

## Out of Time

### Temporal and Heteropatriarchal Confinements in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*

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Time is of the essence in Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith*. Previous works have merely brushed upon this subject, often mentioning the temporal element only in direct relation to spatiality. However, little attention has been paid to time in its own regard as a structuring element and symbol within *Fingersmith*. As the characters move between different spaces, their awareness of time is conspicuous and hints towards the overall importance of time and its specific significance for the character's gender and sexuality. In an analysis of *Space and Sexuality in the Post-Victorian Fiction of Sarah Waters*, Demelza Morgana Hall remarks that "all human-made structures unavoidably encode assumptions about gender and sexuality" (18). Time, as a structuring element of life, should then show similar qualities. The chiming bell at Sue's first arrival; the three watches of Dr. Christie, Gentleman, and Mr. Lilly; the clock-hand that halts at the end—all listed examples show that time may be a major area of interest while analyzing and interpreting the novel.

By taking a feminist and queer approach it can be examined that in the novel, clocks and watches serve as symbols of dominance in a heteropatriarchal society. It can also be argued that the omnipresence of time symbolizes the heteropatriarchal power structures that the protagonists of *Fingersmith* oppose by their act of living "out-of-time" (Mitchell 140).

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF FEMININE TIME

Simone de Beauvoir discusses the function of time and connects it to the role of women on multiple occasions in *The Second Sex* (Deutscher 327–328). A woman, to de Beauvoir, is forcefully connected to

her past. Though she is eager to diverge from the household she grew up in, she is confined to similar routine in her later life within heteropatriarchal dominated power structures: "The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness – there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness – but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine" (de Beauvoir 496).

More so, her life is built on the very concept of routine, as she herself "clings to routine" (de Beauvoir 610). Contrasting women's life with that of men, de Beauvoir notes that for women "time has [...] no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow" (610). Thus, women remain "[u]nable to create or invent," as Rita Felski writes, "trapped in the deadly grip of cyclical time" (25). Her creative force is stunted, her life subdued to follow the repetitive movement of time. Whereas men may utilize creative forces, women are chained to their othered, reproductive role in society (de Beauvoir 610). However, domestic routine poses merely as one of the temporal entrapments of women: through reproduction women are not elevated to creative self-determination but reduced to passive reproduction. Penelope Deutscher suggests that

Beauvoir may well see maternity as involving both repetition of life and also the repetition of tasks. But the additional aggravation is that it is a matter of repetition (convention, conformity, habit) that makes women persist with these lives of routine, *machine-like repetition*. (331, emphasis added)

Other feminist writings draw close connections to such "machine-like repetition" in clocks found in literature,

where they “assure that life keeps moving in a mechanical fashion, that things get done” (Forbes 42). Clocks are furthermore closely associated with time as a structuring element of heteropatriarchal society and its values (42).

De Beauvoir does not consider lesbians in regard to temporal limitation posed upon them by society. Female homosexuality, to de Beauvoir, poses “one way [...] in which woman solves the problems posed by her condition in general, by her erotic situation in particular” (444). Later scholars have discussed the role of lesbians in heteropatriarchal society in more detail. On the cover of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Judith Butler calls Monique Wittig “the radical extension of de Beauvoir’s theory, its unexpected lesbian future”, who extends the previous discussion to the existence of lesbians within heteropatriarchal society. By coining the expression “Lesbians are not women” (32), Wittig enhances the idea that the dichotomy of male and female is not determined by natural or biological circumstances, but instead on cultural determinants. By breaching the “heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems” (Wittig 32), lesbians refuse to subjugate their identity to gendered

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norms present and enforced by society and hence threaten dominant power structures. Albeit Wittig does admittedly not take immediate note on the importance of routine and repetition and women’s relation to time, she sees lesbians entirely outside societal norms. This may lead to the suggestion that lesbians are also outside of routine and repetition as it has been described by de Beauvoir. To be outside the societal “heterosexual contract” is to be an “[o]utlaw” or “mad” (Wittig 32, 40). The demand for “an absolute break, for the triumph of feminine otherness” (Felski 27) may, in light of the up-

coming analysis, be expanded to a “lesbian otherness”.

#### THE OMNIPRESENCE OF TIME

In *Fingersmith*, time is prominent—either through the underlying presence of a routine or through its sheer absence. Whether Maud or Sue are in London or Briar, two spaces rooted in societal norms, time is constantly present, manifested through the mere presence of watches, clocks, and as a structuring element and by its imposed routine on the protagonists. One notable and direct acknowledgment of the omnipresence of time is found at the very beginning of the novel. At her arrival, Sue’s first impression of Briar is significantly marked by the presence of a clock:

Then I heard, from rather near, the slow tolling of a bell—a very mournful sound, it seemed to me at that moment, not like the cheerful bells of London. It tolled nine times. ‘That’s the Briar bell, sounding the hour,’ said William Inker.<sup>1</sup>

The presence of the bell is ubiquitous and not just restricted to the liminal space of Briar, as the brief mention towards the “bells of London” (FS 56) indicates. As Sue moves from Lant Street to Briar, the presence of time remains constantly unchanging, which gives cause for the assumption that the perception of abstract time is indeed omnipresent in society. Of course, as Sue arrives after the death of King Albert, London’s cityscape is already dominated by Big Ben, which is not only a clock but decidedly “gendered male” (Forbes 42). Albeit never explicitly mentioned, this observation again suggests the omnipresence of time and its close connection to heteropatriarchal values. Although Sue exits London and enters Mr. Lilly’s estate, clocks remain ubiquitous.

