Chapter 3
Panopticism, Domesticity and the Imaginary of Prison in *Affinity*

Introduction

While the parallels between the theater and the city and the protagonist's power to perform different identities create a London in which queer spaces are produced through the protagonist's appropriation of spaces in *Tipping the Velvet*, in *Affinity* Waters represents London and Victorian sexual surveillance in prison. In *Tipping the Velvet*, surveillance takes place through the passersby's or spectators' gazes, which aim to control and regulate deviant sexual identities and whose gazes are not always effective, failing to detect 'deviant' behavior when this behavior appears to be the norm. In *Affinity*, however, surveillance over deviant behavior is less subtle and it is structured within the panoptical architecture of Millbank Prison and within the Victorian home.

The novel tells the stories of two Victorian women: Margaret Prior, a well-read upper-class spinster who has recently lost her father, with whom she kept activities as a researcher, and Selina Dawes, a working-class spiritualist who is in prison for fraud and assault. Margaret decides to take up visits to Millbank in order to listen to the prisoners' stories and to eventually write a book as part of her recovery from depression and suicide attempt. Waters constructs the narrative in diary entries written by Margaret and Selina: Margaret's diary relates the fictive present (24th September 1874–21st January 1875) and Selina's journal conveys accounts of the fictive past (2nd September 1872–3rd August 1873), prior to her conviction. While Margaret's writings relate anxieties, feelings, and the sufferings of a woman who finds herself mostly idle and trapped within Victorian domesticity, Selina's journal mostly conveys her daily routines as a séance medium who makes a living from communicating with spirits.

Literary criticism about *Affinity* has often related the author's choice of narrating in the form of diary entrances and the role played by the prison as a sexually liberating space, generally presenting the characters' same-sex desire and the panopticon as the

fulcrum of their analyses.[1] Moreover, these texts privilege Margaret's journal entries over Selina's, as critics tend to perform close readings of the former without paying close attention to the latter. Associating the image of the prison in the novel with the paintings of Escher and to Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione*, Armitt and Gamble argue that Margaret's position as an upper-class researcher legitimates her position as an all-seeing eye at first (as the center of the panopticon), only to later be revealed as an object of surveillance; this occurs when we discover that she is also watched at home and at Millbank and, moreover, that her diary is being read by us, readers, and by Vigers, the maid.[2] Armitt and Gamble's readings of the panopticon are elucidated in tandem with notions of authorship and readership, for they contend that the narrative, in its diary form, "has an almost architectural quality",[3] in which the reader and Vigers are placed at the center of the panopticon. In their view, both journals initially present equal value as documents, and we tend to fall into the trap of reading these passages as truths; this leads us to construe a false image of Selina, and also of Vigers, precisely because we tend to privilege Margaret's account over Selina's.[4]

Following similar lines of interpretation that focus on power relations between author and reader, Brindle points to the fact that Margaret is only deceived because her diary appears as a "facilitator of surveillance",[5] since Vigers reads her diary and communicates the content to Selina, who is in prison. Neither Margaret nor the reader know, until the very last pages of the novel, that Vigers and Ruth, as Selina calls her, are the same character (Ruth Vigers), and that Ruth Vigers and Selina have plotted a scheme to steal Margaret's fortune. Brindle marks two differences between the diarists' writings: while Margaret's journal is structured under the premise of rationality, entailed by her activities as a researcher with her late father, Selina's diary "occupies the superstitious realm of a spiritual hinterland".[6] Despite the clear dichotomy that her argument brings out – that of intellectual rationality as opposed to religious irrationality –, Brindle contends that these differences become increasingly superfluous, as "both [characters] are subjected to an authoritative gaze insisting upon punishment and reform, which reinforces their similarities".[7] For Brindle, their diary accounts convey the same authorial value, since both women are submitted to strict disciplinary surveillance, albeit in different spaces. Brindle suggests that we, as

1 Cf. Armitt and Gamble, "The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*"; Brindle, "Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*; Pohl "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*; Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels" in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Carroll, "Becoming my own ghost: spinsterhood, heterosexuality and Sarah Waters's *Affinity*" and Heilmann, "Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity, The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*".

