings with *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), and has been recently confirmed by the publication of her fourth novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), set in the war-ravaged London of the 1940s. Before this foray into the twentieth century, Waters's atmospheric chronicles of forbidden, and forgotten, passions against the backdrop of the Victorian capital had become the trademark of her fiction -- and *The Night Watch* continues this legacy in its preoccupation with notions of marginality and illegitimacy and in the exploration of the narrative and critical possibilities offered by the vibrant metropolitan setting. This analysis, however, centres on Waters's recuperation and reinterpretation of Victorian narrative strategies and physical locations: it is therefore limited to Waters's “quasi-trilogy” and its engagement with the literary devices of domestic melodrama, gothic fiction and the sensation novel, as well as with the literal and metaphorical geography of late nineteenth century London.

For this reason, this is an essay of two interlocking halves: the discussion of Victorian literary subgenres will trigger the analysis of how Waters negotiates the gender and sexual biases and stereotypes that underpin conventional narrative forms; similarly, the focus on the Victorian city will provide another perspective on the characterization of her protagonists, which is informed by their interaction with London, challenges the supposed naturalness of gender and sexual roles, by foregrounding the notion of identity as performance. In other words, this essay will show how Waters challenges the distinction between masculine and feminine plot drives typical of gothic fiction, how she blurs the boundary between proper and improper models of femininity of the sensation novel, and how she questions the feminine acquiescence with the sphere of domesticity in the novel of sentimental education. In this way, Waters performs a subtle critique of patriarchal rules and values, while casting a candid look on the lesbian characters in her fiction: together, the adoption of popular narrative formulas and the portrayal of protagonists who, more than often than not, must face problematic decisions in the definition of their chosen gender and sex roles, are the key to Waters's success in disentangling queer narrative and queer identity from twenty-first century literary and cultural margins. As we will see, this project is underscored by an ever-present awareness of the literary and cultural constructedness of both the narratives and the characters' positions -- and in both cases it is the confrontation with aspects of the Victorian world (Victorian popular fiction and the Victorian city) that brings the artificiality of literary and cultural 'gives' to the readers' attention.

**"Twisting Passages": Rewriting Victorian Popular Fiction**

*Tipping the Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith* revisit the Victorian era with a seamless combination of originality and tradition: while innovative in their focus on lesbian relationships and immensely readable for their gutsy narrative developments, Waters's early novels have managed to retain a feeling of nineteenth century authenticity, through a Dickensian array of unforgettable heroes, villains and minor characters and an uncompromising exploration of the darkest pleasures and evils of metropolitan life. The Dickensian depth and breadth of Waters's narrative meanderings through the gas-lit streets of nineteenth-century London is accompanied by a gusto for melodramatic twists in the plot reminiscent of other popular Victorian writers, such as Wilkie Collins, whose *The Woman in White* is one of Waters's favourite examples of suspenseful storytelling and the underlying intertextual reference for *Fingersmith*. Ironically, the sense of nineteenth century 'authenticity' and the 'Dickensian feel' of Water's fiction bank rather heavily on our very own twenty-first-century perceptions of Victorian culture; Waters herself has described her research on period details as partly a matter of smoke and mirrors: the historical realism of her novels rests on enough genuine references so as to give the illusion of complete faithfulness to the period but, to a certain extent, it also panders to contemporary popular perceptions of Victorian culture.

Waters's attitude to period faithfulness, in her nodding to contemporary constructions of the Victorian age, is not so much the result of a deliberate choice to take liberties with historical accuracy as the by-product of a postmodern fascination with the hyperreal, the inevitable acknowledgement that the copy is as good and 'authentic' as the non-existent original. Yet, at a first glance, this appears to be Waters's only concession to a postmodern sensibility: all in all, in her writing practice, and the days of blatant self-reflective pastiche, and overt experimentalism appear to be long gone, to be replaced by an earnest revival of popular Victorian literary forms and an unashamed delight in page-turning novels which, for all their twists in the plot, do offer a seemingly unproblematic, unconscious reading experience, allowing their audience to lose themselves in the fast-paced narrative flow. In the best tradition of the weighty three-volume novel (incidentally, both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* are divided in three parts) or the equally substantial publication in instalments, Waters knows how to spin a long, riveting story, satisfying the readers' desire for action as well as psychological and cultural analysis: like their Victorian predecessors, Waters's novels are full of dramatic incidents and memorable characterizations, moral dilemmas and acute social observations. They clearly represent a return to the mainstream pleasure of plot-driven, engaging narratives: it is not surprising that both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* should have made it with relative ease and rapidity, and great success, onto the small screen on the BBC.

