

**Apprehending the Apparitional: Spatial/Sexual Transgressions
in Sarah Waters's *Affinity***

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Sarah Waters's literary representation of female sexuality, in her critically acclaimed second novel *Affinity*, is intimately linked with the rooms, houses and institutions her characters inhabit and/or transgress. An act of transgression is traditionally considered to be something negative and sinful, as the term itself is defined as "passing beyond the bounds of legality or right" (*OED*). "Trans" derives from the Latin for "cross" and refers to the action of "stepping over," and "gress" from "gradi," which means "to go" (*OED*). Therefore, the word "transgression," as well as denoting a sin, also has a distinctly spatial element in that it implies moving or crossing from one space to another. Transgression thus links the discourses of spatiality and sexuality. In recent years, theorists and writers alike have begun to use the term/action to question dominant spatial and sexual ideologies. Cultural theorist Tim Creswell, for example, uses transgression in "normative geographies" to "delineate the construction of otherness" and challenge dominant belief systems (9). "Normative geographies" refers to the notion that space helps to "tell us who we are in society": certain spaces expect certain behaviours (Creswell 8). When these spaces are unexpectedly transgressed, behaviour thought to be "natural" to a space is unmasked as a spatial/cultural construct. Like Creswell, Sarah Waters uses transgression in *Affinity* to question repressive conceptions of Victorian space and sexuality.

Ideas about transgression have been pivotal to critical analyses of *Affinity*. Mark Llewellyn, Heidi Macpherson, Jenni Millbank and Paulina Palmer all relate the lesbian desires of the novel's protagonists to their ability to transgress the imprisoning boundaries that confine them. This is because transgressions work in this text not only to undermine imprisoning spatial dynamics but also to enable expressions of female same-sex desire. Terry Castle, in her book *The Apparitional Lesbian*, claims that lesbians have been compelled to inhabit a "recessive, indeterminate, misted over space" in literature (30). In *Affinity*, ghostly forces transgress the analogous spaces of the gaol and the home, disrupting spatial boundaries by seemingly "walking through walls." However, as I will

show, the undercurrent of ghostly possibility running throughout *Affinity* works both within and against the apparitional history of lesbianism, as Waters simultaneously affirms and undermines the use of ghostly metaphor.

My argument will proceed in three stages. First, I explore the way Waters uses spectral metaphors and aspects of the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement, as well as ideas about the gaze, to undermine repressive conceptions of Victorian space and sexuality. I then examine the domestic imprisonment Margaret experiences at home. Like the prison, Margaret's home at Chelsea is not a secure container. Instead, the house's walls are made to seem permeable and its portals openings for uncanny forces. These seemingly ghostly transgressions, however, are in fact revealed to be material ones, forcing Margaret to confront her repressed desires. In the third and final section, I conclude with a brief analysis of the two endings offered by Waters and the overall effectiveness of apparitional transgressions in relation to female same-sex desire.

Ghostly Metaphor and Lesbian Materialisation

Waters draws on the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement as a means of undermining and transgressing sexual and spatial boundaries in *Affinity*. Many Victorians became occupied with "morbid sensitivities" that were expressed and harnessed by the movement during the mid-nineteenth century (Finucane 190). One of the main reasons for its popularity was the sensational atmosphere of séances, which took place in private homes. The informal conditions of séances gave the Victorian middle classes a chance to act out inner fantasies and disregard some of the social moral restraints under which they normally lived. Despite the movement's popularity, however, spirit mediums were associated with all kinds of deviances. Llewellyn states, "for the Victorians mediumship was simultaneously fascinating, monstrous and socially criminal, transgressing not only the life/death boundary but also strict societal codes" ("Queer?" 210). During séances, for example, mediums would go to great and fraudulent lengths to convincingly demonstrate otherworldly communication, from sneakily rapping the table themselves to performing "fake" ghostly materialisations (Finucane 182). Waters makes use of both the positive and negative aspects of the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement in *Affinity*, showing it to facilitate, as well as undermine, alternative ways of being.