2 Gamble and Armitt, "The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*", pp. 143–144.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.

5 Brindle, "Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*", p. 74.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

7 *Ibid.*

readers, take both journals as truths because Selina and Margaret are both submitted to forms of social oppression, even though both diaries are written in different periods and are constructed upon distinct epistemological grounds – that of Western scientific knowledge representing rationality and that of the occult representing the irrationality of belief.

Brindle's argument is misleading because it overlooks the content of Selina's own narrative about her life prior to her conviction. Thinking of Brindle's reading of the text, it seems relevant to ask the following questions: do these surveillance gazes have the same effect if enacted at home or if enacted in prison? If it is the case that Margaret's diary is written under the rhetoric of rationality because of her bibliographical references, class position, and education privilege, is it not possible that we, as readers, tend to fall into the deception of 'social respectability' because we seem to be reading the authentic feelings of a 'respectable' and intelligent woman? To say that their diaries have the same authorial value because both characters share a history of confinement implies looking into Margaret's diary to obtain a reading of Selina's life, underestimating the latter's agency and ability to narrate her own story. In this sense, Brindle suggests that, despite the incongruent value of their texts, both characters produce narratives with equal authorship value because both women are submitted to equal forces of disciplinary regulation. In my reading, I will dispute these arguments by contending that, although both characters do undergo rigid surveillance, the home and the prison do not provide the same conditions to deal with or confront disciplinary control. Furthermore, I will argue that Selina's and Margaret's class position and their different educational backgrounds directly affect the ways in which we, as readers, understand their diaries, thereby suggesting that they do not present equal authorial reliability as Brindle asserts.

It is true that the rationality in Margaret's diary is, to some extent, undermined by the accounts of her mental condition, since we know that she is recovering from a suicide attempt and that, many of the times that she writes in her diary, she is under the effect of chloral: "Mother came, half an hour ago, to bring me my dose. […] And so I sat and let her pour the grains into the glass, and swallowed the mixture as she watched and nodded. Now I am too tired to write – but too restless, I think, to sleep just yet".[8] Yet, in spite of Margaret's vulnerable emotional state of mind, we are able to find out more about her intellectual research about prisons. For instance, she writes about going to the British Library to read Henry Mayhew's and Elizabeth Fry's writings about prisons,[9] and she occasionally comments on the ongoing developments of her research.

After taking a dose of chloral, Margaret waits for her mother to leave the room so that she can go back to writing in her diary. She writes about a comment made by Mr. Barclay, Priscilla's fiancé, in which he claims that women can only write 'journals of the heart'. Margaret then remembers her old diary, "which had so much of my own heart's blood in it", and affirms that the book she is currently writing – her current journal –

8 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 30.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 57. Waters refers to Mayhew's *The Criminal Prisons of London* (1862) and Fry's *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendance and Government of Female Prisoners* (1827).

will be a different one: this book "should not turn me back upon my own thoughts, but to serve, like the chloral, to keep the thoughts from coming at all".[10] Margaret wants to use her position as a researcher as a means to fight against depression and, in doing so, to use the act of writing to display her rational observations about Millbank Prison:

> […] it would do, it would do, were it not for the queer reminders Millbank has thrown at me to-day. For I have catalogued my visit, I have traced my path across the female gaol, as I have before; but the work has not soothed me – it has made my brain sharp as a hook, so that all my thoughts pass over they seem to catch at and set wriggling. […] I think of all the women there, upon the dark wards of the prison; but where they should be silent, and still, they are restless and pacing their cells. They are looking for ropes to tie about their throats. They are sharpening knives to cut their flesh with.[11]

