

# Alterations and Adaptations of the Past: Sarah Waters & Michel Faber

Patrick Hobbelen  
4191897  
Dr Usha Wilbers  
2<sup>nd</sup> semester

## Contents

Acknowledgements .....	3
Abstract .....	4
Introduction.....	5
Chapter One: Sarah Waters and Lesbian Genealogy .....	11
1.1 Lesbian Anxiety.....	11
1.2 <i>Fingersmith</i> .....	13
1.3 Same-sex relationships and heteronormativity .....	17
1.4 Putting the finger on <i>Fingersmith</i> .....	20
Chapter Two: Michel Faber and Feminism: Gender & Sexuality .....	21
2.1 The (un)settled novel .....	21
2.2 Class and gender.....	22
2.3 Contemporary anxieties .....	25
Conclusive Analyses.....	29
References.....	34

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## Abstract

This thesis reads and analyses Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2003) in the light of its portrayals of contemporary anxieties. A specific 21<sup>st</sup> century anxiety which is discussed is the lack of LGBT+ representation in the past, which leads to confusion within individuals and invalidation through heteronormative society. Another is the unequal treatment of women in a contemporary, nearly classless society, which traces its origins in the class-dependent treatment of women in Victorian society. This thesis relates the notion of 'queering history' and unconventional gender roles of the 21st century and how they are imposed onto aforementioned novels. The historical alterations in these novels can be seen as projections of contemporary anxieties onto the past, and these rewritings are used in order to revalidate from the past and cope with the aftermath.

Keywords: Neo-Victorianism; anxiety; queer theory; feminism; gender; sexuality; Michel Faber; Sarah Waters

## Introduction

“What lies behind us and what lies before us  
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

(attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Neo-Victorianism, a revivalist cultural trend of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is an established subgenre of historical fiction. Historical fiction is a gateway to projecting a modern perspective onto the past, and it can teach us about systematic social issues that are still present in society today. Several novels in this genre won prestigious awards, such as the 2001 and 2009 Man Booker Prize for Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* and Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, respectively, as well as several nominations for other works. The projection of contemporary experiences onto history inevitably leads to distortions or gaps between the historical past and Neo-Victorian texts. By analysing Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002) and Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2003), this thesis analyses how the Victorian Era is reconstructed in the twenty-first century after a close reading of the novels. *Fingersmith* covers LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, Trans-, +) anxieties specifically, while *The Crimson Petal and the White* functions as an overarching feminist novel. Anxiety is in this case defined as a struggle in the back of one’s mind regarding part of their identity or past.

The thesis recognises whether a Neo-Victorian text is part of the genre’s debunking strand. Describing the Victorian past as it ‘really’ was is part of debunking. It has to ‘write the unwritten’, meaning that certain historical aspects are ‘invented’ and therefore invalidate historical accounts. One example of this historical invention is shown by Mrs Reid, a character in Jane Harris’ *The Observations* (2006). She discusses the importance of the unwritten by writing a treatise about servants containing the following fragment:

“Had we an account of the nature, habits and training of the domestic class in my time and details of particular cases therein, no history could be more useful, but it strikes me that such matters are rarely heeded and that what knowledge we have remains within the realm of personal experience. It were to be wished that some good author would make his observations on the subject during his time so that the knowledge could be passed down . . . In the absence of such an author, I humbly offer the following theoretical discourse and case studies. Those servants I have lived to see

myself I wish to remember and note down in these pages, both for my own use and for the elucidation of others” (qtd. in Heilmann and Llewellyn 116-7).

This means it creates an account which either contradicts the Victorian account or gives a new one entirely, the latter of which is also the case with, for instance, lesbian Victorians. Moreover, this thesis discusses how ‘writing the unwritten’ interprets contemporary anxieties within historical fiction, since there are critics who argue that “we need to question the premise of a historicism that privileges difference over similarity, recognising that it is the peculiarity of our current historical moment that has such a privileging takes place at all” (Goldberg and Menon qtd. in Koolen 371). This is especially related to ‘queering history’, where myths might be propagated and reinforced about the LGBT+ community that have no foundation in historical fact. Sarah Waters is an excellent example of an author ‘queering history’, and her novel *Fingersmith* provides this thesis with the material needed to relate the Neo-Victorian account to ‘writing the unwritten’ and perhaps even ‘overwrite’ contemporaneous issues central to the Victorian narrative. Lesbian genealogy will be the main focus for the reading of this novel. Genealogy means traces of existence throughout history, and their representation (or lack thereof).

There is another strand to Neo-Victorian fiction; namely, that of literary nostalgia. Nostalgia influences how contemporary attitudes are presented throughout a novel, since it flows from a great fondness for the Victorian grand narrative, yet nostalgia is a reminiscence of a past that never was or ever will be. As Peter Mandler puts it, “[t]he imaginative capability of history is closely connected to its ethical capability. One of the purposes of historical time travel is to transport our modern selves into alien situations which allow us to highlight by contrast our own values and assumptions.” (qtd. in Heilmann and Llewellyn 10-11). He goes on to explain that this historical distancing is a less complicated way of honestly exploring ethical issues. This is due to the fact that it alleviates contemporary anxieties without losing them out of sight completely. Instead, the past helps us define our attitudes more clearly without losing sight of them completely. This means a coherent and well-ordered narrative is required, including the presence of a reliable authoritative voice. In other words, there is a need for a familiar system, such as a rigid class system, simply because this offers a certainty which is apparently lacking in the modern day and age. One such anxiety is portrayed in Michel Faber’s novel. It is this “contemporary fragmentation of narrative structure at the level of the historical narrative [that] has been mirrored in contemporary fiction’s attempt to return to the ostensible security of coherent narrative structures and textual order as represented by

the nineteenth century” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 11). This is in direct opposition to the twentieth century developments of modernism and postmodernism, both of which outright refuse the notion of a well-ordered, grand narrative. Moreover, societies like the Victorians’ especially appeal to the contemporary reader because of the fact that people often feel overburdened by their responsibilities. A Victorian society, in all its restrictions, also offers an escape from our responsibilities: it offers us freedom of the freedom of choice. It is therefore seen as a way to relieve us of our anxieties which come with this modern freedom. In other words, it provides a narrative which satisfies anxieties by catering to an inherent need of closed ending, something real life can never grant. This will be discussed in the last chapter, where reworking historical periods is concerned.

These strands of Neo-Victorian fiction (debunking and nostalgia) are also closely intertwined with the use of pastiche and parody. Pastiche means that the work of art imitates a contemporaneous style; in this case, the Victorian Era. The use of pastiche is an act of celebration, rather than an act of mockery. The latter is what parody entails. Parody uses satire and/or irony to imitate, whereas pastiche aligns itself with the comical. As Grace Moore points out in her article “Twentieth-Century Re-Workings of the Victorian Novel”, reinventing Victorian heritage and reshaping it into Neo-Victorian fiction can be described as being “a coping mechanism for doubts and anxieties about the future, particularly in the context of technological and scientific developments. [...] Victorian Britain offers a compelling template or scapegoat for present-day anxieties and tensions, contemporary debates about morality, sexuality or race relations” (136). For instance, Michel Faber’s novel deals with anxieties about gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how they are represented by reinventing the Victorians. Norman Jones argues that historical fictions “tend to emphasize points of connection alongside differences: similarities enough to make the past readable (literally and figuratively), and differences enough to keep it interesting” (qtd. in Koolen 373). It is here where the influences of pastiche and parody become apparent. A historical fiction pastiche deals with the past in a joking manner, by taking their sources to another level. The sources are adapted to one’s own tastes, and in the process it intentionally mocks them. The parody uses humour as well, but it pushes its sources and attempts to deliver a comment or critique on them.

