

Neo-Victorian Sapphic femme fatales: manipulation and double game in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*.

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Abstract

The concept of a manipulative evil woman, the seductive and dangerous femme fatale in literature results from historical oppression of the female voice and the patriarchal nature of writing. The prevalent male perspective has depicted a femme fatale as a direct threat to masculine power and dominance. Such a portrayal of woman has been deeply ingrained in literary tradition and became a timeless archetype. Yet, in her neo-Victorian novel *Affinity* (1999) Sarah Waters broke this pattern by queering the archetypal femme fatale with the creation of two Sapphic evil sirens - Ruth Vigers and Selina Dawes, who attempt to corrupt and manipulate other women through their sexuality, labyrinth of lies, deception and disguise. *Affinity* tells the story of Margaret Prior - a spinster from a respectable family who after the loss of her female lover and the death of her scholarly father takes up a new "mission" and becomes a visitor in Milbank Prison for women. While pursuing her new endeavor, Margaret falls in love with one of the convicts - Selina Dawes, a spiritual medium, who manipulates Margaret into helping her escape jail. In her naive search for happiness Margaret fails to notice that her fate has been meticulously planned and orchestrated by a person from Selina's past, who now became a part of Margaret's own present - Ruth Vigers. Therefore this paper focuses on the rules of double game and the ways of manipulation used by the queer femme fatales - Dawes and Vigers - on different women in the novel. I will also argue that from the perspective of queer theory a lesbian femme fatale is twice as dangerous as a heterosexual one and that Waters' creation of such Machiavellic lesbian characters challenges the normative - patriarchal way of depicting women as posing a threat to male dominance.

Key Words: Sarah Waters, *Affinity*, *femme fatale*, queer theory, lesbian novel, sexuality,

Although *femme fatale* as a recurring literary and artistic motif has become a perdurable image throughout the ages it has been identified as a phenomenon most specific to the late 19th century¹. Originating in the Biblical winged and bird-footed Lilith, the enigmatic nature of *femme fatale*

made her ‘a powerful and threatening figure, bearing a sexuality that is perceived to be rapacious, or fatal to her male partners’². With the Victorian re-invention of a ‘fatal woman’ resulting from the growing anxiety about Victorian female sexuality³, the conventional power-balance of the sexes weakened and the threatening nature of a stereotypical *femme fatale* became a powerful prototype for the New Woman. One century later thanks to Sarah Waters’ novel *Affinity* the postmodern version of the Victorian *femme fatale* underwent a peculiar metamorphosis and turned into the neo-Victorian *femme nouvelle*, a female who thanks to her non-mainstream sexuality, ambiguous gender and extreme slyness became an invincible mistress of double game and manipulation. Therefore, this article aims at exploring a completely new version of the *femme fatale* identity, an epitome of the neo-Victorian fascination with the queer, its power and the evil feminine: the *Sapphic femme fatale* - the only woman who due to her Machiavellian nature entralls female victims instead of male ones, and who is able to attract both sexes upon wish.

1. Queering the queer

In order to discuss queering of the queer agents in *Affinity* one has to understand the notion of *queer theory* not only in relation to the non-mainstream sexuality but to non-conformist behavior as well. What is so queer in being queer ?

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative...[Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.⁴

Therefore when speaking about sexuality and specifically about lesbian sexuality one should remember that only *queer theory* stretches beyond the binary assumptions of sex and gender. When offering a queer reading of *Affinity* the categories such as ‘lesbian’, ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ or ‘queer’ will be argued as alternative identities and not as a normative within the theory itself. Moreover, this paper, drawing on *queer studies*, will develop a hypothesis about the existence of the *queer femme fatale* and her fatal effect on both homo and heterosexual females in the novel. Before progressing, however, I wish to explain my understanding of *queer femme fatale* and her ability to mesmerize not only women but men as well.

Queering *Affinity* finds its grounds in Judith Halberstam's notion of the ability of the queer to 'produce alternative temporalities' undertaken by the means of 'allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death'⁵. In Waters' novel it is the double narrative of juxtaposed diaries of two Sapphists, Margaret Prior and Selina Dawes, that forms a unique time spectrum thanks to the division into separate recollections of visiting Milbank Prison, Margaret's family life and Dawes' memories when she was still a practicing medium. Moreover, it is the protagonists' wit and sexuality which makes them 'the Other' among their contemporaries.

Yet the very fact of being queer is not the only aspect of the Sapphic *femme fatale's* fluid identity. Why fluid? Queer theory goes beyond the point of categorization and echoes Foucault's notion of discourse and power. As he puts it 'discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting-point for an opposing strategy'⁶. This follows closely his other claim that, '...their existence [of power relationships] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal...or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistance...'⁷ Therefore being 'at odds with the normal', in terms of Victorian moral standards, both Vigers and Dawes are not only sly and creative but also sexually assertive, leading a life filled with deception in order to hide both their true sexuality and their mesmerist fraud.

