



**“Remember... Whose girl you are”:  
Dynamics of domination in Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999)**

LEA HEIBERG MADSEN\*  
*University of Málaga, Spain*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Sarah Waters’s novel *Affinity* (1999) which has played a crucial role in the consolidation of the neo-Victorian genre and, indeed, has become a touchstone for contemporary feminist fiction. Through Jessica Benjamin’s intersubjective theory it analyses Waters’s extraordinary re-presentation of women’s same-sex relationships, focussing on the dynamics of domination and submission which characterises the female couples in the novel. Benjamin’s approach to the problem of domination gives valuable insight into the psychological structures of erotic hierarchy and, in turn, opens up for new ways to understand erotic desire and power dynamics between men and women, or between people of the same sex. In addition, an exploration of *Affinity* from an intersubjective perspective casts light onto how the novel transgresses both Victorian boundaries and those that persist in contemporary culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Sarah Waters, *Affinity*, neo-Victorianism, same-sex relationships, intersubjective theory, erotics of domination.

**RESUMEN**

Este artículo analiza desde una perspectiva psicoanalítica la novela *Affinity* (1999) de la autora británica Sarah Waters cuya visión revisionista da voz a personajes silenciados durante la época victoriana y hace explícito lo que era imposible expresar entonces, pero también lo que todavía no ha encontrado total reconocimiento desde el punto de vista social y cultural. El artículo profundiza en el análisis de las relaciones de sumisión y dominación entre las parejas de mujeres en *Affinity*. Para ello utiliza como marco teórico la "intersubjective theory" de Jessica Benjamin que revisa nociones como el deseo y la dominación erótica, y ofrece una nueva perspectiva sobre las relaciones de amor.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Sarah Waters, *Affinity*, novela neo-victoriana, teoría intersubjetiva, erotismo, lesbianismo.

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\* *Address for correspondence:* Lea Heiberg Madsen. University of Málaga. Department de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana. Campus de Teatinos. 29071 Málaga. E-mail: l.heiberg-madsen@uma.es

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores, from a psychoanalytical perspective, the portrayal of female same-sex erotics in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999). In my analysis of the novel, I draw on intersubjective theory, specifically on Jessica Benjamin's approach to the problem of domination, which gives valuable insights into the psychological structures of erotic hierarchy and power relations. Benjamin offers the perspectives of both the dominated and the perpetrator, revealing the underlying psychological processes that involve and fasten the two in a relationship of complicity. Her study provides thus an appropriate framework for exploring the dynamics of domination in *Affinity*, in which "power operates, not directly, but through a relational mode of behaviour" (Arias, 2009: 258).

*Affinity* is the most celebrated novel of what is commonly known as Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy, which includes *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), and has ensured her the position as one of the most widely read authors of neo-Victorian fiction. The popular appeal of Waters's novels is evident: since her debut in 1998 the author has repeatedly been shortlisted for and won a number of prizes (latest in 2009 when her fifth novel, *The Little Stranger*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize), and her neo-Victorian tales have all been adapted for television and broadcast worldwide. Her work, however, also receives significant scholarly attention. Indeed, Waters has played a crucial role in the consolidation of the neo-Victorian genre which since the late twentieth century has received increasing popular and scholarly interest and, within the last few years, has become an acknowledged field of study.

The neo-Victorian novel can be described, in short, as a literary, revisionist approach to Victorian culture, which recuperates, preserves and celebrates voices of the past while being "aware of both history and fiction as human constructs" (Shiller, 1997: 540). Significantly, the neo-Victorian mode often serves a double purpose, in that it takes not only the past but also the present up to revision. As Sarah Gamble observes, "[t]he function of the neo-Victorian novel may be to animate the past, but it can only do so from the perspective of the present, which will always read it as reflective of its own preoccupations" (2009: 127). As a dialogic approach to literature and culture, the neo-Victorian text provides manifold possibilities for transgression, subversion and for articulating the silenced of both then and now. Waters's revisitation of the nineteenth century in *Affinity* reveals how ways to transform the present can be found, precisely through revisions of the (Victorian) past. In her approach to the issues of gender and female sexuality, the author both explores and reinforces the genre's potential for liberating the repressed, giving voice to the ignored and silenced Victorians while, simultaneously, bringing out the closeted skeletons of the twenty-first century. The neo-Victorian mode, in Waters's case, becomes a channel through which she can offer visibility and empowerment to the lesbian subject. It is a way, as the author explains in an interview, of addressing those persisting, problematic issues such as gender and sexuality:

“issues that are still very, very current in British culture...[t]hings that we think we’re pretty cool with, and actually we’re not at all, and we keep on wanting to go back to the nineteenth century to play these out on a bigger scale, precisely because they’re still very current for us” (Dennis, 2008: 45). In effect, through her neo-Victorian tale(s), Waters makes explicit what was virtually impossible to express in Victorian times and, also, what is still struggling for socio-cultural recognition and visibility. Her revisionist project is thus double-edged. On the one hand, she revises history in terms of lesbianism and, on the other, she establishes a contemporary lesbian discourse within our present mainstream culture.

Yet, notwithstanding her political agenda, Waters significantly avoids a romanticised or utopian representation of female couples. Rather, she depicts women’s same-sex relationships with all their implications of interpersonal differences, cruelty, (self-) betrayal, dishonesty, and emotional contradictions. In this paper I explore Sarah Waters’s extraordinary approach to and innovative re-presentation of women’s same-sex erotics in *Affinity*, focussing on the dynamics of domination and submission so characteristic of the female couples therein. As point of departure for my analysis I turn to Jessica Benjamin’s elaborations on the concepts of power and erotic desire, which, I argue, open up for a series of fundamental changes in the perception of polarity and gender.

## 2. JESSICA BENJAMIN’S INTERSUBJECTIVE THEORY

In *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (1995), Jessica Benjamin sets out to demonstrate that “[i]f sex and gender as we know them are oriented to the pull of opposing poles, then these poles are not masculinity and femininity. Rather, gender dimorphism itself represents only one pole – its other pole is the polymorphism of all individuals” (1995: 79). Her study ultimately offers a highly inclusive and gender-neutral psychoanalytical perspective from which to approach the question of erotic domination in relationships between men and women as well as between people of the same sex.

Taking the preoedipal phase as starting point, Benjamin explores domination as “a complex struggle of destruction and recognition already well under way in the preoedipal dyad” (1995: 99). According to the psychoanalyst, the self exists under “[t]he paradoxical condition that we are dependent for recognition of our independence, and to the repudiation of the original other/mother upon whom this dependence devolves” (1998: 84). However, Benjamin’s study seeks not only to analyse the evolution of domination as a structure that “can be traced from the relationship between mother and infant into adult eroticism,” (1988: 8) but also to prove the crucial role of recognition in the transformation of the mother-infant experience. Benjamin thereby breaks with the traditional psychoanalytical focus on the role of separation and differentiation, and provides new, illuminating insights into the concept of recognition, which she perceives as “so central to human existence as to often escape notice;

or, rather, it appears to us in so many guises that it is seldom grasped as one overarching concept” (Benjamin, 1988: 15).

A relationship, according to intersubjective theory, consists in one self meeting another self, or a subject meeting another subject, rendering the “need for *mutual* recognition” (Benjamin, 1988: 23; original emphasis) crucial. Mutuality is understood as a balance “between assertion of self and recognition of other” (Benjamin, 1988: 49). On the contrary, imbalance results from an asymmetrical pattern, Benjamin notes, where “the assertion of one individual is transformed into domination [and] the other’s recognition becomes submission” (1988: 62). This asymmetrical pattern is characteristic of the master-slave dynamics. The origin of domination thus lies in the breakdown of balance, causing transformations in the relationship between the self and the other so that “the basic tension of forces *within* the individual becomes a dynamic *between* individuals” (Benjamin, 1988: 62; original emphases). Yet, it is through breakdown and renewal, Benjamin argues, that the other can be acknowledged as another subject “outside one’s own control and yet able to have decisive impact on the self” (1998: 91). Furthering D.W. Winnicott’s original notion of destruction and survival, Benjamin suggests that it is precisely the survival of the other which leads to the “recognition of the existence of the other as external” (1998: 90).

