



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2013) "You will see the logic of the design of this": from historiography to taxonomography in the contemporary metafiction of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*. *Neo-Victorian Studies* 6 (1), pp. 105-125. ISSN 1757-9481.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12212/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

**“You will see the logic of the design of this”:
From Historiography to Taxonomography in the
Contemporary Metafiction of Sarah Waters’s *Affinity***

Martin Paul Eve

(University of Lincoln, England, UK)

Abstract:

Although, in some ways, Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* looks akin to historiographic metafiction, Marie-Luise Kohlke has persuasively argued that the text is more accurately dubbed “new(meta)realism”, a mode that demonstrates the exhausted potential of the form. This article suggests that genre play and a meta-generic mode, dubbed taxonomography, might be a further helpful description for the mechanism through which Waters’s novel effects its twists and pre-empts the expectations of an academic discourse community. This reading exposes Waters’s continuing preoccupation with the academy but also situates her writing within a broader spectrum of fiction that foregrounds genre as a central concern. Ultimately, this article asks whether Waters’s novel can, itself, be considered as a text that disciplines its own academic study in the way that it suggests that the academy has become, once more, blind to class.

Keywords: *Affinity*, disciplinarity, genre, historiography, metafiction, taxonomography, Sarah Waters.

Following in the wake of Linda Hutcheon, those working on the lineage of the ever-nebulously-titled postmodern fiction have become accustomed to thinking about a certain sub-genre of this form as “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988). Indeed, there has been a proliferation of works of fiction that highlight their own fictionality (metafiction) while dealing with the nature of the study/construction of history (historiography), thereby positing the distinctions and overlaps between events, narratives and discursively encoded facts. With the works of John Barth, Robert Coover, E. L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo acting as the most prominent Stateside representatives of the ‘movement’, historiographic metafiction is also firmly recognised as the generic descriptor to which much neo-Victorian material is traditionally subordinated, despite the substantial divergences between canonised neo-Victorianists and high

postmodernists (see Ho 2012: 7). Indeed, a cursory glance at the fiction of Sarah Waters – the subject of this study – would seem to confirm this, in line with the fact that, in Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s appraisal, “[m]uch neo-Victorianism [...] plays on the margins with a self-reflective and metafictional stance” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 148). From Margaret Prior’s opening line in *Affinity* (1999), for instance, the reader is clearly reminded of Hayden White’s theorisation of emplotment, wherein history and fiction exist as though within the axioms of an almost thermodynamic system; although neither may be created or destroyed, their form may be interchangeable. As Margaret reflects, “Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale” (Waters 2000: 7).

More recently, however, there have been signs of the exhaustion of historiographic metafiction as a fictional mode. Indeed, as noted by Shawn Smith, it no longer appears “new or revolutionary” to state that “history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies” (S. Smith 2005: 2), which seems to encompass most of the claims associated with the ‘meta’ prefix and ‘graphic’ suffix. In pointing this out, I do not mean to downplay the ethical validity of allowing counter-narratives of alterity to surface, which has been key in many readings of the function of historiographic metafiction alongside the rise of postcolonialism. Yet one might well ask whether Foucault’s perspectivalised genealogy has now been thoroughly absorbed, canonised and packaged to death.

Conversely, whatever ill-phrased term we use to refer to that which succeeds postmodernism – ‘post-postmodernism?’; a “modernist future?” (James 2012) – there are now signs of a shift in focus. Although historical and metafictional novelistic practices are both alive and well, the target of these elements seems more squarely aligned with ideas of genre theory, rather than solely with historiography. Consider, for example, Thomas Pynchon’s later works. Although initially classed as an out-and-out historiographic metafictionalist – most notably for *V.* (1963), *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997) – since his 2006 epic *Against the Day*, Pynchon’s focus seems to have moved (albeit incrementally) to explore the same notions of historiography, but to do so through the history of literary taxonomy in a practice that Brian McHale has called “genre poaching” (McHale 2011). Similarly, moving across the Atlantic, although his work broadly lacks the standard characteristics of historiographic metafiction, such as explicit textual self-awareness and a focus on the

parallels between fiction and history that is found in other British writers, such as John Fowles or even Russell Hoban, the writings of China Miéville have demonstrated the nuance that can be brought to such genre bending, melding science fiction with Lovecraftian ‘weird’ and even, in the case of *King Rat* (1998), fusing in subcultural narratives of jungle music in a mode that seems to mimic a historiographic function.

Of interest for the subject of this article, both of the above cited authors have also veered into the territory of ‘steampunk’, a term denoting the anachronistic transposition of the technologies of the Industrial Revolution to new settings. In the case of Pynchon this takes place through his dime novel balloon boys in *Against the Day*, the temporally disjointed Chums of Chance, whereas for Miéville it is a dominant aspect in *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and *Iron Council* (2004). While recognising that the specific designation of steampunk is not interchangeable with ‘neo-Victorian’, this re-situation of Victorian motifs, coinciding with the rise of genre-play superseding historical-play, should give us pause for thought: is there something special about the Victorian era and its transcription into contemporary fiction that lends itself to this type of genre play? Is there something in the academic study of literature that privileges this time period in relation to genre studies and historiographic metafiction?