As Allen notes, women who reflected Victorian *femme fatale* stereotype were women 'with the right to control their own desires, their bodies, their reproductive tracts – women who, in other words, deny the right of men to control female sexuality'⁸. Thus, by creating her evil duo, Waters broke the patriarchal standard of depicting 'fatal women' in a threefold manner. Firstly, as a female author, she did not suffer from male anxieties of losing dominance to a seemingly weaker sex - and was therefore not in need of multiplying the male-perspective on women who might threaten her sense of dominance. Secondly, as a lesbian she was able to transform and transport the *femme fatale* archetype of erotically dangerous and witty woman onto the canvas of her lesbian neo-Victorian novel and create plausible characters. Finally, she equipped her heroines with the possibility of living beyond the Victorian morality standards, and granted them the right, which at those times was granted only to men. All that makes Vigers and Dawes active agents of the novel - the only female characters who managed to extricate themselves from the fetters of social rules that bound their contemporaries⁹.

By constructing a queer version of the notorious *fatal woman* in *Affinity* not only did Sarah Waters break the omnipresent and ever-popular patriarchal pattern of presenting *femme fatale* as a man-eater, but also provided a new dimension of possible consequences of queering the ever-heterosexual object of male desire. In her narrative, the epitome of previously male-destructing force was transformed into an agent fatal to the female part of the Victorian society yet it still remained attractive to males “She (Ruth Vigers) said ‘Now, Miss Dawes, don’t you look handsome? Don’t you look like a proper young lady, and awfully fit for a gentleman’s eye?’”¹⁰. *Affinity* is thus the perfect example of a novel in which the heterosexual archetype of an evil woman gave rise to creation of a Sapphic icon empowered by female writing.

Being a prolific lesbian author Waters did not limit herself to creating one Sapphic Siren and in her narrative she introduced a perfectly evil *butch - femme* relationship of Ruth Vigers and Selina Dawes who manipulate main protagonist Margaret Prior into emotional and financial despair. At first the fatal duo seem to be nothing more than money-oriented sexual inverts, but when distorted by the lens of the *queer theory*, they embody much more than one can assume. When the reader meets Margaret she had just lost her father and had to rely on her mother and brother’s provision. In order to fill her time and keep up appearances she became a visitor in Milbank Prison for women. While pursuing her new ‘career’, Selina Dawes, a spiritual medium serving a sentence for fraud and assault, seduces Margaret and the double game begins.

2. 3 levels of the game.

In *Affinity* the double game, based on a well-thought-out strategy of manipulation, is performed on 3 levels: communicative, performative and sexual, and is skillfully orchestrated by one person - a character of seemingly secondary importance, Ruth Vigers. Only at the end of the novel the reader realizes that Ruth is at the same time not only Selina’s lover but also her partner in crime and Margaret’s maid. Being the mastermind of the vicious plan aimed at acquiring Margaret’s inheritance, through manipulation and the art of deception, Vigers directly controls the actions of her imprisoned lover and has an indirect influence on Margaret and other female victims of the fatal duo.

At the communicative level the double game in *Affinity* relies on what is currently known as the Information Manipulation Theory, which claims that a speaker covertly violates one of the four conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner with the sole purpose and intention of deceiving the listener¹¹. Breaking the first maxim means that the speaker will not provide the full scope of information, a situation that is usually not expected by the listener. Such a situation takes place when Vigers becomes

Margaret's maid; the woman never gives out her first name. To Margaret she is nothing more but a new servant, a person of lower status, therefore the mistress does not even think of finding out her maid's christian name. Margaret learns about Vigers' identity no sooner than in the final pages of the novel, when all the secrets as well as the nature of Dawes' relationship with both Margaret and Ruth become apparent.

Breaking the second maxim, the maxim of quality will expose the listener to a piece of information, which is not true. This method is used by Selina to inveigle her clients, as when Mrs. Lewis is being brought to her for guidance and told her that she was woken up at 3 in the morning by an importunate ghost:

'Take my hand and tell me truly now, you know very well who this spirit is and why he comes.' Of course, she did know him, it was a boy she said she would marry once, and when she threw him over for another he went to and died there. She told me this, weeping. She said 'But do you really think it can be he?' I said she ought only to find out the hour he died at. I said 'I will lay my life that it will prove to be 3 in the morning by an English clock.' I said sometimes a spirit might have all the freedoms of the other world, yet still be a prisoner of the passing of the hour it died by.¹²

The method used by the medium is a very simple one. Using the information provided earlier by her client, Selina creates a plausible explanation of the phenomenon of constant reappearance of the ghost. The desperate need of Mrs. Lewis to believe the mesmerist and steady her tense nerves once for all turns Selina into an omniscient, if not omnipotent, person and the medium's words into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The faith in Dawes' powers is additionally strengthened by her reputation, which is a direct consequence of her rhetorical mastery with words.