So, from an intersubjective perspective, the dynamics of destruction and survival is both cause and result of erotic union. It is a central, cyclic pattern and a way of upholding the vital balance between identification and differentiation, attachment and independence. As Benjamin explains, “all negotiation of difference involves negation, often leading to partial breakdowns...[it] is only catastrophic when the possibility of reestablishing the tension between negation and recognition is foreclosed, when the survival of the other, is definitely over” (1998: 96). In this sense, an underlying polarised structure in the erotic relation may result fruitful –even vital– as long as “the shape of the whole is...informed by mutuality” (Benjamin, 1988: 82).

Benjamin’s intersubjective theory provides thus a highly appropriate framework for (re)interpreting the nature of relationships and polarity. While opening up for significant re-figurations of the boundaries of power and the erotic, Benjamin’s study also brings us closer to a comprehension of why –borrowing the words of Roberta Rubenstein– “[u]nion with another is...both necessary and destructive” (1987: 57). Arguably, in her approach to erotic domination, Benjamin reveals a whole new dimension of the erotic. As the psychoanalyst herself observes, “[u]nderstanding desire as the desire for recognition changes our view of the erotic experience. It enables us to describe a mode of representing desire unique to intersubjectivity which, in turn, offers a new perspective on women’s desire” (Benjamin, 1988: 126). Seeking neither to reverse the traditional psychoanalytical perception of the subject-object relation nor merely “to elevate what has been devalued and denigrate what has been overvalued” (Benjamin, 1988: 9), Benjamin shows how “the vision of recognition between equal subjects gives rise to a new logic – the logic of paradox, of sustaining the

tension between contradictory forces” (1988: 221). Intersubjective theory establishes thus a thorough impartial mode through which to represent and interpret desire, given that “[i]n order to challenge the sexual split which permeates our psychic, cultural, and social life, it is necessary to criticize not only the idealization of the masculine side, but also the reactive valorization of femininity. What is necessary is not to take sides, but remain focused on the dualistic structure” (Benjamin, 1988: 9).

In effect, Benjamin does not deconstruct sexual polarity but presents desire as “that space in which the mutual recognition of subjects can compete with the reversible relationship of domination” (Benjamin, 1988: 220). By considering hierarchical dynamics as a natural implication of the dualistic structure of erotic relations, she enables an analysis of “the psychic processes that foster splitting and underlie domination without casting them as unambiguously good or evil, or equating them with masculine and feminine attributes” (Benjamin, 1988: 223). Consequently, her intersubjective theory opens up for the possibility to break with traditional perceptions of gender polarity and with the persisting notions of masculine and feminine roles within the domination/submission dynamics. Indeed, aiming to come to terms with the structures of a resisting “gendered logic” which “thoroughly permeates our social relations, our ways of knowing, our efforts to transform and control the world” (Benjamin, 1988: 220), Benjamin’s approach neither differentiates women’s erotics from men’s nor suggests that male subjectivity denies female subjectivity and vice versa. Rather, it demonstrates that the dynamics of domination, and the underlying psychological processes, are naturally independent of gender and sexuality, explaining thus the psychological “struggle to try to know the other while still recognizing the other’s radical alterity...as one between different identities...as a disagreement and contradiction within identities” (Benjamin, 1998: 101). Implying that erotic hierarchy is as likely to occur in hetero- as in same-sex relationships, Benjamin’s intersubjective theory thereby disrupts the assumption of homosexual erotics as different or non-normative, as well as the idealised perception of same-sex couples as naturally mutual and, ergo, not subject to polarisation.

### **3. THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE, FEMALE SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS AND THE NEO-VICTORIAN NOVEL**

As I have suggested above, Benjamin’s intersubjective approach provides a highly inclusive, impartial and fruitful perspective that allows us to explore the underlying psychological structures of power in all kinds of relationships. Some critics, however, persistently maintain that erotic hierarchy in homosexual relationships is the result of their so-called mimicking the dominant culture. Martha Vicinus, for one, argues that structures of domination/submission in female couples merely imitate the husband/wife dynamics in heterosexual marriages, asking: “how can they not, surrounded as they are by powerful normative codes?” (2004: 7).

