



# Desire and Madness: The Construction of Female Narrative Subjects in *Fingersmith* from the Perspective of Foucault's Theory

Jiaqi Lu(✉)

School of Foreign Studies, East China University of Political Science and Law,  
Shanghai 201620, China  
190606020017@ecupl.edu.cn

**Abstract.** *Fingersmith*, the final book in British novelist Sarah Waters' Victorian trilogy, is dedicated to Victorian lesbians through multiple narratives, depicting a history of a marginalized community forging their own identity. Adopting Foucault's theory, this thesis examines their suppression of desire, their confinement due to the accusation of madness, and their self-recreation through loving each other, which reveals how masculine power discourse suppresses feminine discourse of expressing loving desire by linking female desire to female madness. When the relationship of two female narrative subjects progresses from misunderstanding to mutual dependence, the patriarchal logos and order based on a single value are deconstructed. Therefore, an open text is constructed, which rewrites the patriarchal narrative of desire and madness as well as offering a dialogue with postmodern feminine consciousness.

**Keywords:** *Fingersmith* · Sarah Waters · Foucault · Desire · Madness · Narrative Subjects

## 1 Introduction

As a doctor of literature on queer historical fictions, Sarah Waters fills the hidden vacancy of Victorian lesbian history in a rigorous and imaginative approach in *Fingersmith*. Her modern revision of the Victorian anecdotes not only parodies Dickensian style of suspense discourse, but also offers a pluralistic characteristic with the respective narrative voices of Sue and Maud, the two female protagonists.

The previous researches on *Fingersmith* have focused more on the themes of lesbian identity as well as “confinement of the madwoman”, but little has been done to link the primary elements of the novel, including desire and madness, let alone explore their internal logic. This paper, therefore, will focus on Waters' narrative technique of dual narratives by splitting the novel into three organic parts—desire, madness and self according to its tripartite structure to explore how the protagonists are repressed, constrained and ultimately reconstruct the female subjects. This paper will apply the theories of Foucault from a feminist perspective, whose social researches on the premise

of history “have provided valuable tools for challenging issues of sexuality, gender, and madness” [1]. The thesis will provide an in-depth analysis of how Waters writes about the dynamics between female desire and female madness by constructing separate discourses of personal authority for the two protagonists, thereby dispelling male power discourses as well as establishing independent yet complementary female subjectivities.

## 2 The Desire Repressed

This fiction focused on historically-obscured female desire is set in the 1850s-60s when pornography firstly became “a distinct category as a modern concept” [2] as Foucault argues, “Victorian sexuality discourse makes the sexual acts aimed at pleasure instead of procreation, namely pornography, gain its specific proof of existence while exercising its repressive authority” [3]. Although the famous “repressive hypothesis” holds that “sexual discourse is silenced while sexuality is repressed by culture and morality” [1], there is still plenty of evidence—such as the works of Henry Spencer Ashbee, the erotic collector as the archetype of Christopher Lilly—to demonstrate that pornography “acted as a constituent part of how the Victorian period negotiated sexuality” [4]. However, in this process, what’s been affirmed is male desire, what’s been encouraged is phallogentric pornography. On the other hand, not only the universal power discourse but also the sexual discourse featuring patriarchal autocracy, continues to stifle and conceal female desire, rendering it misunderstood and even twisted.