Spiritualism (and more specifically the séance) has been utilised for the expression of closeted female desire in other contemporary novels set in the nineteenth century. A. S. Byatt, for example, makes use of the Victorian Spiritualist movement and the séance in her subtle suggestion of lesbianism in *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Christabel LaMotte's female companion Blanche Glover commits suicide by loading her pockets with stones and throwing herself in the river after she thinks herself forsaken. Glover's presence seemingly re-materialises at a séance attended by LaMotte, accompanied by voices saying, "Remember the stones," and the sounds of "flowing water and waves" (*Possession* 396).¹ "Lesbianism," notes Jenni Millbank, "is a rupture that crosses" (159). In *Affinity Waters*, like Byatt, uses the Victorian spiritualist movement to signify the "crossing over" of lesbianism from the dark spaces in which it was confined.

Affinity's imprisoning spaces and spectral visitations clearly draw on the Gothic tradition. Palmer ("Lesbian Gothic" 119) and Macpherson (215) both claim *Affinity* as an example of "lesbian Gothic fiction." Works of this genre appropriate "Gothic motifs and imagery as a vehicle for lesbian representation" and explore from a lesbian perspective "erotic female relations and their transgressive dimensions" (Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic* 4). Palmer lists a number of Gothic subsets that writers of the lesbian Gothic genre utilise, including "ghost stories, vampire narratives, Gothic thrillers and texts centring on the witch" ("Lesbian Gothic" 118). Of these possibilities, however, it is the first that has proved the most popular in lesbian Gothic fiction (Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic* 59). Waters works within the tradition of the ghost story to represent female same-sex desire in *Affinity*.

The traditional metaphoric "ghosting" of lesbian desire in literature, according to Castle, is a process of "derealization" (6). "Derealization" refers to attempts to make the lesbian disappear, make her non-existent and drained of "any sensual or moral authority" (Castle 32). Castle argues that the literary history of lesbianism since the eighteenth century has been derealized in that "one woman or another must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one" (34). The character of Miss Wade in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, for example, demonstrates an unnatural interest in a young and angry maid nicknamed

¹ LaMotte's lover, poet Randolph Henry Ash, also attends this séance, after which he writes the poem "Mummy Possesst" (*Possession* 405-12). Waters gestures towards aspects of "Mummy Possesst" in *Affinity*, as the poem, in many ways, can be read as the voice of Selina's maid/lover/master Ruth Vigers.

Tattycoram. Mr Meagles, Tattycoram's patriarchal employer, defines Miss Wade thus: "You were a mystery to all of us, and had nothing in common with any of us ... I don't know what you are, but you don't hide, can't hide, what a dark spirit you have within you" (Dickens, *Little Dorrit* 312). Miss Wade's passion for Tattycoram is ghosted. Rather than being named, her desires are depicted as a spiritual force. Waters recalls parts of *Little Dorrit* in *Affinity*. Selina's surname "Dawes" is also the name of a character who torments Miss Wade when she works as a governess. Dickens's Dawes character is described by Miss Wade as someone who uses "artful devices" (629). Unlike Margaret, who is blind to Selina's artful ways, Miss Wade claims that she "saw through [Dawes's devices] from the first" (630). Margaret, in *Affinity*, reads *Little Dorrit* to her mother but she never quite makes it to Book Two, chapter 22, in which Miss Wade discusses the manipulative behaviour of Dawes. Instead, Margaret actually falls for Dawes's ghostly devices.

Ghostly depictions of sexually transgressive women such as Dickens's have been re-appropriated by twentieth-century lesbian writers. Castle notes that one of the features of modern lesbian literature is a "tendency to hark back, by way of intertextual references, to earlier works on the same subject" (63). Instead of making the lesbian disappear, however, these writers have "been able for the most part to ignore the negative backdrop against which [the apparitional lesbian] has been traditionally (de)materialised ... [and] have succeeded in transforming her from a negative to an affirming presence" (Castle 64). Llewellyn reads *Affinity* in this way, claiming that spiritualism allows for the expression of lesbian sexuality in the novel ("Queer?" 210). Middle-class women, curtailed by societal convention, are subtly able to express/indulge their often unconscious desires behind the smokescreen of spiritualism in the text. As a result, the "ghosting" of women in *Affinity* may be read, on one level, as affirming, since it provides an enabling metaphor, albeit a limited one, for lesbianism.

