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Confinement and Oppression in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*: The Function of the Diary, the Panoptical Gaze and the Lesbian Ghost

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Introduction

1. The author in context

Sarah Waters (Wales, 1966) is an award-winning author of six novels to date: *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002), *The Night Watch* (2006), *The Little Stranger* (2009), and *The Paying Guests* (2014). As Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble have pointed out, her creativity is characterised by a “curious intermingling of passion, crime, sensationalism and social injustice” (141). At present, she is a widely recognised writer. She has obtained a really good reception not only among the general public but also in the academic sphere, as can be gauged from the fact that her works have been studied from many different thematic and theoretical perspectives. She has been shortlisted for numerous awards and won several ones.¹ In 2003, she was included in Granta’s famous “Best of Young British Novelists” and voted as Author of the Year. What is more, some of her fictional works have been adapted for the television and the theatre. The latest adaptation for the stage was that of *The Night Watch*, its premiere taking place at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, on 19th May 2016, and the play being on show until 18th June 2016 (Waters 2010-2011).

Due to their complexity and richness, her novels have been given numerous labels, being classified, among others, as instances of the (neo-) Gothic, Historiography, the Neo-Victorian fiction, and Queer fiction. Of

¹ As Kaye Mitchell notes, Waters possesses an “impressive haul of prizes (which includes the Betty Trask Award, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the Lambda Literary Award for Fiction and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize)” (2013a, 1).

these, the gothic and lesbian elements are perhaps the most salient and the ones that provide what Robert McGrum has described as “hidden depths” (n. p.) to Sarah Waters’s fiction. McGrum situates Waters, “in a circle of contemporary women writers such as Stella Duffy, Ali Smith, Charlotte Mendelson and Joanna Briscoe” (n. p.). And, although generationally Waters appears as the successor of the world-famous lesbian writer, Jeanette Winterson, their styles are frequently described as opposed and representative of two different, even contrary, literary lesbian traditions. As Susana Onega argues, “unlike Winterson, who is placed in the ‘posh’ and ‘exotic’ lesbian trend associated with Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes and Daphne du Maurier, Waters insists on the unexceptionality of herself and her work” (Onega 2017, n. p.).

The same difficulty critics have in categorising her work can be applied to the categorisation of herself as a writer. As a university scholar, Sarah Waters has a wide and in-depth knowledge of literature, and this is reflected in the variety of generic and thematic influences and the richness of intertextual allusions to canonical and popular works easily visible in her novels. Therefore, as Kate Mitchell puts it, “numerous literary influences and comparisons abound in the reviews of Sarah Waters’ writing, ranging from Victorian writers like Dickens and Wilkie Collins, to postwar novelists such as Denton Welch and Elizabeth Bowen, and contemporary authors including Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood” (2013a, 3). Still, for all this, the publication of her two first novels — *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* — pigeonholed her as a lesbian writer, a label that she readily accepted. As Pauline Palmer points out, “while claiming several different authorial

identities including ‘historical novelist, woman writer or just a writer’, she [Waters] argues that ‘it makes sense to call me a lesbian writer since I am a writer who is lesbian’” (72).

2. Affinity

Sarah Waters’s second novel deals mainly with the complex personal and social relations of three women: Margaret Prior, Selina Dawes, and Ruth Vigers. Set in the streets and buildings of Victorian London, it tells the story of Margaret Prior, an upper-middle class lady who is still living with her mother. Pinpointed as a spinster, since she is already 30 and is not married, Margaret sees how her brother Stephen and her sister Priscilla are making a life of their own, while she is still clutched to her mother. After the death of her father and the unfortunate ending of the secret relation she had with Helen —when she decided to marry Margaret’s brother— Margaret becomes so unhappy, that she attempts to commit suicide. To free herself from the oppression she suffers at home she becomes a lady visitor at Millbank prison, where she will meet the working-class spiritualist, Selina Dawes. After several encounters, Margaret starts feeling attracted by this mysterious inmate, her fascination towards her growing unstoppably. Thus, Selina will use her charm to escape, both from prison and from England with her real true love, the unnoticed maid, Ruth Vigers. Indeed, this woman will play a crucial role in the novel. She is the one who knows both protagonists since she has worked as a maid both for Margaret and for Selina’s patron, Mrs Brink. But she is addressed differently by each lady: while Margaret refers to her as “Vigers”, Mrs Brink (and also Selina), calls

her “Ruth”, a fact that will mislead readers, who will only find out that she is the same person at the end of the novel, once the final trick has taken place. This strategy is enhanced by a relevant formal feature of *Affinity*, namely, the fact that it is an epistolary novel alternating entries of two diaries: one written by Margaret and the other by Selina. Though theoretically, this narrative structure allows readers to have two different perspectives on the events, in fact, they are not exactly the same, as the diaries refer to two different times.

The reviewer Jenny Turner uses the terms “‘Frissony’, ‘pastiche’ and ‘lesbo-Victorian’” (n. p.) to describe *Affinity*. She explains that these are words Waters herself uses to describe her own works. As Turner argues, “pastiche” would be a good term to describe her works, since in them we can find a mixture of “Victoriana as a queer theorist might perform it, with costumes by Judith Butler, prisons and madhouses by Foucault” (n. p.). Another aspect of Waters’s novels praised by Turner is what she summarises in a single sentence as its being “always rich in feeling, and clever, and precise” (n. p.). Undoubtedly, Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* presents numerous aspects worth commenting on. As Jerome de Groot puts it: “As a form, the historical novel raises significant questions about representation, and the choices made by both author and reader in interrogating and understanding the world” (57). Bearing this thematic and formal richness of *Affinity* in mind, I will carry out an in-depth analysis of Waters’s best-selling novel with special attention to its narrative form and the way in which it conveys some the most groundbreaking themes tackled in it,

drawing on the notions of confinement and oppression as the common thread linking them.

It is clear that, in this novel, Sarah Waters made really conscious choices when she employed several devices to portray a concrete kind of female characters leading subdued lives in a confined environment. Imprisonment is shown in the novel from the very beginning till the end. And this fact is reflected in the narrative technique, as the diary form is a quite confined and private style of writing, in which the ideas of the characters are allowed to run free. However, at the same time, these ideas are kept shut in the darkness of one's room, belonging to no one but its writer and, in this sense, the concrete form the novel takes is crucial for the creation of suspense and mystery, as well as for conveying the idea of oppression Margaret suffers. Another form of oppression that is omnipresent in the novel, in this case that of Selina and the other inmates of Millbank, is symbolised by the structure of the prison, built on the pattern of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. This panoptical structure cuts out any possibility of freedom and secrecy, since those belonging to the system are doomed to be constantly watched and controlled. As a result, they are confined to a system of rules which offers no alternative. Another salient theme of the novel that adds to the *topos* of absolute confinement is spiritualism and the séances that appear in *Affinity*. Relating spiritualism with lesbianism, these socially criticised practices hide a whole world of sexual discovery and trespassing of mainstream rules in the Victorian Era. As the dissertation will try to demonstrate, confinement and oppression —

understood both literally and metaphorically — will act as the main *Leitmotif* around which the novel develops.

3. Queer literature and lesbian history

Sarah Waters's interest in lesbian writings is a predominant feature of her work that responds to her sexual orientation. Indeed, her protagonists are usually lesbian women who fight against mainstream society in different circumstances. As de Groot explains, her novels “work backwards and forwards, commenting upon contemporary lesbian identity and the workings of sexuality in modernity” (62). Her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, is considered to be groundbreaking in this respect as it portrays the coming of age of its young protagonist, focusing on lesbian themes, and making use of an erotic and picaresque style that will also be found in *Affinity*. As Sarah Waters has noted on different occasions, she is aware of the main topics the academia is usually interested in and these include sexuality and gender. Together with these, her own interests are clearly focused on the past, more concretely on the recuperation of the lesbian tradition of writing. Thus, she wonders:

On what terms does history appeal to a lesbian writer and how is the past negotiated in lesbian literary production? Should the popular novel be a site to recuperate the names and lives of ‘suitable’ or famous lesbians of the past, or is it better approached as a starting-point to invent a ‘history’ haunted by the present and understood to take its authority from the imperatives of

contemporary lesbian identities? Should we read lesbian historical novels as ‘performative’ rather than ‘descriptive’ texts — as indices to the myths and fantasies through which lesbian culture is maintained and reproduced? (in Mitchell 2013a, 6)

For this reason, lesbian and queer theory become essential for an in-depth analysis of her works. Indeed, Terry Castle’s seminal work *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) provides some of the main clues for the understanding of how lesbians are represented in *Affinity*. As she argues,

when it comes to lesbians [...] many people have trouble seeing what’s in front of them. The lesbian remains a kind of “ghost effect” in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot — even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen. Some may even deny that she exists at all. (2)

It is precisely on this “ghost effect” that we shall focus on the chapter of this dissertation aimed at analysing the representation of lesbianism in the novel. As Tatiana Kontou argues, Waters “open[s] up a viable space for the realization of lesbian experience and desire” (181). Even if there is not an explicit reference to lesbians —something that, in fact, would be an anachronism — the reader will confront numerous examples of ghostly appearances and references to spiritualism as a metaphor for homosexual presence and relations. Among the different characters, Ruth Vigers

perfectly embodies the “apparitional lesbian” metaphor and, what is more, as Kym Brindle puts it, she “is the master of observation and the gaze” (76). Ruth will prove to be the most intelligent and dangerous woman in the novel, a lesbian servant who will use her double sexual and social invisibility to defeat Victorian society’s rules. As Kontou explains,

“Waters uses the sensation genre, prison narratives and spiritualist memoirs to create a kind of counter-history, the antithesis of the ‘great lives’ and ‘great works’ of men. The novel is built around the lives of middle-class spinsters and fraudulent mediums, figures that have been continuously excluded from the narration of the past” (172).

Consequently, this is the reason why Ruth Vigers, a marginalised lady’s maid, plays such a crucial role in the novel, becoming the most active character of it. She is the one that defies Victorian rules and is the true example of a free lesbian woman.

4. The historical context in Waters’s works

Together with lesbianism, history is another key element in Waters’s work. As Kaye Mitchell points out, “Waters’ novels are ripe for critical analysis because of their ambitious and insightful use of historical material and popular genres” (2013a, 5). As far as the historical context to her novels is concerned, Waters essentially presents and portrays two main British historical periods: The Victorian Era and the aftermath of the First World

War. In both cases, one of the main settings is London, a city which also plays a significant role in her works. As Abigail Dennis explains, her first three novels are skilfully set in the Victorian Era, and appropriate some of the most recognisable stylistic techniques of the period, something “hardly surprising from an author who holds a PhD in English Literature from Queen Mary, University of London” (41).² As Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble state, the three first novels “share a fascination with the past as spectre haunting the present, and explore the effect of this haunting on the lives and loves of dissident women” (141). More concretely, *Affinity* is set in the Victorian London of the 1870s. Indeed, *Affinity* presents a really complex panorama in which some of the best-known trademarks of Waters’s fiction are easily identified, as Rachel Carroll notes,

On the one hand, *Affinity* is a historically grounded and plausible reconstruction of marginalized women’s histories: the spinster, the spirit medium, the working-class servant. [...] The past is then experienced both through the framework of revisionary feminist historiography and through the past’s own conventions of representation; the novel’s attempt to reconstruct a “lost” past is qualified by a consciousness of the ways in which the meanings of the past change with every attempt to “return” to it. (2006, 143)

² As Sarah Waters explains in an interview, “The late Victorian material came out of work I did for the early chapters of my PhD Thesis [...]. I’d been looking at London’s queer underworld, and could see that there was a lot of material there which felt very exciting and which I wasn’t really seeing outside the academic context” (in Mitchell 2013b, 128).