The neo-Victorian fiction of Sarah Waters, primarily her 1999 novel *Affinity*, affords an excellent case-study to explore these issues. Although *Affinity* initially looks like historiographic metafiction, it might better be designated under a new label: ‘taxonomographic metafiction’. This term, admittedly jargonistic, is a shorthand I propose for ‘fiction about fiction that deals with the study/construction of genre/taxonomy’ and constitutes, I contend, a useful alternative means of classifying such works. As a pre-emptive rationale for the selection of *Affinity*, on which much critical work has already been done, it is important to note that there are certainly other novels in which this mode may be observed, not least the aforementioned later fiction of Thomas Pynchon, as theorised by McHale, and other outright neo-Victorian works such as A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990). Indeed, one of my core contentions is that many texts could be categorised as taxonomographic metafiction, even if hypothesised here from close reading of a single text.¹ *Affinity*, however, provides an example, *par excellence*, of the fixation upon genre that I am here describing, particularly so because the novel’s plot twists rely upon readers’ conceptions and expectations of genre.

Indeed, rather than performing its genre play through a multitude of voicings, as has become customary among other contemporary authors working on genre – for instance David Mitchell in *Cloud Atlas* (2004) – *Affinity* not only explicitly encodes its generic games within its own narrative statements (as, surely, do many metafictional works) but also, as will be shown, functionally deploys genre for its narrative path. In fact, Waters’s novel hinges upon genre for the unfolding interrelation between its narrative and its metanarratorial statements, making it eminently suited for a taxonomographic analysis. While, then, it could be argued that the usual suspects of neo-Victorianism (Byatt, Fowles, Atwood, Waters etc.) seem, on the surface, to be no longer exciting in terms of their genre-play and have been eclipsed by Pynchon, Miéville and other more ‘global’ authors, by re-reading and returning to Waters’s *Affinity*, we can actually see that even back in 1999 this ‘new’ form of taxonomography was in gestation and critics have missed an opportunity to look at neo-Victorianism in this way.

This analysis will adopt a tripartite structure, moving from an overview of genre theory (including notions of academic disciplinarity), through to an evaluation of Waters’s novel, before finally considering the applicability of this terminology beyond the specific contexts set out here. There are many problems of writing about fiction that writes about genre, mostly pertaining to notions of self-awareness and self-perception: for example, how can this article accurately classify when it deals with theorisations that de-stabilise classifications? Yet the re-growing stature of genre studies in twenty-first-century fiction makes this task one that is both needed and, to date, still under-addressed.

1. Genre Studies and the Process of Systematisation

In order to assess a shift from a mode of historiographic metafiction to one of taxonomographic metafiction, it first becomes necessary to define what is meant by ‘genre’, ‘taxonomy’ and ‘taxonomography’. For reasons of economy and also for their long-standing recognition in the critical canon, I will defer readers to Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon for their well-known definitions, respectively, of historiography (through metahistory) and historiographic metafiction (White 1975; Hutcheon 1988). Yet there is far less consensus on the definition and function of genre. At its most basic level, genre derives from the French meaning ‘sort’ or ‘kind’, itself descended from the Latin ‘genus’, a term used most prominently in

contemporary biological taxonomies. Genre seems to appear, then, as a kind of sorting, a mode of filing, of classifying. There is, however, a real problem with this way of thinking, which is, interestingly and counter-intuitively, also analogously found in biology and other forms of rule-following, such as mathematics. Framing genres in this way leads to a linguistic confusion in which the abstract concept of ‘a genre’ is reified until the belief emerges that genres are ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, akin to a mechanistic process of filing into pre-existing boxes. Taking this as problematic leads to the further questions of the origin of genres and the power structures behind their configurations.

One of the most incisive (and concise) explanations of the major problems of genre has come from Robert Stam who identifies four key difficulties of generic labels that are worth recapitulating: 1) extension: generic terms can often be too narrow to accurately represent their subjects while they are also, frequently, too broad to fully capture the nuance of individual works; 2) normativism: generic terms can lead to simplistic membership criteria that are then reduced to a crude tick-box exercise; 3) monolithic definitions: genre can be tyrannous and lead to the false assumption that one generic title will be sufficient; 4) biologism: genres are fallaciously believed to evolve in a standardised way over a common “life cycle” (Stam 2000: 151-152). Each of these problematic aspects begins to build a negative definition of genre wherein it becomes possible to state what genre is not. Genre is not a substitute for the specificities of a work. Genre should not be a tool for re-inscribing pre-existing norms. Genre is not an organism with known phases of development upon which we can rely, but a post-determined unique context in each case.