Sue is typically subjected to identity repression through the social universal discourse. As the accomplice of Richard Rivers, who goes by the alias Gentleman, Sue believes that she is to scam a rich yet ignorant lady as her maid at Briar. In the first section (chapters 1–6), readers follow Sue’s perspective into the narration to experience her affections for Maud as well as her agony under a preconceived assumption that Maud is the victim. The emotional repression of Sue first shows up as deceitful guilt: “But if I did (tell her the truth), she’d find me out for the villain I was.” [5]. Sue disguises her intolerance to disturb Maud’s fate by her desire for money, but she is unable to overcome her love by distancing herself from Maud deliberately. She constantly anticipates how others will respond: “I imagined word of it getting back to Lant Street...I thought of John’s laugh”, “how would I do, back in the Borough with her at my side?” [5]. Despite the “very secretive history of lesbianism” [6] in the Victorian era, the heterosexual narratives that have long dominated social discourse have already established a mainstream authority, forming a measurement of uniqueness, namely a universal discourse to enslave and discipline the mass by “instilling forms of self-awareness” [1]. In the context of secular paradigm, Sue becomes frightened of her own special identity, realizing that being lesbian denotes being an outcast. She is more afraid of being discovered to be in love with a girl than she is of her mission’s failure. In this self-incarceration, the imaginary “mockery from Lant Street” represents internalized disciplinary power that “functions consciously and automatically” [7], whereupon Sue, “the prisoner, becomes her own guard” [1], enabling the continuation of self-criticism and even punishment. The self-discipline created by the universal discourse of social power promotes a single value, which suppresses Sue’s expression of loving desire and results in her confusion about her self-identity.

On other hand, the exclusivity of the patriarchal master discourse is to blame for the sexual repression Maud suffers from. Maud, who has previously been described unilaterally, assumes the role of narrator in the second portion (chapters 7–11). Her narrating voice responds to Sue’s voice in a certain period, yet sometimes conflicts with Sue’s in different details (for example, Sue recounts how Maud desperately kisses her on the wedding night, which turns out to be a tragic parting in Maud’s narration). Maud’s inner suffering is revealed in the subversive narration, breaking her passive image in the previous texts while breeding suspense. In order to get rid of the status of her uncle’s assistant, she conspires with Rivers to send Sue to a madhouse in exchange for her freedom. Maud believes that she has long been numbed after being exposed to pornography as an apathetic, restrained “librarian she was bred to be” [5]. Nevertheless, when she gets along with Sue, her loving desire from the origin of life gradually awakens and battles with her desire to be free, giving rise to her fear towards her innate feelings which differs from the male eroticism of the paradigm. “But I thought desire smaller, neater; I supposed it bound to its own organs as taste is bound to the mouth, vision to the eye. This feeling haunts and inhabits me, like a sickness. It covers me, like skin.” [5] The rude awakening emphasizes how the desires of the female subject and those described from a male perspective are essentially disparate: the former advocates diversity and refuses to be defined, while the latter is of limited logos standards. The operating norms Victorian pornography abides by are the “result of specific cultural conventions and mechanisms of power” [1], which shapes pornography into a cultural phenomenon of phallogentrism. After reading her uncle’s collection for the first time, young Maud surreptitiously observes the body of her maid but is greatly perplexed because she only finds the pornography “filled with falsehoods” [5]. It suggests how women get apprehensive about the feminine body and even femininity due to the rigid behavioral norms disciplined by the perfect expectations of patriarchal master discourse. This unilateral discipline also implies the power relations between the sexes: Men are dominant holders with absolute authority while women are objects being gazed at, as Maud describes, women “have been ticketed, and noted and shelved—so nearly do I resemble one of uncle’s books” [5]. During the process of otherization by patriarchal master discourse, the pair of gloves required for book organization serves as an iconic symbol of repression: it symbolizes norms and “barriers literally and figuratively preventing Maud” [8] from engaging in pornography, hindering the expression of her desire. Young Maud “ceases struggling, surrenders herself to the viscid, circular currents” [5] of male disciplines because of her uncle’s whipping; she later “swallows down her desire, as she has swallowed down grief, and rage” [5] for the reason that she could not break free on the premise of breaking disciplines to fully express her subjective feelings.

Waters’ writing successfully achieves a complex dynamic with both complements and conflicts by subtly dividing the full picture of a specific incident into two portions of narrations unfolding from the perspectives of two heroines respectively. The primary plot of the story appears to be a covert confrontation between two conspiracies, which undermines the narrative authority established in each text by creating “suspense and ambiguity due to the reversal of the plots” [9] throughout the story. Meanwhile, the similar depictions of how Sue and Maud are unable to speak from their true minds also point to the general repression of female desire in the Victorian era as well as the coercive

power of patriarchal discipline behind it, making their respective narrative voices echo and resonate.