The apparitional tradition allows Margaret, the novel's main protagonist, to ambiguously express her lesbianism with limited risk of censure. Margaret, like a number of women in *Affinity*, is not comfortable with her sexuality. For example, when she learns that some of the women prisoners in Millbank make "pals" of each other (after a prisoner named Jarvis asks her to carry a note to her sweetheart), she finds that the reality of the

situation makes her uneasy: “I have heard them talk of ‘pals’ before, and have used the word myself, but it disturbed me to find that the term had *that* particular meaning and I hadn’t known it. Nor, somehow, do I care to think that I had almost played medium, innocently, to Jarvis’ dark passion ...” (67; original emphasis and ellipsis). Margaret prefers ghostly expressions of desire which appear to transcend the mundane barriers of her domestic life whilst remaining imperceptible to those around her. However, the ghosting of lesbianism is not treated as inherently affirming in *Affinity*. Instead, Waters problematises modern apparitional representations by showing them, in the case of Margaret, to be ultimately ineffective and unsatisfying.

Although Waters’s deployment of Spiritualism works, on the one hand, to facilitate expressions of lesbianism in *Affinity*, on the other it implies that if lesbians are to achieve real expression of their desires, they must negotiate material, not ghostly, conditions. By cunningly manipulating the Spiritualist movement, Selina and her maid Ruth Vigers are able to enact their lesbianism materially in *Affinity*. Waters first establishes the link between lesbianism and apparitional motifs in the house of Mrs Margery Brink, where Selina lives prior to her incarceration at Millbank. Selina’s diary entries concerning the period in which she lives at Mrs Brink’s Sydenham residence are unevenly interspersed with Margaret’s throughout *Affinity*. As a result, it is not until the end of the novel that the reader recognises the “true” nature of the events leading up to Selina’s imprisonment. In small and private séances held at Mrs Brinks’s Selina and Ruth (who disguises herself as a spirit named Peter Quick) express their passions protected by the smokescreen of Spiritualism. By showing spectral manifestations to in fact be mundane materialisations, Waters adds another perspective to the use of spiritual metaphor as an expression of lesbianism. Selina and Ruth’s employment of Spiritualism demonstrates how the apparitional tradition is most useful when it is consciously recognised and deliberately deployed as a metaphor masking literal, material lesbian relationships.

Selina and Ruth are able to use the Spiritualist movement for their own advantage by manipulating the gaze. Finucane, discussing the psychological involvement of the audience at a séance, states: “If there was fraud, the percipients were very willing victims. It could be suggested that these people so earnestly wished to communicate with [or see]

spirits, that any approximation to their expectations was accepted as reality” (189). Apparitional appearances are intrinsically linked to notions of observation and the gaze: “seeing is believing.” In *Affinity*, Waters presents Selina and Ruth’s manipulative skills as so effective that they are even able to undermine the all-seeing panoptic architecture of Millbank prison and transgress the well-guarded hearth of Margaret’s middle-class Chelsea home.²

Margaret’s Domestic Confines

Margaret, like the women imprisoned at Millbank, experiences intense surveillance in her home. Palmer argues that the prison and the home are paralleled in *Affinity* both are inherently patriarchal spaces susceptible to “spectral connotations” and “haunted by their inmates’ memories and frustrated desires” (“Lesbian Gothic” 126). The patriarchal structure of Margaret’s home once allowed her to pursue her interests beyond its precincts as her father nurtured and encouraged her intelligence. Yet after his death, Margaret becomes subject to intense familial surveillance. In becoming a Lady Visitor, she believes that she has found herself an interesting occupation away from the family home and her mother’s ever-present gaze. What she finds, however, is that the surveillance she experiences at home is only exacerbated in the prison, and that by befriending the prisoners she is inviting transgression into her domestic space.

