

# Dress and Body Performance in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*

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**Abstract.** Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* [2002] has been acclaimed as the most suspenseful work within her popular Victorian quasi-trilogy. Full of twists and turns, it soon made the bestseller list and has been serialized on film by the BBC. With its solid narrative structure and precise setting in Victorian England, it is categorized as a historical crime fiction; with its same-sex love plot between two heroines, it is also deemed a lesbian novel. Two heroines, Susan and Maud are set to change their identities in a treacherous double-cross: they perform, either knowingly or unknowingly, roles other than themselves. As mistress and maid, their performances involve an imitation of body gestures and an intimacy of feminine garments. This paper aims to explore various modes as well as the significance of body performance derived from class implications of dressing.

**Keywords:** Body, Performance, Dress, Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith*.

## 1. Introduction

*Fingersmith* (2002) has been acclaimed as Sarah Waters' most suspenseful work. Set in nineteenth-century London and a nearby country house, one of the protagonists, Susan Trinder, is an orphan in the care of Mrs. Sucksby whose London slum household hosts a transient family of petty thieves. Susan [shortened as Sue below] helps Richard 'Gentleman' Rivers (called Gentleman below) seduce a wealthy heiress, Maud Lilly, who is being raised in a country house named Briar, where she lives a secluded life under the care of her uncle. The "Gentleman" earns money by thievery and dodging and plots a swindle: Sue will pose as a lady's maid in order to gain the trust of the heiress and eventually persuade her to elope with Gentleman; once they are married, Gentleman will commit Maud to a madhouse and claim her fortune for himself [1]. In advance of Sue's contrived disguise as a maid, Gentleman arrives at Briar and familiarizes Maud with a plan to escape from her exile in Briar, a plan involving the deception of a commonplace girl, Sue, who believes she is sent to Briar to trick Maud. Maud agrees to the plan and receives Sue a few weeks later, pretending to know nothing about the plot. Sue attempts to perform the role of the maid in order to carry out the partial plan told by Gentleman, whereas Maud imperceptibly assimilates Sue's bodily appearance and manner into the way Victorian ladies live. The deftly twisting plots and the vivid historical details about the setting stir up both popular interest and academic enthusiasm to the novel.

On account of Sarah Waters' sensational plots and grim nineteenth century scenarios, scholarly attention has concentrated on her inspiring textural and discursive historiography. Waters' neo-Victorian sensational novel favors "the past it pastiches" [2], which is characteristic of the experimental narrative structure and rich intertextual references of Victorian novels [3]. On the other hand, the protagonist Sue's obvious physical, for the most part, and spiritual relationship with Maud marks the novel as distinctive from mainstream Victorian fictions, where lesbian relationships are almost always disguised as close girlish friendships. With its solid narrative structure and precise setting in Victorian England, it is categorized as a historical crime fiction; with its same-sex love plot between two heroines, it is also deemed a lesbian novel. Thus, Carol Seajay neatly captures the major features of Waters' writing and labels it as "lesbian historical romance" [4]. Such categorization outlines Waters' noted explorations of historical, social and sexual politics in her novels.

The two heroines, Sue and Maud, change places of mistress and maid with "dizzying frequency" since they perform, either knowingly or unknowingly, roles other than themselves in a treacherous double-cross [5]. As mistress and maid, their performances involve an imitation of body gestures and an intimacy of feminine garments. In nineteenth-century society, dressing was a profound signifying practice because of its association with social standing. The way one dresses designates "the person and class" since dress not only "expresses the true nature of a lady," but also "constitutes the lady" [6]. While indicative of women's

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feminine traits, dress, like dramatic costume, serves as a means of acting a part, or performing the role of someone else in one of the themes of *Fingersmith*. The significance of bodily performance is apt to reveal Waters' strategy of overturning characters. Various modes as well as the significance of performance derived from class implications of dressing must be further examined.

## 2. Body Performance

At the outset, Sue's pretention as a maid to accompany the heiress Maud demonstrates the first mode of performance in the story. As a Borough girl, Sue has no knowledge of how a proper lady's maid should act. According to Gentleman, Dainty starts to tackle Sue's appearance, including her hairstyle and dress, to convey a tidy, clever image of a lady's maid. Sue's hair is restyled since she originally wears her hair "like lots of the Borough girls wore theirs" [1]. With her hairstyle simple and unattractive, Sue also needs to be dressed like a neat and gentle maid. Gentleman suggests a plain brown dress, whose color is "more or less the colour of [her] hair" [1]. Sue loathes the brown dress from the bottom of her heart: "the walls of our kitchen being also brown, when I came downstairs again I could hardly be seen. I should have rathered a blue gown, or a violet one" [1]. Gentleman convinces Sue of the brown dress because it is "the perfect dress for a sneak or for a servant—and so all the more perfect for me who was going to Briar to be both" [1]. Disguised as a maid with a plain outfit, Sue does look like a maid at first glance.