Since the analytical perspective of this dissertation is related to the notions of confinement and imprisonment, we shall see how Victorian society imprisoned women according to what was considered improper behaviour. Sarah Waters's focus will be the "lost past" of indecorous Victorian women, the type of women whose stories will never appear in a history book. As Mariaconcetta Costantini wittingly explains, "Distance allows her to fill in the historical gaps imaginatively. But it also increases her awareness of the relevance that reconstructing the past can have for the present" (31). In summary, it could be argued that by focusing on spiritualism and spectrality, Waters is rewriting history from the margins of patriarchal society.

In an article on "The Popular and Critical Reception of Sarah Waters" Kaye Mitchell argues that the critical readings of *Affinity* "attend, in particular, to Waters' use of Victorian spiritualism, not only as a metaphor for an invisible yet insistent queerness, but also as a vehicle for the exploration of nineteenth century femininity" (Mitchell 2013a, 10). The novel, situated, as already pointed out, in Victorian London, presents a complex society divided in different social classes: from those belonging to the upper-middle class — such as the Prior family, who perfectly embody the dominant ideology of the patriarchal world — to the most miserable evildoers of the Victorian underworld — the prisoners at Millbank, who are even more discriminated, if possible, due to the fact that they are low-class women living in a strictly patriarchal and classist social structure. In consonance with this, the vision of the Victorian period offered by *Affinity* breaks the mould set by the Victorian novel in different respects. For

instance, the traditional Victorian standards of morality are questioned, and the immorality hidden under apparent decorum is made to come to light. In this sense, “the neo-Victorian novel can be used as a vehicle for the exploration of alternative versions of history, bringing to the fore what exists in the original nineteenth century narratives only as subtexts or veiled allusions” (Armitt and Gamble 142). Thus, in the Victorian period, as Susana Onega, drawing on Castle’s notion of “apparitional lesbian”, has pointed out, “homosexual women were denied the possibility of rounding off their individuation process and condemned to lead an angst-ridden and ghostly [...] existence at the margins of a patriarchal society ruled by compulsory heterosexuality” (2015, n. p.). Characters that apparently confine themselves to what is appropriate for them ceaselessly try to escape those imposed moral codes. In *Affinity*, the protagonist, Miss Margaret Prior, a middle-upper class closeted lesbian woman, feels free only when visiting Millbank Prison, for she is then able to escape the oppression suffered at home. Significantly, it is her maid Ruth Vigers, also a closeted lesbian, who eventually proves to be the bravest character in defying Victorian morals. As a working-class woman and as a lesbian she is twice marginalised and unnoticed. Thus, as Brindle puts it, in *Affinity*, Sarah Waters “imagin[es] the ‘unrepresented’ lesbian and how women might have experienced late nineteenth-century prison life” (66). However, she will use this invisibility for her own benefit, demonstrating that class discrimination can be used in favour of her picaresque plans. In fact, as will be explained later on, Vigers’s powerful and omnipresent gaze proves to be essential for

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the functioning of the complex panoptical system presented throughout the novel

Chapter I: The Diary Form

1. The juxtaposition of two narrative voices

The fact that *Affinity* is written in diary form cannot be dismissed. As the Russian Formalists postulated once and for all, form and content are inseparable, and so I will begin by analysing the form as a preliminary for the analysis of the contents of the novel and the ideology it conveys. Brindle has stated that “[t]here is a ubiquitous presence of fictional letters and diaries in neo-Victorian fiction” (65). Even if this statement is undoubtedly true, we should not forget that the diary novel has existed for many centuries and, as Trevor Field demonstrates in *Form and Fiction in the Diary Novel*, there are numerous novels that can be ascribed to this genre.³ As explained in the introduction, in the case of *Affinity*, the reader has access to two different voices, as it alternates the diaries of Margaret Prior and Selina Dawes. This gives the impression of providing a broader picture of what is going on. As readers soon learn, each diary reflects some of the most characteristic traits of its author, each of them providing different perspectives on the events they were involved in. On the one hand, Margaret, a well-educated and clever lady, shows her naivety in believing

³ This is another interesting issue that could be worth discussing, since the notion of diary novel is, in itself, problematic. As Gerald Prince highlights, “the diversity of diary novels is, of course, remarkable: *La Symphonie astorale*, *Doctor Glass*, *The Diary of a Rapist*, *Diario de in solterón penitente*, *La Nausée* are all considered to be diary novels and yet differ not only in themes and intentions but also in structure, in narrative syntax, in the formal devices they favor and exploit” (477). However, in order not to make this issue excessively twisted, we should bear in mind Trevor Field’s warning that “the word ‘diary’ must be defined in such a way as to make it an identifiable unit without denying it the freedom of form which real diaries have always enjoyed” (6).

the cunning Selina, since she seems to be easily bewitched by her spiritual tricks. As Onega puts it: “As the reading of her evermore introspected and emotionally charged journal makes clear, the development of the action wholly depends on the forlorn lady’s growing magnification of the imaginary alternatives opened to her by her meeting of Selina” (2015, 5). On the other hand, Selina’s entries, much shorter and more succinct than those of Margaret’s diary, show her working-class background and “serve as a counter-narrative to Margaret’s version and vision” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 186). Margaret’s diary is written in the year 1874 and Selina’s in the years 1872 and 1873. This temporal difference limits the readers’ perspective mostly to that of Margaret, leading to the creation of multiple gaps of necessary information, which are only partially complemented by Selina’s diary, as the two diaries do not focus on the same events. What is more, as Armitt and Gamble point out, although they seem juxtaposed to each other, in fact the two diaries are not placed at the same level, but stand in what they describe as a palimpsestic relation: “At first, there is an *apparently equal* relationship between the two journals: each is superimposed one upon the other to create a sort of palimpsest” (Armitt and Gamble 152, emphasis added). In other words, the total understanding of the plot arises from the complementary reading of the two narrations vertically rather than horizontally, with Selina’s deceptive and laconic words providing diffuse clues the readers must unveil if they are to understand what is wrong about Margaret’s perception of reality: “their mutual dependence derives from the fact that, without its partner, each of the two narratives lacks closure” (Armitt and Gamble 152). Thus, suspense is

increased. Of course, the intermingling of the two voices is by no means accidental as it brings to the fore what Costantini describes as “some contradictions of a disharmonious age, which waded between punishment and transgression, prudery and sensation, moral strictness and class privileges” (17). Costantini’s words reinforce Onega’s contention that “the socio-cultural divide separating Margaret Prior, the Lady Visitor, from Selina Dawes, the working class convict, is crucial for the development of the action” (Onega 2015, 6). For all their difficulty of interpretation, it is Selina’s entries the ones that provide the readers with the main clues for the understanding of what is really going on. For this reason, perhaps a rereading of both diaries would be necessary in order to understand many of the hidden clues that may go unnoticed in a first reading and which are, indeed, the key points to understand the plot. On the whole, Selina’s writings focus on her spiritualist séances and are quite hieroglyphic in style, as the second entry written by her (2 September 1872) perfectly demonstrates. As already pointed out, they are written two years before Margaret’s story, and so function as the perfect complement required to open the readers’ eyes, who will probably empathise with Margaret’s naivety. A good example of this can be found in the metaphor that follows: “They have left me sitting in the *dark*, with only *the light from the window* to *write* by” (Waters 1999, 1, emphasis added). This is Selina’s second sentence in her first diary entry, indeed, a very telling one. Metaphorically, it may be applied to the readers, who find themselves utterly in the dark, since they do not know anything about the plot yet, and may be a little puzzled by the circumstances that led the narrator to make this statement. In

a first reading of the novel, the reader remains in this dark place till the end, when Selina and Ruth's final treachery on Margaret is unveiled. The only thing readers can do is to trust this light coming from the window which is needed for the writing the story.⁴ However, if the window functions as a metaphor for the diaries we are reading we should be careful. Even if, at the beginning, both Margaret and Selina seem to be reliable narrators, as the plot advances we discover that the light coming from Margaret's window is not the right one, and that, in the process of writing, she is completely misreading what surrounds her. In this sense, Brindle intelligently points out that "[i]t is perhaps this 'cloistered' narrative atmosphere that encourages readers to collude with Margaret's confessional text and imagine her illusory love story" (68).

In "Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*" (2010), Brindle provides an illuminating approach to the novel by exploring the function of the gaze — which will be tackled in the following chapter — in combination with the diary form. She brings to light how "unseen letters escape the panoptic principle to drive both the plot and the actual love affair that plays in the shadows and sub-text of the novel" (65). As she suggests,

the gaze and the diary work in tandem to demonstrate who reads, who writes, and who interprets and distributes textual power. The panoptic principle of the gaze is juxtaposed with the privacy of the

⁴ In fact, Sarah Waters said in an interview that "people often stand in windows in my books, looking out — which means, of course, that then there's potential for them to be observed, too [...] it's to do with houses and spaces being an extension of subjectivity" (Mitchell 138). In this case, we are standing in the window as intruders, and what we will get is Selina and Margaret's subjective stories.

diary to raise questions about textual manipulation and power within the author/reader relationship. (77)

As Brindle goes on to explain, the diary acts as Margaret's main medicine (70), never forgetting that this is not Margaret's first diary, but that she had already written one before: "Margaret begins her second diary with the express purpose of avoiding the pitfalls of her earlier destroyed text: namely not to succumb to that derided and clichéd formula, 'journal of the heart'" (70). However, we should question whether she achieves this purpose. It is true that Margaret herself recognises that she wants to write a different kind of book: "I mean this book to be different to that one. I mean this writing not to turn me back upon my own thoughts, but to serve, like the choral, to keep the thoughts coming at all" (Waters 1999, 70). Indeed, she has "catalogued" her visits to the prison and has "traced" (70) some paths through it, with the only desire of rationalising everything. The answer to this question is nothing but total failure since, throughout the novel we can appreciate how she is constantly expressing her feelings, something that is made crystal-clear in her last entry, when she admits that she is "terribly weary" (350) and her writing is a reflection of her desperation, as a broken-hearted lover.