Vicinus's viewpoint implies an association of the domination/submission binary with conventional gender roles and traditional masculine and feminine attributes. Her statement also indicates, as Sharon Marcus has recently pointed out, how critics and theorists continue to believe in and share the "assumption that the opposition between men and women governs relationships between women, which take shape only as reactions against, retreats from, or appropriations of masculinity" (2007: 11). In *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007), Marcus observes, "[h]istorians of women and lesbians have...almost always assumed the dominance of heterosexuality whose evidence stems from the fact that it is all we have been trained to see. A different theory allows us to use these sources to make new distinctions...new connections – for example, between femininity and homoeroticism, or between female marriages and marriages between men and women" (2007: 14).

Intersubjective theory offers a highly valid framework for making such new distinctions and connections, enabling us to (re-)read structures of aggression, possession, submission and passivity, and to understand these as underlying psychological processes of selves-in-relation rather than expressions of internalised norms and ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, as Marcus argues, "[t]o theorize the erotic as a set of dynamics rather than as a function of fixed gender relations or literal sexual acts is to assume that women can and do feel the same forms of desire as men" (2007: 115). Benjamin's psychoanalytic elaborations on erotic domination and submission thus provide significant insights into the psychological mechanisms of women's erotic desires, behaviours, and relationships. Yet, while her approach gives us the opportunity to work apart from the traditional mode of analysis and explore, from a much broader and inclusive perspective, women's erotics and the many different shapes of desire, it also acknowledges that "female experience cannot be understood apart from the real structures of power" (Rubenstein, 1987: 101).

Participating, "as an intellectual and cultural mode" (Llewellyn, 2009: 28), in the theoretical-critical debates on gender, sexuality and otherness, the neo-Victorian novel has proven, on various occasions, how it offers new distinctions: how it may work as a literary site for challenging or subverting those 'truths' that we have been trained to see as such, and for addressing contemporary as much as Victorian issues. Issues, like those discussed above, that remain complex questions on gender and power structures. Recently, Sarah Gamble has described the neo-Victorian genre "as a self-conscious exercise in looking backwards" (2009: 128), relying on "late-twentieth-century critical perspectives" (Wormald qtd. in Gamble, 2009: 131). In her exploration of the genre as performative, Gamble points out that "the neo-Victorian novel has flowered alongside developments in gender theory, particularly the inception of debates concerned with queerness and performativity" (2009: 128) –debates to which Judith Butler remains fundamental. Aiming to disrupt the notion of homosexuality as a so-called copy of heterosexuality –implying a degree of inferiority of the first– Butler has established the idea of sexual identities as performative roles. Sexuality, in this sense, consists

in acts of gender performance, there being “no direct or expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality” (Butler, 2004a: 131). Thus highlighting the relational dynamics of performance, Butler maintains that the acting out of a role always occurs “with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (2004b: 1). Butler’s theory of relational performativity opens up for the possibility to break with the active/passive binary. In other words, it allows for an interpretation of the erotic relation as a dynamics involving two performing individuals acting with or for each other, thus implying that both hold a certain degree of agency –given that performing necessarily implies activity or, indeed, non-passivity. As others have observed, Butler’s original theory of performativity provides a stimulating “scepticism about the transhistorical truth of gender and sexual categories” (Marcus, 2007: 13), giving strength to the perception “that woman, desire, sexuality, and kinship are not fixed essences” (Marcus, 2007: 13). Yet, it is arguably in the light of intersubjective theory that we thoroughly can come to terms with the subject/object opposition. An intersubjective perspective, as I have aimed to show, provides a crucial re-conceptualisation of desire. Indeed, it is through this framework, as one of the most thorough psychoanalytical approaches at present to consider the problem of domination, that we can reach an understanding of why we submit to and dominate others, and why we perform/act/behave in certain ways in our (erotic) relationships. In what follows I analyse Sarah Waters’s *Affinity*, considering the power relations depicted in the novel according to Benjamin’s intersubjective theory, focussing on the concept of domination: on its mechanisms and implications for perpetrators as well as victims.