The assignation of genre is also a process enmeshed in issues of cyclicity and, more importantly, self-knowledge. As Andrew Tudor frames it, to analyse a genre means to identify its principal characteristics, which must first involve generating a list of works that fall under the generic term; however, these works can only be identified as fitting the genre-label through possession of the principle characteristics that they are supposed to embody in the constitution of the generic term (Tudor 1974: 135). This formulation, often cited in genre studies, has broader repercussions for ideas of academic disciplinarity, not least neo-Victorian studies. From whence do academic disciplines appear? How are academic genres formed? These questions are asked not out of a tangential interest in the formulations that

shape our discourse and ability to speak, but rather because they are absolutely central, as shall be seen, to the ideas of taxonomographic metafiction being put forward here. Neo-Victorian metafiction frequently signals its own consciousness of the academic debates surrounding literary 'merit' vs. populism (as just one example). This mode, however, as with historiographic metafiction, is also intensely aware of the paradigms of the academy and its treatment of literary, historical and social categories, or genres, cannot be divorced from the genres of the academy, enforced through division of labour and entrenched in a rarely successful, but nonetheless worthwhile, striving for false reconciliation: disciplines.

If, as Stam suggests and I have hinted, this outcome of assigned genre is problematic, then there might be another way of understanding genre that proves more productive and that could form a framework for thinking about taxonomographic metafiction. Indeed, re-classifying genre as a 'formation process' can be of help in dissociating ideas of genre from notions of Platonic ideals. As a move towards this dynamic mode of formation, Stephen Neale has framed the issue thus: "genres are not systems: they are processes of systematisation" (Neale 1980: 51; Neale 2000: 163). This approach has several advantages, most clearly the fact that in emphasising the dynamic nature of genre and acknowledging the constant negotiation of terminology within a changing environment it becomes possible to also pre-admit the defeat of our taxonomies to definitively incorporate their subject matter. Genre no longer becomes a substitute for the specificities of a work, a tool for re-inscribing pre-existing norms, or a developmental certainty. Finally, this focus upon process also foregrounds the material conditions of production for cultural artefacts and the market services into which genre is pressed. 'Children's literature', 'young adult fiction', 'romance' and so forth serve as much a wish-fulfilment function for the consumer as they do a marketing tool for those doing the selling. Indeed, thinking of genre in this way shows the exact degree to which assigned-genre can become constricting, an aspect of commercial systems that serves only to reproduce the extant conditions of reproduction. Thus, as Jacques Derrida puts it in his study 'The Law of Genre', in a polemic opening hypothetical statement typical of his style wherein such declarations form the aspect of enquiry and are then undermined and reversed throughout the piece, "as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly,

or monstrosity” (Derrida 1980: 57). As shall be seen, Waters’s text undertakes a similar reversal from this position, promising a novel of star-crossed romance and supernatural mystery while subtly exploiting, introducing and proliferating generic impurity.

Certainly, this “process of systematization” model helps to think about the uses to which genre is put, rather than the term itself, and this leads on to the theorisation of taxonomographic metafiction to which the remainder of this piece will be devoted. From this brief incursion into genre theory, there are four key points and suppositions worth reiterating, as they form the crux of the evaluation here: 1) taxonomography is the study of genre, when genre is defined as a “process of systematization”; hence taxonomography is more accurately defined as the study of processes of systematisation; 2) this process of systematisation, by which a text continually forms and then destabilises generic markers as it unfolds, is often performed through the use of intertextual reference as such a marker; 3) material conditions of production are important for a study of these systematising processes; 4) academic disciplines are formed as the outcomes of processes of systematisation over which academics are not themselves the masters. Each of these precepts will now be examined in the context of Sarah Waters’s adjusted mode of metafictional practice.

2. History, Setting and Critical Analepsis

Set in 1870s London, Sarah Waters’s second novel, *Affinity*, is narrated by two alternate female speakers with lesbian leanings: the middle-class spinster Margaret Prior and the working-class convicted felon Selina Dawes. The primary plot in the novel revolves around the philanthropic activities of Margaret Prior, a lady visitor to Millbank prison where Selina Dawes, an imprisoned spiritualist medium, has been sentenced to a five-year term for a never-wholly-explicated charge of fraud and assault. Through Margaret’s diary entries, the text continually signals her ongoing grief for the death of her father and also for the loss of her past same-sex love, Helen, who is now her brother’s wife. Over the course of the novel, Margaret’s visits to Millbank become more and more frequent as she becomes at first curiously interested in and then romantically infatuated with Selina. Selina’s diary entries, on the other hand, detail her life as an infamous London spiritualist prior to her imprisonment.

This spiritualist setting, in addition to chiming with the current popular resurgence of interest in supernatural mediation as entertainment,² allows Waters to project an environment that is at once historically accurate and exotic, but also one that is highly sexually charged. Indeed, the intersection of spiritualism, sexual danger and criminality are continually at the forefront of the text, an aspect that is clearly evidenced in the slim portions of the novel that recall Selina's trial: "She asked you to remove your gown? Why do you think she did that?" – "She said that I must do it for the development to work properly" (Waters 2000: 140).