Furthermore, one of the facts closely associated to diary novels is that the writers of the entries do not usually provide large explanation about themselves since, as Field explains, if they are writing only for their own sake, there would be no need for extended details (97). However, one of the advantages of *Affinity* is that, since we find two different voices, several

clarifying descriptions are provided, especially about Selina, since Margaret provides many details about her that do not appear in her own diary. Thus, the reader — being always in a superior position — is able to create a more complex picture of Selina, and what is more important, a more complete idea of the general panorama. The contrary happens in the case of Margaret, since due to the fact that Selina's entries are written long before they meet each other, the reader does not get a full picture of Margaret, especially as far as physical appearance is concerned, since Margaret does reveal her preoccupations in her diary, which acts as a mirror of her inner self. It is the psychological depth of Margaret's diary that allows Onega to describe it as a "healing narrative" (2015, 17). However, we should not forget there is a third character who is not allowed a voice, regardless of her importance for the plot. As Kontou rightly points out, readers never have access to Ruth's voice, and all the information is mediated through Margaret and Selina's writings (190). However, drawing once more on Castle's notion of the "apparitional lesbian", it can be stated that Ruth uses her ghostly powers from the shadow, and is paradoxically located "at the centre of *Affinity*" (Kontou 190), even if readers are not allowed to read a word from her perspective.

2. The act of writing

When analysing *Affinity*, not only the form is important but also the act of writing itself, since it reveals certain aspects of the personalities of the diary writers, particularly of Margaret's inner anxieties and desires: "For the lonely, isolated individual, mentally barricaded behind a rampart of pages

even if not physically locked away, the journal does become the most intimate part of existence” (Field 148). As far as intimacy is concerned, Margaret really believes her diary is the most intimate sphere of her life and also that it is only read by herself: “I said that *that* book was like my dearest friend. I told it all my closest thoughts, and it kept them secret [...]. And where can I say it, except here? (Waters 1999, 111, 220; emphasis in the original). However, even if, as Prince argues, “writing is a very private matter intended to remain very private” (478), this privacy will be violated by her maid, Vigers when she takes advantage of her job to act as a panoptic observer. Thus, not only does the diary itself acts as a confining place for Margaret, as she is further imprisoned by Ruth’s observation.

Moreover, in the process of writing, two opposed ideas clash. Some critics argue that, by writing, Margaret is locking herself up: “The diary rather than a liberating device, actually becomes another disciplinary tool because, like the gaze, it internalises the punishment” (Llewellyn 208). By the same token, Brindle believes that “[f]ar from achieving power through authorship, Margaret becomes both a ghost-writer and her own gullible reader” (70). Yet, drawing on Foucault’s idea that “one writes to become other than what one is” (1997, 182), as well as on the notion of performativity exposed by Judith Butler,⁵ I would dare to argue that Margaret is writing herself and that she is expressing who she really is. She is letting free her most sincere and true feelings and she is performing the way she feels she ought to perform, regardless of Victorian constraints and

⁵ Even if Butler herself recognises that her own notion of performativity has changed through the years due to her own knowledge and some other critics’ views (xv), in her work *Gender Trouble* we can have access to some of her ideas such as the fact that “‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (190, emphasis in the original).

standards of morality. In other words, even if she cannot escape her particular prison, while she is writing, she is free for a moment. One of the clearest examples could be the sentence: “I thought that I could make my life into a book that had no life in it — a book that was only a catalogue, a kind of list” (Waters 1999, 214). By means of writing, characters like Margaret are allowed to “explore questions of sexuality, gender politics and power” (Mitchell 11). So, even if Margaret wants desperately to believe in Selina’s love and the possibility of finally achieving happiness, she is the writer of her story. Following Butler’s idea that performativity is not a single act but rather a repetition that will lead to the naturalisation of, in this case, her true feelings (xv), it may be stated that Margaret is “performing” herself. Thus, the act of writing becomes a guarantee for Margaret to be free as is demonstrated by the sentence “[t]hat is the last time I shall quote, like this. For from the moment Selina comes to me, I shall *live!*” (Waters 1999, 316; emphasis in the original). What is more important, her act of writing allows the closeted lesbian lady to express her real self, the one Victorian society would condemn as improper, queer, and even mad. The self-conscious element in the process of writing⁶ is made absolutely visible in Margaret’s entries, which constantly makes reference to the fact that she is creating a piece of writing: “I thought, If I may not talk about my visit, then I can certainly sit and write about it, in my own book...” [...] “I feel not at all like writing tonight” (Waters 1999, 29, 59). Even more significant is the fact that, in the last entry Margaret writes — curiously the only one without date — she states: “This is the last page I shall write. All my book is burned

⁶ As Field notes, “the personal diary itself is a type of writing which tends to make people self-conscious” (129).

now” (348). These words must not be underestimated, since they point at one of the key aspects of fictional diaries. As Field remarks, “the diary, in fiction as in real life, will comment on events *more or less as they happen*. The diary novel thus purports to show day-to-day reflections of one or more characters, it being accepted that each one would be keeping individual record of events” (6, emphasis added). As Field makes clear, in the act of writing another idea should be questioned: the act of re-writing, an act in which consciousness will make the writer recreate the events more or less as they did happen, something that applies to Margaret. As she explains in her first diary entry, “Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began and where it ended” (7). On the one hand, she is carefully rebuilding her own story, and on the other, her innocence and her desire to feel romantic and passionate love leads her to understand certain events in the wrong way, and by extension, to write them wrongly. Such is the case with her interpretation of the magic appearance of the word “truth” that she believes to be written with blood on Selina’s arm, or the wax episode. In this last one, during one of Margaret’s visits to Selina’s cell, Margaret sees a “smear of white [...] from the streaming walls” (187), and she believes this wax belongs to Peter Quick’s hand, that she had previously seen in the library of Mr Hither. Selina uses these events to lead her to believe that both happenings had been carried out by the spirits but later on readers are provided with a rational explanation. These examples respond to Foucault’s above-mentioned contention that writing a diary is writing the self, precisely what Margaret attempts to do. It could be said that the diary is the only place where she

feels absolutely free from scrutiny, even if she is not: “I thought, If I may not talk of my visit, then I can certainly sit and write about it, in my own book...” (29). However, unknown to her, Margaret’s diary is read twice: not only does Ruth Vigers read it, but also the readers meddle in her private sphere. As a result, even if Margaret could feel free while writing, she will remain imprisoned by her own words and the pages of her diary.

One of the qualities of the diary novel is that it makes easier for readers to identify with its writer. It seems that personal accounts must be real, since they are writings addressed to oneself and are therefore devoid of cunning or duplicity, since there is no point in lying to oneself. As Field explains, “quite apart from facilitating a suspension of disbelief the journal form is particularly well suited to create a positive belief on the part of even the least willing reader” (54). In this case, Margaret presents herself as a really naïve character, willing to believe in Selina’s tricks, and completely honest in her rendering of what she believes to be the truth of the events she is living. Even if we, as readers, are in a privileged position with respect to the characters, we can be led to believe in this romantic love story, and so, we can also be bewitched by Selina and Ruth’s spiritualism and end up seeing ghosts only because we want a happy ending for poor Margaret.

3. The role of the reader

In order to approach *Affinity* from every perspective, we must devote some lines to the role of the reader, who is always located in a superior position with respect to the characters. As already suggested at the end of the earlier section, the readers of *Affinity* are the real intruders in both diaries, since we are allowed to read these two apparently unrelated diaries at the same time,

or as Brindle puts it, “lie side by side, ostensibly in unequivocal view for the reader” (Brindle 69). As a result, we get from the very beginning a more accurate panorama of what is going on, even if we cannot get a complete picture till the very end. Together with those of Margaret and Selina, the role of the reader is essential, since it is s/he who will have the last saying about what it is really going on. The clearest example of intruder is the third protagonist, Ruth Vigers. What she does when she reads Margaret’s diary could be paralleled to what the reader does with Margaret’s and also Selina’s diaries. As explained in the introduction, Margaret addresses her maid as Vigers, in upper-class fashion, while working-class Selina refers to her maid as Ruth. This deceptive technique is probably one of the great achievements of Waters, used primarily to constantly increase the tension of the plot and an uncertainty that will only be clarified at the end of the novel, when the reader gets to know, through Margaret’s voice, the importance of Ruth’s role in the whole treachery. As Onega notes, this is a major source of ironic tension that grows exponentially as the novel develops:

[W]hile the alteration of the two diaries provides a dialogical dimension to the events narrated that is in fact minimised by the chronological gap between their writing, the fact that the attentive readers can gauge at least to a certain extent the unreliability of Selina’s discourse while Margaret cannot, creates both an ironic tension that increases the emphatic foreboding on Margaret’s desperate attempts to liberate herself from the social conventions enforced on her. (2015, 18)

4. The significance of dates

Finally, dates are another inherent aspect of diary novels. As Field explains, dates are “the most obvious mimetic device of all, [even though] they are not in fact a necessary condition of the diary novel” (7). Fields also argues that, when feeling lonely, late night hours are the most appropriate moment for the writing of a new entry.⁷ This fact coincides with Margaret’s practice, as she always writes at bed time — “I am writing by candle-light” (Waters 1999, 116) —, before, during or after taking her medicine: “It is half-past twelve. [...] Now I am too tired to write — but too restless, I think, to sleep just yet” (30).⁸ In fact, this act cannot be underestimated. As I have argued before, the diary form may easily create a certain willingness in the readers to believe in its writer’s words, but in this case, Margaret may sometimes be under the effect of drugs, which she takes ever since her first suicide attempt for her insomnia, and so, we should be really careful in believing everything she writes. As already noted, the last entry Margaret writes, which is the only one that does not provide a date, is especially remarkable. Indeed, the desperation Margaret feels when she discovers the truth, together with her farewell letter — coincidentally enough addressed to her first true love, Helen — point to an impending second suicide attempt, perhaps, a successful one this time, even if nothing is finally clarified and the text does not offer total closure. However, the lack of date undoubtedly points to Margaret’s mental shock and imbalance produced by Selina and Ruth’s betrayal. She is “so terribly weary” (350) that she cannot even “say what

⁷ “The main reason for night-time writing, of course, is the desire for privacy, and the uncomfortable solitude” (Field 90).

⁸ “Night-time in much of Sarah Waters’ work represents a space for covert queerness and for resistance to the many ways in which society literally and figuratively imprisons her protagonists” (Fischer 16).

time it is” (348). Not only does she take drugs on her own such as laudanum or a kind of morphine, but this goodbye letter also points to the transitional madness she seems to be suffering. In this letter, once again, Margaret expresses her desire not to write anymore: “I am likely never to be obliged to write a second time” (315). She acknowledges that she is “giving up a life, to gain a new and better one” (216), and so, she proves her conviction that she is making the right decision. However, this is perhaps the clearest example of the imprisonment Margaret is doomed to live in, since none of her words will come true and she will remain in her “dark cell” while her lover runs free with her maid.