The third maxim of the Information Manipulation Theory, the maxim of relation, is broken when the information provided is irrelevant to the subject matter of the conversation in question. It is used in everyday speech as simple evasion of the answer or the topic shift and takes place several times in the novel.

The fourth and the last maxim – the relation of manner is being broken when the information is presented in an unintelligible manner and is not aligned with non-verbal language. This particular method was used by the *fatale duo* during all séances, when Vigers passing for Peter Quick produced unintelligible sounds even before she appeared shortly in the dark room behind Dawes' back. The trick was based on the fact that all those sitting at

the séance table were supposed to keep their eyes closed. Thus no non-verbal language was used, as there was no audience to watch it.

All of McCormack's maxims were skillfully used by Selina and Vigers to enthrall their clients, as confirmed by Mrs. Silvester during the mesmerist's trial, when she explained why she let her daughter meet Dawes in private: "She was an artful speaker, and I was taken in..."¹³. The words of a mother whose daughter fell victim to Dawes and Vigers' artful deception prove both, the latter's planning skills and medium's extraordinary abilities of mesmerizing her clients even before the séance itself took place.

Yet Miss Silvester was not the only victim of the *fatale* duo's vicious scheming. There was also the Milbank warden who in exchange for contacting her late child let Dawes escape from prison, and many men, women and girls who used Dawes' mesmerist services and who were left with an impression of her omnipotence. But the most prominent victim, who was left not only with her heart broken, mind shattered but also without any money, was Margaret Prior. This character's tragic step was revealing the majority of her private information to Selina when they first met:

I would tell her any little detail she cared to hear . . . I told her my name; and that I lived at Chelsea, at Cheyne Walk. I said, I had a brother that was married, and a sister who would be married very soon; that I was not married. I told her I sleep badly, and spend many hours reading, or writing, or standing at my window looking out upon the river. Then I pretended to consider. What else was there?—
'I think you have it all. There is not much . . .'¹⁴

The unfortunate need of a spinster to confess to someone who to her mind was not only of lower status, but also condemned and not trustworthy to society and therefore safe to confide in, resulted in the machinations against Miss Prior and the beginning of their vicious plan. Unfortunately, this was not Margaret's only fatal flaw. Another one was making false assumptions about Selina by assuming that she was the only object of her affection, when in reality her true lover was Ruth, known to Margaret as Vigers. All in all, due to her naivety and desperate need to find an intimate friend, Margaret formed a rather feeble and one-sided relationship based on illusions of shared imagination. Her belief in Dawes' mesmerist powers of transporting herself outside the walls of Milbank and her utmost desire for Selina, made the spinster gullible and prone to manipulation. In other words, she was a perfect victim, extremely easy to control and take advantage of.

3. Double game: performativity.

When analyzing performativity in *Affinity* it is apparent that all major female characters pass as someone completely different from what they really are, which only adds to the complexity of the double game and the execution of manipulation in the novel. To her family and Victorian society Margaret is a respectable spinster who followed her father's interests and thus had no time for establishing her own family. Only the reader and her ex-intimate female friend and now her sister-in-law Helen know of her Sapphic nature and sexually marked cravings of the body and heart.

Selina, on the contrary, is well aware of the performance-like nature of her profession, which could support the assumption of her acting instead of being a real medium. As Margaret recalls one of her visits to Milbank:

She (Selina) said, 'You think me a fool, or an actress. You think me a sharp little actress, like they do—'No,' I answered at once. 'No, I don't think that of you'—for I don't, and didn't, even when talking with her',¹⁵

On the one hand, Selina might be perceived as a skillful and respectable medium, a mesmerist of great powers, who was able to talk to the dead upon the wish of her clients, as was noted during her trial by Mrs. Silvester:

And what was your opinion of her?'—I saw at once that she was very clever indeed. She also seemed modest... She seemed quite the girl of quality that everybody painted her....¹⁶

On the other hand, her credibility, after the fatal incident with Mrs. Brink, was rather debatable:

There were, he said, some doubts, 'in certain circles'. Doubts? Did he mean, as to her honesty? He blinked, and then he lowered his voice, in surprise and a kind of reproach. 'Doubts,' he said, 'as to Miss Dawes's wisdom.'¹⁷

The ambiguous nature of her profession and multiplicity of possible interpretations of her words/prophecies presents Dawes as either the perfect medium or a fraud, a gold-digger¹⁸ con artist, who because of her lack of proper education and skills, in order to earn a living, followed her lover's passions of taking part in sexually complex rituals based on drag, fetishism and debauchery.