Entering Briar, the clock appears to be a humanized watchman, closely associated with the head of the household: “High in one of the buildings was the round white face and great black hands of 1 Waters, Sarah. *Fingersmith*. 2002. London, Virago Press, 2005, p. 56; further references in the text, abbreviated as “FS”.

the clock I had heard striking across the fields" (FS 57). Daily life at Mr. Lilly's estate is vigorously dictated by the clock, which is, of course, a mere symbol of his heteropatriarchal rule over Briar and its predominantly female inhabitants (Mitchell 140). The clock regulates and even reprimands:

'Ten days to go,' I would say to myself. 'Ten days, and you will be rich!' But I'd say it, and across the words might come the chiming of the great house bell; and then I would shudder to think of our plot being so much as a single hour nearer its end. (FS 137)

During the time spent at Briar, the daily life of Maud, and thus Sue, is meticulously organized by the chime of the bell (Hall 73–75). As Sue quickly remarks: "At least at Briar you always knew what hour it was" (FS 74). And indeed, the chimes of the bell are heard throughout the first part of the novel.

Throughout Maud's time spent at Briar, clocks, watches, and the routine they enforce is continuously represented negatively. Standoffish at first, Maud falls victim to severe punishment by her uncle at the hands of his servants. Recalling one such punishment, when locked in an ice-house, she "remember[s] the blocks of grey ice [...] that tick in the wintry silence, like so many clocks. They tick for three hours" (FS 192). Maud's "improper" behavior in the strict system posed by Mr. Lilly is ultimately subdued. She follows the routine of his household dutifully and assists her uncle in the reproduction of pornographic material. And although Sue's impression of the clock is barely anything other than ominous, Maud's dire perception links the clock directly to her uncle and her subjection to her assumed past: "But when I have locked my mother's face away I lie, uneasily. My uncle's clock shudders and strikes" (FS 248). Forced to index and read the pornographic books of her uncle, her reproductive qualities are also measured and subdued to time as it is imposed by him: "How long shall I read for, Uncle?' He puts his watch against his ear. He says, 'Until the next o'clock'" (212).

The watch that Mr. Lilly utilizes in this quote is one of many mentioned throughout the novel. Apart from the omnipresence of time in male-dominated spaces, some characters' dominance seems to be exemplified by their possession of watches. Gentleman's watch is described as "snide" (FS 19), whereas the other two notable watches further establish their owners' heteropatriarchal authority: Mr. Lilly as well as Dr. Christie extend their will over Briar and the mental asylum, respectively. Both are mentioned to be in possession of a watch and make marked use of it. Hence it is Mr. Lilly's watch-chain, symbolically draped underneath the library key and razor, that Maud notices before destroying his prized books in an act of liberating defiance (FS 289–290). Dr. Christie has similar control and influence on his subjects:

'Mrs Rivers, how are you?' said Dr Christie, after he had [...] spent a minute looking over Mrs Price and Miss Wilson. 'I am perfectly clear in my head,' I said. He looked at his watch. (FS 420–421)

In the same way as Mr. Lilly, he is symbolically marked by possessing a watch as the preeminent authoritative figure. One may extend this to the previously discussed watches present in the novel, noting that they do indeed symbolize heteropatriarchal society and in general the time Maud and Sue live in, omnipresent and seemingly inescapable.

#### TIMELESS SPACES AND SOCIETY'S OUTCASTS

Not only places explicitly dominated by time are worthy of observation. Some spaces in the novel are seemingly devoid of this omnipresence. Throughout her stay at the asylum, Sue frequently mentions the timeless space she has presumably entered:

Each morning I woke with the horrible sense that days had slipped away and I had not noticed. 'What day is today?' I'd ask Miss Wilson

and Mrs Price. Of course, they never knew. [...] Then I'd ask Nurse Bacon. 'What day is today, Nurse Bacon?' 'Punishment Day', she'd answer, wincing and rubbing her hands. (FS 455)

It may be tempting to assume that this apparent timelessness might be presented as an argument against the symbolizing function of clocks. Nonetheless, by entering the mental institution, Sue experiences the reigning timelessness as isolation and paternalism. The asylum is still very much a place of practiced heteropatriarchal power. As such, it is run by Dr. Christie and his nurses, who enforce strict rules and routines the inmates have to follow, although they do not take part in organizing nor do they understand them (Hall 71). They are isolated from society, deemed "unfit" for their own time. Sue is declared "mad", not only because of the scheme she falls victim to but also for her homoerotic desire within heteropatriarchal society: "The thought that she had said it [Sue's homoerotic desire]—that she had said it, before Gentleman, as a way of making me out to be mad—struck me like a blow to the heart" (FS 442).