Chapter 2: The Panoptical Gaze

One of the main settings of the novel is Millbank Prison, located on the riverside of the Thames. Due to its prominence in the novel, this setting must be taken into account, since it presents important clues for the understanding of the novel.⁹ Thus, in this chapter, a meticulous explanation of the building will be carried out. Sarah Waters herself recognises that she feels attracted towards certain institutions such as workhouses or prisons: “There’s a kind of kinkiness to it, which has really appealed to me” (in Dennis 45). Since the novel is set in the Victorian era, this prison perfectly suits the definition of the panoptical penitentiary designed by Jeremy Bentham and later on studied by Michel Foucault on the light of his vision of power and punishment. On a broader scale, these structures of power and control are essential, not only within the penitentiary system, but also, and more appealingly, outside Millbank, since, as I will try to demonstrate, a whole panoptical society can be found in the novel. More concretely, this system of constant scrutiny will be examined in relation to Margaret’s oppression, something she will not be able to escape from, no matter how hard she tries. Central to this structure of constant scrutiny and surveillance is the act of gazing. Therefore, it is fundamental for the understanding of the rooted panoptical system that is omnipresent all throughout the novel. As Brindle remarks, “configurations of the ‘gaze’ are repeated more than one

⁹ As Ariadna Serrano Bailén explains in her book *Historia e identidad sexual en las novelas de Sarah Waters* (2008), “el psiquiátrico o la prisión son sitios de especial consideración en estas novelas por dos razones: por un lado, estos son espacios influyentes en la identidad de los personajes. Por otro lado, [...] la autora escribe sus obras a partir de su propia investigación, por lo que por su significación opresora son esenciales en su trabajo” (15).

hundred times throughout Waters's novel" (81). Indeed, a whole game of control and surveillance is made clear in different ways. This chapter will study how power relations are depicted in *Affinity* using the gaze as the main weapon. In order to do so, some ideas explained by Foucault related to the panopticon will be studied in relation to the novel, as well as some of the most important points explored by Laura Mulvey on the use of the gaze in the film industry. Taking into consideration the fact that one of the main strengths of this penitentiary system was the implementation of power and control, we can advance the hypothesis that the main characters in the novel stand in a similar relation. As I will explain in more detail, there is between Margaret and Selina a relation of power and control in which Margaret will be completely trapped, even if, after all, it is Ruth who truly controls everything in a silent but really efficient way. Together with this, Margaret's mother, Mrs Prior, will also be constantly controlling Margaret, and submitting her actions to constant scrutiny. Consequently, the gaze plays a fundamental role in several encounters and between different characters with Margaret, always, as the object of the look.

1. The structure of the panopticon and of Millbank Prison

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) Michel Foucault explores the birth of the modern prison. Drawing on Bentham's penitentiary structure, he describes the panopticon as an "enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point" (197).¹⁰ Foucault provides a concrete and minute

¹⁰ The description is very detailed, making clear that vigilance is omnipresent: "enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is

description of the layout of the building of Bentham's panopticon, in words that are worth quoting in full:

at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a condemned man [...]. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately [...]. Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see. (1991, 200)

Significantly, the first diary entry written by Margaret provides a detailed description of the building of Millbank Prison. Indeed, some of the

exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead — all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism” (Foucault 197).

sentences she employs to describe it perfectly match the above definition of the panopticon, and its influence on the design of the building is directly alluded to by Mr Shillitoe when he slyly remarks: “you will see the logic of the design of it” (Waters 1999, 10). Margaret describes this place as “not charming. Its scale is vast, and its lines and angles, when realized in walls and towers of yellow brick and shuttered windows, seem only wrong or perverse. It is as if the prison had been designed by a man in the grip of a nightmare” (8). As the narration advances, she gives further details of the things she saw when walking the corridors for the first time. She admits that “the organization of the prison, of course, is so peculiar I soon grew lost” (9), and that it is a building formed by a series of pentagons in whose middle there is a “hexagon-shaped building” (9). There, the matrons have their rooms and, of course, the central tower is found: “the tower is set at the centre of the pentagon yards” (10). At the top of it there is a “bright, white, circular room, filled with windows” (10). The clearest instance of a reference to this panoptical structure comes next, when Margaret writes:

it was impossible, on entering that room, not to long to walk at once to one of its curving windows and gaze at the view beyond it [...]. Now, was that not a very marvellous and terrible sight? [...]
There was all the female gaol before me; and behind each of those windows was a single cell, with a prisoner in it. (11)

Besides, Miss Haxby (the governess or principal matron of Millbank) is called “the Argus of the gaol” (11) by Mr Shillitoe. This mythological figure

has 100 eyes and keeps some of them opened whenever he sleeps, thus always observing what is happening around. This is the reason why, according to Greek mythology, he was the perfect vigilante. Consequently, it not mere coincidence that Miss Haxby is associated with it, since the inmates of Millbank could never escape her gaze. For all this, however, as Armit and Gamble point out, “though working with such historical source material in *Affinity*, [Waters] deliberately skews the relationship between historical fact and historical fiction, and by extension, truth and knowledge” (142). As they further explain, the appearance of Millbank in such a predominant position, “carries a greater narrative significance” (143), an argument that will prove essential for the main purpose of this chapter.

2. Foucault’s notion of power

One of the main ideas in Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punishment* is that power is something ubiquitous, that it exists not only in some buildings where hundreds of people can be easily controlled, but also in society at large, even in its most private circles.¹¹ By the same token, it can be stated that, in *Affinity*, the panopticon is not only a tool for punishing and correcting prison inmates, but can also be easily found in a regular Victorian home. As already pointed out, Margaret is controlled, not only by Selina —and, more cunningly, by Ruth, both inside and outside the prison— but also by her mother and the widespread moral standards ruling society. Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst argue that “home spaces are

¹¹ “Bentham dreamt of transforming [barracks, schools, workshops, prisons] into a network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert, running through society without interruption in space or time” (Foucault 1991, 209).

a private and secure location, a locus of identity, and an area where inhabitants can escape the disciplinary practices that regulate the body in the public sphere” (in O’Callaghan 123). However, this view is untenable in Margaret’s case, for her home is another kind of prison, perhaps her tougher one, with her mother placed at the central tower, and so, acting as a kind of ward.¹² The same scrutinizing feeling arises from the “sharp, odd look” (Waters 1999, 200) her mother constantly displays on her, becoming the ward of the house-prison. Margaret is absolutely conscious of her mother’s control, as she proves when she decides to lock the key-hole of her room: “it is possible to be careful, even with the chloral in me — that she might come and press her ear to the panels of my door, she would not hear me. She might kneel and put her eye to the key-hole. I have stopped it up with cloth” (224).

3. The role of the gaze

According to Foucault, the gaze is one of the most important features of the panoptical system. As he explained, “[i]nspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere” (Foucault 1991, 195). In Bentham’s panopticon there was not a single moment in which the inmates could be free from a scrutinizing gaze, as already pointed out. In other words, those in control possessed the powerful weapon of the gaze, which worked without interruption, “induc[ing] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assure[d] the automatic functioning of power” (201). This

¹² As Foucault explains, “[t]he panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (1991, 202).

comment can be applied both to Millbank and to the Priors' house in Cheyne Walk, as the novel presents not only a panoptical prison, but also a societal panopticon.¹³ Some scholars have studied this issue in depth, as, for example, Mark Llewellyn and, as we have already seen in relation to the diary form in the previous chapter, Kym Brindle. In his article ““Queer? I should say it is criminal!”: Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*” (2004), Llewellyn provides a thorough study of panopticism in the novel, both in prison and society and offers a detailed analysis of all the different “crimes” a woman such as Margaret can commit in Victorian society.

Furthermore, in relation to the notion of power, we have to take into account Janet Semple’s warning that “power is visible but shrouded, unverifiable and disindividualized. Those subject to power have no knowledge of it, no control over it, but are themselves the subject of knowledge and control” (1992, 115). This quotation is perfectly applicable to Margaret, since she is absolutely blind towards what is really happening, and she falls so deeply in love with Selina that she finds herself in an uncontrollable state of romantic longing: “Now I have more freedom than I ever had at any time in my life, and I do only the things I always have. They were empty before, but Selina has given meaning to them” (Waters 1999, 304). As a result, Margaret becomes the main subject of the plot. Still, as Mark Llewellyn argues, “Margaret’s higher social status allows her to occupy the role of observed and *observer*, and *displace her punishment onto others*, voyeuristically examining Selina through the cell door” (211; emphasis added). Even if this assertion is undoubtedly true, by falling in

¹³ As Bailén explains, “su efecto [panóptico] es trasladado a todos los ámbitos de la sociedad, incluso al privado, transformando la mirada en el principal elemento de castigo para el ciudadano” (95).

love with Selina, Margaret enters an inescapable game in which she loses the control of her gaze as a weapon. At the end of the novel, she will be completely trapped, even if, ironically enough, her naivety makes her believe that she is the one in the role of observer, as Llewellyn suggests. Similarly, even though Margaret glances at Selina from a superior position — and in this way does displace her punishment onto others — we must never forget that Margaret is under observation everywhere, absolutely tied to the conventions and scrutiny of upper-class Victorian society. What lies at the core of this game is Selina’s trickery on Margaret. On many occasions, Selina makes Margaret believe that she is in control, when in fact, she is the one pulling the strings of Margaret’s mind and pushing her towards the plan schemed by Ruth Vigers, the puppet-master moving the strings of the plot.¹⁴ Thus, the assertion that, “sight is affirmed as a primary key to knowledge” (Armitt and Gamble 144) will be refuted as the plot develops.

Another relevant aspect — and a central one for Bentham’s panopticon — is the fact that criminals were considered a different kind of beings — “another order of men” — not even fully human (Semple 1993, 29). In fact, and in drawing on the premise that Margaret is also controlled at home, not only Selina is a criminal but also Margaret can be considered an inmate at home, turning into a member of this outcast group.¹⁵ She is

¹⁴ As Brindle argues, “Vigers becomes the super-reader in a mediated tripartite relationship. She constructs her own network of surveillance to read, write, and inspect text, with Margaret’s diary thereby becoming the key medium in her elaborately coordinated fraud” (78).