### 3 Constrain the Madness

With “the logic of standardization implied in capitalist development oriented toward masculine rationalization through subjugating feminine libido” [10], logos shadowed and ruled over madness in the form of patriarchal discourse during modernization. Therefore, madness has been reduced from a “secret nature revealing the truth” [11] to “the manifestation of non-being” [11]. The prevalence of asylums in Victorian era further demonstrated how madness was placed in a framework of moral codes, and how lunatics were “designated as the object of all measures of confinement” [11], the enslaved “Other”. In chapters 11–15, Waters, through both narrations of Maud and Sue of their incarcerations, portrays the survival predicament of Victorian women by revealing how masculine power discourse has accused feminine expressions of feelings of illogical madness.

The fluidity and diversity of female physical traits make this unique empire the target of criticism from those who believe in the logos moral concept of certainty and absolute identity. As an example, Rivers cuts himself to simulate Maud’s first night of bleeding during the “fleeing”, but finds it unbearable later: “What monsters you females must be, to endure this (spilling of one’s own blood) month upon month. No wonder you are prone to madness” [5]. His opinion suggests a rife discrimination that men, who never experience menstruation, misinterpret it as a flowing and broken sense of abnormality out of their ignorance and egotism. As part of the ongoing censorship of women as castrated subjects and mutilated objects, “their speech is censored at the same time” [12]. Women’s interaction with literature is therefore defined as a malaise caused by fantasy and “sentiments less controlled by the gentle laws of nature” [12], as the doctor of the asylum states: “the over-exposure of girls to literature leads to a nation of brain-cultured women” [5]. So, ironically, Sue is sent to asylum under a trumped-up charge of being “over-indulged in literature and have inflamed her organs of fancy” [5] in the name of Maud. Another excuse of the imprisonment is Maud’s lesbian complex, as rivers put it, “the gross attention attempted to force on (Sue) in her madness” [5]. Lesbians are perceived as depraved figures who can’t “find their place within the social order” [11] because of their heterodox preferences and taboo desires. The asylum then institutionalizes them as outcasts by providing them with an alternative space separate from society. As a typical method of masculine power discourse to oppress dissidents, their aberration is strictly suppressed throughout the confinement to correct their madness.

Meanwhile, the improper therapy of female morals breeds a new kind of madness presented in a hysterical expression of emotions and desires. Lunatic, both an object and a result of oppression, fully embodies the truth of punishing power that “a sojourn in a house of correction necessarily leads to madness” [11]. “The more she protests, the more the madhouse keepers will read it as a form of lunacy; and so keep her the closer” [5]. As a result, Sue acts more and more like other patients the longer she stays in the asylum: she starts to have chaotic memories and frequent nightmares; she gradually

grows used to being beaten and scolded; she stops insisting she isn't Maud and even accepts her "insanity". As Angela Carter notes, "a free woman in an unfree society will be a monster" [13]. The madhouse is a miniature society which acts as a mirror image where Sue could "observe herself but in other patients" [11]. When the observation of others gradually transforms into the scrutiny of herself in this mirror, she could vaguely "recognize herself as objectively mad", which results in the gradual dissolution of her authoritative subject, and her conduct will be reshaped from fierce protest to numbness and acceptance eventually.

While Sue's hysterical discourse of rebellion is progressively corrected by the discipline of asylum, Maud is also fulfilling her hysterical discourse in a self-destructive way in her new captivity after Brair. She is taken to the dark thieves' den in Lant Street and finds out she has swapped identities with Sue since infancy. In this metamorphosed asylum, she is constrained similarly to Sue as an extension of imprisonment in Brair. The disguised house arrest posing as attentive care makes Mrs Sucksby a warden; the chastisement from Rivers after Maud's initial attempt to flee becomes a practice of punishing power; the visit to "the home for destitute women" shatters her resistance and hope. Therefore, the impressions of confinement lead to Maud's symptoms of "compulsive behaviors of caged animals" [14] including food anxiety, glove dependence and other disorders, leaving her no choice but to vent her frustration with confinement on her own body. Finally, in despair, Maud "fancies herself defeated and gives herself up to darkness" [5]. Her pallor and thinness can thus be seen as "the physical expression of an internal conflict" [15].