If, however, *Affinity* can be said to be a novel concerned with spiritualism and its possible links to illicit sexuality, the text itself, as with the later *Fingersmith* (2002), is more specifically centred around notions of confinement and, as Rosario Arias argues, two rather than one imprisoned individual/s (Arias 2009: 259). After her suicide attempt, Margaret is infrequently allowed to leave her home, kept suitably subdued by her mother-'jailor' and thereby, to some extent, Waters mirrors Selina's imprisonment in this character. In a deliberately ironic inversion, the only time that Margaret is free is when she visits Selina in the prison. Conversely, it is only owing to the visits of one prisoner (Margaret) to another (Selina) that the latter eventually achieves her freedom, with the novel's surprise conclusion bringing the supernatural very much down to earth in a traditional escape narrative with a cruel twist: Margaret's servant, Ruth Vigers, turns out to be Selina's lover, having connived with the medium to secure her release and deprive Margaret of her inheritance.

Thinking hypothetically for a moment under a mode of assigned genre, it would seem clear from critical work to date that the primary thematic (if not formal) characteristics that define the genres of this novel are: a Victorian setting (although written in the late-twentieth century, hence neo-Victorian), lesbian gothic romance, spiritualism and the prison. Perhaps the ultimate intersection of these aspects, brought about through a sexualised sadomasochistic context, comes from the description of the prison's disciplinary apparatus:

'Here we have handcuffs – some for girls, look – look how dainty these are, like a lady's bracelets! Here we have gags,'
– these are strips of leather, with holes punched in them to let

the prisoner breathe ‘but not cry out’ – ‘and here, hobbles.’
(Waters 2000: 179)

In this mapping out of assigned genres, though, things are not quite so straightforward.

In order to begin to appraise each of these aspects under what I will term a process-genre model, it is worth first assessing the Victorian setting of the text, an element that also involves thinking more broadly about the status of historical and historiographic fiction. In this latter area, Marie-Luise Kohlke has persuasively argued that Waters’s brand of historiographic metafiction is substantially different to its traditional antecedents on the premise that “historiographic metafiction may have exhausted its transgressive possibilities and become problematic rather than liberating to writers such as Waters” (Kohlke 2004, 156). While Kohlke argues that “[h]istorical fiction offers women writers and their female protagonists a way into history through the back door”, she also asserts that Waters’s fiction is queerly orientated for traditional thinking on historiographic metafiction (Kohlke 2004: 153). Rather than the more explicit practice of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), for instance, in which the narrative forks into three alternative, parallel endings in order to mimetically signpost the constructed nature of history as narrative, Kohlke makes a good case that Waters’s novel “mimics history’s obscuration of its own narrativity, not merely critiquing but re-enacting it”, a mode she dubs “new(meta)realism” (Kohlke 2004: 156). Indeed, this is an aspect that is reinforced by the intertextual reference to Henry James that is surely implied by Waters’s Peter Quick (Ruth Vigers’s impersonation of Selina’s spirit-guide) re-enacting the sexualised, ghostly Peter Quint.³

While I will return to these broader questions of historiography, it is worthwhile, at this point, to delve more specifically into the re-mediation of the historical setting of the novel and to examine the lenses through which *Affinity* re-presents its Victorian timeframe. This is important because, as will be seen, the frames of reference used have a strong bearing upon academic disciplinarity and taxonomography in relation to the text. As at least five critics have noted (Kohlke 2004; Llewellyn 2004; Millbank 2004; Arias 2009; Braid 2010), it is clear that Waters’s text deploys Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon as a deliberate model for the prison setup (even if Millbank was not, ultimately, to be Bentham’s ideal instantiation) alongside

Henry Mayhew's 1862 *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life*. Yet the Victorian is even more strongly represented through the 'Foucauldian' element that carries particular implications for academic readings – in spite of the triteness of employing 'Foucauldian' as a broad catch-all adjective. Indeed, I want to suggest that the specific reading practices that Waters encourages (and which therefore shape the processes of systematisation for the text) are heavily inflected by this high-Theory reference point through Foucault. To briefly demonstrate the Foucauldian inscriptions that have already been ably explored, one need look no further than Foucault's famous explanation in *Discipline and Punish* that, in Bentham's prison design, the "annular building" frames a tower "pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring" such that the cells situated within the "peripheric building" may be backlit and overseen by a single supervisor. In other words, "[t]he Panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately", thus transforming visibility into a trap (Foucault 1997: 200). When this description is compared to that in *Affinity*, the direct modelling upon the panopticon is clear. As the prison governor Mr Shillitoe leads Margaret along the "spiral staircase that wound upwards through a tower", they arrive at "a bright, white, circular room, filled with windows" that houses Mrs Haxby, "the Argus of the gaol". From this description and the direct reference to Argos "Panoptes", it is as clear to the informed reader as to Miss Prior how the prison functions as a Victorian intertext: "You will see the logic of the design of this", as the novel knowingly remarks (Waters 2000: 10-11).