Michel Faber’s novel is an example of how gender and socio-economic aspects are intertwined in both the contemporary world and contemporaneous nineteenth century Britain. As McWilliam argues about, among others, Waters’s and Faber’s works, “[t]he attraction of these novels for scholars is that they take place in a version of the nineteenth century that has

been heavily explored by some of the leading Victorianists of our time. Thus they feature plenty of hysteria, prostitution, consumerism, spiritualism, uppity servants, cross-dressing, and transgression of boundaries” (107). These (Neo-)Victorian themes are construed in such a way they remake the period, which effectively results in echoing the contemporary stance on both the modern day and age and that of the Victorians. McWilliam continues to say that “[r]ecent appropriations are certainly mediated by issues specific to our particular historical moment, but we may come to see far greater continuity between twenty-first-century images of the Victorians and earlier representations of them” (108). It is here that we recognise the reach of these continuities, and how Victorian representation is appropriated by processing these ‘specific issues’.

Hilary Mantel reminds us that the past was not ‘better’ than the present, that people want to run to the future where, as Moore correctly described, our current anxieties will hopefully be resolved. This seemingly running back and forth or “anachronism [...] offers the most interesting possibilities for the neo-Victorian novelist as the past and the present can be mangled in order to inform one another” (Moore 140). This is how the genre ‘queers’ and projects twenty-first century feminism onto history. It is safe to state that new views inherently build on and reflect earlier ones; however, it should be noted that “historical change should not be seen as an organic process, even a mediated one, but as an active social, political and cultural force” (Kaplan in Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 194). The British ‘obsession’, for lack of a better word, with their heritage is an immersion in the revisiting of these views, and occasionally even expands on them. (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 6-7) The execution of this, however, creates a risk: that of society labelling any form of discrimination ‘Victorian’ and thereby disassociating from or “deny its continued existence in our own society” (Moore 140), which could pave the way towards the denial of issues that are perpetrated to this day.

If certain aspects of the present are hidden away by presenting it as part of the past, it also threatens to further marginalise the current issues in society, such as the lack of representation for people who are LGBT+. This lack of representation causes despair for them, as they are unable to find any validation for their identity in the past, especially one as well-recorded as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The importance of this search is for instance reinforced by general remarks similar to “Nobody was gay in the past”. Many of these issues may have been present in the Victorian Era, albeit in a different manner, though it is questionable whether it is desirable to subject the progress made since then to polishing the past as if it never showed cracks in the glass. For instance, media, especially Netflix, have noticed the LGBT+

community and have been making original series representing them throughout. Effectively,, the LGBT+ community is being pandered to. Any social progress made will present itself as 'how it has always been', and thus trivialises any sentiments. However, it could also be argued that by superimposing both historical and contemporary issues it will shed a light on how much progress has already been made. By doing so, it is also possible to offer a critique on society by pinpointing issues that as of yet have not been resolved.

This thesis focuses on how contemporary struggles are represented in revisiting the Victorian Era by examining two Neo-Victorian novels. This thesis attempts to cover this by using different themes in order to independently establish in what different ways the Victorian Era is reinvented. The themes this project will discuss are queering history, feminism and gender roles, and issues related to the class system. The manner of reinventing the Victorian is not inherently escapist and signals social issues still lying at the heart of modern society. What are the effects of 'queering' or otherwise fictionalising history and why is it so important to reflect contemporary anxieties?

Grace Moore, Cora Kaplan, and Linda Hutcheon have done research on Neo-Victorian fiction and historical fiction. Others are Kate Mitchell, Louisa Hadley, and Sarah Waters herself. For instance, Kate Mitchell offers us an approach to analyse *Fingersmith* in the light of LGBT+ representation, commenting on the "problem of historical invisibility for contemporary women who seek historical models of same-sex love[.]" (119). It is this lack of lesbian genealogy which is discussed in the chapter on *Fingersmith*.

Kaplan defines the term 'Victoriana', which is an umbrella term covering everything associated with the Victorians, as being "the self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself[.]" (Kaplan 3) The historical is challenged within Neo-Victorian fiction, because it is through the loss of a sense of history that "a depth model of historical time has been compressed into a single surface, so that the past has become a one-dimensional figure in the carpet, a thematic element in the syncretic pattern of a perpetual present" (3). The view of the past is becoming more simplified and is no longer ordered neatly. As the twentieth century progressed, multiple themes that gave Great Britain anxiety were able to be discussed. For example, the promise of a classless society, thereby erasing Victorian models of class, led to the production of literature providing social commentary. However, Kaplan remarks that in the 1980s and 1990s the Conservative government brought back the Victorian values of thrift, family, and enterprise. It was then that Kaplan "began seriously to consider the curious appropriation of the Victorian for disparate

political and cultural agendas in the present, to see Victoriana's peculiar role, not simply as that always selective and unreliable thing, historical memory, so easily cloyed with nostalgia or soured into persecution of the dead, but as what we might call history out of place, something atemporal and almost spooky in its effects, yet busily at work constituting this time – yours and [Kaplan's] – of late Capitalist modernity” (5-6). Neo-Victorian fiction, then, can be a politicised medium, which is reflected in both Waters's and Faber's novels. Both works offer a commentary on the themes of LGBT+ representation, women, and class, on both contemporaneous as well as contemporary society.

The project explains how anxiety is reflected in Neo-Victorian literature by doing a close reading of two novels, supported by feminist and queer literary theory. The close readings allow for a narrowed down scope concerning the relevant contemporary issues that are projected onto the Neo-Victorian setting. This is how Sarah Water's novel will be the focus of 'queering history', while Michel Faber's novel will emphasise socio-economic aspects such as class, and relate it to gender as well. The selection of two different overlaying themes is more useful as a template for the analysis of the anxieties of the Victorian Era, rather than just one.

## Chapter One: Sarah Waters and Lesbian Genealogy

### 1.1 Lesbian Anxiety

The LGBT+ community is suffering from anxiety because they are not well-represented across society, which is caused by media misrepresentation and the lack of a non-sexualised physical community. Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) is an example of how this anxiety of lack of representation is projected onto the Victorian Era. It does so by combining the genres of the Victorian sensation novel as well as the gothic. Waters adapts the gothic by domesticating transgressive sexuality through the sensational. This is because the gothic allows for a "strongly female focus, its ability to question mainstream versions of reality, and the fact that certain motifs associated with it (such as the double and "the unspeakable") lend themselves especially well to lesbian appropriation and recasting" (Palmer qtd. in Mitchell 123). The 'unspeakable' refers to same-gender attraction within *Fingersmith*. The frame of Victorian heteronormativity complicates the establishment of any sort of queer identity. Indeed, one of Waters's goals is to establish a 'lesbian genealogy' or 'trace' by inventing a historical account where there is none. It is this lack of representation of gender ideals and sexuality which induces a cultural anxiety. (Mitchell 118) Waters's use of typically feminine literary forms is no accident: "these genres are perhaps the most likely sites where a lesbian tradition could have been voiced or, in fact, may have been voiced in muted, displaced ways" (ibid.: 118). Mitchell then also poses that such a "genealogy of female homoeroticism is mapped on to our sense of Victorian literary and cultural history", meaning that the lack of a genealogy is most easily placed the genre of Neo-Victorian fiction and therefore appears logical.

Lesbian theory revolves around the term 'lesbian continuum', mentioned in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*. This term was coined by Adrienne Rich, and means "to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (Barry 136). Barry continues to explain that this continuum involves a diversity of female interaction. He then mentions Bonnie Zimmerman's remark that this definition has "the virtue of suggesting interconnections among the various ways in which women bond together" (ibid.: 137). Paulina Palmer, however, notes a desexualising effect of this term on lesbianism, politicising lesbianism instead. (ibid.: 137) Judith Butler suggests that

identities are “a kind of impersonation and approximation ...*a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (qtd. in Barry 139). It can then be argued that *Fingersmith* attempts to invoke such a lesbian continuum while simultaneously imitating a self-identified, or self-invented, historical past as part of the baggage Waters brings as a lesbian author. This is how Waters invents her own lesbian genealogy in her trio of novels.