Margaret evokes a methodology in scientific research of classification and documentation as she relates that she has organized her field notes, cataloguing, and describing her visit; this gives the reader the impression of a rational approach to her object of study. However, as she anticipates in the beginning of the passage, her experience at Millbank cannot be completely reasonable due to "queer reminders" that trigger the outbreak of disconcerting thoughts. Instead of scientific results, Margaret encounters images of suicide and despair, which show her failure to hang on to her reason and her reaction of projecting her own suicidal tendencies onto the women she visits. In reading Margaret's diary, we encounter the double of rationality and irrationality, the former being present in her higher education and intellectual activities, and the latter being expressed in her mental instability and in the difficulties she encounters in controlling her own text. According to Armitt and Gamble, it is not Margaret or Selina who control the text, but Ruth Vigers, someone who is able to manipulate both narratives. They argue that the fact that we know the spatial location of Margaret's diary, locked up in a drawer in her room, marks the materiality of her text, thereby enhancing its authenticity, blinding our own perception of Selina and Ruth Vigers.[12]

In contrast to the materiality of Margaret's diary, Armitt and Gamble conclude that Selina's journal is not as reliable, for we only have access to her voice and not her presence, as we know that the diary is not in her possession at Millbank and hence lacks a specific locus. For Armitt and Gamble, we cannot have a true account of Selina as a character because her entries consist of "a curious mixture of personal anecdote and business-like records of séances [that] reveal little about her, since they are guarded and allusive in the extreme".[13] Indeed, we do not have much information about Selina's feelings or about her reflections on the world. Instead, we have a diary that sometimes appears more to be a calendar, since she writes very little about her private life and more about her activities as a séance leader:

10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

12 Armitt and Gamble, "The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters' *Affinity*", pp. 153–154.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

> 6 November 1872
>
> To Islington, to Mrs. Baker for her sister Jane Gough, that passed into spirit March '68, brain-fever. 2/-
>
> To Kings Cross, to Mr. & Mrs. Martin, for their boy Alec lost from the side of a yacht – Found Great Truth in the Great Seas. 2/-
>
> Here, Mrs. Brink, for her especial spirit. £ 1[14]

In this passage, not only do we notice a list of places to visit, and the supposed spirits that Selina is to receive, but also mentions of money, which can be read as the amount that she collects from Mrs. Brink. It is true that this excerpt does not mention anything about Selina as a person, yet her diary entries imply that this is a woman who must work to make a living, even if this consists in playing tricks on people who are grieving the death of loved ones. As is the case with Armitt and Gamble's and Brindle's readings of *Affinity*, Mitchell's analysis focuses on Margaret's diary, as she claims that Selina's diary is less trustworthy because it "may perform for Ruth rather than reveal Selina's interiority",[15] considering that Selina says that she is sitting with Ruth in the last entry of her diary. For Mitchell, Ruth enacts a controlling presence in the novel by having access to Margaret's and Selina's diary. Mitchell, thus, sustains the view that Ruth's character is central because she is the one who collects all of the information about Margaret by reading her diary, given that she also exercises authorial control over Selina's journal by influencing what she writes and by reading everything that she writes.

In these readings, it seems that the main problem is that Selina's diary entries break with the pact between reader and diary, for it does not expose her true self, only how she is manipulated by others. Moreover, Selina's writings make us wonder if it is possible to trust her at all, since her accounts of talking to spirits are highly dubious and we can never fully understand what exactly the truth behind her relationship with the spirit Peter Quick is. The moments in which we do trust her are through Margaret's writings about Selina, which clearly show that she has fallen in love with her. Even though Selina's writings appear to be less trustworthy than Margaret's, I suggest that it is crucial to ask what the aspects that draw us to Margaret and distance us from Selina as authors are and in which ways the latter's position as a working-class woman and a prisoner influence her own credibility as a diarist.

Apart from considering the relation between prison, same-sex desire, and diary writing, as other critics have done, my reading of *Affinity* asserts that it is crucial to bring class relations in the book to the fore, and to leave lesbian sexuality as a secondary relation in the novel. In the pages that follow, I will discuss Waters' use of the Victorian Gothic and diary fiction with the act of narrating the prison to later reflect upon the constructions of the panopticon in relation to home confinement, questioning if the parallel between Victorian domesticity and prison incarceration can

14 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 94.

15 Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 125.

actually be read under the same premises, since the conditions for these two distinct forms of confinements are entangled in power relations that are more determined by class position than by gender and sexuality. Margaret's diary entries, I will argue, create an impression of prison as a space of liberation, an image that is strongly biased by her class position and that creates a romanticized and naïve account of prison.