Margaret’s first journal entries convey the masculinized expectations she has established for herself. Trying to write as her father would have, Margaret begins her account outside the prison gate:

He would start it, I think, at the gate of Millbank, the point that every visitor must pass when they arrive to make their tour of the gaols. Let me begin my record there, then ... Before I can do that, however, I am obliged to pause a little to fuss with my skirts, which are plain, but wide, and have caught upon some piece of jutting iron or brick. (7-8)

² Waters is not the first author to utilise the space of the panopticon in the exploration of female same-sex desire. Angela Carter, in her novel *Nights at the Circus*, also makes use of the panoptic to demonstrate that what we see is not always the whole story.

In spite of her intentions, Margaret is physically constricted by the architecture of her dress. The distinctly distanced, almost scientific style of writing that she attempts to mimic is hindered by her gender because she has skirts that interfere with her narrative. Despite Margaret's attempt to construct her visits to the prison as a way of escaping her spatial confines, her gender still gets in the way.

The trappings of Margaret's feminine apparel are not her only hindrance. Her narrative is also curtailed by her home and lack of private space. "The first truly private space," states Mark Wigley, "was the man's study, a small locked room off his bedroom which no one else ever enters, an intellectual space beyond that of sexuality" (347). Margaret, however, is physically denied privacy—what Virginia Woolf called "a room of one's own"—to separate her self or her sexuality from her narrative and achieve the masculine detachment she is trying to emulate. Unlike her father, who would have worked from his study at home, Margaret is compelled to record her experiences from the uncertain privacy of her bedroom, which is haunted by the kisses of her former "companion" (204). She has, therefore, no space in which to write a detached narrative.

Margaret has a bedroom on the second uppermost level of the house just below the attics that sleep the maids, and distanced from the rest of her family, who occupy the floor below. The house, for Gaston Bachelard, "is imagined as a vertical being ... ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic" (17). By choosing her bedroom in the upper echelon of the house, which is presumably a four-story structure, Margaret is attempting to align herself intellectually with what Bachelard calls the "rationality of the roof" (18). Despite her vertical positioning, however, Margaret's bedroom is open, like a prison cell, to surveillance. Shortly after the death of her beloved father and the marriage of her closest female companion to her brother, Margaret attempted suicide by overdosing on morphine. Suicide was a criminal offence during the nineteenth century but because Margaret is a "lady," she does not experience public scrutiny and official conviction for her actions. Instead, what she does experience is private imprisonment and relentless familial surveillance; her bedroom is a sickroom and open to constant scrutiny.

A sickroom is typically "separated and secluded" from the rest of the house, to ensure the tranquillity required for recuperation as well as preventing greater contamination (Bailin 17-18). Separation and seclusion, however, do not mean that the

patient has privacy. Due to the need for constant monitoring and nursing, the sickroom, like the prison cell, is a space that is always open to the gaze. Like the panopticon, which according to Michel Foucault was also a laboratory, for it could be used to “experiment with medicines and monitor their effects” (*Discipline and Punishment* 203), Margaret’s bedroom is a medicinal space. Two years after her illness, Margaret’s mother still visits her room on a nightly basis, to check on her condition and personally administer her medicine: “Mother came, half an hour ago, to bring me my dose. I told her I should like to sit a little longer ... but no, she wouldn’t do that” (30). Her mother’s nightly intrusion reminds Margaret of Millbank. Her previous suicide attempt after the death of her father means that she is treated like a criminal and a hysteric. Llewellyn suggests that, like Selina’s spiritualism, “Margaret’s hysteria is used as a cover for her internal ‘other’ life” (“Queer?” 209). Unlike Selina’s spiritualism, however, Margaret’s hysteria does not help her cause; instead it hinders it by giving her less freedom and subjecting her to more surveillance.