Although Neo-Victorian fiction is often criticised for being a “nostalgic celebration of ‘the Golden Age of the English novel’” (Gutleben qtd. in Mitchell 119), the subsequent allegation that “imitative frenzy cannot but suggest a lack of originality” is unfounded. (Gutleben qtd. in Mitchell 119) In fact, Waters claims that the Neo-Victorian novel “allows for this ... celebration of narrativity, that other sorts of literature just weren’t allowing” (qtd. in Mitchell 119). The invisibility of historical models of same-gender relationships proves troublesome for women to “imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love” (Waters qtd. in Mitchell 120). This anxiety recurs quite literally in *Fingersmith*: Sue has no such compass or genealogy herself, as can be seen through the heteronormative manner in which she tries to make sense of her (erotic) feelings for Maud. She reflects, “It was as if there had come between us, without my knowing, a kind of thread. It pulled me to her, wherever she was. It was like – *It’s like you love her*, I thought” (136). The silence surrounding lesbian presence in the nineteenth century can only suggest “an anxiety too severe to allow for articulation” (Terry Castle qtd. in Mitchell 128). By voicing lesbian attraction, Waters attempts to alleviate this anxiety, though she is careful not to provide an ‘all’s well that ends well’ closure within a narrative that is built on strife. (Mitchell 132). This is highlighted in the novel by the sombre tone which closes the narrative.

In fact, the non-existence of lesbian genealogy is on the foreground when the number of lesbian writers is so scarce that media group them together as one. Sarah Waters mentions that she was “put in the same bracket” with Jeanette Winterson at the time of her first publication. She names several LGBT+ authors from the past, none of which are widely known in a still heteronormative 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Waters put it, she and Winterson were “the only two lesbian writers [the reviewers] can think of” (qtd. in Armit 121). She distinguishes her work from Winterson’s because the latter is in the modernist tradition, and they do not share the same goal. When Waters is asked if she sees herself as being part of the lesbian literary tradition, she answers in the positive. In addition to the topics they wrote, it is likely they have not received as much recognition as they deserved, due to the perpetuation of favouring men’s literary works over women’s, especially concerning awards. The influx of names Waters mentions reinforces the idea that the awareness of the LGBT+ tradition is still

widely absent, because the authors are relatively unknown outside of the LGBT+ literary community. Sarah Waters makes a point to say that she “couldn’t have written any of my books without having read those books first”, which may establish that gay literature has always existed. (121)

## 1.2 Fingersmith

The novel features Sue Trinder, an orphan girl living in London with a criminal underground bearing great similarity to a family. One of the frequent visitors is Gentleman, pronounced by Sue as “Ge’mun” (Waters 19), who makes her an offer she cannot refuse. He has set up an elaborate scheme in which Maud Lilly, a rich heiress living in a mansion in the countryside with her uncle, is to be their victim. Sue is to be set up as Maud’s maid, while Gentleman courts her in order to gain her fortune by marriage. This is because Maud’s fortune only becomes available when she is married. The plan is then to put Maud in an asylum, so Gentleman can cash in the inheritance and give two thousand pounds to Sue as a reward. However, Sue is double-crossed and put into the mental asylum herself, with Maud Lilly and Gentleman, also known as Richard Rivers, on the run. It is here that the reader switches to Maud’s perspective in part two.

Several iconic events during Sue’s stay at Briar must be revisited before turning to Maud’s perspective in order to evaluate the ‘queer’ aspect of the story. The card play and Sue’s attempt at mock fortune-telling is one of them. The first two cards of the manipulated hand show the Queen of Hearts and the Three of Spades, which Sue describes as “sad cards” (99), marking the “beginning of strife” for a “kind and handsome lady”. These describe Maud’s past. The next three represent her present, and are the King of Diamonds, the Five of Clubs, and the Cavalier of Spades. They figure as “[a] stern old gentleman[,] [...] a parched mouth[,] [...] [and] a young man or horseback, with good in his heart” (99) respectively. The last two are the Present, the Six of Spades, indicating a journey, and... the Queen of Diamonds. Sue is at a loss, since she had intended for the Two of Hearts to finish the telling. She improvises by saying it symbolises great wealth, and consecutively finds the correct card after Maud rises and dismisses the ordeal; the card is creased by Maud’s sole and forever marked in future games. Whenever Sue picks up the deck again, she is instantly reminded of her trickery when she draws the Two of Hearts, and Maud assigns emotional value to it as it reminds her of her love for Sue.

The most charged moment is the lesbian sex scene between Sue and Maud. Maud asks Sue “what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night!” (139) Sue’s physical response is

that of blushing, her verbal response that of disbelief; she had assumed Maud knew about this marital duty. Maud mentions kissing, which Sue confirms to be on her mouth. An awkward explanation about an embrace follows, meaning penetrative vaginal sex. A demonstration of the former happens soon after, and the lack of a having a penis is remedied by the use of hands in order to penetrate. This lack of convention functions as the model of contemporary anxiety. The LGBT+ community, missing genealogy, has no other means than to relate themselves to the heterosexual likeness of relationships and sexual intercourse. This confusion is evident in how both Sue and Maud believe that the other has more direct agency during their intercourse. Neither Maud nor Sue know exactly what to do, even though Sue mentions Dainty had once shown her how to kiss. However, kissing alone is still dominated by heteronormativity, whereas having lesbian sex, in this case, cannot be taught to someone because it does not fit within societal standards. Sue feels as if she has been “fired up. [Maud] had wound me tight, like a spring” (141), regarding their conversation as a form of intimate foreplay. Maud, in her view, knew that she was trying to accomplish this, a confirmation of her attraction, yet she lies passive. Sue performs the act, as Maud notes “I feel the rapid beating of a heart, and suppose it my own. But it is hers” (282), thereby diminishing her own passion and placing it entirely with Sue.

Maud tells the reader about the circumstances of her life at Briar: her uncle, a fervent pornographic book collector, has friends over at regular intervals, which Maud has to read the books to. She is repulsed by the very act, but she has no other choice: her uncle brought her to Briar with him from a mental institution, and will be brought back if she disobeys this ritual. Maud also recounts how the plot was devised and how Sue was to be tricked; namely, by teaching and dressing her as a lady and passing her off as being Maud. Maud compares Sue and herself to books, associating the latter with female body and entrapment, as she says “[t]he habits and the fabrics that bind me will, soon, bind her. Bind her, like morocco or like calf. . . . I have grown used to thinking of myself as a sort of book” (250-1). Sue of course insists she was no-one but Susan Smith, her alias, which does not help her case at all, since Maud and Gentleman say otherwise, and everyone they have hired to that point are convinced Sue is not in her right state of mind. Maud continues to explore the events that happened after she escaped to London with Gentleman. She was promised a house, but is brought under at Mrs Sucksby’s place at Lant Street in the Borough. Mrs Sucksby has practically functioned as Sue’s mother all her life, but takes Maud in as if it were her natural daughter. However, Maud is not at all pleased by this, having been brought up as a lady. This is because Lant Street reminds her of a hierarchal order, much controlled by patriarchal heteronormativity, as she is

unaware it is not Gentleman who is in charge. Seeing Mrs Sucksby reminds Maud of her own mother, infuriating her, especially because she is now held captive, waiting for an uncertain destiny that is not of her own making; she feels controlled like she was at Briar. Her marked past at her uncle's does nothing to change her attitude towards the thieves' den or its residents. She continuously tries to escape the house, until one day she succeeds in doing so. She runs to her uncle's friend, Mr Hawtrey, one of the gentlemen Maud had to read porn to, believing he will assist her. The only assistance he provides, however, is a glass of water, treating the wounds on her feet, and a carriage to the nearest mental institution. She escapes the latter fate by bribing her guide and driver and undoing and giving them her petticoats, which then bring her back to Lant Street. Defeated, she gives up all resistance to Mrs Sucksby.