In fact, for all their emphasis on the transparency of the narrative medium, and the primacy accorded to the unfolding of the plot over formal and linguistic experimentalism, Waters's novels are examples of a subtle kind of narcissistic and literary writing. "[R]esolutely silent on its own fictionality, presenting itself as paradoxically more real than the thing it imitates”, Waters's fiction nonetheless gives voice to "the historically silenced and forgotten who have no history” (Kohlke, 156, *passim*, italics in the text). The novels' ostensible unconsciousness is both calculated and polemical, for it "mimicks [sic] history's obscuration of its own narrativity, not merely critiquing it but re-enticing it” (Kohlke, 165). At the same time as she satisfies her readers' narrative greed, Waters exposes the blind spots in official history through her choice of marginalized,
Innovative, "new(meta)realism," where the 'meta' reads like a last minute, paragraphathint at the narratives' ultimate artistry and self-awareness. While I see the validity of Kohlke's take on the realist element in Waters's novels (a point developed with particular reference to Affinity), I would argue that Waters's use of historical fiction is much more than an appeal to new(meta)realist conventions, but rather the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with, and to express, their sexual identity is relevant enough to the experience of a queer audience, the roundness of Waters's characters succeeds in enlisted the sympathy of any reader, while the quiet pace and the inventiveness of the plot make these novels compelling reads and instant best-sellers, excellent examples of popular fiction in the most positive sense of the word.

<6> As anticipated, Affinity and Fingersmith have very clear literary affiliations with the gothic novel and the sensation novel respectively; Tipping the Velvet instead is harder to categorize within the frame of Victorian fiction: its most direct, recognized literary predecessor is, by public consensus, Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722), to whose shenanigans Tipping the Velvet provides an equally mischievous queer counterpart.[6] The two narratives share an interest for the demonology of prostitution and petty criminality, as well as a rumbustious story-line and a subversive picaresque spirit: as in the case of Moll Flanders, the picaresque format of Tipping the Velvet underlies the protagonist's apparent moral and emotional progress in her 'sentimental education,' seriously impairing the credibility of her final redemption. Thus, the Victorian Bildungsroman loses its edifying punch and becomes a provocative fictional crossbreed, much like the gothic and the sensation novel.

<7> Besides offering the possibility of attention-grabbing plots, the three particular narrative conventions adopted by Waters all lead to an understated critique of patriarchal ideology and to the testing and trying out of alternative rules, for they contain a fantastical and/or improbable streak (the markers either of wishful thinking drives or nightmarish anxieties) in a sound realistic grounding. In other words, the picaresque, the gothic and the sensation novel are all hybrid genres, combining formulaic plots, stock characters and larger-than-life scenarios with a minute realism; the latter two forms in particular often rely on the representation, and implicit questioning, of female domestic life (Modlesi, 20). The picaresque endless sequence of adventures, the gothic suspense and the sensationalist melodrama, when focused on female experience (which the gothic and particularly the sensation novel do almost by definition) give voice to women's dissatisfaction with the status quo and to their ambivalent feelings towards the rules of patriarchy.

<8> Waters's true strength as a writer, both in the aesthetic and political value of her novels, is that she exploits the subversive potential of her chosen subgenres in surprising, unorthodox ways, with full consciousness of the paradoxical double bind of complicity and critique that these narratives necessarily carry within themselves: providing an outlet for the expression of women's rage against patriarchy is also the easiest way to contain and control these rebellious urges. Waters's Sapphic revisitation of these popular narrative conventions contains some truly unexpected twists in the tale, especially if we want to argue that her ultimate goal is to provide positive models of homosexual behaviour. In fact, the novel's critique of patriarchy -- and of the double restrictions that it imposes on homosexual women -- is complemented by an unprejudiced representation of her heroines as less than perfect, and occasionally downright unpleasant, human beings: Waters's writing is in no way a 'drawing by numbers' exercise, or a facile matter of roles and values reversals, even if that means that sometimes her characters' defiance remains only skin-deep, while the conservative rules of society get slowly reinstated in the conclusion of her stories.