Diary Fiction, the Gothic Novel, and the Making of Class

In *Affinity*, Waters constructs her narrative around recurrent themes from the female Victorian Gothic, such as female imprisonment, repressed sexuality, the oppression of women, and the supernatural. As Davison explains, the Gothic as a literary genre was revived in the 1840s, during the Victorian period as a genre that is often combined with social realism.[16] In this framework, upper-class values and domesticity become a target of ardent criticism, but under the lens of the supernatural and the uncanny. According to Davison, the employment of these Gothic tropes enhance the elements of realism in the novel, since the Gothic undermines the notion that "all aspects of our existence are identifiable and representable" and it puts in check "the idea that all aspects of our identity and institutions can withstand logical and moral scrutiny".[17] For Davison, the concern with individual psychology and the social criticism that is directed towards Victorian literature paves the way to frequently present the aspect of self-estrangement in female characters which acts as a stage that is "revealed to be the result of monster-making social institutions that necessitate unnatural self-repression".[18]

The element of self-estrangement is crucial for the construction of both Margaret's and Selina's characters. In the former, this is linked to the repression of her sexuality and her difficulties to free herself from the traditional Victorian gender mores, and, in the latter, self-estrangement is perceived in her spiritualism and in her abusive relationship with the spirit Peter Quick. In both cases, Margaret and Selina feel the urge to give accounts of moments in which they lose themselves and, thus, the act of writing becomes a means to relate the psychological damage that they endure. Yet, these writings are produced under different circumstances and the texts that are created suggest different forms of social constraints. In Margaret's writings, we encounter the suffering of a well-educated woman and how her role as a woman is constricted in society. While it was her late father that enabled her activities as a researcher and supported her plans to spend time in Italy with her best friend and lover Helen, his death left her to her mother's conservative education, which did not allow her to proceed with her intellectual work. As well as losing out on the possibility of becoming a scholar, Margaret also loses her relationship with Helen, who decides to

16 Davison, "The Victorian Gothic and Gender" in Smith and Hughes (eds.) *The Victorian Gothic: an Edinburgh Companion*, p. 127.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

18 *Ibid.*

marry Margaret's brother. It is Priscilla, Margaret's sister, who fulfills their mother's idealization of womanhood and marriage, while Margaret is treated as a deadweight that her mother must carry. After Priscilla marries, Margaret writes about the ways in which she is pitied by the gazes of friends and family, and compares her condition to that of her brother and sister:

> When Stephen went to school when I was ten: they said that that would be a 'difficult time', because of course I was so clever, and would not understand why I must keep my governess. When he went to Cambridge it was the same; […] When Pris turned out to be handsome they said that would be difficult, we must expect it to be difficult, because of course I was so plain. […] they had said only, always that it was natural, it was to be expected that I should feel the sting of things like that; that older, unmarried sisters always did. […] If I might only have a little liberty.[19]

Margaret's complaints address the fulcrum of Victorian domesticity: the ideal of the woman who is to marry and to have children. These expectations mark her position as an upper-class woman, a social position of the family that can also be identified in her brother who goes away for school and then goes to Cambridge to become a lawyer. She relates the realization of her dissatisfaction, at age ten, as she is made aware that her intelligence is to be kept at home and not encouraged elsewhere. The loss of her father is so devastating because he is the figure that nurtures her intellectuality and the possibility of transgressing home-confinement through knowledge. Margaret's diary, in this sense, represents this possibility; it is a way to register her fieldnotes about Millbank, and serves as a way to escape her reality. As she writes in her last note at the end of the novel, writing is something she must do: "I must write, while I still breathe",[20] making it clear that she cannot read what she has written before, explaining that she has burned her diary because she knows that is how Ruth Vigers and Selina managed to steal her fortune. Written in a formal register of English, Margaret's diary entries display her high education and convey a well-structured social critique of Victorian domesticity, blended with the sentimentality of the 'journal of the heart'.

