

Claire O'Callaghan

SARAH WATERS: GENDER AND SEXUAL POLITICS

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Review by Melanie White

“When feminism meets queer theory, no introduction seems necessary,” says critic Elizabeth Weed in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (1997). However, Claire O'Callaghan's analysis of both in *Sarah Waters: Gender & Sexual Politics* shows that a great deal of careful negotiation is, in fact, required to navigate their often contradictory perspectives and priorities.

O'Callaghan usefully examines each of Waters' six historical novels in turn, focusing on the tensions between gender and sexual politics in her first three neo-Victorian novels (*Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *Fingersmith*), then examining the responses of these discourses toward heteropatriarchal “normalcy” in her 1940s novels (*The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger*) and her most recent, 1920s-set work, *The Paying Guests*.

Given the thorny nature of her task, by necessity O'Callaghan's approach does not allow for much cross-textual comparison, but she unpicks the nuances of each novel with sensitive political and literary insight. Following her unpacking of the conceptions of womanhood embodied by cross-dressing Nancy in *Tipping the Velvet*, and the meaning of lesbianism during a period before it was recognised in *Affinity*, she embarks on a rather less obvious take on *Fingersmith*, pitching it as a “metafiction” that challenges, through Maud and Sue's relationship, the conventions of male-oriented pornography. She shows how Maud's narrative, in which she is coerced into working in her uncle's pornographic library, reflects “that the culture surrounding pornography is a regime of violence and power over women.” Pleasingly, given that Maud ends up inheriting her uncle's house and taking over his library of “poisons”, O'Callaghan invokes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: “That Maud has literally claimed her uncle's space in the library suggests that Waters reconceptualises pornography as a space for women.”

O'Callaghan goes on to show how Waters mines post-war circumstances to explore the effect of a return to “heteronormativity” on her marginalised characters in *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests*, emphasising the pressures of domesticity in the latter. The odd man out (literally) among all six novels is *The Little Stranger*, the only one to feature a male protagonist, Dr. Faraday. In examining Faraday's “hegemonic masculinity”, O'Callaghan finds the greatest alignment between feminist and queer theories, for here they are united against a common oppressor: “heteropatriarchy, its pernicious means of operation and the distorted means by which ‘non-conforming’ gendered and sexual subjects (male and female alike) are often suffocated.”