<9> Affinity, for example, spells out the gothic topos of the identity, as far as women are concerned, between the space of the home and that of the prison: the novel charts two parallel stories of domestic and criminal horror, with Margaret Prior's doomed spinsterhood and captivity in her family home and Selina Dawes's detention at Millbank, charged with fraud and assault committed in the exercise of her questionable profession as a spiritual medium. Diane Long Hoeveler has acknowledged a whole critical tradition that distinguishes between "female" and "male" gothic plots: "female" narratives essentially aim at exposing the social and economic evils plaguing women (their confinement to the sphere of domesticity, or their lack of independent identity and legal status, as the consequence of manumission), while "male" gothic tales usually revolve around the reversal of fortune for the other as one's self, and thereby rely on the creation of a psychological horror.

<10> Until the very last section of the novel (the last thirty pages of the book), Affinity seems to unfold according to the expected pattern of a traditional female gothic tale, since it describes Margaret's awakening to the harshness and the injustice of her condition as a woman bound to her phallic mother's house, and follows her planned escape from her mother's rule. Such an escape would appear to depend on Selina's breakout from Millbank, and the final consummation of Margaret's and Selina's spiritual and sexual affinity: Margaret's infringement of the domestic order spells onto a criminal transgression against society (after all, female homosexuality has never been a criminal offence, because of its invisible – or not so invisible – social and cultural prohibitions), with Selina, who longs for the reversal of fortune for Margaret, who comes to realize that she has been an unwitting pawn in the hands of Selina and, even more shockingly perhaps, of her own maid, Ruth Vigers, Selina's real, long-term lover. Thus Waters originally and successfully combines female and male gothic plots: Margaret is deprived both of her money and her identity by her other self, Selina. What we are left with is an ironic take on the 'affinity' of the title: in a deft, last-minute sleight-of-hand Waters denies her readers their feel-good story, and turns a buoyal tale of sisterhood into a truly frightening, honest appraisal of the precariousness of Margaret's ability to claim her own individual identity, both as a woman and as a lesbian (Margaret's lack of control on her own identity is also clearly exemplified by the slipperiness of her name: she is Margaret to her mother, but Peggy in her relationship with Peter Quick, Selina's spinster sister-in-law and, later on, to Selina) [8].

<11> A complementary reading to this take on Margaret's demise would perhaps suggest that the real villain of the piece (possibly in response to her own subordinate and downtrodden position) is Ruth, Margaret's - and in fact Selina's - maid: doubly invisible, not only as the impersonator of Peter Quick, Selina's spirit guide, but also because of her low social status. Kohlke argues that at the end of the novel the reader is left pondering the possibility that Selina herself might be a victim, manipulated against her will by Ruth: "[Waters] calls into question the extent to which the performances of power and domination in this novel may have been influenced and even exploited by her lesbian lover Ruth, who adopts a stereotypical butch and masterful attitude towards her 'girl'" (Kohlke, 161-62). Interestingly, Affinity unfolds with the alternating first person narratives of Margaret's visits to the prison and Selina's pre-Millbank diary, but ends with Ruth's possessive takeover of her beloved sister-in-law and, later on, to Selina).