#### **4. WOMEN-LOVING WOMEN AND THE DYNAMICS OF DOMINATION IN *AFFINITY***

With its transgressive, female vision, lesbian discourse and subversive plot, Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* is undoubtedly a touchstone for contemporary feminist fiction. At the same time, the novel has played a crucial role in the consolidation of the neo-Victorian genre. Revealing a new dimension of the neo-Victorian revisionist project, re-vision in *Affinity* is double-edged. Relying upon a very particular form of neo-Victorian ventriloquism, as others have similarly argued, Waters achieves a so-called double liberation of the silenced. In other words, the novel revisits and revises nineteenth-century women’s same-sex desires, while simultaneously establishing a contemporary lesbian discourse within our present mainstream culture. In an essay on Waters’s use of the neo-Victorian mode, Mel Kohlke points out, “Waters recuperates a lesbian history left out of the Victorian public record apart from negative mentions in medical discourses on sexual perversion and degeneracy. By showing lesbianism to be pervasive from the lower to the upper classes, Waters creates a quasi-genealogy of lesbian existence” (2006: 9). Similarly, Paulina Palmer, who has argued that female same-sex desire remains abject in

contemporary culture, describes Waters's work as a significant challenge to "the lesbian's abject role" and a valuable contribution "to her resignification" (2007: 49). Indeed, the re-writing in Waters's case is not so much about revealing "the 'hidden' sexual history of the period" (Kaplan, 2008: 51) as an attempt to renegotiate the position of the lesbian in society and culture *then* as well as *now*.

However, Waters's re-vision of the lesbian in *Affinity* is complex –and very far from being romanticised or utopian. Waters is not merely thematising female same-sex desire, as Cora Kaplan argues, but also "the cruelty of women to women...same-sex betrayal and sadism, psychological and sometimes physical" (2008: 51). Waters, in effect, allows no simple generalisations of women-loving women. This, on the one hand, attests to the fact that "a category of 'woman' that adequately captures and affirms women's agency and identities cannot be constructed in a framework that reduces the multiplicity evident all around us to an underlying unity" (Goldenberg, 2007: 144); on the other, it reveals the dual function of lesbianism in *Affinity*. As Mark Llewellyn observes, "Waters makes her work a critique not only of the [Victorian] modes of dealing with social and sexual transgression, but also the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' responses to similarly perceived deviance" (2004: 213). Effectively, Waters provides the (lesbian) female characters in *Affinity* with subjectivity, volition and viewpoint: qualities with which the complexities, paradoxical forces and the dark sides of human nature come along, triggering, in intersubjective terms, the "disagreement and contradiction [between and] within identities" (Benjamin, 1998: 101). This, however, is arguably how Waters avoids presenting female same-sex erotics as Other. She avoids, as critics have pointed out, "unhelpful restrictiveness" (Jeremiah, 2007: 137). Below, I discuss in more detail how Waters plays on and with notions of femininity and identity in relation to erotic domination in order to re-present women's same-sex relationships.

In *Affinity*, as suggested in the introduction to this paper, power is relational. The novel's protagonist, Margaret Prior, is a young, unmarried, upper class lady who after her father's death –and her brother's marriage to the woman she loves– decides to become a lady visitor at the local prison. There she meets and falls in love with the young girl and inmate, Selina Dawes. The two women, eventually, arrange Selina's escape but it then becomes clear that Selina has merely used Margaret for her own purposes. While Margaret ends up bankrupt and with a broken heart, Selina escapes with her beloved Ruth, who is also Margaret's maid and the mastermind behind the scam.

Already on their first meeting Margaret becomes fascinated with Selina, a spirit medium sentenced to several years for fraud and assault. Margaret feels increasingly attracted to Selina who soon has Margaret in her power. Although Millbank prison has "subdued" a lot of Selina's "girlishness" (Waters, 1999: 306), through the eyes of Margaret, Selina appears as a slender, delicate girl with fair hair and a "fine face": "her cheek was pale, the sweep of brow, of lip, of lashes crisp against her pallor" (Waters, 1999: 27). That she seems "only young and powerless" (Waters, 1999: 64) gives Selina a head start over Margaret, enabling her to take

control from the beginning. Through playing the role of victim Selina, in fact, holds the power, making Margaret submit to her will.

