Literary Dialect in Sarah Waters's Fingersmith (2002)

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Literary Dialect in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002)

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Abstract:
So far, much of the critical work on Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian novels has focussed on how she both adopts and adapts the Victorian novel form to reflect her own interest in lesbian narratives. In contrast, this article explores Waters's representation of the nonstandard English in the direct speech of the working-class and criminal underclass characters in *Fingersmith* (2002) and the extent to which it can be read as a development of the literary dialect of the nineteenth century, especially that seen in Dickens's oeuvre. I demonstrate that her representation of dialect reflects twenty-first-century awareness of, and complex attitudes towards, nonstandard speech varieties. I consider the way in which Waters's novel, in changing the focus of stories set in the Victorian era, also changes the form of characters' nonstandard speech, and explain how direct speech is integral to the development of a plot which challenges the reader's expectations and opinions.

Keywords: characterisation, Charles Dickens, *Fingersmith*, grammar, lexis, literary dialect, phonology, plot, Sarah Waters.

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Published in 2002, *Fingersmith* is Sarah Waters's third novel and, like its two predecessors, it is set in the Victorian era, in 1862. It tells the story of Susan ('Sue') Trinder, brought up in London amongst thieves, who is used and betrayed by Mrs Sucksby, the woman she considers her adoptive mother. Susan becomes embroiled in a plot to defraud an upper middle-class heiress, Maud Lilly, who is kept a virtual prisoner by her wealthy bibliophile uncle, an obsessive collector of pornography. Given her socially diverse cast of characters, Waters has ample opportunity for the representation of nonstandard speech, and her use of literary dialect should be considered as another aspect of her neo-Victorianism. This article analyses how Waters represents direct speech that deviates from the standard in terms of grammar, lexis or phonology, arguing two points: firstly, that Waters is progressive in terms of the form of her literary dialect; and secondly, that she exploits the prejudice against nonstandard varieties which is still in evidence today. This

Neo-Victorian Studies
14:1 (2021/2022)
pp. 1-27

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

is not to claim that Waters herself shares such attitudes towards speech; rather, after appearing to espouse classicist views on language, by the end of the novel, she puts the reader in a position where s/he might reflect upon the assumptions s/he has made about characters based on their speech. I demonstrate that whilst there are Dickensian overtones in the form and the function of Waters's use of literary dialect, these are manipulated in order to align with modern readers' awareness of nonstandard varieties and, more significantly, to challenge stereotypical Victorian as well as present-day perceptions of the lower classes.

In her study of pornography in *Fingersmith*, Claire O'Callaghan argues that Waters "does not view pornography as monolithic" and instead sees different kinds of pornography as having "diverse effects" (O'Callaghan 2017: 90). This idea can also be applied to Waters's use of literary dialect: the interplay of standard and nonstandard speech has different effects on the reader (and indeed on some of the characters) at different points in the novel. Waters conveys the idea that standard language is an indicator of status, wealth and intelligence, but then also challenges the very same idea. This, in turn, might lead the reader to re-evaluate her/his attitudes towards actual speakers of nonstandard and Standard English. Through a linguistic case study of a now iconic neo-Victorian novel, this article proposes that writers' language use in neo-Victorianism deserves much closer attention and study, specifically with regards to how it impacts texts' self-consciousness and influences reader responses to characters.

1. Lant Street

The majority of Waters's dialect-speaking characters in *Fingersmith* are the inhabitants of the Lant Street house, all of whom are involved in criminal activity. They are Mrs Sucksby, who makes her living by 'infant farming', Mr Ibbs, a receiver of stolen goods, and John Vroom, 'Dainty' and Flora, all of whom are thieves. Among them lives Susan Trinder, one of the novel's two narrators, who has been taught certain nefarious means of earning a living but is protected from committing the more risky acts of theft. The London setting is central to *Fingersmith*, as indeed it is to all of Waters's neo-Victorian fiction, and it is foremost Dickens's work that Waters references in her evocation of the Victorian Lant Street locale. Maria Teresa Chialant includes *Fingersmith* in a category of recent novels which "although not explicitly connected with a specific Dickens novel, invoke the Dickens

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

world" (Chialant 2011: 42). Such a view is challenged by Mark Llewellyn, who refers to "the trap of the neo-Victorian reviewer", succumbing to "the idea that every neo-Victorian text must be described as 'Dickensian' and that this word itself signals a kind of authenticity and a labelling of a certain reading experience" (Llewellyn 2009: 32). Yet the first page of the novel has Susan recount a childhood visit to the theatre where she saw an adaptation of *Oliver Twist* (1837) and was terrified by watching Bill Sykes murder Nancy. This then prompts the reader to view the home of Mr Ibbs, Mrs Sucksby and the young thieves as a version of Fagin's den, which is emphasised at the end of the novel, when Mr Ibbs tries to escape with his stolen goods as the police forcibly enter the property.

Therefore, despite Chialant's comment, there is a specific connection of *Fingersmith* with a Dickens novel. Indeed, Chialant, contradicts herself somewhat, later commenting that Mrs Sucksby "proves to be, in the end, fundamentally generous and motherly – a reversed Fagin, perhaps" (Chialant 2011: 50), before she notes the direct reference to *Oliver Twist* discussed above. This being the case, Llewellyn's notion of a "trap", whilst valid, does not seem to apply to *Fingersmith* in the same way that it might to other neo-Victorian novels. Rather, Waters herself makes the connection between her novel and *Oliver Twist* explicit, prompting readers to draw on their knowledge of the nineteenth-century novel in their twenty-first-century imaginings of Lant Street. Also, the reference to a theatre performance serves as a reminder of the many film and television adaptations of Dickens's iconic novel, adding extra filters through which the novel and its language might be read.

More significantly, Waters also draws on nonstandard speech, often found in Dickens's work and reproduced in adaptations, to aid the initial characterisation of the thieves. There is a socio-linguistic aspect to consider in that, in their home environment, these thieves and ne'er-do-wells can be assumed to be speaking in their most relaxed manner rather than altering their speech to try to converge with that of an outsider. The area where the direct speech of Waters's characters is most different from Standard English is lexis. Mr Ibbs, Mrs Sucksby and their group use marked lexical items, which not only index their London upbringing but also their social group, that is, as criminals. The first chapter features a range of slang terms, including *poke* (n. stolen goods), *blues* (n. police), *prig* (v. steal), *ready* (n. cash) and *crib* (n. home); combined with the use of vulgar or taboo language, such as *fart*, *arse*,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

bitch, *bloody*, *shit* and *fucking*, these words create a sense of a vulgar underclass. The first of the above groups of words is to be found in Dickens's novels (see Hughes 1991: 152). To some extent, Waters adopts established conventions for representing dialect: she incorporates Dickens's language to evoke the language of the criminal underclasses, and for readers familiar with his works, this may prompt a comparison between Mr Ibbs and his 'family' and Fagin and his associates. In using the latter group of words, however, Waters's representation of criminal speech differs from that seen in Dickens's novels, where all such gross or scatological vocabulary is avoided.