Alongside Waters's 1995 Ph.D. on lesbian and gay historical fictions that necessitated reference to Foucault, there are other clues throughout the text of *Affinity* that strengthen notions that it is Foucault whose image is supposed to most clearly materialise in the mind of the academic reader. We are told, for example, of "how the world might gaze at [Selina]", of how "it was a part of her punishment", with Jacobs, the prisoner in the "darks", screaming "Damn you for gazing at me" (Waters 2000: 64, 181), the objectifying gaze being, of course, a core part of Foucault's early institutional histories. Furthermore, Waters does not miss the opportunity to pun on the name of her warder, Ellen Power, using the surname-only homonym to flag up the second of Foucault's core axes: knowledge, power and ethics. For example, early in the text, Margaret recalls that "[w]hen I

gazed at Power, I found her smiling”, while later we are given the blunt query: “Power gone?” (Waters 2000: 39, 278). In addition to highlighting the aspects of class, power and the gaze that I will later contend are the key elements in this novel, these clear allusions to Foucault are important for thinking about *Affinity*’s taxonomographic aspects for two reasons. Firstly, in sowing Foucault’s genealogies throughout her text, Waters appears to be writing under the genre of what we might term a *critical* historiography. This is made clear through the way in which *Affinity*, alongside her earliest neo-Victorian novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), both overturns the repressive hypothesis and also makes sexuality a part of identity formation in the Victorian era. Notably for Waters, these two aspects are used to reflect a feminist, lesbian critique of the present in the same way that utopian and dystopian texts deploy temporal and spatial differentiation and repetition in order to enact critiques upon their own origins. Writing of Waters’s exploration of “how women in the nineteenth century were ostracised, criminalised and placed outside society”, Llewellyn fittingly remarks that “[t]he use of an historical period can imply that there is a parallel or affinity between the age about which an author is writing and the one in which she writes” (Llewellyn 2004: 213).

While Llewellyn warns of the dangers of attributing a direct correlation between the source history and contemporary target era in a mode of trans-historical critical affinity, he also notes that “there is an inescapable desire to categorise the kind of novel Waters wants to write” (Llewellyn 2004: 213). This brings me to my second point, under which it becomes possible to re-join genre (a process of systematisation) with Waters’s novel: the intended discourse community for such Foucauldian references appears to be those readers with an academic background and an interest in the (neo-)Victorian, the foreknowledge of which means that, at this level, Waters can play some elaborate generic games.

3. **Affinity (noun): “A similarity of characteristics”**

This notion of an “inescapable desire to categorise the kind of novel Waters wants to write” brings the argument back full circle to issues of genre and classification, which seem to be central to this novel, if admittedly locked in a further classificatory desire. On multiple fronts, this initial attempt to thwart generic placement can be seen with ease: the text is the lesbian novel that isn’t a ‘lesbian’ novel; it is a historical fiction that is

about the present; it looks to be a work of historiographic metafiction that has exhausted its transgressive potential; it is a supernatural thriller that is wholly natural; it is a prison novel in which confinement is ultimately removed to a panoptic society; and it is two diary accounts told through impossible diary objects.⁴ There is also a process at work here, though, that caters specifically for an informed academic discourse community. This is one of decoding Waters's encoded text and re-reading the deliberate Foucauldian inscriptions that she makes, thereby systematising the Foucauldian text through this reading process.

Following the logical regress, the consequence of this mode of thinking, which asks why a certain discourse community goes through a specific process of systematisation, is to ask how that discourse community was systematised in the first place. Indeed, this means that we should treat academic disciplines in exactly the same way that we think about genre: as problematic and cyclical when assigned – which accounts for some of the problems of why, as Stanley Fish put it, “interdisciplinarity is so very hard to do” (Fish 1989) – but better understood as a process of systematisation. Indeed, even at a broad level, the study of literature, of mathematics, of physics and so forth each requires a definition based upon a systematisation of the objects of study that does not exist independently of humans, but is entwined in processes of practice and ideology. Disciplinary boundaries are defined that dictate (and are, paradoxically, defined by) not only the ‘object’ studied but also the behavioural patterns that form a conservative sanity check for the practice of the study of those objects. Within each ‘discipline’ there are sub-disciplinary practices constrained by the typed hierarchy in which they are situated.

This thinking around disciplinarity is important for readings of *Affinity*, because this text plays a game of taxonomography, knowingly luring different discourse communities with aspects of their vocabulary, but also seems to attempt to re-systematise academic disciplines themselves. For an instance of how others have begun to hint at this structure, consider that Sarah A. Smith, in a take also re-framed by Rosario Arias, suggests that *Affinity* is a text that shows that “[t]he conclusions that Margaret’s story prompts – that gender is a form of prison and a kind of madness – are predictable commonplaces of feminist studies of the Victorian period” (S. A. Smith 1999: 24; Arias 2009: 256). Firstly, this meta-situation reflects back on the novel, rather than on any external politics: it becomes “more about

the politics of the novel than sexual politics” (S. A. Smith 1999: 24). Secondly, though, it would be foolhardy to say that sexual politics are not aspects that the text covers; Margaret is trapped by the status that society affords her gender within the novel and also believes in notions of her own hysteria. Such statements simultaneously acknowledge that this *is* what the text does, while calling it trivial and obvious, eventually arguing that *Affinity*’s final aim is to expose the commonplaceness of these traits. What such a reading misses, though, is that the text’s surprise ending would not be possible were it not for the foregrounding of all aspects except for class, the single element that allows the antagonist Ruth Vigers to go unnoticed for the majority of the work. As Heilmann and Llewellyn put it: “we don’t really ‘see’ what is presented to us because we displace our belief onto another part of the narrative [...] we fail to realize that the servant in the household carries the key” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 149). Although such an accusation of neglecting class in favour of exoticised deviance could here be being levelled at Foucault, it is more clearly aimed at the reader who is ensnared in the generic game.