The novel returns to Sue's account in the asylum, where she is physically abused and humiliated by the staff, especially Nurse Spiller, who has experience in inflicting pain on her patients on body parts which will not bruise visibly. The other patients or inmates are different to Sue and each other on various points; Betty is described as a "simpleton" (409) or an "idiot girl" (410), possibly suggesting Down Syndrome in contemporary terms, especially when her childlike behaviour and appropriate nurses' treatment is taken into consideration. The nurses, especially Nurse Bacon, "used her more or less as they would a servant, and had her running every sort of chore" (409). It is then revealed Betty is actually a daughter of a very grand family, which draws a parallel between her and a long line of incestuous noble family, not unlike the historical House of Habsburg. Old Miss Wilson has what modern doctors would probably diagnose as Tourette's, depicted stereotypically by cursing, and is threatened to have her tongue curbed whenever she has an attack. Mrs Price is only described as being "sad Mrs Price", and wakes everyone up with a choking sound while "biting her fingers so hard she was making them bleed" (437), suggesting a Body-Focused Repetitive Disorder. However, this is subject to debate as there is no mention of any other instances in which Mrs Price behaves erratically. In any case, it is relevant to mention that all of these symptoms match Sue's behaviour one way or the other. Sue's ignorance and naivety which led her there are reflected by Betty's "simpleness", and Sue's vulgar language, originating from the Borough, is reflected by the stereotypical Tourette's portrayed in Miss Wilson. Despite Mrs Price's minor presence, her assumedly repetitive behaviour is present in Sue's insistence on rejecting Maud's name as her own. There is another similarity to Betty which will be highlighted later on, concerning her heritage.

The nurses feed on Sue's ignorance. For instance, they give her nasty or 'queer' looks. Sue repeatedly finds out what these and other signals mean later on. In this case, the nurses have heard of Sue's sexual woman-on-woman experience, and their micro-aggressions grow to blatant homophobia during the nurses' weight contest. The nurses sit on Sue, taking turns, in order to get a squeal out of her, which function as a point system. Nurse Bacon is last, and humiliates her even further: "Then she did this. She pushed herself up on her hands, so that her face was above me but her bosom and stomach and legs still hard on my own; and she moved her hips. She moved them in a certain way. My eyes flew open. She gave me a leer. 'Like it, do you?' she said, still moving. 'No? We heard you did'" (442). Despite having her following fit result in the cold water plunge, Nurse Bacon feels guilty and warms up to Sue: "'All right?' she said softly. [...] 'No harm – eh, Maud? All fun, ain't it? We must have our bit of fun, mustn't we? Or we should go mad...'" (444) Later on, she even seems favourable when Sue offers to run an errand for her, though it is only a means to escape for Sue. When Sue is rubbing her hands, "[...] her eyes half closed and she gazed at me from beneath the lids. She gazed in a warm and thoughtful way, and almost smiled. 'Not so bad, is it?' she murmured. 'Eh?'" (458) A page later, she is masturbating, eyeing the ladies, and when she looks at Sue, she "seem[s] to turn some idea over in her mind..." In a sense, Nurse Bacon's relationship with her favourite, Betty, also indicates some sort of sexual attraction. The ritual of greasing her hands has become an intimacy for the two of them. This all suggests Nurse Bacon is not heterosexual either, and only succumbs to the peer pressure of her co-workers.

Sue makes her escape, and eventually reaches London with Charles, the knife-boy at Briar who had assisted her in her escaping. His goal was to find Gentleman to become his servant and polish his shoes. This is significant later on. She finds Maud and Gentleman at Lant Street, and decides to spy on them for a couple of days. She intends to kill Maud when she thinks she has taken over her old life, ignorant of the fact Maud is still being held against her will. When they rush into the house, the conflict escalates and the knife that Charles has sharpened is used to kill Gentleman. Charles runs out to the street and screams murder. In no time, the entire gang has been arrested and Mrs Sucksby pleads guilty to killing Gentleman, though it is uncertain whether it was her, or Maud who committed the deed. Mrs Sucksby is eventually hanged, and Sue finds out about her birth right: she is actually Susan Lilly; thus, much like Betty, she is actually the daughter of a very grand family. At this point the reader is already informed about this in Maud's account, and that Maud Lilly is actually Maud Sucksby as well. However, it is Sue's inability to pick up subtle remarks again which delayed this discovery. Sue goes off to find Maud, with her first stop also being the final one: Briar. There

Maud reveals all that has transpired, and also admits to having started writing pornography of her own in order to make a living. In the end, the two lesbian lovers are reconciled.

### 1.3 Same-sex relationships and heteronormativity

*Fingersmith* offers another example of gay sexual attraction, this time between two men: Gentleman and Charles. It is only vaguely hinted at by Charles' responses to Gentleman's arrivals and departures at Briar, and by the fact he is so adamant about following him to London. He also shows where his true loyalty lies when Gentleman is stabbed to death; he cries out for the police to come. The repeated phrase of "polishing [Gentleman's] shoes" becomes a metaphor for having sex. This metaphor mimics the one of greasing Nurse Bacon's hands, as they both feature a type of lubricant, as well as extremities of the bodies. Both instances also have a status gap in its participants; Betty is a patient of Nurse Bacon, fulfilling a servant role, and Charles desires to serve Gentleman. Both Betty and Charles symbolise immaturity, as they uncritically comply with their partners' wishes. However, whereas Betty and Nurse Bacon are separated by mental faculty, Charles and Gentleman have a difference in physical age. Extremities can therefore not establish any sort of relationship on their own. Indeed, the mechanics of these relationships, which contemporary readers might call paedophilic in nature, have to be *greased* in order for them to work. Both these relationships serve as an example of what LGBT+ relationships are not supposed to be. Much like heterosexual relationships, they are not supposed to have a hierarchy or dominance of one over the other. This is why the relationship between Sue and Maud, eventually, is stable and becomes as one should be.

When reading the novel as a whole, the frequent use of the word 'queer' is noticeable, though its meaning is still demarcated from the contemporary usage. As Rachel Carroll mentions in her article "Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in neo-Victorian feminist fiction", the abundant use of the word, which also occurs in Waters's novel *Affinity* (1999), invokes the contemporary meaning of the word. As Carroll puts it, the reader is very much aware of the word "as a form of homophobic insinuation or abuse and its late-twentieth-century appropriation as affirmative and subversive" (Carroll 144). She goes on to explain that the nineteenth-century setting has the word inhabit "a continuum of normality; it denotes experiences, impressions, or perceptions which strike a note of incongruity or troubled comprehension, but which implicitly retain the potential to be recouped" (144). As shown earlier, Sue definitely has a difficulty of comprehension, and she is therefore both

queer in the nineteenth century as well as the twenty-first century aspects of the word. Though most of the times ‘queer’ is used to mean odd, strange, or peculiar, there is at least one instance in which the word is marked to evoke the non-heterosexual connotation. Sue reflects on her escape as well as on Nurse Bacon’s response to her offer, “[...] – I thought of how pleased she had got, when I’d said when I would rub her hands” (Waters 460). The possibility of Nurse Bacon experiencing same-gender attraction has already been established, but it is the next paragraph which reinforces this idea starting with the sentence, “Queer, the things you think at such times” (460). The construction of this sentence makes it clear that ‘queer’ refers back to Nurse Bacon’s delight, and not to Sue’s ‘guilt’ of her trickery, since that part has been pushed to the background with the use of a hyphen in the previous sentence. It simultaneously maintains the contemporaneous use, which could be read as the covert way LGBT+ people could be represented or read into fiction. There is no question whether their presence exists or not, it simply *is*, without deviating from what is normatively established to be present.