It must be remembered, though, that the social mores of the time did not permit Dickens the use of such lexis. Geoffrey Hughes states that although Dickens was happy to include criminal slang in his novels, in the persona of *Vox Populi* he denounced "the sewerage and verbiage of slang" (Hughes 1991: 152). Hughes notes that swearing, which at the time would have connoted blasphemy rather than scatological or genital vocabulary as used by Waters (see above), does not feature in Dickens's work, which uses, for example, *jiggered* as a euphemism for *damned* and *drat* in place of *curse* (Hughes 1991:152). Hughes refers to the nonstandard variant of *damned*, which is rendered as *dem'd* in Chapter 21 of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), as "risque for 1838" (Hughes 1991: 152). (Notably, it is the dialectal rendition of this word which disguises it somewhat, perhaps even functioning euphemistically.) Hughes comments that "more than at any other stage of English culture, the elite neither recognized or accommodated the underworld"; and he gives the example of the "humane and diligent" research into the lives of those in the underclass carried out by Henry Mayhew and William Acton which was presented in a form "cleansed of impolite language" (Hughes 1991: 151).

In terms of grammar, the regional and social varieties used by Waters's Lant Street characters are ones used widely in the literary dialect of nineteenth-century novels, not least in Dickens's works. There are examples of nonstandard agreement of subject and verb, usually where *was* is used with *you*, for example: "What was you thinking of" (Mrs Sucksby), "We thought you was the blues" (Susan), and "as you was getting on so nicely" (Mr Ibbs) (Waters 2002: 4, 19, 26). The form *don't* is also used in third person singular negative structures such as "the old man keeps her close, don't he?" (Mr Ibbs), "Suppose she don't care for you" (Susan), and "Why don't she wear the kind of stays that fasten at the front?" (Dainty) (Waters 2002: 25, 28, 37). There

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

are other marked verb forms such as "I sticks to you" (Dainty), "I likes to see her cry" (John Vroom), and "I done her ears last week" (Dainty), as well as nonstandard past participles as in "She was only beat a bit about the face" (Mrs Sucksby) (Waters 2002: 17, 35, 493, 5). Whilst these forms are used relatively frequently, none of them is particularly widespread in Waters's text, unlike the dialect representation of nineteenth-century novelists such as Dickens and Gissing, whose first novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) contains "relatively dense notations of low-status London speech" (Mugglestone 2003: 191). Even less prevalent is the use of the double negative, which appears in Susan's query "Haven't you nothing we might take?" (Waters 2002: 156) and on only a few other occasions in *Fingersmith*. Similarly, *as* and *what* are used as relative pronouns but sparingly, for example, "Have you something with you, as Mr Ibbs will like the look of?" (Mrs Sucksby) and "Another poor motherless infant what I shall be bringing up by hand" (Mrs Sucksby) (Waters 2002: 21, 20).[1] These nonstandard features are much more prevalent in Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* (Pickles 2018: 55) and in the speech of Dickens's working-class London characters such as Inspector Bucket, Trooper George, Phil Squod and Jo the crossing-sweep in *Bleak House* (1853) (Pickles 2018: 131-134). The most widely used marked form in *Fingersmith* is *ain't*, which appears, as it does in the nineteenth-century works named above, more consistently throughout the novel, both in the speech of the London thieves and the servants at Briar, the country home of Christopher and Maud Lilly.

Unlike the literary dialect of Dickens and other nineteenth century novelists, that used by Waters in *Fingersmith* contains few examples of the representation of nonstandard pronunciation. One notable exception is *shadow* becoming *shadder* in Mr Ibbs's speech (Waters 2002: 22). Very infrequently *'em* is used instead of *them* (see, e.g. Waters 2002: 20 and 453), *sovereigns* is abbreviated to *sovs*, again by Mr Ibbs (Waters 2002: 22), and *hysterics* becomes *sterics* in Flora's expression (Waters 2002: 5). There is also the metalinguistic comment that the word *Gentleman*, which is used as a nickname for the conman Richard Rivers, is pronounced "as if the word were a fish and we had filleted it—Ge'mun" (Waters 2002: 19). The image used to refer to medial elision,[2] taking out 'the insides' of the word, is particularly striking and generates a touch of humour. It also characterises Susan, the narrator at this point, as someone who has a sensitivity to language, something which might surprise the reader, given that Susan is introduced as an

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uneducated member of the underclass. Thus, Waters subtly begins to challenge any preconceptions the reader may have about the ability of the uneducated to use and appreciate language. Waters avoids the reversal of the /v/ and /w/ phonemes, popularised by Dickens in his presentation of Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), as even toward the end of the nineteenth century this form, according to Bernard Shaw, had dropped out of actual and then literary usage and would not necessarily be familiar to a modern readership (Shaw qtd. in Matthews 1938: 73).[3] The omission of these forms can be regarded as an aspect of Waters's neo-Victorianism, since she represents nonstandard speech according to the varieties with which an early twenty-first-century reader is likely to be more familiar, varieties used in film and television adaptations of Dickens's work. What is particularly notable, though, is that throughout Waters's novel there is no representation of either h-dropping, whereby, for example, *head* would become *'ead*, or elided *–ing* verb forms such as *huntin', shootin', fishin'*. One assumes that 'real' London or Cockney speech would contain an abundance of these forms, and indeed they are present in the works of Dickens and other nineteenth-century novelists who represent this variety; yet Waters chooses not to include them in the speech of her characters. Unlike the reversal of the /v/ and /w/ phonemes, these forms are very much present today and remain familiar to modern readers. So why does Waters not use them? In order to attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to consider the idea of 'authenticity', that is, the creation of a fictional world which provides an accurate representation of 'life as it was' (setting aside the philosophical complexities involved in the notion of 'reality'), and how this is created for the reader.