<12> Fingersmith makes the juxtaposition between proper and improper models of femininity, as well as the chasm between the privileged and the lowly, even more extreme in the characterization of Maud Lilly and Sue Trinder, the two central figures in the story. At the beginning of the novel, Maud is described as a dutiful, innocent young lady, bound to a tyrannical uncle, while Sue appears to be a streetwise petty thief, acting...
There is in Fingersmith a sustained deconstruction of the binary opposition between proper and improper models of femininity, carried out in the doubling up of the morally and socially ambiguous figure of the sensation heroine. "To put a woman at the active centre of a sensation plot [...] to make her functionally transgressive, because such an active and assertive role conflict[s] with accepted views of the proper feminine." (Pykett 1992, 82). Yet, even as, true to the scandalous nature of the Victorian popular form, patriarchal rules and accepted definitions of respectability are blurred, Waters's story undercuts the heroines' role in shaping their own destiny. The subversive charge of the sensation novel is curtailed by an implicit reminder of women's vulnerability and powerlessness. The entire plot of the novel hinges on the two protagonists' initial determination to deprad each other of their identity (even, possibly, of their sanity): for both young women -- who ignore the fact that they have been living each other's existence all along, in a plan carefully orchestrated by Mrs Sucksby -- the affirmation of one's successful independence cannot but come at another woman's expense. As in Affinity, where not even Margaret is completely innocent of predatory behaviour (arguably, her role as a prey becomes only possible from two equally unpalatable scenarios: the covert pastoral Idyll, with country girls tumbling in haystacks, and more explicit stories where, nonetheless, 'friendship' between women seems to occur only within enclosed / aberrant / ephemeral contexts, often accompanied by physical or mental alienation (lesbianism as insanity, or the result of a more or less permanent and complete social outcast respectively, grants them a limited degree of agency.

Yet I would maintain that throughout the novel Nancy really undergoes a theatrical apprenticeship, rather than a sentimental education: her decision to settle down with Florence does not imply a heartfelt subscription to her lover's values and code of conduct, but is motivated, in part at least, by the desire to step down from the traditional stage (be it that of Kitty's show-business, Diana's upper-class, clandestine lesbian circles, or even Florence's political podium) and genuinely blur the boundaries between actors and spectators. Nancy concludes her roguish series of adventures, renouncing her histrionic past in order to join a carnivalesque pageant, where everybody is a participant and an observer at the same time. If Nancy's initial subversive drive can be ascribed to her "third-person status" (Bakhtin) as a picaresque hero, her truly revolutionary achievement is the annihilation of the dichotomy between subjects and objects of the gaze. It is worth pointing out how this is merely a less sinister variation on the theme of the outsider: to Nancy's fundamentally comic figure, theatrical metamorphoses and picaresque romp, correspond the darker machinations and more dramatic transformations effected by Ruth Vigers and Mrs Sucksby, whose third-person status, as servant and social outcast respectively, grants them a limited degree of agency.

Another theme that Tipping the Velvet makes in a much more obvious and light-hearted manner than the two later novels is the idea of gender and sexuality as performance. (10) The new(meta)realism of Affinity and Fingersmith (intranisically metafictional because, to a certain extent, formulaic) is a subtle, yet constant, reminder of the textuality of its main characters, of their ultimate 'inauthenticity' in their subjection to a series of cultural and literary rules: of course, the most immediate frame of reference for hybrid genres, pledging an affiliation to narrative conventions as well as a care for realistic details, is as much the literary tradition they draw inspiration from as reality itself (Frye, 59). The resolution has come from above, from Mr Lilly's convenient passing away and, most significantly, from a corrupt female deus ex machina: it is Mrs Sucksby's sudden reformation (admittedly triggered by the desire to save her own child from the gallows), which constitutes the real turning point of the plot, allowing for a happy ending of sorts. With the (contrived?) change of heart of the one character who has been virtually scripting the whole narrative from the very beginning, Waters points out the double textual nature of Maud's and Sue's identity, who are inscribed in Mrs Sucksby's plot even before they make their appearance on the pages of Fingersmith. Maud's case, in fact, is further complicated by her belonging to Mr Lilly's narrative too, since he has carefully brought her up to become a formidable, unique figure, a lady connoisseur of erotic fiction: this extra layer in Maud's textuality is foregrounded by the literary associations of her name, as well as by the fact that her own account of the events is framed by Sue's, whose narrative opens and closes the novel.