The shame that Sue feels when the nurses let her know that they are aware of her sexual encounter with Maud makes it appear like ‘outing’ is a single absolute act. Eve Sedgwick explains that “being ‘in’ or ‘out’ is not a simple dichotomy or a once and for all event. Degrees of concealment and openness coexist in the same lives. Nor will sexual orientation alone usually make a person a complete outsider, and therefore innocent of all patriarchal or exploitative taint” (qtd. in Barry 140). Identity is not a stable core; it is the position upheld towards different social contacts. It is here that the notion of the ‘lesbian continuum’ reoccurs; yet it is desecrated by the betrayal of the (mainly) heterosexual nurses. Indeed, the ‘lesbian continuum’ constitutes a “moral condemnation of female heterosexuality as a betrayal of women and their interests, with the implication that women can only achieve integrity through lesbianism” (Barry 137).

Heteronormativity and its oppressive structures occur through the motif of touch throughout the novel. The element of interpersonal touch can be interpreted in different ways, dependent on the two characters’ bond, or lack thereof. Only Maud’s interpersonal touches with Gentleman and Sue are considered, as well as Sue’s touches during her stay in the asylum. In several instances between Maud and Gentleman, touch is meant to be a way to exert control or establish dominance, and this method is mostly adopted by Gentleman to Maud, and rarely vice versa. The first instance of touch happens on page 229, the scene where he secures Maud into his plot which Maud believes will set her free; he lets go of her fingers the page thereafter, which Maud describes as “breaking the spell of our conspiracy”. Chapter nine opens on the next page, where Maud supposes she “might draw back, unloose [herself] from the tugging of [Mr Rivers’] ambition” (231). She likens the plot to that of a

web or weave, in which a spider or a tailor exerts their influence; here, touch is already mentioned as a force. Gentleman takes Maud's hand and mocks her after her uncle's friends have likened her to the pale beauty of Galatea; she is crushed by the dominance of her uncle at Briar, and her river flows from under the rock. She is as pale as the statue of Galatea as well, as pale as a mushroom. (233) It is here where a parallel can be observed between the myth of Galatea and Sue and Maud. The myth of Galatea tells that her lover Acis is crushed by a boulder. She then transforms his blood into a river. Another myth, this time related to Pygmalion, tells that no woman was beautiful enough for him, which led him to carve a statue he named Galatea. He prayed to Aphrodite so as to let the statue come to life, which was granted; they then ruled over Cyprus together. Mrs Sucksby has deliberately made prospective relationships impossible by lowering the age restriction on the contract Sue's actual mother had signed, in order to prevent her plans from being ruined. Sue's wishes of being able to tell Maud the truth about the plot flows from her attraction to Maud, as she desires to free both of them from Gentleman. She wants their relationship to be possible, and almost like Pygmalion's prayer the narrative leads to exactly that. They both settle as lovers at Briar, now their personal domain – Cyprus.

Maud wears her gloves, not because her person is to be preserved, but because her uncle wants his books preserved, though she presents it to the outside world as if her girlhood is protected by it (211). Though men, especially Gentleman, attempt to dominate her by their firm grips, she is not touched by anyone except through her gloves, though Sue touches her without. In this sense, they form a protection against the patriarchal fingers of society. One of the few opportunities Gentleman has are the drawing lessons he gives to Maud under employment of Mr Lilly, and he takes it to guide her into his plot, as well as set the trap for Agnes to lose her dignity and employment. His control over her fades as her bond with Sue grows closer. Their physical contact gives control to Sue, though she is hesitant to use it for Gentleman's gain: she, too, has become enthralled by touch, though it is Maud who exerts a form of control now as well. It is this control that is one of the anxieties that is portrayed within the novel. Control over one's own identity as part of being LGBT+ also creates a 'trace' since such control enables (recorded) discourse.

## 1.4 Putting the finger on *Fingersmith*

In essence, the novel creates a genealogy which is lacking for the LGBT+ community, addressing several anxieties at a time. The novel establishes how the lack of a guideline or compass is a source of confusion and misunderstanding of one's same-gender attraction. By showing three same-sex relationships, of which two are considered unhealthy due to their paedophilic nature, and one which is the fruition of a healthy union, the novel rejects misgivings about the nature of gay relationships. Gay relationships have nothing to do with paedophilia, and neither are they a fetish or a form of control. They are what a healthy heterosexual relationship is supposed to be: intimate, genuine love. Unlike heterosexual relationships, however, gay relationships have gone mostly unrecorded, which has created a segregation between what society believes *ought* to be, and what *is*. Though not about same-sex eroticism necessarily, this *ought* versus *is* is also a topic of discussion in Faber's novel: Sugar has fantasies about a patriarchal world undone, and the next chapter on Faber's novel comments on how contemporary anxieties are played out within such fantasies.

## Chapter Two: Michel Faber and Feminism: Gender & Sexuality

### 2.1 The (un)settled novel

Michel Faber's novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) is a portrayal of Victorian Britain in terms of its class system, gender conventions, and faith. The first part of the novel is immediate in how the setting is intended, as the narrator quite literally guides the reader towards the characters within the novel. However, the narrator makes it clear the reader is going to be treated as if they are "an alien from another time and place altogether" (Faber 3). Through this metafictional element, the reader is alienated from the setting within the novel; it is an attempt to divide the contemporary reader and 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The novel refuses to provide the reader with a form of escapism, warning the reader they are not immersing themselves in an aesthetic imitation of Victorian realism. Indeed, the appeal of the Neo-Victorian novel appears to flow from "a desire to have Victorian length, plot, and character but without the 'difficulties' of Victorian language and circumlocution concerning issues of the body and sexuality" (Heilmann & Llewellyn 14). At first glance the novel does appear to offer exactly that, accompanied by clear temporal distinctions which are "actually little more than a fabrication to mask a novel that is an extension of the contemporary rather than historical realism" (14). In fact, Heilmann and Llewellyn tell us the lack of a closed ending was cause for complaint among the audience, as one reader wrote to Faber that "[n]ovels aren't supposed to just stop! Novels aren't like real life. Novels are supposed to have satisfying tight endings" (12). This particular reader provides the exact reason why the Neo-Victorian novel and its inclusion of contemporary anxieties is so appealing: such a narrative, if finalised, satisfies the audience of a desire they may never be able to fulfil in life.

It is those metafictional elements that Faber borrows from John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969): "The idiosyncratic but anonymous narrator with his intrusive social facts, obvious historical comparisons and heavy-handed digressions, is [...] designed to alienate the reader from the seductive identification with the story and its protagonists" (Kaplan 90). The expectations of the romantic and sentimental genre are frustrated by its open-endedness as well, which "acts as an interruption of our affective identification with certain clichéd tropes of love and family that is also a parody of the narrative prose that produced them" (ibid.: 96).

## 2.2 Class and gender

The omniscient narrator is a manifestation of contemporary identity, and clearly has agenda of their own, as they attribute subjective values to the characters as well as the environment they are in. This works because the narrator, at this point, holds ultimate authority. The reader is placed within this setting, as if it is a road trip filled with discoveries. However, the characters are portrayed in such a way that their position within Victorian London, and even the way they relate to the other characters, is a static given. The reader begins in the slums of Church Lane, St Giles, one of London's most derelict slums. The goal of the novel is immediately set on page 4. The reader is there to make connections in order to discover the class system and climb its ladder. The reader starts at the bottom, though they are promised a reward for their patience, as they are introduced to Caroline, a poverty-stricken prostitute who has no means to provide for herself without having to depend on her male customers, though she earns more in a day than she would in a week of labouring in a factory. Caroline is depicted as a product, an object to use, even by the narrator as they indicate the reader has been hiding from detection. What is more, the reader is implored to settle next to her as soon as she has fallen asleep, thereby dismissing any right of consent Caroline ought to have (Faber 8). What follows is a demonstration of the narrator's clairvoyance, thereby firmly establishing their authority. It is this clairvoyance and the way they cloak the reader which etherealises all but the characters within the plot, meaning they are ghost-like apparitions.