2. Authenticity, Literary Dialect and Vulgarity

The most significant aspect of Waters's re-writing of nineteenth-century narratives is her tale of lesbian love. This is the "counterhistory" of the novel (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 17), since the story of the development of a sexual relationship between two females is not one told in canonical Victorian fiction. Partly through the use of the 'pre-texts', Waters skilfully evokes the Victorian era; yet she does not concern herself with whether or not the account of the lesbian affair is historically accurate. In an interview with Kaye Mitchell, she explained:

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

> Lesbian historians might agonise over whether women in the past had sex with each other, but if I want my lesbians in the 1860s to have sex, then they just do. I'm in charge. I do try to be sensitive – of course I do; that's what motivates me to write historical fiction. (Waters qtd. in Mitchell 2013b: 136)

The question of whether or not the lesbian sex is historically accurate, or authentic, is perhaps redundant insofar as a twenty-first-century readership, living in an age of increased gay rights and openness about homosexuality, is more likely to accept such a relationship. Likewise, Waters's representation of dialect departs from that seen in Dickens: she does not 'agonise' over the fine details of representing nonstandard speech. Because modern media have made present-day readers much more familiar with regional and social dialects (or representations of them), there is not the same necessity, as there was when Dickens was writing, to include a range of marked forms to try to convey a sense of characters' nonstandard speech.

As pointed out by Susan Ferguson and others, writers' use of dialect within direct speech is neither consistent nor a strictly accurate representation of what such a person would speak like in 'real' life; rather, it is often used when characters are first introduced or as part of the development of theme and plot in order to differentiate the speakers from other characters and also from a Standard English narrative voice (Ferguson 1998: 1-17). Jane Hodson gives a full account of the debate surrounding authenticity and literary dialect, concluding that "authenticity is not an objective quality inherent in specific dialect representations, but that the perception of authenticity is nevertheless important" (Hodson 2014: 220). As shown, Waters uses relatively few marked forms in her literary dialect, but those she does employ, combined with a modern reader's familiarity with representations of Cockney speech, either as rendered in earlier works or as heard in films and on television, are sufficient to create a belief in the authenticity of the variety being represented.

Considering the question of why Waters avoids the use of h-dropping in her characters' speech, the answer may lie in Alexandra Jaffe and Shana Walton's study of how students read transcripts of speech from the southern United States (see Jaffe and Walton 2000). One of their findings was that whilst the word *I* was written as standard, six out of eight students who normally read this word with standard pronunciation read the word with a distinctively Southern pronunciation. Knowing that the transcript was of

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Southern speech, and taking cues from other orthography, which did represent certain nonstandard pronunciations, these students heard a Southern voice and reflected that voice in their reading of the text, even where the text itself did not signal such a different pronunciation. Jaffe and Walton comment, "[c]ollectively, then, we can say that participants were 'doing Southern' by performing difference from their notions of 'standard' speech", and they argue that readers have access to "prepackaged socio-linguistic personae", which they draw on to "perform the orthography" (Jaffe and Walton 2000: 584). This argument could be applied to my reading of *Fingersmith*. Readers who are familiar with Dickens's novels, or adaptations thereof, may well have a mental store of "prepackaged […] personae", in this case underclass Cockneys, and therefore hear features such as h-dropping even when they are not signalled by the literary dialect. Waters does not need to be as detailed as Dickens in her literary dialect, because the twenty-first-century reader, engaged in an immersive experience, is able to respond to the cues she gives to 'perform' Cockney. Thus the few nonstandard grammatical structures used by Waters, along with the widespread use of *ain't*, although not confined to the Cockney dialect, are enough, when combined with a London setting, for the reader to imagine or, in Jaffe's and Walton's terms, to "perform" Cockney speech. Furthermore, Waters may also want to avoid "reader resistance", which could occur if her text were heavily marked and the reading experience became one of "enforced labour" (Toolan 1992: 34).[4]

Attitudes to vulgarity and censorship have altered quite considerably in the last one hundred and fifty years; indeed, words which, thirty years ago, were 'bleeped out' of films shown on television, regardless of the time they were aired, are now left audible. Thus modern readers may accept the inclusion of swearing as part of the representation of criminal speech, which aims to create a sense of authenticity. Readers today may well expect such vocabulary. As pointed out by Hughes, the lexicon of swearing has altered, with words related to sex being used as insults only relatively recently. He states that the earliest recorded use of the word *fuck* (not expletive at this point), which is of uncertain origin, is 1503, whereas the term *fucker* was not used as an insult until 1893, with *prick* and *cunt* appearing as insults even later, in 1928 and 1929 respectively; similarly, Hughes comments that the substitutes *eff* (as in *to eff and blind*) and *effing* were recorded from 1943 and 1944 respectively, but these were preceded by *adjectival*, which was recorded from 1910 (Hughes 1991: 24-28). Hughes argues that Dickens anticipated the

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use of *adjectival* – in effect, a Victorian 'bleeping out' – citing a piece in *Household Words* from June 1851 in which Dickens writes, "'I won't,' says Bark, 'have no adjective police and adjective strangers in my adjective premises!'" (Dickens qtd. in Hughes 1991: 12). Hughes cites John Stephen Farmer and William Ernest Henley's *A Dictionary of Slang and Its Analogues,* issued in seven volumes from 1890 to 1904, as the nineteenth century's most definitive work on the language of the lower register. It is from this publication that we learn that *fucking* could then be defined as "a more violent form of the word bloody" and that it was used in a variety of compounds including *fuckster* (Hughes 1991: 161). Hughes concludes that Farmer and Henley's work makes it clear that the modern expansion of swearing occurred earlier than we tend to suppose, namely in the late Victorian period, but "was suppressed by decorum" (Hughes 1991: 161), at least in literary works.

What is of interest here is that Susan Trinder uses the term *fuckster* as an insult levelled at Gentleman when she realises she has been betrayed (Waters 2002: 174). Although this term is actually Victorian, its use may not be strictly authentic, since the term *fucker* was first recorded as an insult in 1893 and *fuckster* was recorded by Farmer and Henley in the final decade of the nineteenth century as opposed to thirty years earlier when Waters's novel is set. It is difficult to be certain about the date of the earliest usage of such terms, however, because new vocabulary items, especially 'underground' ones, may have been in use for some time before they were recorded. Either way, Waters's inclusion of the term resonates with a modern readership, which is very much familiar with terms relating to sex being used as insults. She goes beyond the use of Dickensian criminal slang to appeal to a readership approaching the novel with a double consciousness; the use of blasphemy, whilst more historically accurate, may have no impact on a modern reader and might even seem somewhat ridiculous. Also, as in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), Waters's lexical choices are sometimes linked to her concern with atypical Victorian discourses, namely pornography and lesbian narratives, as she re-evaluates their place in the literary landscape of the nineteenth century.