Margaret’s Chelsea home acts as a viewing tower; her actions beyond its immediate confines are closely observed. For example, after one prison visit, Margaret decides to walk home, believing her mother to be out: “I walked, because I guessed that Mother would still be busy with Pris. When I went home, however, I found that she was not out as I had supposed, but had been back for an hour, and had been watching me” (51). Margaret’s mother closely watches her because she views her daughter as different and “too susceptible” (263). Margaret’s discordant position in her family causes her to associate more strongly with the women in Millbank, where she may also have been if she were not a “lady.”

Although Waters parallels Margaret’s home space with that of Millbank, the main difference between the two sites is that the boundaries are not as strictly guarded in the home as they are in the prison. The failure of Margaret’s home to fulfil its most basic requirement, which is to provide shelter from outside elements, reveals the space’s susceptibility to transgression. Bachelard claims that “faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house’s virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues” (46). The same personification applies when the house ceases to provide protection and resistance. Margaret begins to notice changes within

her home shortly after she becomes a Lady Visitor and agrees to think of the women prisoners (specifically Selina) when she is “wakeful” (50). Margaret, through her keen interest in Selina, unconsciously invites transgressive forces into her home. After three days of rain she writes:

The rain has made the kitchen flood, and there are leaks in the attics; worst of all, our girl, Boyd, has given us her week’s warning ... We all supposed Boyd content enough, she has been with us for three years ... She said the truth was, the house when she was alone in it has begun to frighten her. She said it has ‘turned peculiar’ since Pa died, and his empty study, that she must clean, gives her the horrors. She said she cannot sleep at night, for hearing creaks and ... once she said, she heard a whispering voice, saying her name! (56)

Margaret’s home fails to provide its most primary service by allowing the rain to transgress its threshold. This structural failure activates feelings of fear and uncertainty within the household—particularly, it seems, within those who inhabit the attics, the servants. Palmer states that Waters “portrays the servant-girl ... as signifying the hole in the social cell, the chink in the closely protected carapace, of the bourgeois family where forces of disorder can creep in and unravel family ties” (“Lesbian Gothic” 128). A woman called Vigers quickly replaces the timid Boyd. Vigers’s instalment, however, drastically changes the dynamics of the residency, and heralds the arrival of disorder, because she is actually Ruth Vigers, Selina’s former maid and lover. Ruth orchestrates Boyd’s apparent nervousness and subsequent resignation, playing on the middle-class assumption that servants are more susceptible to ghostly disturbances.

As Margaret’s domestic space becomes increasingly permeable, and the boundaries she imagined protected her begin to dissolve, her behaviour, like Boyd’s, becomes erratic. Returning from a disturbing visit at the prison, Margaret struggles to separate herself from the vaporous forces that threaten the very structure of her private life:

Outside, the day was dark, the street made vague by a thickening fog. The Porter’s man was slow to find a cab for me; when I climbed in one at last I seemed to take a skein of mist in with me, that settled upon the surface of my skirts and made them heavy. Now the fog still rises. It rises so high, it has begun to seep beneath the curtains. When Ellis came this evening ... she found me upon the floor, beside the glass, making the sashes tight with wads of paper. She said, what was I doing

there?. ... I said I was afraid the fog would creep into my room, in the darkness, and stifle me.
(189-90)

Margaret's attempt to stop the fog entering her bedroom is futile because the transgressive forces are emanating from within the house, not beyond it. Ruth cunningly satisfies Margaret's derealised longing for Selina through a series of material interventions into her private space. Unseasonable flowers appear in her bedroom (220); Selina's severed blonde plait upon her pillow (258); and, as Margaret's desire grows, a velvet collar turns up in the pages of her diary "with a lock of brass" (294). Margaret attributes these transgressions to spectral forces controlled by Selina, and welcomes them as expressions of desire. The only thing that begins to bother her about them is that she does not witness and have some control over their arrival: "They never come when I am here and watching. I wish they would. They would not frighten me. I should be frightened, now, if they ceased! For while they come, I know they come to make the space between us thick" (286).