Waters herself has explained the consistent choice of an urban setting for her novels as a wilful attempt to disenfranchise the doubling up of the morally and socially ambiguous figure of the sensation heroine. "To put a woman at the active centre of a sensation plot [...] to make her functionally transgressive, because such an active and assertive role conflict[s] with accepted views of the proper feminine." (Pykett 1992, 82). Yet, even as, true to the scandalous nature of the Victorian popular form, patriarchal rules and accepted definitions of respectability are blurred, Waters's story undercuts the heroines' role in shaping their own destiny. The subversive charge of the sensation novel is curtailed by an implicit reminder of women's vulnerability and powerlessness. The entire plot of the novel hinges on the two protagonists' initial determination to deprad each other of their identity (even, possibly, of their sanity): for both young women -- who ignore the fact that they have been living each other's existence all along, in a plan carefully orchestrated by Mrs Sucksby -- the affirmation of one's successful independence cannot but come at another woman's expense. As in Affinity, where not even Margaret is completely innocent of predatory behaviour (arguably, her role as a prey becomes only possible from two equally unpalatable scenarios: the covert pastoral Idyll, with country girls tumbling in haystacks, and more explicit stories where, nonetheless, 'friendship' between women seems to occur only within enclosed / aberrant / ephemeral contexts, often accompanied by physical or mental alienation (lesbianism as insanity, or the result of a more or less permanent and complete segregation, such as the belonging and/or confinement to an all-female institution -- a college, or a prison, or a community where the men are temporarily absent because of a transitional emergency).

With her choice to have her characters live, struggle and succeed or fail in Victorian London, the largest metropolis and the capital of the most powerful empire in the world in the nineteenth century, Waters steers clear of the comparison of lesbianism with a temporary, idyllic, harmless fantasy or with a psychological nightmare / mental disease, for a full immersion into history, and into very significant periods of
new identities, new conceptions of human nature, declared itself. Men became women. Women became men. Gender and country were put in doubt: the single life was found to harbour two sexes and two nations. Feminality and the female writer broke free; the New Woman, and the Old, a novel of passion, might be found to hold hands there, as sisters. ... [It was] an age in which there seemed to be three sexes, an age tormented by generics and pronoun and pen-name, by the identity of authors, by the ‘he’ and the ‘she’ and the ‘who’ of it all. (Miller, 209)

What Karl Miller describes so vividly, with special reference to the literary field, is the sign of a momentous revolution in the way the concept of “Woman” and the role of women in the family and society are thought of; in the second half of the nineteenth century irresolvable contradictions are finally subjected to close and critical scrutiny: it becomes more and more difficult to ignore the contrast between women’s role as the object of authority and as the subject of desire, the object of respect and inoffensiveness, and their role as wives and mothers (or the substitute for them) in the public sphere. As Jack Dangermond says, “we can no longer view women as merely the female partners in search of a male subject, but must consider them in their own right as the subject of the novel itself.”

With the increasing prominence of women’s voices, the novel becomes a powerful tool for addressing social and political issues. In the works of Virago, for example, the protagonist’s journey is not just a personal one, but also a political one, as she navigates the challenges and contradictions of her time. The novel becomes a vehicle for exploring the complexities of gender, power, and identity, and for questioning the assumptions and norms that have been in place for so long. As the protagonist strives to find her place in the world, she becomes a symbol of resistance and empowerment, inspiring readers to think critically about the society they live in.

The novel of the 1880s is marked by a series of disillusionments and the unwanted attention of less than gentlemanly characters, while Mr Hawtrey refuses to offer any literary acquaintances, a Mr Hawtrey, dealer of erotic fiction in the notorious Holywell Street; unsurprisingly, Maud’s journey across London is empowered place that it really is. Maud runs away from Lant Street with the hope of making an appeal to the chivalric spirit of one of her uncle’s literary acquaintances, but is only met with indifference and disdain. As such, the Later London she knows is not fit to come out of the pages of a book and survive in the city. Precisely when she has made her escape from the Borough in a brave act of defiance and freedom, we hear the shabbiness of the London she knows: “This is not a true account of the real world, but rather an attempt to depict the world as it should be.”

It is clear that Nancy’s ease with her own sexuality progresses alongside her orientation within the exciting metropolitan scene (“...and I grew easy, at last, with London, as with Kitty herself”) while the “smaller, swifter dramas” which Nancy is a witness to convey, each in its own way, a sense of subversion of order and liberation from constraints. The carnivalesque overturning or erasure of hierarchies is echoed in the conclusion of the novel, when Nancy openly declares her love to Florence, as they both join a socialist demonstration in Victoria Park: the public square is the emancipating, non-judgmental, inclusive stage, where the railing crowd can simultaneously be participants and observers, actors and spectators of a popular drama.