¹⁵ In Llewellyn’s words: “Margaret and Selina are thus both criminals in society’s eyes and are punished for breaking cultural taboos, for being unacceptably *different*. Although the difference is never explicitly named, women who do not conform are by definition monsters and must be watched and restrained to enforce conformity upon all women” (209; emphasis in the original).

both a thirty year-old spinster — which was at the time regarded as something disgraceful — and a closeted lesbian, thus doubly marginalized from the perspective of mainstream Victorian society. What is more, she attempted to commit suicide, a crime that would have condemned her to gaol with the other criminals, were it not because of her status as a lady. As Miss Ridley, one of the matrons of Millbank Prison, ironically confides to: “they [the inmates] are not like you and me, miss [...] the sort of women who pass through here! They hold their lives very cheap...” (Waters 1999, 62). Similarly, while the members of Margaret family are listening to her stories about the prison, Helen tells her: “but you cannot mean really to *befriend* these women? They must be thieves, and — worse!” (32; emphasis in the original), thus making clear the social inferiority of those women. For all this, Margaret seems to have no escape from the accusing gaze and so, “as panoptic object, under vigilance by family, staff, and doctors, it is unsurprising that Margaret seeks private communion within the confessional pages of her private diary” (Brindle 70). According to Brindle, “Margaret’s diary is breached to become a facilitator of surveillance that betrays its role as confidante. Mediated access to Margaret’s private journal enables Selina’s ‘panoptical’ view and allows her to violate the most private areas of Margaret’s life” (74). Consequently, even what Margaret believes to be absolutely private is also being gazed at. What is more, Margaret will also be controlled at Millbank. At first, she believed that her visits to this prison were freeing her from the control she has to endure at home¹⁶ — “I would

¹⁶ This idea has been exposed by Bailén, who believes that Margaret’s freedom is only momentary: “[una] situación de reclusión y vigilancia constante en su propia casa que le provoca la necesidad de acudir a Millbank, donde, por un momento, creará sentirse más libre” (37).

rather sit with the prisoners at Millbank than sit with Priscilla now. I would rather talk with Ellen Power, than be chided by Mother. I would rather visit Selina, than go to Garden Court to visit Helen” (176)— but, as we know, she will eventually discover that she was wrong. In the prison, Selina will act as her main “ward”, even if, as is discovered later on, Selina is in her turn a puppet of Ruth Vigers. Besides, once Selina’s final trick has taken place, Margaret will be looked at suspiciously by everyone working at the prison, and they will harshly interrogate her as if she knew what was going on: “When I appeared with Miss Crave they turned their eyes on me; and one of them — Mary Ann Cook, I think — made a gesture” (Waters 324).

4. Scopophilic desire

One of Laura Mulvey’s main ideas exposed in her seminal work, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1999), can be useful to understand what happens in *Affinity*. She explains that the female image has been used in films so as to maintain the dominant patriarchal order. Even though *Affinity* is a narrative fiction — and one portraying a homosexual relationship —, the same idea can be found: the female image, in this case Margaret’s, is constantly looked at in order to maintain the system as it is thought to be correct, especially by her mother. Margaret feels constantly scrutinized by society, and she is really conscious of it.¹⁷ For example, the moment when Selina asks her for help with the escaping plan, she utters: “We would be cast off, by society” (Waters 1999, 274). Further, Mrs Prior’s opinion about

¹⁷ “Margaret is forced to confront the fact that each look she receives not only within the walls of Millbank, but at home or in the street, is a judgemental gaze, surmising her status and in some senses acting as an aspect of her punishment” (Llewellyn 207).

Margaret's ill health is firmly based on the general belief that spinsterhood is unnatural. Thus, she openly blurts out: "you [Margaret] wouldn't be ill like this [...] if you were married" (263). Even more telling is the moment when Mrs Prior addresses Margaret as "Mrs Anybody" and adds: "You are only *Miss Prior*" (253; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, Margaret is kept under control by the drug treatment her mother provides her with in order to cure her from her depression, something she will later on do on her own: "and then, more laudanum, or chloral again, or morphine, or paregoric — I never tried that" (349). Thus, in *Affinity*, "Waters illustrates how nineteenth-century domesticity reinforced normative moral imperatives to ordain strict sexual mores. Waters achieves this by paralleling the Victorian middle-class home as analogous to a prison" (O'Callaghan 125).

As the novel develops, Margaret and Selina's relationship becomes more intense and intimate, and becomes evident from the different instances in which they look at each other. Perhaps, one of the clearest examples of Selina's control over Margaret can be found in the episode of the locket with Helen's hair that Margaret wears around her neck. After Margaret loses it and is unable to find it anywhere, the locket suddenly appears at home as if it was a trick of the spirits. After this uncanny experience, Margaret realises that she is being watched by Selina even in the privacy of her bedroom: "her eyes are open, and she is looking at me" (Waters 1999, 117). These words close the diary entry of that day, implying that the image of Selina watching her may be still resonating in Margaret's mind. As their relation advances, Margaret becomes more trapped within Selina's spiritualist tricks. Such is the case of the moment in which Selina talks as if

she were Margaret's deceased "Pa", producing in her an unbearable feeling of terror:

When she looked at me now it was a kind of horror, as if she saw it all [...]. She looked at me, and *her* eyes had pity in them! I could not bear her gaze. I turned away from her and put my face to the bars. When I called to Mrs Jelf, my voice was shrill.¹⁸ (88; emphasis in the original)

In her essay on visual pleasure, Mulvey exposes the notion of scopophilic desire as a form of pleasure arising from the act of "looking itself" (835). This is exactly what happens in the final encounter between Margaret and Selina, when Selina undresses and Margaret can do nothing but stare at her beauty. This pleasurable act of looking is made even more explicit with Margaret's comment: "Still I gazed at Selina, not speaking — hardly breathing I think" (Waters 1999, 310), thus acknowledging that she is absolutely hypnotized by Selina's body. Margaret makes another comment that is worth highlighting while Selina is getting undressed for her: she says that Selina "kept her face turned from me — as if it hurt to have me gaze at her, yet she would suffer the pain of it for my sake" (309). This voyeuristic aspect of Margaret's behaviour brings to mind Mulvey's association of voyeurism with sadism. If, as Mulvey explains, sadism is "a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat" (840), in this episode, it can be stated that, for a moment, Margaret seems to be in control of the situation. In fact, this would

¹⁸ Since Selina "knows Margaret's secrets, [she] succeeds in inverting the power balance by turning *her* pitying gaze upon Margaret" (Brindle 73).

be one of the few occasions on which she is allowed to have the role of powerful observer. As Beth Newman remarks, “the gaze can serve to destabilize the viewer as well as to confer mastery, especially if the gazer is caught looking by another subject who sees the gaze and perceives it as an expression of desire” (1034).

5. Escaping the panopticon: darkness, invisibility, and rebellion

Last but not least, there is another point that needs to be brought to the fore: the role of Ruth Vigers in the development of the plot. Even if those who are in control of the gaze have the power to control others, while those being looked at are under constant scrutiny, it is precisely Vigers’s double position of invisibility as a maid and as a lesbian that will allow her to control the whole plot from the shadow. As Heilmann and Llewellyn explain, “while from her first visit to Millbank Margaret is aware of and sensitive to the panoptical gaze — a gaze which she realizes is also, increasingly, turned on her, both at home and in the prison — she never considers the potential dangers of the maid’s gaze” (189). Echoing the description of Millbank, Margaret explains that: “at the side of each gate, there is a vertical iron flap which can be opened any time the matron pleases, and the prisoner viewed: they call this the ‘inspection’; the women term it *the eye*” (Waters 1999, 23; emphasis in the original). Of course, the fact that the eye is written in italics is by no means accidental. In relation to the main point of this dissertation, it reinforces my contention that surveillance is something ubiquitous and so, that no one can possibly escape the look, in this case, of a matron. However, even if this would seem impossible in Foucault’s system, there is indeed a

place in Millbank Prison where the inmates could be freed from the gaze: the dark cell. As Margaret acknowledges when she reaches this part of the prison: “Beyond the bars there was darkness — a darkness unbroken, so intense, I found my eyes could make no purchase on it” (181). The symbolism of the dark room at Millbank must not be underestimated. None of the inmates want to be locked up in what Margaret describes as a really chilling place:

We took a passage [...] which, to my surprise, led away from the wards, towards the heart of Millbank — a passage which wound downwards, via spiraling staircases and sloping corridors, until the air grew even chiller and more rank, and vaguely saline, and I was sure we must be below the level of the ground [...]. They [the walls] were not whitewashed, like the walls above, but rough, unfinished, and quite glistening with damp. Each was densely hung with iron — with rings and chains and fetters, and with other, nameless, complicated instruments whose purposes I could only, shuddering, guess at. (179)

As Miss Haxby explains later on: “The darkness is the punishment” (182). The fact of entering this darkness has explicit connotations of non-existence since, once in the darks nobody looks at you, and so, you do not exist anymore. However, it is precisely this apparent non-existence and the marginalisation provided by her social status that allows Ruth Vigers to freely move and take hold of the central tower of the panopticon. In

Brindle's words, "Vigers's social invisibility allows her to disappear completely beneath the radar of Margaret's narrative: she is the 'faceless gaze'" (76). This interpretation reverses the traditional assumption that Ruth's social position automatically renders her powerless. Though she is virtually invisible through most of the novel, there are some little hints in Selina's diary that justify this reading. As Selina remarks in one of her entries, "all the time Ruth sits and watches [...]. Ruth only watches, with her black eyes" (Waters 1999, 174). Mulvey points out that Freud "associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a *controlling and curious gaze*" (835; emphasis added). This idea can be easily applied to the way in which Vigers gazes at Margaret at different points in the novel, turning the latter into her main object of desire; and she controls Margaret to the point of having access to her innermost feelings and thoughts in her intimate diary: "I seemed to see the smears of Vigers' gaze upon the pages" (Waters 1999, 348). As Margaret notices, "once or twice she [Vigers] has come to my room and gazed *strangely* at me [...]. I have seen her looking *curiously* at the lock upon the velvet collar" (305; emphasis added). It is also this maid who appears suddenly, "like a ghost" (119), in this case giving Selina a shock. Thus, Vigers can also be equated with an inspector since, according to Foucault, "an inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning" (204). After becoming Margaret's lady's maid, Vigers is given a room in the attic of the Priors' house — in the most undesired and, significantly enough, darkest area of the house — which

automatically recalls Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's canonical work, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). Therefore, it is easy to associate Vigers with liminality and madness, in this case, provoked by society and due to her sexual orientation. However, it is precisely this marginal and dark place of the house that allows Vigers to control Margaret from a position which is, by chance, physically superior. The paradoxical nature of Vigers's room brings to mind Newman's contention that "discourses and representations are not likely to function as monolithic, total systems in which a single aspect (however powerful) cancels all internal resistance to or questioning of the status quo" (1038-39). In fact, it is precisely in this room that the most passionate and secret encounter between Selina and Ruth takes place, consequently breaking the stiffness of the Victorian rules of decorum: "She had had Selina here, above my head. She had brought her past my door, and up the naked stairs — all while I sat, with my poor shielded candle. All while I waited through the long hours of the night, they were here, lying together" (Waters 1999, 341).

As a result, the architectural form of the panopticon is not only used in the novel to explain how Millbank was designed, but also serves a further purpose, that of reflecting how the whole society was designed to have a central — even if invisible — tower of control. Indeed, this assertion is validated by the fact that it is only by the very end of the novel that Margaret finally discovers that it was Vigers who had been controlling her from the beginning. Thus, even if Mr Shillitoe rightly exclaims that "we are quite a little city here!" (9) — meaning that the prison is a city where everything seems to be under the control of the central tower's vigilance —

there is also a place that can escape this gaze. In Millbank, as we have seen, it is the dark room, where darkness allows the inmates to be free from scrutiny. In Victorian society, we find that class discrimination can be paradoxically used by Ruth Vigers, a member of the menial class, as her main tool to carry out her strategic plan to deprive the lady she works for of money, name and lover. The novel demonstrates that, despite the strength of Foucault's panopticon, there exists a darker place for rebellion, and that invisibility is proved to be, together with the gaze, the unnoticed but most powerful weapon.