In contrast to Margaret's well-constructed sentences and upper-class English, Selina's accounts of daily life are delivered in informal and oral English, showing signs that she writes quickly, as she often uses abbreviations and signs that do not convey any meanings to the reader. These aspects of her writing suggest that she has less time to write, given that she also works as a full-time séance, and that she is not very interested in form or expressing herself in writing. As Margaret recalls in her own diary entry, Selina tells her that she kept a journal before being convicted, in which she "wrote in it at night, in the darkness, and writing it would make her yawn and want to sleep".[21] Writing for Selina is not a *necessity*, but a pastime to unwind from a day full of work. Unlike Margaret, she does not manifest writing as a means

19 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 348.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

of escape, rather as the production of unpretentious reports of her life, particularly regarding her work.

As a matter of fact, she also provides notes about her studies on spiritualism, such as the "*Common Questions and their Answers on the Matter of the Spheres* by The Spirit-Medium's Friend" which suggests a kind of test with questions that must be answered. For instance, one of the questions inquires into how many spheres a spirit must go through once it departs from earth, to which Selina answers: "There are seven [spheres], & the highest of them is the home of LOVE that we call GOD!"[22] As we can see, this can be read as the equivalent to Margaret's studies, only that Selina is registering a study of the occult. While Margaret's notes about Millbank and about her intentions to write the prison's history are considered part of her intellectual practice, Selina's notes about spiritualism, God, and religion are not even mentioned by critics, since it relays a kind of knowledge that is not scientific. It is possible to affirm that, to a certain extent, spiritualism and religion in the novel are depicted as forms of knowledge that are as relevant as history and social sciences. However, critics tend to overlook Selina's accounts of her studies because of the lack of reliability that they entail, even though Margaret's diary is also not completely trustworthy due to her overtly sentimental accounts and her emotional instability.

Many readings of the novel are skeptical towards Selina's diary and her activities as a spiritualist, as Armitt and Gamble's and Brindle's texts suggest. Mitchell also offers a similar reading, arguing that "the equivocations and evasions in Selina's diary are designed to conceal the truth about her reputed spiritualist powers" and that Selina herself is a fraud that uses her power "to explore her same-sex desire and, potentially, to defraud heiresses".[23] Of course, we are certain that Selina does commit fraud and that she does use her spiritual powers to take advantage of other women. Nevertheless, the fact that she studies religion and that Margaret actually finds evidence of Selina's importance in London's spiritualist circles creates an ambivalence about her character. On the one hand, we know that she takes advantage of spiritualism to deceive and to make money off women who attend her circles; on the other hand, though, we know that this is the kind of work that provides her financial income. In the novel, spiritualism functions as a material means for Selina and Ruth and as an aesthetic and narrative device that puts the reader in a contradictory position: we want to believe the ghost story, but at the same time we constantly question the veracity of Selina's séance circles.

As Bown et al. elucidate, the supernatural was not only related to the uncanny in the Victorian imagination, but also to the development of technology, for many of the novelties developed during the period, such as the telegraph and the telephone, produced both feelings of fear and of fascination. The supernatural was, therefore, a topic of discussion that surfaced in between the scientific and the occult, one that was often expressed in a tone of mockery in satires and parodies that were directed at the "foolishness of believers in supernatural phenomena".[24] Spiritualists often resorted to

22 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

23 Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 125.

24 Bown et al., *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 1.

the use of scientific language to explain their theories about the world in order to refute the thought that the supernatural was a "'superstition' of the uneducated and ignorant" and to distinguish themselves as members of "the rationalism of educated opinion".[25] What is crucial in Bown et al.'s cultural analyses about spiritualism in the nineteenth century is that the occult was an important way to reflect on social and political phenomena in the Victorian period, given that it often evoked the relationship between individual and society.