Similarly, the initial drama in Fingersmith revolves around a series of bluffs and counter-bluffs, and the characters’ deliverance from their fate depends on their ability to deciper and unravel the plot that keeps them imprisoned. Maud’s ordeal is perhaps the best case in point, because she is embedded in three ‘narratives’ (Mr Lilly’s, Mrs Sucksby’s and Waters’s of course): she is represented as a particularly literary character, and as such notfit to cut out of the pages of a book and survive in the city. Precisely when she has made her escape from the Borough in a brave act of defiance and freedom, we hear the shabbiness of the London she knows: “This is not a true account of the real world, but rather an attempt to depict the world as it should be.”

In the city of London, where characters are allowed to choose, rehearse and finally act their own individuality. As Judith R. Walkowitz points out, the perception of London as a stage had become widespread and fully acknowledged by the 1880s and of course it is exploited to its full potential in the glitzy, West End setting of Tipping the Velvet in the Naughty Nineties.

The ability to create, nurture and then claim a strong public, as well as private, persona against the backdrop of London’s multifarious reality underlies, as anticipated, the whole of Waters’s fiction; in texts concerned with the search for a secure sense of identity, it is no surprise that there should be a crucial opposition between being and appearance. This polarity is played out in the Victorian locations of legitimized subversion (the West End theatre), surveillance and repression (Millbank prison) and the alternative order of the underworld (the Borough): in other words, within places and spaces where observing and being observed are everyday activities, and where the desire for self-exposure and the elusion of close watch paradoxically coexist. As in Tipping the Velvet, where West End theatres and East End slums finally coalesce as places of performance, so in Affinity and Fingersmith the prison and the home, and the London underworld and Mr Tilly’s country mansion are ultimately exposed as places of close watch and (hidden) perversion: the heroines’ success is measured against their ability to evade from these controlled, and controlling, spaces and inhabit the non-hierarchical pageant of the city streets. Yet only Nancy Astley manages to do so: with her desecrating and free spirit, she is truly in control of her act and truly at home in the metropolis - perhaps because she acknowledges from the start that her identity is an act and the streets of London her privileged and liberating stage. When Kitty’s agent asks the two girls to explore London in order to ‘scrutinise the men’ in preparation for a new act, Nancy quickly finds herself relishing the challenge, and truly enjoying the experience:

... we seemed to learn the ways and manners of the whole unruly city; and I grew easy, at last, with London, as with Kitty herself — as easy and as endlessly fascinated and charmed. We visited the parks — those great, handsome parks and gardens, that are so queer and verdant in the midst of so much dust, yet have a little of the pavements’ quickness in them, too. We strolled the West End; we sat and gazed at all the marvellous sights — just not the grand, celebrated sights of London, the palaces and monuments and picture galleries, but also the smaller, swifter dramas: the overturning of a carriage; the escape of an eel from an eel-man’s barrel; the picking of a pocket; the snatching of a purse. (Waters, 1998, 86).

Finally, the character of Miss Strangeways embodies the spirit of this historical period would be a good and obvious enough reason to prompt Waters’s interest in Victorian London; an equally crucial part is played by the less self-explanatory potential to envisage the metropolis as a theatre, that is a place where characters are allowed to choose, rehearse and finally act their own individual identity.
trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895. Whether male or female, as such. On the other hand, though, male homosexuality was brought to the attention of the late Victorian public by the 

the back cover of the paperback Virago edition of Sexing the Cherry (1989), her early historical novels, are characterized by a sustained recourse to the devices of magic realist and fantasy, as well as by a more or less overt parodic intent. Winterson's political agenda is undeniable, particularly in her early fiction, which often banks on a deliberately polemical and unsuitable reversal of binary oppositions (see, for example, the sequel to the fairy tale 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' in Sexing the Cherry, in which the 'happily ever after' for the twelve brides consists of getting rid of their legitimate husbands and taking on women lovers). If Winterson writes militant novels of ideas, Waters makes her political commitment covert, a natural by-product of her talent to weave engaging stories, which can reach out and draw into their world straight, as well as queer, readers.