Chapter III: Lesbian Invisibility

This chapter focuses on a relevant aspect the novel elegantly deals with: the relation between spiritualism and lesbian desire. Spiritualism empowered women in Victorian society, as it provided them with a “job” — indeed, one of the few accessible to them¹⁹ — as well as a certain degree of freedom to interact with other women relegated to the same marginal position for various reasons. One of the uses of this interaction between women was the facilitation of erotic and lesbian encounters. In order to analyse this aspect of the novel, I will draw mainly on two studies. The first, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in the Late Victorian England*, written by Alex Owen, provides a thorough and in-depth analysis of Victorian society in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, focusing on different aspects related to women and spiritualism. Among others, the explanations Owen offers about women’s power and influence, the transgression of conventional gendered attitudes, or the process of materialisation of spirits provide illuminating insights into some of the most intriguing episodes of the novel. The other study, already mentioned on several occasions, is Terry Castle’s canonical work, *The Apparitional Lesbian*. This study adds to the reading of *Affinity* some subtle references to the status of lesbian women in society. Castle’s famous concept of the “apparitional lesbian” facilitates the assimilation of the ghosts and spirits that appear in the novel with lesbianism. While in the nineteenth century spiritualists were considered

¹⁹ As Kontou explains, “many lower-class women became professional mediums as an alternative to the tedium of service” (187).

social outcasts, the same could be applied to present-day society, where lesbians are still sometimes denied the necessary freedom to express themselves. As Castle explains, when dealing with lesbians “[o]ne woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized” (34). Echoing this, the existence both of spirits and lesbians is constantly denied in the novel, and as poor Margaret acknowledges, she herself is becoming a ghost of what she used to be: “My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost!” (Waters 1999, 289).

1. The condition of women in the Victorian Era

First of all, it is necessary to clarify the treatment women received in Victorian society. As Owen explains, “the pervasive figure of the Victorian perfect lady, [was that of] a quiet, delicate, submissive creature, a self-sacrificing wife and natural mother” (7). Thus, since Margaret is not married at the age of thirty, she will be considered a spinster in society’s eyes. Accordingly, her correct place in the world would be to remain at home, acting as a companion to her widowed mother: “And your place — how often must I say it? — your place is here, at your mother’s side” (Waters 1999, 253). As far as the notion of spinster is concerned, “[t]he pervasiveness of the feminine ideal simply indicates how strongly concerns about social class interacted with gender roles and expectation” (Owen 8). For instance, when Margaret decides to go to the library of the British Museum two years after her father’s death, she writes: “The others, who do not know me, call me ‘madam’ now, I noticed, instead of ‘miss’. I have

turned, in two years, from a girl into a spinster” (Waters 1999, 58). This comment has further relevance since, as Rachel Carroll explains, visiting the library on her own “suggest[s] an autonomy at odds with the femininity defined in relation to the service of masculine needs” (2007 n. p.). Moreover, side by side with the image of the perfect lady, Victorian society also created “a discourse concerned with female depravity, bestiality, and rampant sexuality” (Owen 6). The oppositional extremity of these two images used to clearly mark the difference between a middle or upper-class lady, and a working-class woman. When Margaret visits Millbank for the first time, social differences are rapidly brought to the fore. Mr Shillitoe openly states: “Villainous women, society has deemed them; and society has passed them on, to Mis Haxby and me, to take close care of them” (Waters 1999, 11). In the Victorian Era there were strict moral codes and social groups and statuses whose boundaries seemed impossible to break or trespass. However, as it is shown in the novel, the behaviour of different women is proved to be similar regardless of their social status, even though with different consequences. The most evident example of this is Margaret’s suicide attempt. She did something that was considered a crime punished with imprisonment.²⁰ However, unlike other inmates of Millbank, her social status prevented her from going to prison, a fact that Margaret herself finds odd: “Don’t you think that queer? That a common coarse-featured woman might drink morphia and be sent to the gaol for it, while I am saved and visit her — and all because I am a *lady*?” (256, emphasis in the original).

²⁰ Such is the case of the inmate called Jane Samson, who tried to commit suicide by taking laudanum: “Took it seven times, and the last time a policeman saved her. They sent her here, as being a nuisance to the public good” (Waters 1999, 23).

2. Lesbianism and ghosts

As already contended at the beginning of this chapter, one of the most powerful images *Affinity* offers the reader is that of the ghost as a metaphor for lesbian desire. According to Bailén, Waters's first three novels go back to the Victorian period in order to rewrite the history of the homosexual and feminine subjects, which have been constantly excluded from mainstream discourse,²¹ and are also meant to help readers understand how lesbians are perceived in contemporary society. In fact, retaking Mr Shillitoe's words about villainous women quoted in the previous section of this chapter, we can find a parallelism between outcasts and lesbians. Given the strict moral codes and stark division of social classes in the Victorian Era, those being imprisoned were catalogued as evildoers. Significantly, Terry Castle applies the same idea to the condition of lesbians in this century: "the woman who desires another woman has always set herself apart (if only by default) as outlaw and troublemaker [...]. As soon as the *lesbian* is named [...] she is dehumanized" (5-6; emphasis added). Here, we could change the word "lesbian" by "prison inmate" and the result would be exactly the same. Once women cross for the first time the threshold of Millbank Prison, they undergo a cleaning process, that is to say, they have their clothes and possessions removed, they have their hair cut, and they are given an uniform that totally dehumanise them. The only thing left for them is a label that condemns them as convicts. A similar comparison could be established with maids who, even if they are not evildoers, belong in one of lowest social

²¹ "Se considera que en sus novelas Waters se propone regresar al periodo victoriano para reescribir y revisar una historia de la que el sujeto femenino y el homosexual han estado excluidos" (18).

classes. Thus, the fact that Ruth Vigers is presented both as a lesbian and as a servant must not be dismissed. As Selina let us know, the way Vigers makes her first appearance is very telling: “She had come quietly, not like Betty used to come but like a real lady’s maid, like a ghost” (Waters 1999, 119). This ghostly description implies that, even if she is sometimes unnoticed, the maid is always present. As a result, this behaviour allows her to know some of the creepiest details about Margaret and, of course, she acts as the perfect “medium” between her and Selina. In fact, once Margaret discovers the final treachery, she desperately states: “you [Selina] have the last *thread* of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it?” (351; emphasis added). This thread, in the most obvious way, makes reference to the special connection Margaret felt she had with Selina, which in turn points to her longing for achieving romantic love. But, I would dare to suggest that it could also be related with Vigers, since she is the thread that has been giving all the valued information about Margaret to Selina. As Kontou describes, “the servant could bring the private world to public attention” (190), and although Selina is not exactly embodying the public sphere, she belongs to a circle other than the private one. Also in relation to marginality, Vigers can be equated with the inmates at Millbank (all of them being considered society’s outcasts) and so, she can become, together with them, one of the most unseeing but dangerous ghosts. There is a moment when Margaret hears some footsteps in the gaol but is unable to see anything. So, she thinks that “[t]hey might be ghosts!” (20). But then she adds: “And then they were terribly real”. Therefore, if we parallel Vigers with the inmates, we could say that she also plays this ghostly role, as has

already been explained. As Armitt and Gamble explain, “the whole truth belongs to the socially invisible: the ‘deviant’, the servant and the criminal classes” (158). This premise lies at the core of *Affinity*’s power of subversion, and Ruth Vigers perfectly fits into it.

The novel provides many instances in which certain paragraphs, if read as a kind of palimpsest, are really revealing. The best example is the complex story that Mr Hither — one of the employees at the Association of Spiritualists who is in charge of the library — tells Margaret about the colour red. He tells her that she has to imagine that the vast majority of the population had a condition of the eye that would prevent them from seeing and identifying the colour red. Then, he asks Margaret to imagine herself suffering from this eye condition, so that, “when some special people [...] told [her] of another marvellous colour — [she] would think they were fools” (225). Mr Hither then goes on to explain that the whole society would agree with her, strengthening the idea that those who could see the colour red were absolute fools. And then, one day, when red becomes visible to her: “You will want to hide your eyes, at first, in wonder and fear” (225).²² The invisibility of the colour red may be read metaphorically as the refusal to acknowledge the existence of deviant forms of sexual desire outside heterosexual normative relationships.²³ As a result, those belonging

²² As Terry Castle explains, “[e]ighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideologies were at once fascinated and repelled by the possibility of women without sexual allegiance towards men” (62).

²³ The whole paragraph is aimed at making the metaphor even clearer, if possible: “Then, he went on, ‘a morning comes and you awaken — and your eye has corrected itself. Now you can see pillar-boxes and lips, poppies and cherries and guardsmen’s jackets. You can see all the glorious shades of red — crimson, scarlet, ruby, vermilion, carnation, rose ... You will want to hide your eyes, at first, in wonder and fear. Then you will look, and you will tell your friends, your family — and they will laugh at you, they will frown at you, they will send you to a surgeon or a doctor of the brain. It will be very hard, to become aware of all those marvellous scarlet things. And yet — tell me, Miss Prior — having seen

to the LGBT community, or more concretely, lesbians, may be considered “fools” by those who do not belong to it and, by extension, by those who do not believe in the possibility of feeling sexual desire towards the same sex or are unable to understand and respect it. This is, indeed, the reason why, as Castle brings to light, “given such murderous allegorizing, it is perhaps not surprising how many lesbians in real life have engaged in a sort of self-ghosting, hiding or camouflaging their sexual desires or withdrawing voluntarily from society in order to escape such hostility” (7). In fact, this applies to Helen, who after having a relationship with Margaret, prefers to hide her emotional scars and marry Margaret’s brother Stephen in order to comply with Victorian standards of morality, thus condemning herself to be sentimentally imprisoned. As Bailén argues, Helen is yet another victim of society, since she is unable to accept the fact that she is different from what is perceived as normal.²⁴ Selina alludes to this problem, when, discussing Helen’s behaviour with Margaret, she remarks:

You think she has *evolved* — but is it that? To have done what everyone does? She has only moved to more of the same. How clever is that? [...] But people, I said, do not want cleverness — not in women at least. I said, ‘Women are *bred* to do more of the same — that is their function. It is only ladies like me that throw the system out, make it stagger. (Waters 1999, 209; emphasis in the original)

them once, could you bear ever to look again, and see only blue, and yellow, and green?” (226).

²⁴ “Helen pasa a ser otra víctima de la sociedad, ya que es incapaz de aceptar que es diferente de lo que las normas dictan” (40).