The gaze is a recurrent element in *Affinity* and is, as Heidi MacPherson observes, repeatedly foregrounded “as a powerful medium of control” (2004: 219). The novel, however, disrupts the conventional, hierarchical notion of observer/observed by turning it upside down, so that the presumed victims of the gaze “find the power in being gazed upon, or harness the control for their own purposes” (MacPherson, 2004: 205). Moreover, as Llewellyn argues, “[a]lthough a victim of the gaze, Margaret is also an active participant in using the gaze for her own (sexual) satisfaction” (2004: 210). In the case of Margaret and Selina, it is all about who controls the gaze, rather than who holds it. Consequently, even when Margaret is observing Selina in her prison cell, and is thus *gazing* at her, Selina remains the one in control –a fact Margaret (and the reader) hardly perceives until the end of the novel. The power shifts, or dynamics, that apparently take place between the two women, in terms of *gazing/being gazed at*, are therefore non-productive. In other words, the power alternations, which according to intersubjective theory are so vital for upholding the tension within the erotic relationship, are absent. Margaret’s sense of being in control is the result of pure manipulation.

The notion of whoever gazes holds the power is obviously reversed in the relationship between Margaret and Selina. However, Waters’s depiction of power relations in *Affinity* goes beyond reversal, exploring the very structure and mechanisms of domination as well as its implications for both perpetrator and victim. According to intersubjective theory, the vital tension in a relationship can suffer breakdowns and be restored repeatedly –what Benjamin refers to as the process of destruction and survival. A re-establishing of the balance, however, cannot be achieved when “recognition is foreclosed, [and] the survival of the other, is definitely over” (Benjamin, 1998: 96). This notion of destruction and survival is a recurrent – albeit underlying– motif in *Affinity*. In the relationship between Selina and Ruth (Ruth is Margaret’s maid, Selina’s lover and also the mastermind behind their scheming), the process takes place metaphorically but also in a literal and highly physical sense. That the two women perform a number of roles provides them with possibilities to maintain an erotic relationship, despite the fact that they must “express their passions protected by the smokescreen of Spiritualism” (Hall, 2006: 5). So, whether it is in the form of their spiritualist sessions, or as lady and maid, the dynamics of domination/submission remain an underlying tension within the couple. During their performances as spirit medium and spirit, Ruth’s power over Selina is constant. Disguised as the spirit Peter Quick, Ruth blindfolds her partner, which is both a symbolic expression of domination as well as a physical act of disempowerment, literally impeding her gaze. By tying Selina’s hands and body, Ruth obtains total physical control over the girl and by putting her, bound and blindfolded, at display for the audience, Selina is objectified. In this sense, Ruth causes a metaphorical destruction but also, indeed, *real* and physical harm, making Selina suffer physically during the sittings. Yet, the couple always

seem to restore a certain balance when Ruth (as maid), after the sessions and on a daily basis, takes care of Selina and waits on her. Thinking along the lines of intersubjective theory, Selina's injured, bleeding body and extreme fatigue become signs of her destruction, which ultimately allows Ruth to acknowledge Selina as another subject "able to have decisive impact on [Ruth's] self" (Benjamin, 1998: 91).

Although we may not realise it until the end of the novel, the process of destruction and survival, as I argue above, is a central pattern of Selina and Ruth's relationship. Ruth's final words, "remember...whose girl you are" (Waters, 1999: 352), suggest that she will continue to be the dominating of the two. However, her remark does not actually end the *story*, as it is said, chronologically speaking, at an earlier point in the narrative (the novel jumps forwards and backwards in time). Implying a certain degree of open-endedness, Ruth's words thus invite for further speculation. An interpretation from an intersubjective perspective opens up for the possibility that Selina's escape from Millbank will make Ruth acknowledge her partner's independent self –as this will be, in intersubjective terms, Selina's ultimate survival. Obviously, Ruth is the mastermind behind the scheming against Margaret. Yet, there are several instances in which Selina acts on her own initiative, drawing on her own intuition, judgement and skills (e.g. when she avoids being transferred to another gaol), attesting to the girl's active agency and independence. Keeping in mind that Ruth in fact has played a fundamental role in Selina's ending up in prison, we may consider her imprisonment and escape in terms of destruction and survival. Thus, Selina survives –she escapes– and thereby disrupts Ruth's omnipotence, consequently achieving a more balanced dynamics between the two. The couple, in fact, reflects Benjamin's argument that erotic domination results fruitful and tenable only when "the shape of the whole is...informed by mutuality" (1988: 82). Their common project, to obtain freedom and independence *together*, provides the lovers with a degree of complicity –of reciprocity. This, according to intersubjective theory, will enable them to part with the recurrent and asymmetrical master-slave pattern and sustain mutual recognition on a permanent basis.