On top of that, Foucault proposed another form of madness other than the corollary of compulsive punishment: "that of desperate passion" [11]. As he explains, madness is "a suspension of passion" from the "love disappointed or deceived" [11]. Sue is furious about Maud's deceit in the asylum, but Maud's gloves she keeps secretly becomes "all she has to keep her nerve up" [5]. She bites the gloves to vent her rage while couldn't bear to have them taken away, making them a symbol of her unrequited love for Maud, a mix of desire and hatred. Maud, on the other side, keeps stressing her fear of forgetting Sue, her anxiety to find Sue, and even suffers from a mental breakdown because of her remorse for cheating on Sue. The reversal of identities creates suspense, leaving their relationship to be re-evaluated. It is, in this new context as well as the segregated spaces for lesbians, do they confirm their love and identify themselves as homosexuals. Imprisonment attempts to reconstruct their desires which defy the paradigms, but in fact, it strips them of the objects of their desires as well as suppresses their discourse of expression, leaving a "permanent void in the castrated subject" [16]. The madness caused by their repressed love and desire serves not only as an inevitable byproduct of intolerance, but also as a hysterical expression to fill this vacancy.

Waters' writing convincingly presents "a paradoxical circle" [11] between madness and confinement through a dual narrative approach in which the narrations of two female protagonists complement one another with their own experiences of confinement. Their individual experiences provide a complete picture of how punishing power accuses rich female emotion of madness when it doesn't conform to phallus culture, as well as how female resistance and self-destruction to "confinement which symbolizes profound unreason" [11] are defined as hysteria. By exposing the fallacious treatment of madness

in masculine power discourse, the hysterical voices of Maud and Sue attempt to “fill the void left by the deprivation of their desire objects” [16].

#### 4 Love and Self

As the state of imprisonment shapes the repressed, the accusation of madness assimilates the condemned, Hysteria appears to be a common yet incomplete discourse of women regardless of whether they intend to avoid harm or combat oppression by emotional catharsis. It is not an “effective form of female protest” [15] as it serves as a substitute of narration which couldn’t become the utter truth and “renders the sufferer weak as a culture controlling female body by turning women against their own bodies” [15]. In chapters 15–17, through the sole narration of Sue, Waters describes how Sue and Maud use their own fingers to deconstruct the confinement of patriarchal discourse and reconstruct feminine discourse through the process of “gradually recreating themselves through the other” [17].

To analyze how Sue and Maud recreate themselves after their separate confinements, this paper must first discuss their failed attempt, starting with a sexual encounter violating secular regulations. This unique feminine life experience begins with Maud acting ignorant, asking “what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night” [5], and then “transforms into mutual passion of girls” [18], transiently affirming the existence of self. However, the weight of reality during the day overwhelms this true connection at night. The secrecy and deception between them restore this rebellion to the masquerade of “imitating heterosexual desire” [18] rather than a continuous and complete love expression and sexual communication through the caress between lesbians. “In your dream? I don’t think so, miss. Not me. I should say, Mr Rivers” [5] Sue’s timidity towards her sexuality denies her revelation and submits her role to Rivers. It is this psychological barrier in between that maintains the desire confluence at an incomplete stage of imitation, making the two narrative voices independent authorities that resonates yet are unable to intermingle.

Sue harbors complex feelings for Maud after learning of her betrayal, of which the love is opaque, but the want for retaliation pushes her to break free from confinement, resulting in a genuine rebellion and deconstruction. She duplicates the key and manages to flee “the abusive amalgam of heterogeneous elements” [11] with Brair’s knife-boy, Charles’s assistance. This flight essentially differs from the one Rivers abets due to Sue’s free will and the fact she is utilizing her own power. The lock is a symbol of the confinement of the prisoner while the key, a tool to awaken the self, opens the way to freedom. Extra attention should be given to the act of duplication since if Sue steals the key, she is only “taking possession in order to internalize or manipulate masculine way things work” [12]. Instead, the shoddy counterfeit key which stuck to every usage is like a pair of homemade wings, granting Sue the original opportunity to “crumble, ridicule the bar of separation” [12]. With her thieving skills learned from Lant Street, Sue, as a “Fingersmith”, develops her novel way of deconstructing patriarchal regulations and “flies away from the dominant culture to a space where new images, new narratives and new subjectivities can be created” [19].