By breaching the "heterosexual contract" (Wittig 32), she is henceforth positioned outside of society and declared "*mad*" (40). Sue is kept isolated from society, which nevertheless is no indication for the absence of heteropatriarchal power structures. Instead, she is consciously kept from entering society despite her repeated attempts to convince Dr. Christie of her sanity (Hall 71).

The escape from their respective confinements ultimately leads Maud and Sue to return to Briar. In a circular motion of the narrative, Sue enters Briar to find Maud once again. Yet, it is not the chime of the Briar bell that catches her attention, but the absence of it. Previously governed by routine enforced symbolically by the clock, it is now a timeless space (Mitchell 140–141). Sue, while wandering, notices that "[i]t seemed quieter inside the walls, than it had been before—quieter, and queer"

(FS 538). Kate Mitchell reads the absence of the Briar bell as the possibility for the two protagonists "to reunite in the newly feminised space of Briar" (140). Nonetheless, the word that draws most attention here is 'queer'—the space is thus not (only) feminized, but (also) what Patricia White calls, "lesbianiz[ed]" (156; Hall 68). Nicky Hallett suggests that "lesbian desire changes both spatial and temporal structures" (35). This appears to be true at the end of *Fingersmith*: Maud and Sue reappropriate the space previously used to confine them, as they now find it absent of Mr. Lilly's authoritarianism symbolized by the clock (Mitchell 140–141). The previously heteropatriarchal space, controlled by the constant passing of time in

form of the clock, is led back to a state of origin, of timeless refuge from society, and thus from the time the two protagonists had been forced to live in (Costantini 28–29).

#### "WE CAN MAKE IT OURS": SURPASSING TEMPORAL LIMITATIONS

Routine and time are ruptured on several occasions, just to dissolve briefly into a timeless state as has been observed in the previous section. Most notably, this momentary timelessness is described in Maud's description of Sue during intercourse (Hall 76). Although Hall suggests that "Maud and Sue's sexual arousal is echoed and affirmed by the ticking of the clock outside their bedroom" (76), another reading may be possible. Here, the routine forced upon both of them is changed; time moves unusually as Sue herself "moves her hips and hand as if to a rhythm, a time, a quickening beat" (FS 283). After this erotic encounter between the two women, a shift is notable in Maud's intentions:

I meant to cheat her. I cannot cheat her, now. 'I am not what you think,' I will say. 'You think me good. I am not good. But I might, with you, begin to try to be. This was his plot.

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We can make it *ours*—'. (FS 284, emphasis added) A union is created that excludes all previous heteropatriarchal forces and changes the self-perception Maud had thus far displayed. Instead, she begins to think outside of heteropatriarchal society, and this can be detected in her definitive use of the word 'ours'.

Ultimately, Maud and Sue seem to escape the heteropatriarchal bonds imposed on them by society, by their own time, the nineteenth century. By entering the timeless space of Briar, they exist literally and metaphorically outside their own time, establishing a homoerotic female household within the previously "confining conditions" (Hall 62) of Mr. Lilly's estate (Hall 62–64; Mitchell 140–141). Instead of being isolated, they isolate themselves from heteropatriarchal society, accordingly becoming outcasts fleeing their societal constraints (Wittig 42; Castle 5). In this state of existence, they are able to tell their story in rich, explicit detail, which would have been an impossible endeavor if actually written during the time it takes place, the nineteenth century (Costantini 19–20; Parker 17; Mitchell 117). Thus, the ending appears to be a self-conscious admission of the neo-Victorian novel: only able to be written down and to be told by "re-reading, re-voicing, and re-imagining" (Llewellyn 180) what has previously been left untold in the protagonists' own time.

The findings that have been presented suggest that time is indeed largely omnipresent and closely associated with the authoritative, male characters. Sue and Maud are subdued to a routine not of their own choosing but of societal expectations. Briar's clock and the watches of both Mr. Lilly and Dr. Christie symbolize said demands of the heteropatriarchal, structured society.

The existence of timeless spaces does not necessarily indicate an absence of underlying heteropatriarchal power structures. Quite the contrary: Sue's detention at the asylum is still marked by routine, although she remains excluded and isolated as she is deemed "mad". Seemingly equivalently isolated from society at the return to the second timeless space, Briar after Mr. Lilly's

death, reads differently. Instead of being a forced movement, Sue chooses isolation in the now timeless space as a fitting flight from society.

While the ending itself may remain ambivalent, the interrupted movement of the clock suggests a positive ending. As they now lead an existence outside the value system of their own time, it becomes possible for Sue and Maud to tell their story, indicating a self-awareness of the neo-Victorian text itself. As stated in the introduction, the notion that "time is of the essence" is echoed throughout the novel as a symbol of heteropatriarchal dominance in the spaces of *Fingersmith*.

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