Encouraged by these ghostly transgressions, Margaret begins to make moves towards fully realising her desire for Selina, rather than remaining in a "misted over" and derealised space. For Margaret, Selina's seeming reciprocation of her longing makes the space between them "thick" and subsequently more real. Even Margaret's self-observations show her to be moving away from her formerly derealised position, "I ... am growing subtle, insubstantial. I am evolving... When I am alone, as I am now... I gaze at my own flesh and see the bones show pale beneath it. They grow paler each day. My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost! I think I will haunt this room, when I start my new life" (389). By making plans to run away with Selina and start a new life in Italy, Margaret is evolving and moving towards material, rather than metaphoric, expressions of her lesbianism. Yet despite the fact that she is attempting to substantiate her desire, the signs by which she recognises and reads it remain derealised. Margaret's sexual evolution is inextricably entangled in apparitional metaphor and, therefore, unable to cross over into the "real" world.

By the end of the novel, Margaret is made to realise that she, along with many readers, has been duped; what she saw was not the whole story. Margaret finds that she

has no place: “I am filled with horror, and with envy and with grief, because I know myself untouched, unlooked-for and alone” (349). Ruth has stolen Margaret’s identity and emigrated with Selina in her place because she, unlike Margaret, is able to materially realise her desires. Margaret, on the other hand, has invested all her longing and future happiness in an empty metaphor which, once negated, leaves her with nothing. On the brink of coming out, she has gone to criminal lengths to secure a future for herself. When Selina does not miraculously appear at her bedroom window, Margaret is forced to understand that all along her “affinity” has in fact belonged to someone else and that there have been no “spirit friends,” only Ruth.

Conclusion

By turning the spirits into flesh Waters gives life to Selina and Ruth’s desires. Conversely, their fleshing out renders Margaret’s love invisible. Macpherson claims that “in explicitly or implicitly seeking ‘improper’ relationships, [Waters’s] fictional prisoners step outside their prisons and wrest control from those who seek to contain them” (205). In the end, however, this saving vision is only partial. Margaret is never actually able to escape her confines. Selina and Ruth’s duplicity has left her in an impossible situation. What she believed to be true never really existed at all: “*Selina has taken my life, that she might have a life with Vigers in it*” (340; original emphasis). Rather than face a future of domestic imprisonment and familial recrimination, Margaret imagines ending her own life by jumping into the Thames: “How deep, how black, how thick the water seems tonight. How soft its surface seems to lie. How chill its depths must be” (350-51). Waters gives Margaret a traditional Victorian ending. She is now a fallen woman and, as Nina Auerbach states, “generally the fallen woman must die at the end of her story” (161). Margaret therefore, like her desire, is derealised by the end of the novel because she has publicly transgressed moral, as well as legal, boundaries.

Selina and Ruth’s fate appears, on the one hand, to be the second traditional option given to fallen Victorian women in literature, in that they are exiled. By removing the characters outside of England, and the narrative, Waters recalls the Victorian literary tradition of sending disorderly women away (usually to the colonies). But, on the other hand, Selina and Ruth’s ending can be read as distinctly post-Victorian because they do

not leave individually as fallen women. Instead, they go away to Italy together, as though they are eloping. This vision of a place in the sun, however, is not entirely utopian for Ruth seems to exert a masochistic control over Selina. Therefore, despite her new found freedom, Selina continues to be governed by others, and it is Ruth who has the last word: “Remember ... whose girl you are” (352).

In *Affinity*, depictions of seemingly spectral transgressions undermine the containability of women within sites such as the prison and the home. Both the prison and the home in this text are ruled by the ever-present gaze, which gives the illusion of total knowledge. However, through materially manipulating the gaze (by creating the impression of a ghostly presence), Selina and Ruth are able to undermine the notion that “seeing is believing.” Waters moves towards making a space for female same-sex desire in this novel as Selina and Ruth’s deliberate management of Spiritualism allows them to find a place, albeit in exile, where they can be together. By allowing her lesbian characters to cross over from the spaces in which they have been historically enclosed, and dwell in regions where their presence was previously displaced or ignored, Waters questions repressive understandings of the nineteenth century and explores the perspectives of “other Victorians.”

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