In *Affinity*, this relationship addresses issues of class and femininity. Using the parallel between the occult and social criticism, Lynch discusses the relationship between domestic service and their ghostly images in Victorian literature, namely in Elizabeth Braddon's texts. She notices that the domestic servant and the ghost both play similar roles in Victorian ghost stories, since servants, like ghosts, live in the house but do not belong to it; instead, they engage themselves with 'workings' of the house. "Like the spectral spirit", Lynch explains, "servants were outsiders in the home secretly looking in on the forbidden world of respectability".[26] She argues that servants, who often stemmed from rural areas and lacked education, were perceived as "unstable outsiders persisting in outmoded belief systems stamped as superstitious".[27] In this sense, Lynch suggests that, in spite of upper-class curiosity about the supernatural, the practice of the occult was closely related to working-class subjects and their ignorance of 'rational' knowledge.

In the novel, we perceive this kind of relationship in the love triangle between Margaret, Selina, and Ruth Vigers, since the latter characters are working-class women (Ruth is a servant) and both are involved with spiritualism. Margaret gains our trust because of her supposed rationality and respectability, since the occult appears in her writings as mere object of interest connected to Selina, rather than something that she has sought out herself. Selina, conversely, is discredited in many readings of the novel because she is perceived as ignorant and sly and as a character who tries to take advantage of affluent women and who desires Margaret's fortune to possess a respectable life with Ruth. Finally, Ruth Vigers is taken to be the great villain of the novel, since she is the one who designs and executes the whole plan. Although she seems like a harmless character throughout the narrative, she is the most powerful one: she takes advantage of her invisibility as a servant, as well as Margaret's upper-class curiosity towards the supernatural, to achieve the life that Margaret wanted, but which she did not have the strength to pursue, which is to live her life with another woman and to achieve independence from the Victorian home.

Waters' narrative tricks go beyond the suspense created by the supernatural and the uncanny; they also touch upon issues of class. Ambiguity and doubt are produced through the portrayal of social class, given that *Affinity* suggests that spiritualist discourses propagated by a working woman, like Selina, cannot enter the normative realm of scientific knowledge, thereby making it impossible for her to defend herself.

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25 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

26 Lynch, "Spectral Politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant" in Bown et al. (eds.) *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 67.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

By contrast, Margaret has the disadvantage of intense surveillance at home, yet she has the privilege of education and wealth to free herself from the oppression of domesticity, even though she cannot do it on her own. Margaret's intellectuality leads us to believe her and to empathize with her sufferings, urging us to deem her as the great victim of the story, not actually as a victim of her own lack of agency. This also tricks us into thinking, at least upon our first reading, that it is Margaret's writings, not Selina's, that convey criticism of Victorian society, given that we sympathize with her narrative about domestic confinement and her 'goodness' in doing charity for poor women.

However, Selina's diary also yields episodes that criticize social norms and women's position in society, in this case, her accounts relate class oppression, as well as the dangers of domestic violence and sexual harassment. Before moving in with Mrs. Brink in Sydenham, Selina lives in a hotel in Holborn, in the suburbs of South London, where the owner Mr. Vincy harasses Selina and beats the maid, Betty. In November 1871, she writes:

> An awful row tonight! I had Mrs Brink with me all afternoon, & so was late to the dinner-table. […] Mr. Vincy seeing me slip in now however, said 'Well, Miss Dawes, I hope Betty had kept some meat back for you & not given it to the dog. We thought you might be grown too fine to eat with us.' […] He passed me my plate, that had a bit of rabbit on it & a boiled potato. I said 'Well, it certainly would not be hard to find a better thing than Mrs. Vincy's dinners', at which everyone put down their forks & looked at me, & Betty laughed, & Mr. Vincy slapped her, & Mrs. Vincy began to call out 'O! O! I have never been so insulted, at my own table, by one of my own paying guests![28]

Instead of narrating how this scene makes her feel, Selina describes a series of events that leads to the fight. The description of the dining room suggests that the guests in the hotel all live together, Betty being the maid and Mr. and Mrs. Vincy being the owners of the hotel. Mr. Vincy, whose harassments Selina has already recounted in other passages, is clearly an abusive man to the women in the house,[29] even though Mrs. Vincy claims otherwise, as she accuses Selina of trying to seduce him.[30] From Selina's diary entries, we discover that she does not have the privilege of a stable home and, moreover, that she cannot count on anyone after her aunt passes away. The scene shows a hostile environment in a precarious home, themes that are also to be found elsewhere in the Victorian Gothic, as we have seen in the novels written by the Brontës. Margaret is explicitly watched at home and her family pressures her into getting better for the sake of her mental stability and, therefore, for the purposes of respectability; however, her accounts show that she can at least count on Helen, her best friend, who has married her brother Stephen. In spite of her possession of great fortune and education, it is Margaret who cannot free herself from Victorian mores, not necessarily the other way around.