To elaborate, a taxonomographic approach allows us to see the way in which class is elided in Waters’s work: through genre. Indeed, the novel rests upon a notion of class that is buried by the study of gender, homonormativity, the prison, and the gaze. In this instance, the traditional objects of study for the sub-disciplines of gender studies and others derived from Foucauldian genealogical methods serve to mask other understandings of the work. This is a game of pre-empting and guessing, a game that the text metafictionally replicates in the relationship between Margaret Prior and the aptly named Miss Riddle, of which Margaret notes, “I guessed what she guessed” (Waters 2000: 250). More specifically on notions of class, the reader should recall that, when Margaret finally realises how she has been manipulated and defrauded, she casts her mind back to Vigers and says: “What was she, to me? I could not even recall the details of her face, her look, her manners. I could not say, cannot say now, what shade her hair is, what colour her eye, how her lip curves” (Waters 2000: 340) – and neither can the reader. Vigers is furthermore described as having “lumpish servant’s limbs”, but, despite this description of bulk and substance, she thrives on invisibility. Early on in the text, Margaret writes of how she hopes that the warders might “see the weakness in me and send me home”, only to lament that “they did not see it” (Waters 2000: 13). This aspect of unseeing, of

invisibility, is the only way that the novel's twist can come about. The text makes the reader complicit with a wish-fulfilling pleasure in which many of the expected aspects of neo-Victorianism – sexuality, female confinement and the prison – are amplified and thrust into sight, so that it can underplay notions of class, embodied in Vigers, in order to keep the key antagonist hidden. Margaret is advised to “keep [her] rings and trinkets hidden [as she would] from the eyes of a servant” (Waters 2000: 16), but keeping the servant hidden from the eyes of the reader is part of the taxonomographic game that the novel plays.

While the authorial game-playing is clear in retrospect, Waters does sow a few clues throughout that indicate that class might be an underpinning factor, thus adding the metafictional element that interweaves narrative and metanarratorial discourse. When talking about the penalties for suicide, Margaret asks, in a pun that also diverts us through the use of the term “queer”: “Don't you think that queer? That a common coarse-featured woman might drink morphia and be sent to gaol for it, while I am saved and sent to visit her – and all because I am a *lady*?” (Waters 2000: 256).⁵ Of course, the actual affinity between the characters here lies in societal penalty for lesbian desire, but there is a secondary, ironic meaning to the novel's title. In the varying treatment afforded to Selina and Margaret for their respective crimes of fraud and attempted suicide and shared ‘crime’ of same sex desire, which are handled entirely differently on the grounds of their different class backgrounds, we are shown the basis of the plot-twist: societal groupings and treatment of those groups. In this reading, ‘affinity’ becomes a term for genre, for ways in which things are grouped on the basis of their characteristics, as part of an ongoing process of systematisation.

The novel affords further clues to the discerning reader of a staged inter-class affinity between Ruth Vigers and Margaret Prior. For instance, although at one point Vigers's “gaze seemed dark”, Prior describes her face as being as “pale as my own” (Waters 2000: 241). Conversely, inter-class delineation through surname-only appellation also proves key to the plot. Consider that, were class structures not present, the reader would have been alerted far earlier to the fact that “Ruth” and “Vigers” are the same person; one of Selina's entries clearly alludes to her interaction with an individual called “Ruth” (Waters 2000: 191-195, *passim*). Even the fact that Vigers is never referred to as Miss Vigers encourages us to think of her surname as

her sole identity and dissuades the reader, through the downplaying of class, in the genre process, from forging the connection between the two.

It is worth noting that this focus on genre and classificatory desire in Waters's novels is not confined to *Affinity*, but is nonetheless most strongly concentrated within this text. The trajectory of genre within an economy of game-playing as a focus in Waters's works, to which *Affinity* contributes, was one that was kick-started in her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, wherein the lead character remarks that she “had believed [herself] to be playing in one kind of story, when all the time, the plot had been a different one” (Waters 1999: 398). Indeed, many aspects of this antecedent book foreshadow elements of *Affinity*. When, for example, that novel's protagonist, Nancy Astley, first becomes interested in Diana Lethaby's servant, Zena Blake, she suddenly realises that she has been using her surname-only address: “I had grown used to calling her only ‘Blake’”; perhaps more importantly, Nancy also remarks that “I had grown used to not *looking* at her, not *seeing* her at all” (Waters 1999: 300-301). This earlier work is notable for its situation in the picaresque tradition – with more than a hint of roaring Moll Cutpurse – but also for the way in which each of its parts takes on particular genre functions: the rags-to-stardom first section, the down-and-out rescue segment, and the socialist-to-love redemption phase. The second is perhaps the most interesting (and merits further investigation) with its twofold inscription of a consenting sadomasochistic relationship atop a deliberate reference to Angela Carter's reworking of the Bluebeard myth in the titular story of *The Bloody Chamber* (1979): “There might be a heap of girls in suits – their pomaded heads neat, their necks all bloody” (Waters 1999: 238).⁶