The self, as Benjamin has argued, exists under "[t]he paradoxical condition that we are dependent for recognition of our independence" (1998: 84). Similarly, as intersubjective theory proposes, erotic desire is based upon the need for recognition. In *Affinity* Selina and Margaret both embody this paradoxical condition of the self. The latter's practical preparations for Selina's escape from Millbank and their subsequent elopement together –as Margaret believes– are acts of devotion but also an expression of her own independence (with the plot's time frame in mind, Margaret's handling large sums of money and paperwork indicates a strong degree of independence). However, Margaret needs Selina to acknowledge her doings: she needs (Selina's) recognition of her independence. In fact, Margaret reaches the extreme point where it is only through Selina's recognition that her self can come alive. While waiting for Selina to show up, with all the newly purchased dresses laid out ready for her, Margaret realises so, and reflects: "Then I know that they [the dresses] are waiting, like

me, for Selina to assume them – to make them quick, to make them real, to make them palpitate with lustre and with life” (Waters, 1999: 306). Selina, however, never shows up. Whereas the fantasy of erotic domination and submission in intersubjective theory may work as a fruitful dynamics, in the case of Margaret and Selina it remains, in its most literal sense, a fantasy. It is not until towards the end, though, that Margaret and the readers come to realise that the erotic connection between the two is nothing but a mere illusion –and that Margaret will never obtain Selina’s recognition.

Notwithstanding the women’s obvious differences (class difference and one being a convict) Margaret and Selina gradually stress their ‘sameness’. That is, an increasing connectedness between the two is perceived (by Margaret and the reader) thanks to the text’s skilful incorporation of parallels and similarities between the characters. It is clear that Margaret understands ‘affinity’ as ‘sameness’. By identifying with Selina, to the extent that she fails to see that they are *not* the same, Margaret thus fails to see that their perceived affinity is nothing but an illusion. To a certain extent, the women’s apparent similarity is what misleads the reader, betrays and eventually destroys Margaret. As Palmer argues, “Waters, while utilizing the motif of the double to explore the emotional dynamics...also questions its appropriateness” (2007: 63). Identification, from an intersubjective point of view, may serve “to bridge difference” (Benjamin, 1998: 107). However, such bridging is necessarily a two-way process, and this is why it fails to work in the case of Selina and Margaret. Eventually, both Margaret and the reader discover that Selina craves not for Margaret’s love but for Ruth’s. So, although Margaret (and the reader) perceives an erotic tension between the two women, this is the result of neither mutual recognition nor identification but, rather, the workings of Selina and Ruth’s (and Waters’s) manipulation. As Hall points out, “Margaret is evolving and moving towards material, rather than metaphoric, expressions of her lesbianism. Yet despite the fact that she is attempting to substantiate her desire, the signs by which she recognises and reads it remain derealised” (2006: 10). Indeed, Margaret (and readers) recognises the “movements from identification to object love, from object love to identification” (Benjamin, 1995: 79), which intersubjective theory explains as the underlying pattern of erotic relations, taking them as evidence of their progressing erotic bonding. Consequently, she is (and we are) fooled: tricked into seeing an erotic tension where there, actually, is none.

Although Margaret and Selina’s love is never materialised, it is, nevertheless, possible to analyse their relationship in terms of erotic dynamics. While Selina’s involvement with Margaret is mere performance, the latter –taking their bonding for real– soon comes to occupy the position of dominated, submitting willingly to Selina’s demands for the sake of what she believes to be a mutual erotic attraction. As mentioned earlier, Margaret embodies the intersubjective notion of the paradoxical condition: that the self depends on recognition. She, in other words, has a profound, unfulfilled longing for being truly acknowledged as the person she really is –for having her self recognised. So, for Margaret, Selina “conveys not only a