28 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 104.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 52–55.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Perhaps what makes Margaret's journal more attractive to the reader is the fact that it fulfills the requirements of truth and authenticity implied in the contract between reader and text. According to Abbot, in narrating a novel, the diary form functions as an artifice to convey reality, since it can be regarded as a document and holds the quality of "artless spontaneity".[31] Abbot states that the value of sincerity in a diarist's writing pertains to the value of authenticity, considering that the basic principle consists of narrating a true story and, in so doing, revealing the diarist's character.[32] In Margaret's diary, we can definitely grasp her character, given how often she narrates her insecurities, anxieties, unhappiness, and expectations. Conversely, Selina's journal does not expose her feelings; instead, it narrates actions taken from her perspective and often in vague description, giving us very little information about her own character: all we know about her is that she works hard as a séance in many parts of town, including at Mr. Vincy's hotel, and that she later moves to Mrs. Brink's home to serve her as a private spiritualist, supposedly receiving the spirit of her mistress's mother.

One instance of how their diaries present different values of authenticity and truthfulness is how they manifest their falling in love. Neither of them openly discloses that they are, in fact, falling in love; Margaret describes her encounters with Selina using utterly exaggerated words that infer her complete sentimental involvement with the prisoner. During her first visit to the prison, Margaret writes that she feels "a marvellous stillness" emanating from Selina's cell, a silence that is disrupted by a "*sigh*, a single sigh – it seemed to me, a *perfect* sigh, like a sigh in a story; and the sigh being such a complement to my own mood I found it worked upon me, in that setting, rather strangely".[33] As a perfect complement to her feelings, Selina's sigh seems to anticipate what she later tells Margaret about *affinity*: when "two halves of the same"[34] encounter and the souls have a special affinity with each other. This constant use of adjectives, long descriptions of feelings, and even moments of epiphany are absent from Selina's diary. When Selina meets Ruth Vigers for the first time, as Ruth and Mrs. Brink visit Selina in Holborn for a spiritualist session, Selina only relates their arrival to Mr. Vincy's hotel and their superfluous conversations.[35]

Once Selina moves in with Mrs. Brink, for whom Ruth Vigers works as a servant, three weeks later, Selina's writings describe in the most minute level of detail her excitement in moving to a big house and her amazement with the objects that decorate it. Mrs. Brink shows her the room in which she will sleep, which she finds "so large" that she thought it to be "another parlour". She thinks about the ladies she has attended in the past and also of Mr. Vincy, "putting his fingers on me & waiting at my door".[36] The feelings that she relays are those that recall the past and the difficulties that she has had to overcome. The journal entry goes on to describe a great quantity

31 Abbot, *Diary as Fiction*, pp. 18–19.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

33 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 26. Emphasis in original.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 92–94.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

of objects, to which she is not at all used: "great many cabinets & drawers […] There is a vast closet, & this is filled with gowns, & has rows & rows of little shoes, & shelves with folded stockings & bags of lavender".[37] Selina realizes that these things belonged to Mrs. Brink's late mother, who had died 40 years earlier, and she concludes that she ought not touch those things, for she is afraid of the spirit suddenly appearing at the door.