Another grand carnival of deconstruction takes place before Maud’s flee from Briar. The brass finger positioned at the door of the library prohibits entry, making this room

of pornography “an enclosed space governed by authority and hierarchy” [9], so it isn’t enough for Maud to just flee from this place of confinement. She sneaks into uncle’s library to slash his cherished books: “But the book does not shriek. Rather, it sighs, as if in longing for its own laceration; and when I hear that, my cuts become swifter and more true” [5]. The sighs in the book are like Maud’s own imprisoned voices since pornography serves as a cultural product of patriarchal sexual discourse. By destroying the carrier of the male gaze paradigm, the scrutiny from the implicit discipline of pornography is eliminated as she deconstructs a patriarchal desire field. As a result, she frees her voice and liberates herself from the passive role of assistant. The act of destroying the precious books also constitutes a symbolic castration of her uncle since pornographic collections are also employed to coerce Maud as a signifier of authority, by which she liberates herself from the oppressive patriarchal sexual discourse. The psychological trauma of castration soon leads to Mr Lilly’s death, followed by the breakdown of implicit order, while the rebirth of Brair provides Maud with the chance to reconstruct her own discourse.

After Rivers’s death and Mrs Sucksby’s execution, Sue finally discovers her origins and realizes that “Maud had tried to save her yet she had wanted to kill Maud” [5]. When the truth is revealed, “the walls keeping out her love for Maud bursts” [5], Sue finally dares to confess her “weirdness” to Dainty, her companion at Lant Street as the agent of secular perspectives. As the dust settles, Sue and Maud are reunited at Briar while Maud’s literacy creations have turned the manor into a room of their own for women. In this space where feminine writing replaces masculine pornography, the imagery of “Fingersmith” referring to a skillful burglar extends in a cultural sense. Discarding the gloves which used to cover her fingers, Maud no longer cares about stains compulsively: instead, she presses her “fingers dark with smudges of ink” [5] boldly onto the paper, leaving her words, voices, opinions and desires in the world of pornography dominated by men. Through her experience dealing with pornography and her understanding of the connection between female madness and female desires, she acquires a “liberatory knowledge of diverse investigations of patriarchal order and consciousness-raising” [20] to challenge her destiny. In this way, she can “destabilize entrenched social ideologies that encourage female submission and oppression” [8] in a “definitely feminist erotic perspective” [6]. In contrast to what Foucault argues, “to free oneself from one set of norms only meant adopting different norms in their stead” [1], Maud’s creation represents the authentic feminine sexuality as a “rewrite of male narratives” [18] about love and equality, which is accordingly subversive and exploratory. She regards herself as a unique subject “like no girls” [5] due to her life experience of feminine love, so as transforming a limited and closed text governed by logos into a free and open text. In addition to “offering a corrective to the inheritance of a male-dominated pornography trade” [8], her erotic creations also become an expression of female subjectivity, which no longer masquerades as a heterosexual expression of love but is recounted in her own voice, “filled with all the words for how she wants Sue” [5]. In the end, Sue and Maud read together and share their loving desire for each other, build their own identities and allow their voices to reverberate in this nest of love which overthrows the patriarchal order.

Water fervently depicts the process by which Sue and Maud overcome the many misunderstandings and shackles placed between the two by patriarchal regulations through Sue’s singular narrative. By deconstructing the products of patriarchal culture such as



the key to asylum and phallographic pornography, the confinement symbolized by gloves is replaced by the emancipation of “Fingersmith” as an open narrative identity shared by the two. The othering community of lesbians accomplishes the social practice of exploring female sexual discourse while narrating their own desires, reestablishing a pluralistic “self” through text reconstruction. The walls between the women finally dissolve in the final heartfelt conversation, whereupon Maud’s voice echoes Sue’s narrative, forming a chorus of two authoritative subjects writing about female loving desire together.