Not unexpectedly, Sue's disguise and performance as a maid is unfortunately penetrated by Maud and other servants in the house. Maud observes Sue in private as much as possible. She peeps at Sue who sleeps next to her room: "She walks. She sits. She is warm and quick . . . I can smell beer upon her breath. She speaks. Her voice is not at all how I have dreamed it, but light and pert; though she tries to make it sweeter" [1]. Maud senses that Sue's insolence is not malice but is derived from the environment where she grew up. Sue's bodily gestures and activities, unlike the cold Briar house, stem from an easy, pleasant life, which Maud has never lived and eagerly dreams of. Sue's performance could not successfully fool the other servants since a lady's maid's employment, unlike that of other housemaids, is far from laborious. In most instances, a lady's maid's duties involve her taste and include her services "rendered more connected with the toilette and the wardrobe, as well as the personal ornament, dress, and decoration of her mistress" [7]. A lady's maid ought to be well-educated and to have considerable share of the useful and ornamental branches of female acquirements. If judged by the above standards, Sue's fake identity is easily exposed because Sue apparently falls short in regard to these qualities.

Sue's maid performance is absolutely a bungling contrived performance. Sue has been hastily trained as a maid: her appearance decorated, her manner corrected, and her duties to serve the mistress recited and rehearsed. However, Sue has an atmosphere of unrestraint, innocence and easiness due to her background of hustle and bustle on Lant Street. Despite her ostensible maid's outfits, Sue is unable to conceal the real nature of her body, a body accustomed to a crowded house with the smell of beer and meat. The ever exposed slips in Sue's performance refers to nothing but Sue's own body, a spontaneous body which has absorbed London's lower class atmosphere and style. The assumption that identity may be based on attire and decoration is doomed to fail since fellow servants are very likely to see through Sue's pretended performance.

Sue's contrived performance is of little significance to Maud. It is Sue's coming to Briar that launches the core of the whole plan: Sue's performance as Maud, the mistress. Cultivating a lady's body requires long term work and is no doubt a tough task. Victorian ladyhood, as with any other class of social hierarchy, encompasses a variety of etiquette and social manners. In order to make Sue a lady like Maud, Maud endeavors to "civilize" Sue's body through an example of herself. First of all, hands have a primary significance in the making as well as performing of a ladylike body. Maud's hand, were originally "plump at knuckles" [1], dark nails with madhouse dirt, so her uncle harshly commands Mrs. Stiles to have Maud put on the gloves to "keep [her] fingers smooth" for the precious books [1]. Her hands are transformed from coarse to white and soft. Maud's hands remain as they are when she comes to Briar at the age of eleven: "Her nails were soft and perfectly clean, and grew quickly, like a child's nails" [1]. Sue does not need to do coarse jobs in her Lant Street home, yet her hands are natural and her nails bitten due to her bad habits. Maud cautiously observes how Sue's fingers become softer as days go by: "I look, again, at her hands. They have grown whiter, and are healed about the nails" and "in gloves [they] will seem smaller; and then will resemble my own" [1].

The second attribute of a ladylike body to which Maud pays attention is appetite. Since her girlhood, a Victorian woman was preoccupied with the fashion requirement of slenderness. One of the most eminent features to characterize slenderness as the Victorian ideal of feminine beauty is a small waist [8]. The reason that the waist plays the pivotal place within the beauty imperative is its correlation with its interior counterpart, the stomach. Appetite suppression grew into both a means and an end of this beauty imperative. Cultivated as a typical lady, Maud is anxious about food provided by the cook. The food is associated with her uncle's punishment, and it terrifies her. Maud seldom has a good appetite while growing since she is strictly disciplined in regard to maintaining a lady's figure in terms of both dining and wearing clothes. Opposite to Maud's anorexic body marked by the small waist, Sue seems to enjoy food very much. Maud is stunned to see that Sue has such a good appetite for food and great interest in eating: "She eats three eggs, spooning them quickly, neatly into her mouth—not shuddering at the yielding of the yolk, not thinking, as she swallows, of the closing of her own throat about the meat. She wipes her lips with her fingers, touches her tongue to some spot upon her knuckle; then swallows again" [1]. Sue's real appetite for food astonishes Maud, who never ponders the enjoyment of eating. Sue's genuine appetite is closely connected to her voracious desire for money and pushing Maud to the insane asylum, as Maud imagines, "You have come to Briar, I think, to swallow up me" [1].

Sue's appetite is difficult to regulate like a lady's within a couple of months. It turns out that Maud's ideas take a different direction. After eloping with Gentleman, Maud and Sue stay in the cottage a few miles from Briar. Gentleman and Maud pretend to get married under the witness of Sue and Mrs. Cream, the woman in care of the cottage, where Maud acts helpless and refuses to dine despite her poor appetite. The sudden change makes Maud ever paler than before: "Her cheek never grew rosy. Her eye stayed dull" [1]. Sue interprets Maud's fasting action as her inability to adapt to the new environment and her new identity as Gentleman's wife. With a cordial liking of food, Sue does not want to waste the food and eats it inasmuch as Maud does not: "Maud could eat none of it. I ate it instead—since somebody must. I ate it, and she only sat beside the window gazing out, turning the ring upon her finger stretching her hands, or drawing a strand of hair across her mouth" [1]. Those foods change Sue's body figure after a few days: "I gazed at my sleeve of silk, and at my own arm, that had got plump and smooth with careful feeding" [1]. What Sue eats transforms her physical shape, her skin gradually smoothens, like that of a wealthy girl born to an affluent upper class family.