Whereas Selina is taken either for a skilled medium or a charlatan, for the most part of the book, it is rather difficult for a reader to decipher

Vigers' real role in the machinations. But when passing as Peter Quick Vigers falls under J. Butler's notion of drag, which states that: 'In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency . . .'¹⁹ Thus Ruth's imitation of Peter Quick is credible and close to perfection, as she changes the tone of her voice and dresses appropriately for the role each time she enacts it. Her dominant and sexually violent nature escalates only when a 'victim' does not fulfill her wishes, as was the case with Miss Silvester, a 15 years-old American, who was too scared to fulfill Quick's/Vigers' commands: 'The disturbance was thought to have originated with Miss Dawes's spirit-control 'Peter Quick', or with a low and violent spirit masquerading as that control . . .'²⁰ At times of sexual tension accompanied by external factors such as disobedience, Vigers literally 'steps out of line' and becomes herself again turning into the controlling butch, who is used to be the dominating agent in her relationship and expects her lover to attend her every need.

4. Double game: sexual level.

As far as the sexual level of the Sapphic *femme fatale's* fluid nature is concerned, sexuality is yet another tool of deception in *Affinity*. With her drag-loving personality and butch identity Vigers falls under the category which Florence Tamagne calls "a 'masculine' lesbian derived from the 'New Woman'"²¹. Being the congenital convert this neo-Victorian puppeteer transgresses more social boundaries than the Victorian society would ever be ready to accept. Firstly, she is a lesbian, which was inadmissible in late Victorian England; secondly, she is a 'masculine woman' - the butch, which was in contradiction to the Victorian model of a woman as an 'angel in the house'. Finally, she is not only a regular cross-dresser but also a fetishist. Her fetishism is apparent in her posing as the male spirit-control 'Peter Quick', and enjoying being in drag both for financial purposes, as everyone had to pay for taking part in the séance, and for sexual ones.

Being the dominant agent Vigers needs to be in full control and approaches her victim only by command exhorting her to let her begin the game: 'let your spirit be used, your prayer must always be May I be used . . .'²² You must take off your gown now & you must grasp Miss Dawes'²². In other words, all Vigers' deeds revolve around and are aimed at her sexual satisfaction, be it through being able to live with her beloved one or thanks to making money by seducing and taking advantage of disturbed young girls from respectable families.

More tellingly, Vigers' gender at times of sexual escalation is not fixed but swings between the feminine and masculine. She's both Peter Quick and Ruth Vigers, a tender lover and a violent dominator. She is a perfect puppeteer and orchestrator of her own malicious plan aimed at

seducing women and taking financial advantage of them, as well as the executioner of the plan of sexual oppression of young women.

All in all, the politics of the neo-Victorian femme fatales' deplorable conduct relate directly to their Machiavellian nature. They are self-centered and purely egoistic and will not turn away from both physical (Vigers) and emotional (Dawes) violence towards any person who will stand in their way. Thus being at the same time socially transgressive and progressive they form a unique couple, a seductive and sexually demanding identity marking the birth of a new literary character – the neo-Victorian Sapphic *femme fatale*. Their fatal impact on females is best described by the rhetorical question that Margaret asks herself in the novel's final pages, when she's all alone, devastated yet still under Dawes' spell: 'Selina, you will be in sunlight soon. Your twisting is done — you have the last thread of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it?'²³.

Notes

¹ See B Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Oxford Paperbacks, 1988.

² R Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1992, p. viii.

³ J King., *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 131.

⁴ D Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 62.

⁵ J Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. p.2

⁶ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p 100.

⁷ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: Introduction*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p 96-7.

⁸ V.M Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*. New York, Whitston Publishing Company, 1983, p.194.

⁹ Even though a lesbian, Margaret does not fit into this rule as she was unable to form a firm lesbian relationship, and lost her best and intimate friend to her brother. Thus, regardless of her sexual preferences, by living a solitary life she was unable to extricate herself from the rules of the Victorian society.

¹⁰ *Affinity* p.175

¹¹ S.A McCornack, 'Information manipulation theory'. *Communication Monographs*, vol.59, 1992, pp. 1-16.

¹² *Affinity* p.53-4

¹³ Ibid, p. 138

¹⁴ Ibid p. 46

¹⁵ Ibid p.85

¹⁶ Ibid p.137

¹⁷ Ibid, p.134

¹⁸ As there is no word for describing women exploiting women.

¹⁹ J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, pp. 137-38.

²⁰ *Affinity* p. 133.

²¹ F Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe, Vol. II Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939*, Algora Publishing, New York , 2004 , p.50

²² *Affinity*, p. 26

²³ Ibid, p. 352.

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