## 5 Conclusion

As a post-Victorian novel, Waters constructs the respective narrative authority of two heroines in a dual-voice narrative. She writes about women’s search for identity and the establishment of subjectivity in their exploration of the relationship between desire and madness through the process of their narrative voices colliding and blending. The ambiguity of narrative detail caused by the barrier in between heightens the suspense of the novel, suggesting that they resist giving to a centralized, grander narrative subject; as the barrier breaks down, the narrative voices of both intertwine, which strengthens the certainty of their own subjectivities. The authority of previous narrative traditions is undermined by this original narrative device, which represents postmodern pluralism. While discipline inhibits desire and logos enslaves madness, these two elements are gradually equated: the repression and demonization of female desire as well as the othering and confinement of female madness serve as the two fundamental obstacles to Victorian female self-realization. By deconstructing this logic of the patriarchal system, the oppressive discourse of masculine power is dissolved, and women are free to reconstruct an open and life-experienced discourse of female desire, to write about “self” with their subjectivity.

## References

1. Oksala, Johanna, *How to Read Foucault*. W.W. Norton & Co., New York (2008).
2. Ferguson, Frances.: *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism did to Action*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2004).
3. MingAn,Wang.: *Sex and Democracy*. In: Giddens, Anthony.: *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*, pp. 1–12. Social Sciences Academic Press, Beijing (2013).
4. Frederickson, Kathleen.: *Victorian pornography and the laws of genre*. *Literature Compass* 8.5, 304–312(2011).
5. Waters, Sarah.: *Fingersmith*. Riverhead Books, New York (2002).
6. Kai di. Sarah Waters on lesbian literature and historical fiction. [https://www.thepaper.cn/newDetail\\_forward\\_1879906](https://www.thepaper.cn/newDetail_forward_1879906), late accessed 2022/09/08.
7. Foucault, Michel.: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin Books Ltd., London (2019).
8. Miller K.A.: *Sarah Waters’s Fingersmith: Leaving women’s fingerprints on Victorian pornography*. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*4(1), (2008).
9. Zhen, Yao.: *Rewriting the Female Romance: On the Postmodern Narrative Strategies in Fingersmith*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature* 35(03), 92–97 (2014).



10. Felski, Rita.: *The Gender of Modernity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (1995).
11. Foucault, Michel.: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Routledge, Abington (2001).
12. Cixous, Hélène, et al.: *The Laugh of the Medusa*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (vol. 1, no. 4), 875–893 (1976).
13. Carter, Angela.: *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. Penguin Books, New York (1979).
14. Showalter, Elaine.: *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (1977).
15. Ladylike Lunacy Hysteria and the Female Body in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*, [https://www.academia.edu/27531446/Ladylike\\_Lunacy\\_Hyteria\\_and\\_the\\_Female\\_Body\\_in\\_Sarah\\_Waters\\_Fingersmith\\_Tammy\\_Kaye](https://www.academia.edu/27531446/Ladylike_Lunacy_Hyteria_and_the_Female_Body_in_Sarah_Waters_Fingersmith_Tammy_Kaye), last accessed 2022/09/08.
16. Jiang, Lan.: From Master Discourse to Universal Discourse: An Analysis of Four Discourses Theoried in Lacan's Lectures XII. *World Philosophy* (05), 77–88 (2011).
17. Beauvoir de Simone.: *The Second Sex*. Jonathan Cape, London (1956).
18. Yurttas Hatice.: Masquerade in *Fingersmith*. *Journal of narrative theory*48(1), 109–134 (2018).
19. YiYao, Guo.: *Poetic Writing of Sexual Difference: A Study of Hélène Cixous's Écriture Féminine*. Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, Beijing (2013).
20. Ramazanoglu, Caroline.: *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*. Routledge, London and New York (1993).

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