The previous scene which showed Caroline cleaning out the semen of one of her customers is both one of intimacy and voyeurism. However, its explicitness is necessary in order to illustrate the horrible situation Caroline is destined to live the rest of her life, as a 'fallen woman'. Indeed, it is here one finds a subjective evaluation of Society, though it is immediately justified by the explanation she is better off than being an abused, hard-working wife without any say in either the domestic or public sphere. The remark, "[i]f this is what it means to be 'upright', and Caroline is supposed to be 'fallen' . . . ! What did God make cunts for, if not to save women from donkey-work?" is the final argument to the legitimacy of any prostitute's motivations. Caroline, from a well-to-do background, has consecutively lost her husband, her home, her child, and what used to be her source of income, and is therefore an exemplification of a 'fallen woman' in not only the Christian virtuous manner, but socio-economically as well. Still, she is promised to be the one to introduce the reader to someone 'worth knowing' (23). Despite her loss of ambition, she is happy, which is immediately contrasted with Sugar, also a prostitute, whom the reader is about to be introduced to (26).

At first, Sugar is described in a manner displaying gender ambiguity, but she is soon to be revealed to be female. The public display of affection between the two women leads to a 'blow to the pride' of the stationer's, since he had taken Sugar for a lady, which reforms his treatment of her immediately. This mistaken status is indicative of the social ladder Sugar has climbed as a prostitute. To Caroline, it is a mystery how Sugar was able to do this, as she thinks "there's not a single physical attribute of which she could honestly say that Sugar's is better than hers" and concludes that "[t]here must be more to her than meets the eye" (27). Appearance is contrasted here with health, as Sugar has a skin condition, as well as skill as a performer. Later on, Caroline wonders if Sugar's "animal serenity", "expensive clothes", as well as "never saying 'No'" (29) are what makes Sugar more attractive to men than she is. The narrator provides another reason; Sugar's excellent memory. Later on, Sugar's personal life is displayed by the narrator as if she were an open book, an object without a will of her own. She is revealed to have been a prostitute since she was thirteen years old, which the narrator finds 'disturbing', which lets the 21<sup>st</sup> century morality existent within them shimmer through (34). It is this paedophilia and "child-like innocence" (35) which also attracts men. She is described as being a girl of "peculiar habits", since she is literate and makes good use of it. This coincides with Sugar's feminism, as will be discussed later on.

Sugar's skills as a prostitute ultimately help her to climb the social ladder, since she is purchased by William and showered in money. Though she does not like William per se, she thinks him "no worse than most" adding he is "[v]ery generous" (281). At first, her having been purchased means liberation to Sugar (272) as she can live in luxury, though she soon finds she is a prisoner within her new abode in Priory Close, as she is mostly waiting for William to arrive. She decides to take matters into her own hands and begins to spy on the Rackham family in order to learn more about William. She is caught spying by Agnes a couple of times; though Agnes, in her poor (mental) health, envisions her as her guardian angel. Another example of how this elevation of status influences Sugar, is her reflection on the novel she had been writing. Her novel is identified as being autobiographical, minus the accounts of homicide against men. Sugar had intended her novel to be the one that disrupted Society's view on prostitution, and as Bodley puts it, "[t]here's a simply thundering call nowadays for books that destroy the fabric of our society" (62). However, Sugar's admittance to the higher spheres of Society makes her re-evaluate her attitude towards its members. She recognises the hatred and scorn that she once held, and experiences an almost existential crisis concerning her past. The goal of her novel was to help the case of the common prostitute, but the words have lost their meaning: "These melodramatic murders: what do they achieve? All

these straw men meeting grisly ends: what flesh-and-blood woman is helped by it?" (412) She continues to reread her work as it reveals a certain misogyny towards the upper class woman, in a way that is remarkably familiar to contemporary values, i.e. about slut-shaming, degradation of sex workers, and female purity equivalent to virginity. In fact, Sugar begins to see the real evil in her capital S 'Society':

"Why can't it be the factories that are smashed to the ground, the sweater's dens that are consumed in flames, rather than the opera houses and the fine homes? Why should the people living on a higher plane be dragged down to a lower, rather than those on a lower rising to a higher? Is it really such an unforgivable affectation to forget one's body, one's flesh, as a lady might do, and exist merely for thought and feeling?" (413-14)

Sugar's character development, made possible by William's accumulating fortune, shows just how much influence a man's control can have on a 'Fallen Woman'. In a sense, she is no longer her old, 'abandoned self' as William laments he once was in his youth. Rather, she grows to be able to see the two sides of the figurative coin. She deems her story to contain a "poisonous ugliness" that is only possible in one's life because they are not intelligent enough. The latter part of this reasoning is where Sugar goes wrong, having been gulled into believing social mobility is easy. It is this part where the aristocratic male sphere of influence comes in. Poverty becomes entertainment, as is shown in *The Fireside* (92). Though William initially holds socialist views (58), he does not pursue this ideology as soon as he has secured his inheritance. His previous position as a cuckold or failure coincides with this belief, as does Sugar's, albeit differently due to the differences in gender and connections. However, Faber streamlines the possibility for Sugar's turned stance by having William foreshadowing the 'seed' of conservative capitalist belief: Rackham believes Sugar to be undervalued, perhaps even spurned by men on account of, amongst other things, her "male intellect" (118). Be that as it may, it is Agnes who rejects the authority of books in a side-comment in respect to her toilet book: "Books never address what one really needs to know" (57), thereby again hinting to disappoint readers' expectations in this book as well.

### 2.3 Contemporary anxieties

With this last comment in mind, it is time to address anxiety within the novel. *The Crimson Petal and the White* is an attempt to provide not an alternative history, but a history that has been previously unrecorded, which still informs contemporary society. The struggle of the lower classes and the invalidation of women's experiences are still perpetrated to this day. One only needs to take one look at the United States of America, a society very much shaped by the British Victorian and colonial past, to see how wealth is distributed among its citizens; for instance, on 15 June 2015, Business Insider UK reports that "the bottom 80% of Americans have just 7% of the nation's wealth", citing a 2011 Harvard study conducted by Mike Norton and Dan Ariely. Another look, aimed at the Republican Party, also shows several woman-unfriendly statements, one of which was during the 2012 presidential election. Republican Senate candidate of Missouri, Todd Akin, claimed that "[i]f it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down" in response to whether a woman should have the option for abortion if she becomes pregnant as a result of rape. (qtd. in Graham) Though it is not directly related, Faber's novel deals with the fear of pregnancy through involuntary sex, regardless of prostitution. The potion prostitutes such as Caroline and Sugar use, and its accompanying ritual, is a desperate attempt to prevent pregnancy, since it would disrupt their sole source of income and even increase the costs of living. Both Amy Howlett's and Mrs Castaway's backgrounds serve as examples as to what is likely to happen. Amy Howlett's son, Christopher, is not just doing household chores: his function can easily be seen as a form of child labour, as he is a means to hold the women 'in place', so they can do their job more easily. Both Mrs Castaway's and Sugar's cases are a more extreme matter. Mrs Castaway is heavily implied to be Sugar's mother, or at least her adoptive mother, as Sugar recalls memories from her childhood. Her mother, being a prostitute, forces Sugar into the family business when she is thirteen. While Christopher has the privilege of being male, Sugar has no such privilege, and in order to earn her keep as Christopher does, she has to give up her body and become a 'Fallen Woman', despite the fact she only starts her menstruation cycle at the age of sixteen, and as such only then becomes a woman to Society. Femininity is a commodity in Faber's novel, one which men feel entitled to. For instance, William longs to tell Ashwell and Bodley about Sugar, yet he is aware that "all female treasures are in the public domain" (Faber 143). If this were not telling enough, the book William and his friends frequently consult; "More Sprees in London – Hints for Men about Town, with advice for greenborns" is the pillar of the objectification of women, since it describes the prostitutes as

well as the pleasures they provide, and how much a customer should expect to pay for said pleasures. It also provides the owner with the exact location of these prostitutes, and ultimately the book even rates them.