A comparable self-consciousness pervades Waters's use of 'queer'. Jerome de Groot perceptively points out that Waters's use of the term is simultaneously authentic in its earlier sense of 'strange' and "seems a minor wink to the reader", who will also interpret it as a reference to sexual identity

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(de Groot 2013: 62). Much earlier, Mark Llewellyn similarly remarked on how Waters's protagonist's "seemingly unconsciously modern puns on the word 'queer'" stress "the sexual politics" of Waters's early fiction (Llewellyn 2004: 213). De Groot makes his point in relation to *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), while Llewellyn discusses *Affinity* (1999), but the term is also used in *Fingersmith*, for example when Susan recounts her maid's duties as including giving Maud salts "if she comes over queer" (Waters 2002: 40). The joke works only because of the reader's awareness of the modern meaning of the word. It is, therefore, a different kind of authenticity that Waters achieves, one which reflects modern-day social practices rather than those of the Victorian era and is a key feature of neo-Victorianism. Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) is another neo-Victorian novel which appeals to our double consciousness and creates a different kind of authenticity: the plot has the protagonist, Sugar, leave prostitution to become a governess and *de facto* businesswoman, reflecting twenty-first-century notions of social mobility. Whether or not such mobility was possible in the Victorian era is debatable; the key point is that the social mores and relatively rigid class structure of the time did not permit novelists to suggest such a thing, but Faber now invites the reader to consider that possibility. In the development of her lesbian narrative, Waters, free of the societal constraints faced by Dickens, also invites us to re-consider the way in which language was used by the different classes in the Victorian era.

Another factor to consider is that in the United Kingdom, those with regional speech now hold prominent positions, such as national newsreaders and television presenters, which were previously unattainable for anyone who did not have an R.P. (Received Pronunciation) accent. We appear, on the surface, at least, to be more accepting of nonstandard varieties. However, a recent study into attitudes towards language, the 2013 ITV Savanta: ComRes poll, found that the R.P. accent is, by far, considered the most prestigious, with Cockney, Birmingham and Liverpool accents occupying the bottom three rankings.[5] Respondents were also asked whether they felt they had ever been discriminated against because of their accent, with twenty-eight percent responding in the affirmative (Marshall 2013: n.p.). Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that at least some of the people who feel they have suffered discrimination because of their accent seem to hold the same 'conservative' views about accent which may have led to that very discrimination. Also, usage guides, such as Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003) remain

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popular, "spread[ing] language neurosis far and wide" (Marnell 2015: 1). Thus it would seem that some attitudes towards language have not changed radically since the nineteenth century, in which speech became a marker of status (Mugglestone 2003: 2). There remains today a degree of prejudice against certain varieties of speech, coupled with an anxiety about 'correct' usage. Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox state that

> the Victorians are frequently constructed as our immediate ancestors whose achievements remain evident in the modern world, not only in the form of art, literature and architecture, but also political structures, social organisations and legal frameworks. (Bowler and Cox 2009/2010: 4)

I would add linguistic usage to this list; whilst this is not an "achievement", the link between language usage and status, which developed in the nineteenth century is another factor that contributes to our sense of identity in the modern world. What is of greater significance than the authenticity of Waters's use of literary dialect and vulgarity is how she weaves these into the fabric of the novel, playing on readers' awareness of the link between language and status to manipulate our responses to the protagonists.

3. Susan and Maud

Of the novel's two first-person narrators, neither of whom is in full possession of the facts, Susan is the first to speak. *Fingersmith*'s plot can be seen, at least in part, as an homage to Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), and Waters's use of her two main female characters as narrators is reminiscent of Collins's use of multiple narrators. In both cases, their stories overlap and provide the reader with different perspectives on the same events. Additionally, Waters's narrative is reminiscent of the bildungsroman style of *Great Expectations* with the latter's clear sense of an older, wiser narrator looking back on a naïve and sometimes foolish younger self.

What is more striking is that the first-person narrative of Susan Trinder contains a similar number of marked forms to the direct speech. Waters breaks with the nineteenth-century tradition of having a Standard English narrative voice, as in *Great Expectations*, where the older Pip who narrates the story does so in Standard English throughout. Both Pip and Susan are taken from their respective environments and have life-changing

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

experiences: Pip is made a gentleman and therefore acquires a gentleman's style of speech, while Susan, although her story differs from that of Pip, assumes her true identity as the daughter of a lady by the end of the novel. Yet the voice of the older Susan, looking back on her previous life, narrates Chapter One using terms such as *peach* (v. to inform to the police), *poke* (n. stolen goods), and *snide* (adj. counterfeit), as well as the use of the negative form *ain't* and marked grammatical structures such as "whose heart he had just about broke" (Waters 2002: 21). Waters also uses a generally informal conversational style for Susan's voice: "And after all, she had been right. Here was my fortune, come from nowhere—come at last. What could I say?" (Waters 2002: 31). The alignment of Susan's narrative voice with the direct speech used by her and the other characters in the scene she reflects on furthers the impression that Susan was and, crucially, still is very much one of this gang. This is the opposite of what Dickens does in *Oliver Twist*: the novel is narrated in the third person, but Oliver's Standard English elevates him, making it clear that he does not belong in the workhouse or in Fagin's gang, and serves as a hint of his true parentage. Readers familiar with this convention, approaching *Fingersmith* with a knowledge of *Oliver Twist*, are likely to be led to believe that Susan belongs in the underworld; both the literary dialect and the nonstandard English within the narrative present her as being at one with her environment. Even those readers not familiar with Dickens's novel are likely, based on the results of recent language surveys, to take the same view of Susan. Thus, Waters manipulates nineteenth-century convention and modern prejudice to *disguise* rather than reveal Susan's true identity. Ironically, Mrs Sucksby, who (we later discover) knows Susan's true birthright, treats her as though she is special, "a jewel" (Waters 2002: 12), but the reader tends to overlook this hint, given the dialect used in both Susan's direct speech and her narrative.

Furthermore, presenting 'Gentleman', or Richard Rivers, as using far fewer marked forms than the other characters in the opening chapter helps to convince the reader, like the Lant Street inhabitants, that Rivers, although a criminal, "really was a gent" (Waters 2002: 20). Rivers uses the words *ready* (n. cash) and *bitch* (Waters 2002: 25), but his speech contains none of the nonstandard grammatical structures evident in the representation of his low-class associates (hence recalling the more elevated diction of Dickens's Fagin in contrast to Nancy, Sykes, and Dodger). Rivers is also given relatively lengthy passages of direct speech in which he articulately explains his plan to

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

defraud Maud Lilly. Waters even has her character make a metalinguistic comment, while demonstrating code-switching (or his equal grasp of low-class idiom), in order to draw the reader's attention to his differing style of speech: when John Vroom states that Rivers will "jiggle" (have sex with) Maud, Rivers, after finishing the explanation of his plan says, "and – as Johnny would say – I must jiggle her once, for the sake of the cash" (Waters 2002: 25-27). In this way, Rivers, purporting to merely 'imitate' or borrow John's vulgar vernacular, seems unlike the usual inhabitants of the Lant Street house, although it is later discovered that he is not a gentleman by birth. Thus, in the opening chapters of the novel, Waters plays on attitudes to language use to help set up the complex twisting plot of changing identities, tricking the reader into a perception of Susan as lower class, which will later be destroyed just as Susan herself discovers her true history.