compound fear of and desire for recognition, but also a sense of being somehow changed or transformed by her illicit knowledge of herself” (Carroll, 2007: 8). In this sense, Margaret fantasises not only about her and Selina’s elopement but imagines also with horror how she eventually will be discovered and “cast off by society” (Waters, 2004: 274). Paradoxically enough, “Margaret’s pact with Selina offers to realise both what she most desires and what she most fears” (Carroll, 2007: 7), that is, “[to] be seen, and recognised” (Waters, 1999: 274). Significantly, it is Selina’s promise of recognition that leads Margaret into the arms of her perpetrator. By assuring Margaret that she, Selina, sees her real self and acknowledges her for –or despite– what she is, Selina ultimately wins her visitor’s trust and heart: “‘I have looked at you’ she [Selina] said quietly then. ‘But do you think I look at you, with *their* eyes? ... ‘Do you think,’ she said finally ‘that I will be like *her* – like *her*, that chose your brother over you?’ ... I [Margaret] felt the tug of her, then. I felt the lure of her, the grasp of her” (Waters, 276; original emphases). Proving to have fatal consequences for Margaret, the moment she gives up asserting her own subjectivity Selina’s omnipotence is, in effect, affirmed. As Margaret herself observes, she literally loses her self, failing to perceive herself as independent and external to her beloved: “I [Margaret] said, ‘I’ll do it. I’ll go with you. I love you, and cannot give you up. Only tell me what I must do and I will do it!’ ... My soul left me – I felt it fly from me and lodge in her” (Waters, 1999: 280). This leads Margaret to think that her desires will be fulfilled once she submits to Selina’s demands. However, when she comes to understand that Selina’s acknowledgement of her is fakery, the tension between them is broken and their relationship, or the illusion of it, falls apart. Translating this situation into terms of destruction and survival, Margaret is destroyed and, since “recognition is foreclosed” (Benjamin, 1998: 96), the tension cannot be restored and is lost for good. Whether Margaret will survive or not, in both a metaphorical and a literal sense, is left in the air –like all Selina’s promises. Either way, the ending of *Affinity* underpins the intersubjective argument that recognition is “central to human existence” (Benjamin, 1988: 15): Margaret’s self ceases to exist when she is refused the acknowledgement she so longs for.

That being recognised is fundamental to a person’s existence is an aspect that marks Selina too. Subtly referring to Ruth, Selina explains Margaret that “she will do anything to keep that love about her...[b]ecause to lose it will be like death to her” (Waters, 1999: 211). So, just like Margaret, Selina longs for and depends on recognition. Aiming to fulfil that existential need, Selina seeks Ruth’s recognition and, therefore, gladly submits to her. Yet, as suggested earlier, Ruth and Selina may be able to establish and maintain a balance which, in turn, will allow them to achieve a healthy, equal relationship.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Intersubjective theory brings us closer to an understanding of why we accept, perpetuate and continue to have relationships of domination and submission. An exploration of *Affinity* from an intersubjective perspective casts light onto how the novel transgresses both Victorian boundaries and those that persist in contemporary culture, and, in turn, onto how the neo-Victorian mode serves to bridge the gaps of history as well as to establish connections between minority and mainstream at present. As I have argued in this article, Waters’s renegotiation of the figure of the lesbian involves much more than a thematisation of female same-sex erotics and the articulation of tabooed desires. Indeed, the women-loving women in *Affinity* are more than merely visible: they are characters with complex personalities. Yet, rather than providing a picture-perfect image of the women-loving women in her novel, Waters portrays the female couple with all its implications of interpersonal differences, cruelty and (self)betrayal; or, in other words, with the negative sides of human nature. Consequently, the depiction of female same-sex dynamics in *Affinity* embraces, in manifold ways, the intersubjective perception of the erotic dynamics of domination and submission. By disrupting the conventional structures of power and the erotic, Benjamin and Waters –in each their way– contribute to a broader feminist project of re-vision, and convincingly prove how “women of the present can reshape a sexual tradition” (Miller, 2007: 3).

## NOTE

1. The term “self-in-relation” was first used in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), written by the pioneering, feminist psychoanalyst, Nancy Chodorow, with whom Jessica Benjamin “shares many common assumptions...and is indebted to” (Benjamin, 1988: 247).

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