With remarks like this one, Waters poignantly introduces comments about society and women which make readers think about society, not only in the past, but by extension, also in the present.²⁵ By the same token, the fact that Selina “prefers the spirit people, who do not judge her, to those who have only laughed at her ‘misfortune’” (84), can be also read metaphorically. Although literally, these “spirit people” are ghosts, metaphorically they can be said to refer to lesbians. In general terms — though this could surely beg for further discussion — those individuals belonging to liminal social groups would be more open-minded and would not judge anyone on the grounds of the sexual condition. Last but not least, among the numerous references to this topic in the novel, there is another one I would like to comment on. In it, Margaret says: “There were many spinsters there to-day, I think — more, certainly, than I remember. Perhaps, however, it is the same with spinsters as with ghosts; and one has to be of their ranks in order to see them at all” (58). As this quotation illustrates, unless one was one of them, it seemed impossible to notice their presence, and what is even more surprising, their existence.

This invisibility of lesbian women is further enhanced throughout the novel both by Selina and Margaret’s repeated use of key words with a strong connotative wealth. For example, the word “queer” constantly appears in the novel, and its playfulness and flexibility allows Waters to use it in different contexts, usually referring to things or happenings considered

²⁵ As Costantini makes clear, Waters “explores the possibilities of self-development offered by love relations both in the Victorian and, by implication, in the present world. The transgressive quality of same-sex love makes this exploration more meaningful” (34).

to be out of the norm, but never making reference to homosexual desire.²⁶

As Rachel Carroll rightly points out,

The term queer is employed extensively and in keeping with late-nineteenth-century usage to denote the odd, the peculiar, and the strange, ranging from the quaint to the devilish. It is used both of Millbank prison and of spiritualism to evoke a sense of unfamiliar and unaccountable impressions. (2006, 143)

The connotative richness of this word can be appreciated in the following episode. During a séance, Selina tells Miss Isherwood, one of the young ladies attending it: “The things that happen in this room will sound *queer* to the ears of insensitive people” (Waters 1999, 261; emphasis added). What is literally stated in this sentence is that the spiritualist practices that take place in the séance room would sound queer — that is, different, awkward, odd — to those who know nothing about it. But for the contemporary reader, the association of queerness with homosexuality is unavoidable. Therefore, it conveys both senses: as rare and homosexual, thus adding to the liminality and spectrality of lesbianism.

Another relevant term which in a first reading may go unnoticed and turns out to be clogged with meaning is the word “pal”. When it is first introduced to the reader, it is understood just as a word used to refer to friendship in prison jargon: “This is a place for “palling up”, as the creatures call it; yet no-one has made a pal of *her*. I believe they are leery of her” (42,

²⁶ “David Halperin’s famous formulation suggests that queer is a kind of refusal to be part of a binary” (De Groot 61).

emphasis in the original). However, as we learn later on, “pal” is the word used to refer to the lesbians of the time. Since in the Victorian period the word “lesbian” as such did not exist,²⁷ pal was used to refer to female relationships, not only making reference to friendship or sisterhood, but including sexual connotations. However, this sexual behaviour was thought to happen out of the profound solitude women experienced in prison, thus denying the existence of homosexual desire as such. As one of the matrons, Miss Manning, explains to Margaret: “White and Jarvis [two convicts] are notorious in the gaol as a pair of ‘pals’, and were ‘worse than any sweethearts’. She said I [Margaret] would find women ‘palling up’ like that, they did it at every prison she ever worked at. It was the loneliness, she said, that made them do that” (67). The matron’s words echo Castle’s contention that, when dealing with romantic love between women, real sexual attraction was not “allowed” and was rather interpreted as some sisterhood bond. This assumption was based on the general belief in the Victorian period that, unlike men, women were naturally asexual. Indeed, Miss Manning’s interpretation of the convicts’ sexual behaviour is representative of what Terry Castle describes as the Victorian assumption that “lesbianism is simply another form of female ‘homosocial’ bonding, blandly analogous to ‘the bond of mother and daughter [...] the bond of sister and sister, [or] women’s friendship” (11). The next comment provided by Margaret on this subject is, once more, revealing: “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 know it” (Waters 1999, 67; emphasis in

²⁷ Castle brings to the fore that although “*lesbian* and *homosexual* may indeed be neologisms, [...] there have always been *other* words — a whole slang mob of them — for pointing to” (9; emphasis in the original).

the original). By writing the word “*that*” in italics, Margaret is adding an extra layer of meaning to the word pal. Indeed, it could be said that she notices that she could be addressed as such, since she fits into the description provided by the ward. Applying Mr Shillitoe’s metaphor of the eye condition explained above to this episode, it may be stated that this is the moment when, for the first time, Margaret is able to see the colour red in its splendour, something that makes her feel uneasy.

A priori, it is widely believed that feminists favour the lesbian community. However, some fervent feminist historians have dismissed the importance of homosexual relationships, so much so that some have even denied its existence. In this sense, this branch of contemporary feminism may be said to share the eye complaint suffered by Victorian society, what Terry Castle describes as a “morbid refusal to visualize” the existence of lesbianism (11). Waters is undoubtedly conscious of it, and so, she incorporates some comments in the novel which make reference to this issue. Mr Hither tells Margaret that “[t]here were many spiritualists, I am afraid — and some of them the very people who had most celebrated her successes! — who turned their backs to poor Miss Dawes, when she stood most in need of their good wishes” (Waters 1999, 134).²⁸ So, even within feminist circles, which are thought to have a more evolved and open-minded mentality, we can find how certain issues can become a “rag-tag affair”, that is to say, something fearful and negligible for those who do deny its

²⁸ The novel provides another comment which makes allusion to the same issue: “She [Selina] said she had had many friends, and they had liked to call her a ‘martyr to the cause’ — but only at first. For she was sorry to say that there were jealous people, ‘even in the spiritual movement’, and some were very glad to see her brought low. Others were only frightened. In the end, when she was found guilty, there was nobody to speak in her behalf...” (Waters 1999, 85).

existence. As Mr Hither goes on to explain to Margaret, difference could lie at the core of this rejection: “‘These are matters of the spirit, and that is rather different.’ He said it is that that can make the spiritualist faith sometimes seem such a ‘rag-tag affair’ to non-believers” (131). The notion of difference in this context helps strengthen the meaning of the metaphor of the red colour-blind eye. It is precisely this difference — and by extension, the lack of knowledge about it — that can make spiritualism, and also lesbianism, a problematic issue. Above all, the most significant aspect of the novel is that, with all these metaphors and hidden meanings, it creates a profound critique of the situation of lesbians not only in the past, but also, through its constant implications, in the present.

Referring to the spectrality of lesbians, Terry Castle argues that: “there are always ‘more’ lesbians to be found in the world than one expects — that lesbians are indeed ‘everywhere’, and always have been” (18). Her words undermine the hope that lesbian invisibility will soon be a thing of the past. One of the women at the library of the Association of Spiritualists tells Margaret about Selina’s séances and the moments in which Peter Quick took control over her and how, then, he “would tell us of the new time that is coming, when so many people will know spiritualism to be true, spirits will walk the pavements of the city, in the day-light” (Waters 1999, 151). This comment predicts a future of liberty for spiritualism and the end of the taboos found in society as far as lesbianism is concerned. However, even if, compared to the Victorian period, the situation of sexual minorities in our present age is progressing, there are still women who, due to fear of

rejection or even shame, hide their true sexual condition in public spaces and prefer to live in the shadows.

3. The myth of the androgyne

Another relevant aspect of *Affinity* is the subtle references that can be found in relation to the myth of the androgyne as described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (189a–193d), a story that is considered to be the origins of Platonic love, or as Selina puts it, a person's "affinity" between soul mates. In this myth, the figure of the androgyne is a human being composed of four legs, four arms and a single head with two faces. Those bodies could be completely male, female, or present both male and female genitalia. Zeus split those bodies into two as a punishment, condemning them to long and look for their soul mate or perfect half, who could be either a man or a woman, for the rest of their lives. Later on, this myth has been used by different philosophers and theologians to explain the existence of a perfect spiritual match: "Emanuel Swedenborg had established a theory of correspondences between earthly and spiritual life, one aspect of which was the proposition that every man and woman had a soul mate, or spiritual affinity" (Owen 35). In *Affinity*, Selina is the character who most directly makes reference to the myth: "We have been cut, two halves, from the same piece of shining matter [...]. But my spirit does not love yours — it is *entwined* with it. Our flesh does not love: our flesh is the same, and longs to leap itself. It must do that, or wither! *You are like me*" (Waters 1999, 275; emphasis in the original). Indeed, Selina explains that the spirits themselves question their guides: "'Are you a man or a lady?' But they guides are neither, and both; and the spirits are neither and both" (210). This comment

is followed by Margaret's argument that a world without any kind of sex distinctions would be a world without love, to what Selina replies that: "It is a world that is *made* of love' [...] we will fly to someone, we will all return to that piece of shining matter from which our souls were torn with another, two halves of the same" (210). These comments are aimed at making the readers think about the essence of love, regardless the sex of the individuals involved in a romantic relationship, urging them for respect and acceptance. Moreover, when Selina deals with spirits, she asserts that "in the spheres there are no differences" (191) between men and women, thus arguing for equality between sexes. In fact, Selina demands a change in the way men and women are conceived in the eyes of Victorian society so as to allow their world to evolve towards a more equalitarian understanding of gendered issues, as Selina tells Margaret: "it was doing the same things always that kept us 'bound to earth'; that we were made to rise from it, but would never do that until we *changed*. As for *women* and *men*, she said — well, that was the first thing that must be cast off" (209, emphasis in the original). Even if literally Selina is referring to the spiritualist community, these words can be easily applied metaphorically to present-day society, and be said "to highlight for astute readers the very contemporary (and un-Victorian) nature of the text" (Llewellyn 213).