When Maud Lilly's narrative first begins in Chapter Seven, the Standard English of the narrative voice along with the Standard English of Maud's direct speech form an immediate contrast with the opening of the novel and Susan's narrative. Yet Maud's opening account places the reader in a setting which is even baser than the Lant Street house, as she explains what she understands to be the circumstances of her birth in the asylum where her mother had been confined by her family. Given that Maud grew up as "a daughter to the nurses of the house" (Waters 2002: 179), hearing them speak nonstandard English, it seems highly unlikely that she herself would use only Standard English. Unlike Susan Trinder, who has acquired the style of speech of those surrounding her, Maud has not done so, and thus there is an initial contrast between the two characters. At first, Waters appears to be using the convention of elevating the language of the protagonist in order to symbolise either her moral worth or her middle-class parentage (as, at this point, the reader believes Maud to be a wealthy heiress, the daughter of a lady wrongly committed to an asylum), or both, as Dickens does with Oliver Twist. But this is not entirely the case. At the end of the previous chapter, the plot twist suddenly revealed that Susan and not Maud was the innocent target of the plan all along, and that Maud is complicit in that plan. Therefore Maud's use of Standard English is not indicative of her morality, although the reader is still likely to accept that the prestige form is used to signal Maud's level of education, an education gained as a result of her higher birth.

As this chapter progresses, we see that Maud was not unaffected by growing up in the asylum: she recalls her younger self as a hardened,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

troublesome child, who had tantrums and was literally beaten into submission by her uncle and his staff. Her use of the word "cunt" both in the narrative and when speaking to a servant is more shocking than anything that appears in the language of those at Lant Street, not least because it pulls against the relatively formal Standard English used elsewhere both in her direct speech and in her narrative:

> 'What are you looking at?' she says
> 'Your cunt,' I answer. 'Why is it so black?'
> She starts away from me as if in horror […].
> My cunt grows dark as Barbara's, I understand my uncle's books to be filled with falsehoods. (Waters 2002: 200-201)

Although jarring, we are likely to view her use of the term as the result of working with her uncle's pornographic books and not understanding that the word is taboo. In effect, Waters here exploits pornography's association with vulgarity and inappropriate explicitness on publicly censored subjects. As noted by Hughes, although the word 'cunt' can be traced back to 1203, it was not used as an insult or swear word until 1929; the term was taboo in the Victorian era but had previously been used publicly, most famously in the London street name Gropecuntlane, recorded in 1230 (Hughes 1991: 20). However, according to Lisa Z. Sigel, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the term's eighteenth-century "more bawdy and ribald connotations" also gave way to a more "self-consciously" inflected usage of 'cunt' closer to the adjective "'dirty'" (Sigel 2002: 5). As "'[d]irty words' infused ideas of pollution onto aspects of sexuality", the word 'cunt' came to imply "the linguistic pollution of the vaginal area for the sake of men's pleasure" (Sigel 2002: 5). The latter threat, of course, remains implicit throughout *Fingersmith*, although the only sexual violation – Rivers's rape of Maud's under-age maid Agnes, in order to have her dismissed to make room for Susan, an act in which Maud conspires – is never depicted outright. Hence the child Maud's linguistic 'slip-up' also gestures towards the moral 'pollution' effected by her unnatural upbringing,

In the earlier cited scene from her childhood, however, Maud uses the term 'cunt' in a purely anatomical sense; and in doing so, she somewhat ironically appears naïve, a sheltered girl who is unaware that the word is

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inappropriate. This view is strengthened when, later, the worst insult she can find for the Lant Street inhabitants is "Go to Hell" (Waters 2002: 358), which might seem innocuous to a modern reader, especially when compared with the lexis Waters gives to her Lant Street characters, but is in keeping with Victorian swearing being of a blasphemous nature. We can view the Standard English used by Maud as symbolic of her middle-class parentage and education, not yet knowing otherwise. Thus, as with Susan Trinder, Waters uses literary dialect or, in this case, a lack of it, to create a perception of Maud which is later destroyed as the plot twists.

In this respect, Chapter Twelve makes an interesting contrast with the novel's opening chapter. Following Maud and Rivers's marriage, Maud is taken to the Lant Street house by Rivers, Susan having been incarcerated under the false identity of Maud Rivers in the asylum. In this household, Maud, unlike Susan, is presented as an outsider, her Standard English contrasting with the dialect spoken by Mrs Sucksby and the others:

> I go to Richard and seize his waistcoat. 'What is this? Where have you brought me? What do they know of Sue, here?'
>
> 'Hey, hey,' calls the pale man mildly. The boy laughs. The woman looks rueful.
>
> 'Got a voice, don't she?' says the girl […].
>
> 'You don't imagine that you ain't more welcome here, than anyone?'
>
> I still shake, a little. 'I can't imagine,' I say, pulling myself away from her hands, 'that you mean me any kind of good, since you persist in keeping me here, when I so clearly wish to leave.'
>
> She tilts her head. 'Hear the grammar in that, Mr Ibbs?' she says. (Waters 2002: 315-317)

The marked forms *don't* and *ain't* highlight the difference between the two styles of speech, but it is Mrs Sucksby's metalinguistic comment which draws most attention, presenting Maud as belonging to a world very different from and far above that inhabited by the Lant Street residents.

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4. Dialect, Reader Manipulation and Code-Switching

This exchange is followed by the novel's most extensive passages of literary dialect as Mrs Sucksby explains to Maud the plan she developed; and this further emphasises the contrast between the two characters. All of this is part of Waters's skilful manipulation of the reader's response. Our view of Maud is cemented before the revelation to both Maud and the reader that her mother was a common thief: "Dear, dear girl, you was taken from here so they might make a lady of you. And a lady they've made you—a perfect jewel […]. I been working it over for seventeen years. I been plotting and thinking on this, every minute" (Waters 2002: 344). The words used by Mrs Sucksby are reminiscent of those spoken by Magwitch when he returns to London to see Pip and reveals that he is Pip's mystery benefactor. The revulsion felt by Pip is mirrored by Maud Lilly here. Although there are no new discoveries about Pip's parentage, both he and Maud are claimed by someone they find abhorrent and discover that they have been deceived. The term 'jewel' is used in Susan's narrative in Chapter One, and is a further way in which Waters makes the reader aware of the twists in the plot: Susan, who we think is the daughter of a thief, does ironically turn out to be a jewel in the sense both that she is the daughter of a lady and that she is of monetary value to Mrs Sucksby, whereas Maud is merely given the appearance, the polish of a jewel. The image acquires another layer of meaning when, at the end of Chapter Thirteen, there is the further revelation that Maud is Mrs Sucksby's daughter and so is of great emotional value to her.