In fact, both writers explore similar issues: Winterson carries out the analysis of the disintegrated postmodern self and the exposure of gender roles as cultural stereotypes through her recourse to fantastic and parodic literary modes, her adoption of gothic rather than formal realism, and her highly provocative and subversive narrative style. Waters instead accomplishes her questioning of a unified notion of self and the shared concern about voicing and giving visibility to lesbian experiences, the two writers' works are very different: Jeanette Winterson's oeuvre is overall marked by a rejection of the conventions of formal realism and the lengthy, 'three-volume' narrative scope that Waters instead embraces in her neo-Victorian novels. In spite of their individual distinctive features, Tipping the Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith can all be adequately described as realistic historical novels; Jeanette Winterson's fiction, by contrast, is much more obviously experimental and unconventional in style, so much so that even The Passion (1987) and Sexing the Cherry, her early historical novels, are characterized by a sustained recourse to the devices of magic realist and fantasy, as well as by a more or less overt parodic intent. Winterson's political agenda is undeniable, particularly in her early fiction, which often banks on a deliberately polemical and unsutable reversal of binary oppositions (see, for example, the sequel to the fairy tale 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' in Sexing the Cherry, in which the 'happily ever after' for the twelve brides consists of getting rid of their legitimate husbands and taking on women lovers). If Winterson writes militant novels of ideas, Waters makes her political commitment covert, a natural by-product of her talent to weave engaging stories, which can reach out and draw into their world straight, as well as queer, readers.

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Endnotes

1. Waters would agree with "Victorian quasi-trilogy" as a definition for Tipping the Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith: "...there's something about a trilogy -- they're not a trilogy, but there's still a sense of completion to having written three and then moving on.," Sarah Waters in an interview with Ron Hogan, http://www.booksense.com/people/author/waterssarah.jsp "Faux-Victorian (or neo-Victorian) quasi-trilogy" also seems like an apt description, if one is happy with the proliferation of qualifiers.


4. Cf. Waters's response to the question about the interplay between scholarly research and creativity in her writing: "Part of the thing of it is not like as a street word -- in the way that I suggested it was used. Part of the project of that book was not to be authentic, but just to imagine a whole new kind of narrative, and the narrative is rumoured to be destined to become a feature film, possibly on a screenplay by Andrew Davies, who is already working on the screenplay for the novel."

5. In the meantime Affinity is rumoured to be destined to become a feature film, possibly on a screenplay by Andrew Davies, who is already responsible for the adaptation of Tipping the Velvet for the small screen (cf. "Interview with Sarah Waters", 11 February 2003, on http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/books/features/sarah-waters-interview.shtml

6. "Lesbian romp" is the most catchy label adopted to describe Tipping the Velvet, which remains the most sexually explicit of Waters's books. The publication, unsurprisingly, has seen Waters hailed as the new champion of lesbian literature: from the tentative "This could be the most significant debut of its kind since that of Jeanette Winterson (Daily Telegraph) to the outright celebratory "Imagine Jeanette Winterson on a good day, collaborating with Judith Butler to pen a Sapphic Mallors Fingersmith (Independent on Sunday), the latter a review which now significantly appears on the back cover of the paperback Virago edition of Tipping the Velvet.

7. The Labouchere Amendment of 1885 made illegal gross acts of indecency, and therefore did not particularly target homosexual identity, whether male or female, as such. On the other hand, though, male homosexuality was brought to the attention of the late Victorian public by the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895.
In this respect, Waters is the true heiress of the sensation novel tradition which opened up the space for analyzing the performative nature of gender (and class!), in displaying “villainy as the mimicking inversion of respectability, feminine anomaly as the masquerading of the codes of femininity.” (Bourne Taylor, 9).


[12] The idea of the city as a stage is supported by Waters’s skill in drawing readers’ attention to the importance of clothing in the characters’ stories: we are reminded of the theatricality of life by Nancy’s costumes, Ruth Vigier’s / Peter Quick’s masquerades, Maud’s gloves, as well as by the contrast between Margaret’s attire as a philanthropic gentlewoman and Selina’s prison uniform, or Sue’s coarse, corset-less garb and Maud’s elegant dresses and crinolines. (The focus on these details is aptly reflected in the cover of the paperback Virago edition of the three novels). [9]