Faber does not explicitly use the term ‘feminism’, yet both Sugar and Mrs Fox are both feminists in their own regard. While Sugar fills the negative stereotype of a violent man-hater through her novel (227), Mrs Fox combines both her faith and rationale to see how fluid the position of the (‘fallen’) woman is, attempting to liberate prostitutes from the squalor of their position by doing work for the Rescue Society (not to be confused with Society). For instance, she remarks how an image is perpetuated by the mere standards of Society: Henry inquires after the attire of prostitutes, and Mrs Fox answers they wear “[t]he latest fashions, more or less”. Henry then asks if they “flaunt their bodies”, to which Emmeline replies after serious thought, “I suppose they do. But it isn’t with their attire so much as with the way they wear it. A dress which on me might appear perfectly decent, might be a Jezebel’s costume on them. The way they stand, and sit, and move, and walk, can be indecent in the extreme” (185). Decency is a social construct, and Henry’s consequent ruminations about the way an indecent woman would move as opposed to the manner in which a decent woman might move, proves how a constructed dichotomy has come to settle within Society’s conventions. It is not the clothing which Society blames; indeed, it is behaviour which is at fault, and the propriety of behaviour is usually instilled and fabricated by the very same Society. The fixedness of this portrayed standard is a reflection of today’s lack of guidelines. Women are still judged on their appearance and on their behaviour, but it is unclear to them when they act or dress in an ‘appropriate manner’. This restriction is most evident in dress codes at American high schools. Girls are often sent to the principal since their teachers find they ‘show too much skin’ which would ‘distract the boys’: in other words, a girl’s appropriateness is supposed to preserve a status quo that benefits boys’ education over that of the girls’ if this code of conduct is thought to be violated. This topic has sparked debate over the last couple of years (Zhou), and is reflected in Faber’s novel.

Agnes is also aware of her oppression and male entitlement, though she relates it to her (Catholic) faith on occasion. Not only does the novel suggest Agnes is repeatedly sexually assaulted by Doctor Curlew on his visits (Faber 161, 164, 165, 169-70, and 174-5), the way she experiences this is thoroughly described in the same passages. Her mind is no longer present in the physical world, and instead it wanders the world of dreams. Since rape is a certain cause for trauma, it is not unlikely this indicates a form of dissociation. This is reinforced by the way Agnes repeatedly sees herself as being out of her body, and views her

surroundings as being less real or being far removed from her. When the reader first witnesses Agnes' encounter with her abuser, she laments not having William recall Beatrice from fetching the doctor (158). Her first response to Curlew is that of avoidance, as she tells him she is "quite well now" (160). She "attempts to hide her rising panic with a coy half-smile" when he comments on her pallor. She then tries to dismiss him using all sorts of excuses, which he successfully refutes. She is, however, in doubt whether she is "mad to imagine that Doctor Curlew is bullying her" (161). If not the main cause of her illness, Curlew is certainly triggering her into dissociation, a common symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. Her imagining the Convent of Health is the manifestation of this coping mechanism as she tries to escape the reality. Faber makes excellent use of postmodernist fragmentation to reinforce the idea of trauma, as he divides this singular event between multiple scenes of multiple different characters. Agnes' loss of grip on reality, and the certainty her reappearing 'dream' offers her, provokes thought in her that serves as commentary on patriarchy. Agnes claims she does not believe in dreams, though her nocturnal journeys are described only as dreaming. Her faith leads her to believe that dreams are a part of waking reality, as any assumption for them to be unreal would "credit herself with the power of invention" and that she is "powerless to create" (220). Only God can create, yet men, "in their monstrous conceit and their shameless blasphemy [...] disown half of their lives, saying none of it exists, [that] it's all phantasmagoria!" (220). She proceeds to specify her point using the novelist. Men feign their work is the product of their own imagination, in spite of novelists inventing nothing. Their work is a "patchwork" of multiple truths, of which most are not their own (221). In their stead, Agnes prefers the work by women writers, because they state their work is a product of their own lives. William believes this to be a sign of lack of intellect in his wife, as he imagines her to be reading a book explaining male intellect to her: "*Great Thoughts Made Plain for Young Ladies*" (78). This is ironic, since he proves that the male intellectual elite write about the theoretical world, like he did, yet they do not have the faintest clue as to how the real world works (76). Furthermore, he believes governess novels, i.e. women's literature, to be "piffle" (102), though Sugar genuinely agrees with him. Indeed, her opinion here is not part of her performance; she wants to prevent her novel from "becoming one of those 'Reader, I married him' romances she so detests" (229). Both William and Sugar place products of men above women's, and are both victims of their error: they become the centrepiece of a plot belonging to the classic governess novel. This double irony is the focus of contemporary women's anxiety. Today's women and their accomplishments are still felt to be inferior to that of men's, which *The Crimson Petal and the White* corrects. In fact,

(learned) men, such as Doctor Curlew and William Rackham, can be seen to be a threat to women's safety, health, and social status. By vilifying men, Sugar fails to see the nuance of her liberation of prostitution, and does not recognise she is now dependent on William. Her assimilation into his Society depraves Sugar of her ideals as she transforms into an uncritical pawn of a plot she 'so detests'. She becomes that which she hates most, a hate that had been instilled in her since her childhood, as Mrs Castaway casually announces that "[m]en are not to anyone's taste" when discussing Jennifer Pearce's sexuality, failing to distinguish between sexual attraction and directed hatred (284).

Speaking of Jennifer Pearce's sexuality, if one returns to Eve Sedgwick's comment that 'coming out of the closet' is not a 'single absolute act' (see chapter 1.4), it is exactly Mrs Castaway's comment that blurs the "boundaries between self and other, subject and object, lover and beloved as the lesbian moment in any text" (Zimmerman qtd. in Barry 141). Of course, sexuality and gender tie in with the sexual revolution. As Cora Kaplan puts it, the text is "misanthropic rather than misogynist, women [being] the only sympathetic gender in the novel. [...] By having a more 'feminist', supportive take on intelligent manipulative women, and by folding Victorian pornographic language into his story, Faber inverts without really altering the antagonistic structure of gender in Fowles's novel" (99). However, Kaplan continues, Faber's novel is ultimately adhering to tradition, as Sugar for Sophie is the emblem of "the good maternal" bond.

In conclusion, the less-than-feminist Victorian world has been reworked and transformed into a projection of 21<sup>st</sup> century morals, as can be seen in Mrs Fox and the outrage she sparks, even with Henry. Though Agnes is powerless to create, authors like Sarah Waters and Michel Faber are not, since they take apart the era and recreate it according to their own desires and anxieties. How such transgressive acts come to be, then, is discussed in the next chapter.