When prior to her departure to Briar Susan is given some instruction on how to be a lady's maid, one of the things Gentleman focusses on is her speech, telling her that she must use the formal term "chemise" rather than her preferred variant "shimmy" and must pay attention to her pronunciation so that she does not sound like she is "selling violets" (Waters 2002: 36, 40). Although Susan is more mindful of the way she speaks and behaves when in the guise of Maud's maid, her direct speech is represented as containing some marked forms, as it did when she was living with Mrs Sucksby, for example, "You was only dreaming" and "Now we're flying, ain't we" (Waters 2002: 87, 95). Likewise, the narrative voice (Susan's) continues to include the marked forms which index her upbringing amongst East London thieves, for example: "faked-up", "tit over heels", "shimmy", "a busted window" and "lushing it away" or drinking large quantities of alcohol (Waters 2002: 67, 71, 83, 85, 92). However, the criminal slang is removed from her direct

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speech as she attempts to act her part. There is one incident, after Susan has been at the house a few weeks, in which Maud gets her to dress in one of her old gowns, and a servant enters and mistakes Susan for Maud (see Waters 2002: 102). Unbeknown to both Susan and the reader, Maud is beginning to practise the plan of transforming Susan, switching their identities. What is noteworthy is that although Susan does not speak at this point, the narrative voice becomes completely standard and relatively formal:

> And it was very good velvet. I stood, plucking at the fringes on the skirt, while Maud ran to her jewel box for a brooch, that she fastened to my bosom, tilting her head to see how it looked. Then there came a knock at the parlour door […]. For it was something, wasn't it, to be taken for a lady? It's what my mother would have wanted. (Waters 2002: 102-103)

The change in the narrative voice, along with the change of clothing, works to foreshadow the change of identity, with Waters subtly appealing to a perceived link between class and speech.

This change of identity is first presented as a trick played on Susan, the thief's daughter; but we later learn that Susan has actually been given back her true identity: she is, in fact, Susan Lilly. Thus the comments above become retrospectively ironic: Susan is a lady and it is she, not Maud, who rightfully belongs at Briar. The counterpart to this incident occurs when Maud assumes the identity of a lady's maid in order to get Susan committed to the asylum, consciously altering her speech when interviewed by the doctor about her 'mistress': "I speak as a servant might" (Waters 2002: 299). There are, however, no marked forms in Waters's representation of Maud's direct speech. This could be because, at this point, she does not want the reader to view Maud as anything other than a lady adopting the role of a servant. The doctor comments that Susan, meanwhile, "speaks like a servant now, and thinks nothing of mouthing filthy words" (Waters 2002: 301). Whilst this plays into Rivers's hands, it is also part of the trick Waters plays on the reader, characterising Susan as an East London thief. The success of the deception depends upon the reader accepting views, such as the one above, that servants and low-born people are to be expected to use 'filthy' language, whilst Standard English is the preserve of the middle and upper classes.

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Once committed to the asylum, Susan's speech is initially that of Lant Street. She yells, "Don't you fucking let her go—!" (Waters 2002: 395), as the carriage containing Maud and Rivers departs from the asylum, using her most natural speech at a time of extreme emotion. When she tries to explain to the nurses that she "ain't Mrs Rivers" (Waters 2002: 398), this is taken as further proof that she insanely believes herself to be a servant. Then her direct speech becomes more formal and standard, as she makes a conscious effort to reason calmly with the staff in an attempt to get them to see the truth of the situation, but this is merely taken as proof that she truly is a lady. Thus she finds herself in a lose-lose situation. Throughout this section of the novel, Susan's direct speech is presented as swinging from controlled Standard English to nonstandard profanity, as she attempts to tell her story and is then frustrated by the doctors and nurses, who refuse to believe her and persist in the view that "when I spoke in the way that was natural to me, I did it to tease them" (Waters 2002: 430).

In her article 'Variation and the Indexical Field', Penelope Eckert argues that "the meanings of [linguistic] variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings", which are intrinsically linked to the ideology of the speaker and the interlocutor – and, one might add, the listener/reader also. Eckert makes the further point that, when speakers adopt a form associated with a particular social group, it is not necessarily because they wish to belong to that group, but rather because they wish to align themselves with certain qualities exhibited by that social group (Eckert 2008: 459). Thus when Susan uses Standard English to attempt to reason with the doctors, this could be interpreted as her attempt to prove her sanity by aligning herself with the calm polite manner typically associated with the middle and upper classes, rather than a wish to appear as a member of those classes. The ideology of the doctors and nurses, however, means that this standard language is taken as proof of her status as a lady. The fact that she slips into nonstandard profanity when she is most emotional appeals to the staff's belief that such language cannot be the language of a sane lady; therefore she is insane. Whilst the reader knows that Susan is sane, having the asylum staff link language and class may well resonate with her/his own preconceptions as to classist language use.

Waters continues to include nonstandard language in the representation of Susan's direct speech, and this can be seen to take on a more performative function. When visited in the asylum by Charles, the knife-boy

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from Briar, Susan's speech is initially unmarked as she aims to enlist his help to escape, querying "Be a good boy now, and tell me the truth. You've run off, haven't you, from Briar?" (Waters 2002: 450). Charles reports that since Maud's disappearance, "[t]he house've been on its head", with many maids and the cook departing while "Mr Lilly ain't in his right mind" after suffering a fit, resulting in Charles's eventual dismissal and return to his aunt's farm in the country (Waters 2002: 451). As Susan realises that Charles, in love with Rivers, is seeking to reunite with Gentleman, she 'performs' or simulates sympathy and her speech converges with that of Charles: "I dare say your aunty don't want you" (Waters 2002: 450-452). Once Susan realises that Charles is homeless and she can manipulate him into helping her, the standard speech with which she initially addresses him acquires certain marked forms, as she tries to build a bond between herself and the boy. Similarly, when the pair have made their way to London and desperately need money, Waters has Susan resort to nonstandard English to beg on the streets:

> 'Please sir, please lady,' I said. 'I just come upon this poor boy, he's come in from the country this morning and has lost his master. Can you spare a couple of farthings, set him back upon his way? Can you? He's all alone and don't know no-one, don't know Chancery Lane from Woolwich.' (Waters 2002: 478-479)

The nonstandard verb forms and the rare use of a double negative, along with the naming of specific areas of London, establish Susan as belonging to the city. Waters presents Susan as performing the identity of a kind-hearted Londoner in order to appeal to the generosity of passers-by, people she thinks will be more likely to give when addressed by one of their own who is looking to do good. Susan then steals a watch from a woman on an omnibus, under cover of admiring the woman's baby: "Look at them lashes! He'll break hearts, he will" (Waters 2002: 480). The compliment paid to the doting mother, combined with the nonstandard determiner 'them' creates an apparent intimacy between the two women, which Susan uses to get physically close to the woman in order to facilitate the theft.