4. Spiritualism and séances: transgressing gender roles

The interpretation of *Affinity* requires taking spiritualist séances into consideration, since they provide valuable information about gender transgression and women empowerment. As Owen argues, in the Victorian

period, “[t]he spiritualist séance struck at the very heart of this normative definition [of orthodox femininity], exposing the conditional nature of femininity and redefining acceptable limits to intimacy and pleasure” (218). This aspect of the séance is made visible in Selina’s narration of the séances she held in the house of her protector, Mrs Brink. In one of them, which is, probably, the most explicit sexual encounter described in *Affinity*, we can read how Miss Isherwood, the young lady attending the séance, is made to believe that she is meeting the spirit Peter Quick, while she is actually in the hands of Ruth Vigers. Speaking through Selina, Vigers obliges Miss Isherwood to uncliothe the medium and touch her naked body (Waters 1999, 262). Thus, all kinds of Victorian moral codes of behaviour and proper sexuality are broken and transgressed during this séance.²⁹ This routine comes to a dramatic end during the séance in which a fifteen-year old American lady, Madeleine Silvester, has a nervous breakdown after she is grossly touched and violently abused by Peter Quick (137-40). This episode leads to Mrs Brink’s horrified discovery of the fraud and her death of a heart attack soon after, and ends with Selina’s impeachment and condemn for improper behaviour. Waters’s description is based on historical data. Accounts of the Victorian Era prove that private spirit séances were indeed used to facilitate homosexual encounters between women. This is the reason why women usually removed their clothes. As Miss Silverster reports: “when she [Selina] came out she had removed her gown and was dressed only in her petticoat. Then she said that I must do the same” (140). Moreover, women were empowered through spiritualism, since it allowed

²⁹ Owen explains that “a critique of sexual *mores* was never overtly on the agenda but séance behaviour drastically subverted accepted ideas of decency and womanliness” (40).

them to take control over their sexuality and freely fulfil their desires. As Kontou explains, the relationship that Selina and Vigers-as-Peter Quick establish during the séances can be described as “a ghostly version of heterosexual coupling” (182). They are able to give vent to their sexual desire freely, especially Vigers, who is in command of everything. Indeed, her superiority is suggested by her way of addressing Selina, as can be gauged from latter’s comment: “and Ruth looked at me once and nodded. ‘Good girl,’ she said” (195). Here, Selina makes clear that Ruth is in control of everything. Indeed, this treatment could be equated to that of a master talking to a servant or a pet; with Selina, who is Ruth’s lady in real life, obeying her maid’s orders. As Selina’s subservient role makes clear, even if through spiritualist practices women obtained power, there was also an element of female passivity at the core of spiritualism since the medium was always in trance when the appearance of a spirit took place: “The possessed woman was inert, inactive, never responsible, mesh[ing] perfectly with contemporary views of and attitudes towards women” (Owen 233). In one of the séances, Selina explains that Peter Quick had told her that she ought to be “a servant of the spirits” (Waters 1999, 261) and he orders her to repeat the sentence “*May I be used*” (261; emphasis in the original), thus enforcing this passivity. In fact, this sentence acquires further significance at the end of the novel, when Peter Quick — who we do not yet know is being skilfully played by Ruth Vigers — says that he has the power to use whoever he wants (261). Significantly enough, the last sentence of the novel contains Ruth’s warning to Selina: “Remember [. . .] whose girl you are” (352). This sentence demonstrates that Ruth is the one and only master

puppeteer, not only of Selina but also of Margaret. Once Margaret realises that Vigers has always been in the middle of her relationship with Selina, she becomes aware of it: “there might as well have been Vigers at the gate, looking on, stealing Selina’s gaze from me to her” (342). She also acknowledges that Selina and Ruth will be able to perform their true sexuality, contrary to herself, who is doomed to remain in her ‘dark cell’ forever. Thus, Margaret recognises her failure and gives the triumph to the victorious maid: “There had been no trickery on Vigers’ part — only a sly and dreadful triumph. She had had Selina here, above my head. She had brought her past my door, and up the naked stairs [...]. But then, the passion was always theirs” (340).

Conclusion

As pointed out in the Introduction, the aim of this MA Dissertation was to demonstrate that Sarah Waters's second novel, *Affinity* (1999), conveys the feelings of confinement and oppression experienced by lesbian women in the Victorian Era both by means of its form and its contents. In order to meet this aim, I have first set the writer in her literary and cultural context and then divided the work into three chapters. Chapter I was devoted to the analysis of implications and consequences of writing the novel in the form of two apparently juxtaposed diaries and the role of readers in their interpretation. In Chapters II and III, I have carried out the in-depth analysis of the novel's main *topoi*: the panoptical structure of society, the gaze, and the invisibility of lesbian women in the Victorian period. Through the different areas of *Affinity* that have been explored, all of them have confirmed the *a priori* impression that Sarah Waters possesses an extraordinarily original imagination which allows her to deal with really poignant issues in a cunning, skilful and magic way, what Armit and Gamble describe as "this curious intermingling of passion, crime, sensationalism and social injustice that characterizes her creativity" (141). As argued in the Introduction, I decided to focus on the idea of confinement and imprisonment in order to create a common thread which made the examination of several aspects of this best-seller possible. The starting hypothesis for the structuring of the analysis was that the meaning and ideology of the novel stems from the inseparability of its form and content.

For this reason, I devoted Chapter I to the presentation of the diary form and the analysis of Selina's and Margaret's diaries. It showed that their alternation is more apparent than real and that, especially in the case of Margaret, her act of writing makes her fall prey to an insidious form of surveillance. It is true that diaries are meant to create an area of privacy and freedom for its author and, according to psychoanalysis, they have an intrinsic healing capacity in that they facilitate the transformation of traumatic memories into narrative memories. However, in the case of Margaret, the potential healing effect of her (second) diary after a frustrated suicide attempt is tragically subverted when Ruth Vigers, taking advantage of her double invisibility as a lady's maid and as a lesbian, breaks its privacy and uses her lady's diary to keep her under her constant scrutiny and control. The central metaphor behind this *topos* of surveillance is Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and Foucault's related notion of power and punishment. For this reason I devoted Chapter II to the presentation and analysis of the panoptical structure of Millbank Prison, where deviant working-class women were incarcerated. The analysis also showed how, in the case of upper-middle class women like Margaret, the control and punishment of deviance was exerted at home and through the repressive power of society as a whole. In either case, the panoptical gaze is one of the most powerful weapons of control and imprisonment in the novel. Chapter III is devoted to the analysis of spiritualism in general and the séance in particular in relation to lesbianism. The analysis demonstrates that the séance provides the liminal space of freedom where women can give vent to their repressed sexual desires.

All in all, the dissertation has demonstrated that the different *topoi* that recur in the novel create a whole system of imprisonment, literally and metaphorically speaking. In itself, the diary form is the most personal and private way of writing a story. In agreement with this, the two narrative voices in *Affinity* try to transmit their stories as they think the events happened. Each of them complements the other — even if it has been argued that they are not parallel —, and both express, in different styles, their most sincere feelings. Margaret proves to be really conscious of what she is writing, and so, this act becomes important for the building of the plot and the suspense created through the story. Even if she takes the diary for a liberating device, and there is no denying that it allows her to express her most repressed inner feelings, she will not be able to perform her last desire, and all her plans will remain confined to the pages of the diary. Indeed, the fact that she will eventually burn her diary while suggesting that she is going to commit a second suicide attempt provides the clearest evidence of Margaret's incapacity to shake off the intangible bars of her imprisonment and of the unfulfilment of her desires. Besides the two narrators, Selina and Margaret, there is a third character whose voice is hidden for the reader, but turns out to be the most manipulative of all. The paradoxical success of this invisible and silenced lady's maid gives the novel both a tragic and a picaresque tone, depending on whether the reader decides to empathise with Margaret, the forlorn upper-middle-class spinster, or with the working-class couple, Selina and Ruth. In the end, the last word is always ours, and it is up to the reader, who is always in a superior position, to make the decision of

empathising with Margaret's love and desire for freedom or celebrate Selina and Ruth's revenge on the dominant class.

As the analysis has shown, form and content go inevitably together, and the system of imprisonment is further presented by means of a subtle game of control, surveillance and scopophilia that both entraps and trespasses on the solid brick walls of Millbank Prison. Thus, Margaret is never free from scrutiny and she cannot shake off the shackles imposed on her by mainstream conventions. Throughout the novel, Margaret is oppressed by Victorian rules, her mother being the epitome of them. Moreover, her education and her sense of superiority as a lady prevent her from seeing reality objectively. What is more, she is also oppressed, even if in a more subtle way, by the matrons and the inmates of the prison. Consequently, following Foucault's premises and ideas, the despotic gaze is found everywhere and the apparent unbreakable transparency of the system becomes the main source of ideal control. However, in striking paradoxical contrast, the invisibility of Vigers, Margaret's maid, allows her to act as a real *picara*, together with Selina and so, creating the perfect "picaresque couple" (Onega 2017, n. p.) moved by their sense of survival. Ruth Vigers acts from the darkest part of the panopticon, which is, ironically enough, the space nobody dares to enter, thereby proving "how powerful the seeing but unseen woman can be" (Armitt and Gamble 158). The failure of this apparent transparency of the societal panopticon is metaphorically equated to the darkness of such a marginal position in Victorian society, thus proving it to be the most powerful one. This assertion is proved by the fact that Ruth Vigers —the character who is located in the central tower —

actually controls first, Selina, and then, in a more callous way, Margaret. In this sense, as Heilmann and Llewellyn explain, it is the “blinding power of the subaltern’s gaze” (189), that is presented in the novel as the most dangerous.

Finally, the power structures and imprisonment techniques employed by the dominant ideology to control and repress deviance in the Victorian period are conveyed through the complex metaphor established between ghosts and lesbians. This metaphor echoes Castle’s assertion that we cannot see lesbians because they have been “ghosted” or made to seem invisible by culture itself (4). The analysis shows that the lesbian ghosts in the novel come to light to demonstrate their existence, regardless of the attitude people can take towards them. *Affinity* presents in a really clear way all those rules spread by the strict Victorian morals over the streets of London, especially those dictating the behaviour of women. Due to this suffocating atmosphere, women find themselves confined to their homes. It is in this context that spiritualism becomes an area of freedom, offering not only a possible escape from the general oppressiveness, but also a place for sexual experimentation. This is the reason why spiritualist séances become a central part of the novel: in them, many of the Victorian norms were trespassed and sexual performance was freed from moral constraints. Furthermore, allusions to such topics as the condition of the eye or the presentation of the myth of the androgyne analysed in Chapter II, show that Waters hides a plea for a more equalitarian understanding of love relationships and urges readers to endorse a more respectful attitude towards lesbians (and the LGBT community as a whole) in our present-day society.

This example shows why certain choices made by the writer are crucial for the creation of meaning and ideology.

In summary, the analysis carried out in this Dissertation allows me to state that *Affinity* presents different layers of literal and metaphorical imprisonment, some of them embedded within others, thus creating a kind of Russian doll effect. The diary presents two enclosed voices and, especially in the case of Margaret, it becomes evident that there is no escape from the dark place described in it. Then, Millbank's architecture and the game of panoptical gazes fostered by it create another layer of confinement, in which Margaret is never freed from the inspection of others. Finally, the innermost layer, symbolised by the smallest Russian doll, appears in the form of ghosts and lesbian unfulfilled desire, embodied by Selina, and more significantly, by Ruth Vigers. The comparison of the layers of imprisonment to a Russian Doll structure is enhanced by Foucault's assertion that the various towers of control in the panopticon do not work in a symmetrical way, and that therefore their effect on the inmates would be finally "unverifiable" (Foucault 201). Like them, what readers of *Affinity* feel at the end of the novel is an inescapable feeling of confinement which comes back from the shadows of the text, creating a kind of palimpsest of suffering and repression hidden under a plot of love and self-deception. Thus, it is impossible, even for readers, to get out of this complex system of imprisonment, with the exception of Ruth Vigers, who will use all these points as her main weapons to trespass on all the social and sexual boundaries and procure a future of freedom, love and wealth for herself and Selina. At first, Margaret perceived darkness as something inscrutable, but

at the end of the novel, as she rightly points out, “darkness was different for me now. I know all its *depths* and *textures*” (304; emphasis added). Her words warn readers that we have to be suspicious about all the depths and textures the novel intelligently hides beneath a series of metaphors, since it is the meaning conveyed by them that gives the novel its true significance.

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