Continuing the genre-play, *Fingersmith*, Waters's next neo-Victorian work after *Affinity*, also adopts this theme. In many ways closely replicating *Affinity*'s structure of two mirrored female protagonists who narrate in alternation, *Fingersmith* encodes the bait-and-switch distraction that *Affinity* attempts within its own narrative. Indeed, Waters casts the mis-reader into the role of the stooge within the text, identifying with Susan, when Gentleman remarks that she “will be distracted by the plot into which I shall draw her. She will be like everyone, putting on the things she sees the constructions she expects to find there” (Waters 2003: 227). In *Fingersmith* this distraction is achieved through a perspectivalised pre-emption wherein the reader empathically identifies with the narratorial figure and projects

their desires upon the text in this light, whereas in *Affinity*, it is primarily concerned with pre-empting the reader's expectations of the conventions of the neo-Victorian novel and using them to form its own distraction fraud. In both *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, Waters is her own form of con artist.

To return to *Affinity*, however, which is the novel that demonstrates these taxonomographic aspects with the greatest clarity, the way in which we can most easily discern the text's attempt to pre-empt the pre-emption of the reader is in the false trail that it lays to suggest an imminent death at the end of the novel. There are strong hints that statements such as those surrounding the prison garment boxes ("It was as if the boxes were coffins") are proleptic (Waters 2000: 237), especially given that much of the text concerns the supernatural and an ability to communicate with the dead; why not also an ability to see into the future? This false foreshadowing is also echoed in Selina's diary, which is presented to the reader as potentially supernatural at this stage, wherein Peter Quick (whose surname, ironically, carries the Biblical contrast to the 'the dead') refers to a "*fatal gift*", thus strengthening these notions (Waters 2000: 261). In reality, it is unclear whether Margaret kills herself at the end of the text. She speaks of the "final thread of [her] heart" growing "slack" (Waters 2000: 351), but she cleans her wounds and tidies the house as if to carry on living, a way in which the novel then both frustrates expectations of stereotypes while also clearly dodging the earlier proleptic hints. While this is certainly an unorthodox take on the strong implications of suicide presented at the end of the novel, the taxonomographic aspects that I am suggesting here teach us to be wary of textual insinuation.

The final twist of the knife that *Affinity* sticks into historiographic, as opposed to taxonomographic, metafiction comes from the impossible objects upon which the text's history rests.⁷ While the historical study of life-writing remains dependent upon the continued existence of the material artefact, whether through narrative necessity or in a deliberate amplification of the counter-factual history contained in the text, *Affinity* destroys the intra-textual objects that would support its assertions. "How queer", the text finally puns, "to write for chimney smoke" as Margaret burns her diary (Waters 2000: 348).

Others, such as Heilmann and Llewellyn, alongside Kohlke, have done a great service to the field in re-situating *Affinity* as: 1) a text that moves away from an exhausted postmodern historiography, despite its

potential characterisation as such a text; and 2) a novel that links Victorian class-blindness to a contemporary parallel. What I have argued is that these twofold shifts are achieved in Waters’s novel through the mechanism of a move to taxonomography, a metafictional focus upon the nature and play of genre in relation to both reader and critical expectations. Waters is acutely aware of different discourse communities and plays the academic reader like putty with sown allusions to Foucault, imprisonment, spirituality and Victorian lesbianism – knowing that these will excite members of this discourse community – so that she can cloak aspects of class and the novel can achieve its pay-off. These stereotypes – the lonely, and in the case of Margaret Prior, suicidal, tragic homosexual (consider also that Selina Anne Dawes has the initials ‘SAD’); the pitfalls of gender and its constructed nature; the Victorian setting encouraging Foucauldian readings; the prison; aspects of madness and suicide; the life-writing/diary form; even the signposting of the text as historiographic metafiction in Margaret’s opening line – are all aspects that *Affinity* bowls at an academic discourse community, putting them into a competitive economy of genres with one another, so that the true aspect that it wishes to explore, namely class, remains undiscovered. In many ways this seems to mirror the critiques made by proponents of intersectional feminism, namely that certain forms of feminist discourse pay inadequate attention to race. It could certainly be said here that Waters’s novel implies that there are academic readers entrenched within discourses of queer and gender theory who are, analogously, under-representing class within their areas.

This taxonomographic focus is an advanced technique that is aware of the shifting nature of genre, of the fact that it is a process driven by behavioural patterns, for as the text temporally unfolds, it must anticipate the process through which its target discourse communities, whether academic or popular, intellectual or affective (to the extent that these are opposing terms), will systematise its contents; it must guess what the reader will guess. This, in turn, involves an awareness of the constructed nature of disciplines – of those very discourse communities – by the same processes. *Affinity* is a novel that, in its metafictional practice, reflects back, not just on itself – the constant accusation levelled by detractors of the form (James 2012: 10) – but on the academy, on commercial processes of genre, on conditions of production and, through these socio-cultural contexts, on class in what may be described as a new ethical act that attempts to systematise

the academy and its discourses through a mutual shaping process. *Affinity* is an example of a neo-Victorian novel that attempts to discipline the reading practices to which it is subject, asking the academy to return to class as a fundamental issue in reshaping cultural narratives. In its pre-emptions of the processes to which it is subject, *Affinity* is a text that always seems to have one up on its readership, attempting to re-shape our forms and ways of thinking about forms. One should always remember, academic reader, the text seems to say, whose girl you are.