Waters's representation of Susan's ability to code-switch reflects twentieth- and twenty-first-century sociolinguistic studies, showing the quick wit of her protagonist. What is also worth noting is that, at this point, the lexis

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used in the narrative reflects the fact that Susan has returned to her former way of making a living, as she states that "under cover of Charles's coat, I had had a feel about her waistband; and had prigged her watch" (Waters 2002: 480). The marked term 'prigged' links back to the narrative style at the beginning of the novel. Elsewhere, Susan's narrative voice is more standard and comparatively formal, but it seems that, as she returns to London, both her direct speech and her narrative acquire features which link her with her past once more, her style of speech being a deliberate choice made by the character in order to manipulate events. Waters appears to be making a socio-linguistic point, showing that Susan has not forgotten her previous identity and, as she performs her previous role, her language modulates accordingly. This enables Susan to slide back into London life unnoticed, so that she may carry out her surveillance on the Lant Street house in order to work out her best course of action.

Maud, on the other hand, is presented as having no understanding of the ways of London and its people and no resources to help her negotiate her way through the city. After her escape from the Lant Street house, Maud is lost in London, trying to find her way to the home of one of her uncle's more sympathetic colleagues:

> 'You,' I say, holding my hand against my side, 'will you tell me, where is Holywell Street? Which way to Holywell Street?'—but at the sound of my voice, they fall back. (Waters 2002: 370)

Unlike Susan, Maud does not know how to speak to working-class Londoners: her commanding Standard English and her pronunciation mark her as an outsider, someone whom no one is willing to help. Here, Waters is inverting traditional notions about language and power: the dialect speaker has the power, and the one who uses Standard English with, presumably, an R.P. accent proves powerless. This not only invokes modern ideas about regional varieties having status, but also reconsiders the power struggle between the different classes in the Victorian era, suggesting that the educated middle classes were not necessarily the most powerful in every context.

Susan eventually makes her entrance into the Lant Street house, believing that Mrs Sucksby, who set her up in the first place, will be delighted to see her and wish to exact a terrible vengeance against Rivers for leaving

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her at the asylum. While she recounts her story to Mrs Sucksby, her direct speech is represented entirely in Standard English:

> 'This gown I stole,' I said. 'And these shoes. And I walked, nearly all the way to London. My only thought was to get back here to you. For worse than all the cruel things that were done to me in the madhouse was the thought of the lies that Gentleman must have told you, about where I had gone. I supposed at first, he would have said that I had died.' (Waters 2002: 491)

The inversion of the usual subject-verb-object sentence structure at the start gives the speech a formal quality, as does the lengthy complex sentence. Throughout this section of the novel, even when she is at her most emotional, Susan's speech is represented almost entirely in Standard English, and as can be seen above, she is presented as being eloquent and articulate. Similarly, the narrative voice remains standard and comparatively formal. By this point Maud and the reader already know the full truth about the girl's parentage, but Susan does not. It is unlikely that the language of a 'real life' Susan would have altered to the same extent: despite the fact that she was linguistically guarded whilst acting the part of Maud's maid, she has received no formal tuition and has mixed primarily with the lower orders of society since leaving Briar. Furthermore, she is still illiterate at the end of the novel. Thus, Waters's use of Standard English for both Susan's direct speech and her narrative voice seems to be a literary device rather than an attempt to achieve verisimilitude. Susan's language is in direct contrast to Chapter One, where both her narrative and her direct speech were the same as the language of those around her and reflected her environment. Now we know that she is Miss Lilly, an heiress, she is presented as an outsider in the Lant Street house, her language contrasting with that used by Mrs Sucksby, Mr Ibbs, Dainty and John Vroom.

At the same time, Maud, who is present during this conversation, is presented, in terms of her physical appearance at least, as having taken on Susan's previous identity, which is actually Maud's true identity. Her hair and clothing have been changed, and she has had her ears pierced. There is also one linguistic indicator that Maud has changed, when she refers to Rivers as 'Gentleman', the name used only by the Lant Street inhabitants, and this is noted with bitterness by Susan: "'*Gentleman*,' I said. '*Gentleman*. You have

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learned Borough habits very quick'" (Waters 2002: 489). However, Susan is mistaken. Blinded by emotion, she fails to see that Maud, who is suffering terribly herself, is the only person in the house who is trying to protect her from the full knowledge of Mrs Sucksby's plan. This one word is the only 'Borough' term that Maud has picked up; her speech is otherwise similar to Susan's present style. The linguistic parity of the two girls signals the bond between them, although Susan cannot yet see this herself, and foreshadows their union at the end of the novel.

At the novel's close, after learning how Maud tried to shield her from the truth, Susan follows Maud in returning to Briar. Susan and Maud acknowledge their feelings for each other and are presented as embarking upon a new life together. Waters uses direct speech to complete the characterisation of her two protagonists now that the reader knows their true identities. During this section of the novel, the two speak Standard English to each other and, likewise, Susan's narrative is standard. The use of Standard English for both protagonists makes them equals. It is also worth noting that, according to the term of Susan's mother's will, they each have half of the Lilly fortune and are therefore financial equals as well. Throughout the novel we have seen, at different points, that each agreed to a plan to commit the other to an asylum; however, they both suffer and are the victims of deceit, each coming to regret her actions and wishing to save the other. Thus it could be argued that, after all, the language of both Maud and Susan is elevated, similarly to that of Oliver Twist, as a means of reflecting their morality, finer sensibilities and, in Susan's case, high birth. Otherwise, it might seem strange that Susan, who previously used dialect in both her direct speech and her narrative, should now use Standard English.