The most influential factor to fulfill Sue's mistress performance is an exchange of dresses. When Sue assists Maud in her coordination of welcoming outfits, Maud suggests that Sue should take off the brown dress, which seems to be too plain and shabby to suit Sue's complexion. Maud studies Sue's figure and then gives her an orange dress, "a queer thing of orange velvet, with fringes and a wide skirt. It looked like it had been blown together by a strong wind in a ladies' tailor's" [1]. The dress does not fit Sue perfectly for Sue has never put on a lady's dress, and her body does not get used to its cut. Yet Sue adores the dress very much and gently touches its texture and design: "And it was very good velvet. I stood, plucking at the fringes on the skirt" [1]. When Maud and Sue are busy with undressing and dressing, there comes a knock from the housemaid Margaret on the parlor door. Margaret steps in, then misrecognizes Sue as Maud, and directly says to Sue: "'I have just come for your tray, mi—'" [1]. Margaret suddenly stops for she sees the one in a bright dress is not her mistress, but Sue: "Oh! Miss Smith! Is it you, there? I should never have known you from the mistress, I'm sure!" [1] Margaret does not recognize who the girl in the dress is because no one except the mistress would dress so elegantly. It is natural for Margaret to treat the one in a gorgeous dress as her mistress. Sue is satisfied with being taken as a lady by virtue of the velvet dress as a symbol of ladyhood and respectability. Sue's body is naturally assimilated into a lady's maid's life: with her hands changing from coarse to soft, her skin from rough to delicate, her dress from plain to respectable, Sue's mistress performance comes, in secret, to form the whole scheme of the trick.

With Sue substituting as the mistress, Maud must then perform as Sue's lady's maid in the last phase of the plan. The mistress and the maid are meant to complement each other. Intentionally after a long time of fasting, Maud's countenance turns gaunt and peaky. Maud makes herself coarse and untidy, far from an image of a respectable lady, abandoning her gloves in particular: "her hands were bare" after her fake consummation with Gentleman [1]. Her slovenly bodily appearance and dejection successfully eliminates Sue's suspicions. Maud's performance also hinges on the dress she must wear, a plain dress. During the awful days of waiting for her departure, Maud wears "the gown she had travelled from Briar in, that had mud about the hem" and gives her best gown to Sue: "Her best gown—a silk one—she gave to me" [1]. Sue interprets Maud's behaviors as evidence of Maud's fear and despair concerning her unknown future life,

which is directed by Gentleman. At the departure, “[Maud] wore the old gown, that was stained with mud, and [Sue] wore the handsome silk one” [1]. However, the doctors of the asylum apprehend Sue on arrival and call her “Mrs. Rivers,” instead of Maud. Sue suddenly understands from the cold reactions of Gentleman and the seemingly innocent Maud that they had conned her: “That bitch knew everything. She had been in on it from the start”[1]. The scene of the reversed roles of Sue and Maud, of mistress and maid and vice versa is full of tension. Maud and Sue’s body images have been dramatically reversed: for Sue, in Maud’s dress was ready to go back to her sweet Borough home, Maud in a dirty gown was being sent to the asylum; in Sue’s dress Maud is ready for a house in Chelsea as Gentleman promised her. Sue and Maud’s contrived body performances as mistress and maid, whether voluntary or involuntary, is accomplished with an exchange of roles as well as dresses.

### 3. Conclusion

Ironically, both girls, Sue in the mental asylum and Maud in the Borough undergo the loss of their identities as they perform each other’s earlier roles of mistress and maid. They are recognized by their dresses, and their new identities are then accepted, which is to say, their original identities are denied or disappear without their initial dresses. When Sue screams to the asylum doctors that she is not Mrs. Rivers but her maid Susan, they ignore her defense, as Gentleman sets Sue up as the ‘mad Mrs. Rivers,’ his troubled wife. Sue’s illiteracy means difficulty in proving her identity. Meanwhile, Gentleman takes Maud into Sue’s Lant Street home and warns Maud of her position now: “you have nothing: no friends in London, no money to your name—why not so much as a name!” [1]. Fundamentally, the dress plays a pivotal part in the switch of identities, yet the signifying process of the dress is rendered problematic in the heroines’ manipulations of body performance. The dress turns to be the only means and end of their identification, their inherent bodies thus being invisible or intangible. In this sense, their identities are put on and taken off, literally, through the dresses for their “selves are shed like clothes” [9]. A trick of Sue and Maud’s reverse body images thus primarily concerns itself with costumes of performance in collusion with conventional beliefs in the dress as the very façade of identity. In conclusion, *Fingersmith* destabilizes the signifying process of dress and complicates expressions of body performance. The significance of “performance” which Mrs. Sucksby maneuvers is more than Sue and Maud’s contrived performances of the mistress and the maid, but of their own identities.

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