## Conclusive Analyses

Contemporary anxieties are a common motif in 21<sup>st</sup> century literature, and Neo-Victorian literature has shown to be no exception to this. There is a vast range of many different anxieties varying in size and scope, and this thesis discussed the ones in the niches of the LGBT+ community, feminism, gender, and sexuality. However, Neo-Victorian authors have a peculiar interest in their chosen period, since they “continue to take aesthetic pleasure in invoking the Victorian, a pleasure tinged with another sort of unease, associated with the mix of familiarity and strangeness which Freud theorised as the uncanny, and which surfaces when we do that tempting and transgressive thing and try to imagine ourselves in the past or the past in our present”. (Kaplan 11) Cora Kaplan continues to explain the appeal of projecting contemporary anxieties onto a previous historical period:

“The strange belatedness of the literary imagination, the way in which it often lags behind the real-time of belief systems while making its own thrifty use of its remnants and discards, is one element in the continuing popularity of fictional Victoriana. Sexuality may be the leitmotif of these fictions, but other themes emerge as they too become emblems of a past whose power over the present had been broken. When the end of class society in Britain was declared in the post-war decades, Victorian class culture became another available antiquarian topic for fiction to explore, its taboos and excesses almost as exciting and exotic as Victorian sexuality. And as Britain’s industrial heart declines and disappeared, so writers turned their gaze, with something less than nostalgia, onto the nineteenth-century culture of work. Above all, however, these novels were a symptom of a surprisingly passionate reinvestment in the language and structures of Victorian print culture, especially its fiction and poetry, a reignited affair with a rich and reliable old flame, long neglected and foolishly abandoned for the cosmopolitan delights of literary modernism”. (Kaplan 86-7)

Indeed, it is here that one can see that the historical element is a gap between two periods, and once one crevice has been filled, such as the industrial period, literature continues to cover the next. This is not merely speculation: it can be observed in Sarah Waters herself. After writing her trio of ‘Vic-Lit’ novels (*Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002)), she changed the historical time period of the Victorians to that of the World Wars:

*The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Little Stranger* (2009) are both set in the 1940s, while *The Paying Guests* (2014) is set in the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Great War. It can then be concluded that historical fiction is nothing new or out of the extraordinary; it appears to be a trend in itself the last couple of decades to revisit historical time periods and rework them so they fit contemporary anxieties.

Kaplan also notes the trope of the ‘elusive, exceptional woman’ within Neo-Victorian writings. This woman, she notes, is a portrayal of ‘transgressive female sexuality’.

“Treated today with more sympathy than censure, resistant and/or transgressive Victorian women quickly became a staple cliché of this genre of Victoriana, their redemption through work of different sorts reflecting their authors’ implicit faith in the crude moral economy that replaces lust with labour. Almost all of the novels in this genre, from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* through Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*, find this figure irresistible: from the late 1960s onwards she remains oddly durable in the hands of leading writers, even when her mild lesbian proclivities – hinted at in a brief voyeuristic peek in Fowles, homophobically expressed in Byatt – become a more complicated sexual and social identity in Waters.” (Kaplan 109)

Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* is a novel filling the niche of LGBT+ literary representation. As Waters herself indicated, there have been many authors before her working outside of the heteronormative standards of society. However, most of these works have gained little to no recognition, as events such as gay rights have only started to gain awareness since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The year 2002 appears to have been the right time for the publication of Waters’s lesbian novel, noting the book was shortlisted for both the Man Booker Prize and Orange Prize of the same year.

Waters’s *mimesis* of both the Victorian sensation novel as well as the gothic contributed to the reading of her novel as an example of ‘new’ lesbian genealogy. The display of several same-gender relationships and the differences between them made it possible to clear up some misconceptions about LGBT+ people. The continual strife in the narrative has kept it from becoming an ‘all’s well that ends well’ story, making the point of the story as real as life. Indeed, same-sex relationships are not much different to heterosexual ones. They hold the same value: they can be healthy or toxic, passionate or frigid, overt or covert.

*Fingersmith* retraces the word ‘queer’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and invokes not only the contemporaneous meaning of ‘peculiar’ and ‘odd’, as well as its meaning of sexuality

deviating from default heterosexuality. Moreover, it attempts to break down the default by normalising this perceived deviation. It is also an endeavour to reclaim the negative connotation of the word as a slur, which is still used in this regard against gay people. However, this overtly pursuit of reclaiming the word still indicates that the word is not to be used freely, as the LGBT+ community has suffered under the term and the wound is still fresh. This thesis strove to minimise the use of the word as a generalising term because of this.

Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* is an excellent example of how the rigidity of societal conventions is not the perfect means for any form of escapism, but engagement. Its explicitness and vulgarity, and, indeed, the metafictional element of the narrator especially, warns the reader this book is not like any other Neo-Victorian novel; it does not take into consideration any romanticised views of the past. It contrasts itself against the familiarity of the Neo-Victorian image and the treatment of the reader as a friend: Faber's fiction will not have any of it. The novel does not offer a definite conclusion in order to simulate real life and reflect a real contemporary anxiety: life will not offer anyone a clear ending. Waters's conclusion is one of the culminations of strife and the acceptance of the past as it was, without providing her characters a restoration of any happiness.

Faber's use of irony in the novel works to provide the classic narrative of a governess novel, although it does not have the same 'purity' or 'sanctity' of marriage or any harmony between master-servant relationships. For instance, Clara steals from the Rackham household, William is offered the possibility of sexually abusing Letty and getting away with it, and Sugar's liberation is really entrapment within the domestic sphere of which she breaks loose.

The issue of gender is also prominent here: femininity is commonly regarded as a commodity or being in the public domain, accessible to any male. It is through Henry that Faber provides the reader with an example of how men should treat their lover: with respect and care, something inherently lacking in William and Agnes' marriage. This accessibility of the female body becomes the subject of hypocrisy through William, reflecting contemporary issues of slut-shaming and fidelity. His fear of having a contender for Agnes, though he commits adultery himself on a regular basis, is a form of male entitlement to the extreme. Faber dissolves the possibility of this entitlement by purposefully neglecting to inform the reader where Sugar and Sophie end up, giving them back their privacy, which functions as a shield from the public dominion of men.

A similarity between the two novels is, ironically enough, the motif of books or literature throughout both narratives. Whereas *Fingersmith* uses books as ways of both

domination and liberation, as well as difference, *The Crimson Petal and the White* lets literature function as contenders between masculinity and femininity, and as a common ground as well. Maud Lilly is initially a victim to the pornographic books her uncle has her read, a prisoner suffering emotional neglect and sexual abuse through impression. The latter observation should be taken carefully, as it is hazardously close to contemporaneous belief that ‘too much literature’ endangers women. Later on, she is freed from both her uncle as her ‘master’ and finds that her training is useful for her to make a living. The epistolary plot devices are that of revelation, and shows how Sue has been kept in the dark through not only the contract her mother signed, but also the letter Gentleman wrote to Maud, which explicitly stated their intentions with Sue. Though Maud did have the intellectual means and the knowledge to inform Sue of what was hers, she is instructed by Mrs Sucksby not to do so, which separates being book-smart from being street-smart.

Faber’s novel exposes the divide between gender status through the use of fiction. Agnes indulges herself in women’s literature, as well as spiritualism and guides to women’s fashion. Clara reads Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Their tastes to literature are considered to be inferior to men’s tastes and productions of literature. Both Sugar and William regard their mutual masculine intellect as superior. Their attempts to reflect real life in theoretical works or fiction ultimately leads to failure to grasp the complex machineries of real life as they are subjected to positions in literature they deem so worthless. This becomes their ruin. However, literature also serves as a common ground between the two, as their mutual interest connects them and fixates the point of their relationship, though it breaks them up in the end as well.

Through the close reading of both novels, this thesis endeavoured to settle how the conventions of the Victorian past is reflected in Neo-Victorian literature, and how it informs the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well. A link has been established between the portrayals of those who have historically been on the background – LGBT+, women, and those without expression of sexuality – and the perpetual status of them nowadays. The novels discussed delineate from a common remark from critics that historical fiction tends to be only escapism. Neither of these novels suggests having such a goal in mind. Instead, they draw from 21<sup>st</sup> century anxieties and deliver narratives reminiscent of them and invoke a historical past as their projection. They do not offer an alternative history; instead, they provide a history that might as well have been, fitting within the well-recorded Victorian Era.

Further research can be done on how new productions treat women: are they still the clichéd ‘elusive, exceptional woman’? If so, what are the effects and what does it say about contemporary anxieties? If not, what has changed and does it reflect new standards of

morality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Novels that can be looked at include Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable Creatures* (2010), Emma Donoghue's *The Sealed Letter* (2008), and Peter Carey's *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012). However, such research is of course not limited to what Kaplan calls Victoriana. Researchers can turn to the World Wars, for instance, just as Sarah Waters has done.

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Student number: 4191897