Yet, at the same time it is apparent that Waters's use of direct speech has played a key role in the plot twists, and readers might reflect on that fact that their acceptance of the classicist view of the superiority of Standard English has made these twists more effective. The ending also contains some isolated exceptions to the use of Standard English, which problematise the view that Susan's speech has become more refined: on the penultimate page, she says that the way Maud now lives at Briar, "just don't seem right", and she uses the word "*sod*" to refer to Mr Lilly (Waters 2002: 547, 546). (Not coincidentally, of course, the novel also concludes with Maud, now a writer of pornography herself, teaching Susan how to read via her own commercial, 'polluting', sexualised writing, which presumably employs tabooed words

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and 'vulgar' language.) *Fingersmith*'s ending thus challenges both the nineteenth-century literary convention of elevating the speech of either a moral or a high-born protagonist, as in the case of *Oliver Twist*, and the view, which became entrenched in the nineteenth century and remains so today, that Standard English is the preserve of the middle and upper classes. Not least, as a writer of pornography, Maud, like Sue, must also become a consummate performative code-switcher. Waters reminds the reader of Susan's previous life, showing that one's speech is, at least to some extent, an indicator of where and with whom one grew up, and not necessarily a reflection of class, intelligence or inherent moral worth.

5. Conclusion: Literary Dialect and Neo-Victorianism

When compared with a nineteenth-century novelist like Dickens, Waters does comparatively little to represent the variety of speech used by the nineteenth-century London underclass. The neo-Victorian form of Waters's literary dialect loosely draws on Dickens's original works, adaptations of them, and the general 'Dickensian' flavour of much neo-Victorian fiction. Readers coming to the novel with a knowledge of Dickens will, in Chapter One, understand that the Dickensian underworld is being evoked through Waters's use of Dickens's criminal lexis as well as the descriptions of Mr Ibbs, Mrs Sucksby, their residence and their means of making a living. Modern media have made the reading public familiar with representations of the country's regional and social varieties of language, if not the actual varieties themselves, without the need for any direct personal experience. Hence Waters does not need to use as detailed a literary dialect as Dickens did: her readers can 'perform' Cockney dialect, following the linguistic prompts that she provides. The nineteenth century, perhaps more than any other, was the period in which novelists took pains to represent nonstandard varieties, and this inclusion of dialect appears to have been popular with readers. Dickens's novels were originally published in serial form and therefore could be readily adapted according to their public and critical reception. The immense success of the nonstandard-speaking Sam Weller, as detailed by Taryn Siobhan Hakala (see Hakala 2010: 163), is testament to the Victorian enjoyment of literary dialect. In contrast, modern readers do not necessarily want the task of deciphering relatively dense passages of nonstandard speech.

Waters's decision to avoid extensive use of nonstandard English enables the reader to progress swiftly through *Fingersmith*, enjoying its clever

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plot, but there are enough marked forms to manipulate our perception of the protagonists, playing on the idea that, even today, readers are likely to judge characters based on their linguistic usage. Thus, despite a comparative absence of marked forms, Waters's literary dialect constitutes an integral strategic part of the novel, aiding the various twists and turns in the plot as the identity of the two female protagonists is established only to be subsequently undermined and inverted. Whilst Dickens's portrayal of dialect-speaking characters is sympathetic, as seen in the case of Sam Weller, he adheres to the view that speech styles are markers of social status, a view challenged by Waters's neo-Victorianism, which emphasises the performativity of class and language as well as gender. Whereas Dickens has Oliver Twist speak Standard English, giving the reader a clue about his true parentage, and the narrative voice of the older Pip reflects his elevated social status, in *Fingersmith*, the use or absence of literary dialect generally works as a ruse to disguise the protagonists' true identities from the reader, so that the force of the plot twists is felt to maximum effect.

In the present day, contradictory views of nonstandard English co-exist. On the one hand, we generally accept that a person's variety of speech is simply an indicator of where he or she grew up and has nothing to with intelligence or morality; but there remains a sense that some linguistic usage is 'wrong' and open to ridicule by those who have the 'right' variety. Waters skilfully exploits these conflicting views within her "ficto-linguistic" framework (Ferguson 1998: 1). The way her characters speak is not necessarily the same as the way that 'real' versions of them would have spoken; instead, Waters uses literary dialect to play to and then challenge traditional notions about language use, class and power. Jane J. Lee argues that the protagonists in Waters's first three novels "defy canonical cultural narratives of the period" (Lee 2018: 4). Lee is referring to sexuality, but the comment can be applied just as well to the representation of Susan in terms of her language usage. Susan is an uneducated member of the London underclass, who displays a heightened sensitivity to language and demonstrates intelligence in her ability to code-switch, which gives her a certain power. Conversely, Maud's Standard English makes her powerless in London's East End.

Waters invites the reader to question the assumptions s/he might make about people – actual, living people and not just fictional characters – in everyday life on the basis of their language use. Moreover, we might

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reconsider our view of the uneducated Victorian working class and underclass. As Marie-Luise Kohlke argues, "neo-Victorian works […] are inherently presentist: they are grounded in the contemporary contexts of their production" (Kohlke 2018: 1), which arguably extend to contemporary attitudes to others based on their accent and dialect, even in a supposedly 'classless' society. Not dissimilarly, O'Callaghan refers to "the usefulness of historical fiction as a textual medium through which (long-standing) debates are rehearsed and reconceived from both the present and in light of its concerns" (O'Callaghan 2017: 96). Waters reconceives ideas about language usage in the Victorian era from the contemporary context, in which the classicist view of speech varieties is still in evidence. Whilst providing the reader with a lesbian "counterhistory" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 17) and a captivating plot, *Fingersmith* also pursues a more subtle neo-Victorian agenda in its engagement with the long-standing debate about speech and status, its exposure of the different attitudes towards standard and nonstandard speech, and its invitation to re-evaluate both past and present views about the links between language usage, character and power. As such it provides a paradigmatic case study that underlines the importance of reassessing writers' strategic deployments of dialect in direct speech and narrative voice in wider neo-Victorian literature.

Notes

1. Notice, incidentally, the allusion to Mrs Joe from Dickens's 1860-61 *Great Expectations* here.
2. Besides 'ain't', dropped h's or final consonants, abbreviations and medial elisions are also the main non-standard expressions employed in Lionel Bart's 1960 stage musical *Oliver!* and its subsequent 1966 film adaptation. Corresponding examples from the lyrics to 'It's a Fine Life', for instance, include "'ere/'Ere", "skimpin'", "'Til", "ta'ers" and "ma'ers" (see All Musicals 2022: n.p.).
3. Shaw's comment occurs in a note to *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1900).
4. Angela Carter deliberately creates such resistance – to the point of illegibility – in her 'A Victorian Fable (with Glossary)' (1966). The text consists wholly of nineteenth-century slang, which readers must laboriously translate into modern vernacular via the appended 'Glossary'.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7417892

5. ComRes, which is a member of the British Polling Council, conducted online interviews with 6045 British adults over the age of 18 in August and September of 2013. The questions were about accent only, rather than dialect, but the results are still relevant here.

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