[13] Sarah Waters talked about the choice of a London, urban setting for her novels, in deliberate contrast with rural and self-enclosed scenarios, in response to a question I asked during a talk at the GLBT Society of the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK in November 2004. The complex reality of metropolitan life offers a livelier historical context and provides a useful counterpart to those sections of her novels which are set in confined all-female spaces (the prison in Affinity, the asylum in Fingersmith, even the golden cage of Diana’s mansion in Tipping the Velvet). The Night Watch instead capitalises on the state of emergency of WWII, exploiting the temporary gender revolution brought about by the conflict: much of the dramatic tension of the novel’s earliest section, set in 1947, derives from the characters’ disappointment in the reduction of available opportunities for women in the aftermath of the war. [8]

[14] Cf. Margaret’s appeal to her deceased father’s historiographical skills: “I wish that Pa was with me now. I would ask him how he would neatly tell the story of a prison –- of Millbank Prison –- which has so much of the dramatic tension of the novel’s earliest section, set in 1947, derives from the characters’ disappointment in the reduction of available opportunities for women in the aftermath of the war. [7]

[15] By contrast, Borough-girl Sue finds the countryside “unnatural” (“The air smelled too pure. Some time in the night I woke, and the barn was full of cows: they stood in a circle and looked us over, and one of them coughed like a man. Don’t tell me that’s natural.”, Fingersmith, 466) and years for the familiar darkness and excess of London (“The chimneys grew taller, the roads and rivers wider, the threads of smoke more thick, the farther off the country spread; until at last, at the farthest point of all, they made a smudge, a stain, a darkness [...] ‘London,’ I said. ‘Oh, London!’, Fingersmith, 467). In reality, Sue knows her way around Mrs. Sucksby’s Borough no more than Maud does, which accounts for the necessity of their final return to Briar. [6]

[16] This is yet another example of the combination of “male” and “female” gothic plot drives. [5]

[17] Like Waters’s debut, Winterson’s first novel (Oranges are not the Only Fruit) has also been notoriously televised by the BBC in 1990 [4]

[18] In making this suggestion, I am thinking in particular of the contrast between the fundamental humanity and realism of Waters’s characters and the self-righteousness and larger-than-life nature of some of Winterson’s creations. It goes without saying that the pioneering polemical strength of Winterson’s work has paved the way for Waters’s understated political message. [3]

**Works Cited**


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All material published in *The Literary London Journal* (material within the directory www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/) is copyright © the identified author. If no author is identified in relation to content, that content is copyright © *The Literary London Society*, 2003-2014.
Tracing representations of re-imagined Victorian families in literature, film and television, and social discourse, this collection, the second volume in Rodopi’s Neo-Victorian Series, analyses the historical trajectory of persistent but increasingly contested cultural myths that coalesce around the heterosexual couple and nuclear family as the supposed normative foundation of communities and nations, past and present. It sheds new light on the significance of families as a source of fluctuating cultural capital, deployed in diverse arenas from political debates, social policy and identity p... Neo-Victorianism is an aesthetic movement which amalgamates Victorian and Edwardian aesthetic sensibilities with modern principles and technologies. Many magazines and websites are devoted to Neo-Victorian ideas in dress, family life, interior decoration, morals, and other topics. Many neo-Victorian novels have reinterpreted, reproduced and rewritten Victorian culture. Significant texts include The French Lieutenant’s Woman (John Fowles, 1969), Possession (A. S. Byatt, 1990), Arthur and George (Julian First pigeonholed as a lesbian neo-Victorian novelist, Waters’s reception has evolved to include attention paid to other aspects of her works. Her fourth novel, The Night Watch (2006), consensually marked a turni... 6 The other prism through which Waters’s novels are analysed is their treatment of space and time. Chapter one, by Susan Alice Fischer, offers a comparative reading of Waters’s Affinity (1999) and Virginia Woolf’s Night and Day (1919), and examines how the characters’s resistance to social norms, quest for identity and search for true connection with another human being are mapped onto clearly demarcated spaces and temporalities. Victorian novels tend to be idealized portraits of difficult lives in which hard work, perseverance, love and luck win out in the end. They were usually inclined towards being of improving nature with a central moral lesson at heart. While this formula was the basis for much of earlier Victorian fiction, the situation became more complex as the century progressed. The husband and wife poetry team of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning conducted their love affair through verse and produced many tender and passionate poems. The reclaiming of the past was a major part of Victorian literature and was to be found in both classical literature and also the medieval literature of England.