Notes

1. Indeed, the case could be made for issues of taxonomic play in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia' in *Angels of Insects* (1992), both of which explicitly make reference to Darwinian aspects that would integrate well with thinking on classification.
2. As just one example of this, consider the popularity of Derren Brown, whose TV shows at once exploit an interest in the supernatural while also claiming to logically debunk it.
3. As Kym Brindle notes, "Peter Quick is a pseudo ghost intertextually resonant of a Victorian fictional ghost: Henry James's Peter Quint of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), a point previously noted by Catherine Spooner and Mark Wormald (see Spooner 2007: 364 and Wormald 2006: 195)" (Brindle 2009/2010: 83).
4. Apparently Margaret plans to burn her diary at the end of the novel, while it remains unclear who possesses Selina's journal from before her incarceration or whether this too may have been lost or destroyed.
5. This use of the term "queer" was a device that Waters had earlier deployed in *Tipping the Velvet* (Waters 1999: 22 and passim).
6. This seems to be more evocative of Carter, rather than merely the Bluebeard myth itself, through the conjunction of a strong feminist context atop sadomasochistic practices.
7. I am grateful to my student, Siobhan Garrigan, for first bringing this aspect to my attention.

Bibliography

- Arias, Rosario. 2009. ‘Epilogue: Female Confinement in Sarah Waters’ Neo-Victorian Fiction’, in Lauterbach, Frank and Jan Alber (eds.), *Stones of Law, Bricks of Shame: Narrating Imprisonment in the Victorian Age*. Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 256-277.
- Braid, Barbara. 2010. ‘Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels’, in Ciuk, Andrzej and Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska (eds.), *Exploring Space: Spatial Notions in Cultural, Literary and Language Studies*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 74-82.
- Bryndle, Kim. 2009/2010. ‘Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters’s *Affinity*’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2:2 (Winter), Special Issue: *Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past*, 65-85.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1980. ‘The Law of Genre’ (trans. Avital Ronell), *Critical Inquiry* 7:1, 55-81.
- Fish, Stanley. 1989. ‘Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do’, *Profession* (1 January), 15-22.
- Foucault, Michel. 1990a. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (trans. Robert Hurley). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1990b. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (trans. Robert Hurley). London: Penguin.
- . 1997. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan). New York: Vintage.
- . 1998. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 2nd ed. (trans. Robert Hurley). London: Penguin.
- . 2009. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (trans. A.M.S. Smith). London: Routledge.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-first Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ho, Elizabeth. 2012. *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*. London: Continuum.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- James, David. 2012. *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

-
- Kohlke, M.-L. 2004. 'Into History through the Back Door: The "Past Historic" in *Nights at the Circus and Affinity*', *Women: A Cultural Review* 15:2, Special Issue: *Hystorical Fictions*, 153-166.
- Llewellyn, Mark. 2004. "'Queer? I Should Say It Is Criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999)", *Journal of Gender Studies* 13:3, 203-214.
- McHale, Brian. 2011. 'Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching', in Severs, Jeffrey and Christopher Leise (eds.), *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*. Maryland: University of Delaware Press, 15-28.
- Miéville, China. 2000. *King Rat*. London: Pan Books.
- Millbank, Jenni. 2004. 'It's About This: Lesbians, Prison, Desire', *Social & Legal Studies* 13:2, 155-190.
- Neale, Stephen. 1980. *Genre*. London: British Film Institute.
- . 2000. 'Questions of Genre', in Stam, Robert and Toby Miller (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 157-178.
- Pynchon, Thomas. 2006. *Against the Day*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Smith, Sarah A. 1999. 'Love's Prisoner' [Review of Sarah Waters' *Affinity*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 May, 24.
- Smith, Shawn. 2005. *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*. London: Routledge.
- Spooner, Catherine. 2007. "'Spiritual Garments": Fashioning the Victorian Séance in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*', in Kuhn, Cynthia and Cindy Carlson (eds.), *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*. New York: Cambria Press, 351-368.
- Stam, Robert. 2000. 'Text and Intertext: Introduction', in Stam, Robert and Toby Miller (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 145-156.
- Tudor, Andrew. 1974. *Theories of Film*. London: British Film Institute.
- Waters, Sarah. 1995. 'Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to Present'. Doctoral Thesis. London: Queen Mary, University of London.
- . 1999. *Tipping the Velvet* [1998]. London: Virago.
- . 2000. *Affinity* [1999]. London: Virago.
- . 2003. *Fingersmith* [2002]. London: Virago.
- White, Hayden. 1975. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wormald, Mark. 2006. ‘Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians’, in
Tew, Philip and Rod Mengham (eds.), *British Fiction Today*. London:
Continuum, 186-197.