Instead, she sees another woman at the door, Ruth Vigers, and Selina claims that her "heart went into [her] mouth" because Ruth came in "like a real lady's maid, like a ghost".[38] Selina's heart leaping into her mouth can be read as a scare of suddenly seeing a 'ghost' standing at the door, but we can also read it as an expression of falling in love abruptly, particularly upon becoming aware of their love affair afterwards. As a servant, Ruth presents a ghost-like character that is able to float into Mrs. Brink's secrets and take advantage of them, occupying a privileged position that epitomizes "the conjuncture of external, and by extension public, class status and internal, private matters".[39] For Lynch, Victorian ghost stories use the tropes of the domestic sphere to discuss public issues of society, such as class and gender relations. Ruth's character and her invisibility subvert the role played by domestic servants in society and at home: it is her invisibility as a servant in different private spheres that grants her the opportunities to overcome the precarious status afforded to the domestic servant. On the one hand, Ruth Vigers represents the ignorance of the poor and the blind devotion of a servant to her mistress, which mark the qualities of a 'good' servant and which define the submission of working-class subjects in the Victorian period; on the other hand, Ruth has access to all of the private information in Mrs. Brink's home, and later in Margaret's home too, that will allow her to break free from the subjugation of domestic service and enable a life with her lover, Selina, in Italy. Ruth is both the villain and the ghost who achieves victory by making the most of her invisible social position and of the underestimation of her intelligence: she enacts class revenge in its full potential.

In the development of Selina's writings, we notice that she grows closer to Ruth Vigers, as the latter obediently follows Mrs. Brink's orders to take personal care of Selina in order to preserve her powers for the dark circles. Selina never mentions that she is fond of Ruth, but we notice that Ruth becomes increasingly present in her writings. Selina writes about their conversations about Mrs. Brink and Ruth's devotion to her, while the latter is "fastening my gown about me, looking at me in the glass. All my new gowns close at the back, & need her hand to fasten them".[40] The closer they get, the more dependent Selina becomes upon Ruth, and it becomes clear that the latter exercises strong manipulative influence on the former.

In her first month in Sydenham, Selina tells Mrs. Brink that she does not want to receive money for her séance services, since she is already being rewarded by living in her house and by receiving so many gifts. As time passes, the scenes between Mrs.

37 *Ibid*.

38 *Ibid*.

39 Lynch, "Spectral Politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant", p. 67.

40 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 155.

Brink and the spirit who is supposed to be her mother grow to be more sexually charged, as the spirit, which possesses Selina's body and allegedly makes her repeatedly kiss Mrs. Brink, utterly satisfies her mistress with the caresses.[41] It is in this context, regarding Mrs. Brink's desires to be touched and kissed, that Peter Quick mysteriously appears as Selina's 'guide', the "*control*, that every medium waits for" and who has come "to demonstrate the truths about spiritualism".[42] After this strange apparition, the dark circles at Mrs. Brink's always become full, for many of her friends and acquaintances visit in order to meet this new spirit. After several months, Selina starts charging three pounds for each client who comes to see Peter Quick, attending to them in the cabinet installed at Mrs. Brink's house. Selina makes more money with the circle because Peter Quick caresses the women and sexually provokes them. In fact, Walkowitz's historical descriptions of these dark circles convey a very similar situation that Waters portrays in her novel: "a medium, usually an attractive young girl, would be placed in a cabinet, bound and gagged, while a fanciful spirit would issue forth", and the medium – supposedly possessed by the spirit – would erotically interact with the guests. The encounters at Mrs. Brink's home are charged with "dramatic sexual displays and inversions [that] were accomplished at materializations".[43]

Margaret's and Selina's distinctive writing styles denote their self-perception in the world in very different ways: the first relates the world in sentimental writing and the latter conjures the form of a daily chronicle, containing the narration of a series of events in chronological order without much reflection about them. Margaret's sentimental accounts mark the reflexive function of her diary writing: according to Abbot, this places the diarist's will for freedom at the center of the narrative, closing "the gap between the creative and the critical" and conveying "a drama of both writing and reading".[44] For Abbot, this kind of diary narration entails the sensation that the reader is reading the diary as the fictional character is writing it, meaning that the fictive present in the novel is created by us, as readers, simultaneously accompanying the character's writing of the diary. In conveying the fictive present, in which we read what Margaret has just written, her diary leads us to fall for the tricks of reading Selina first as an 'angel' and then as the 'devil', and also to become overly involved with Margaret's drama of home confinement and her depression. When Selina does mention her feelings, they are usually described in one word and they are often related to the uncanny practices of spiritualism. For instance, the novel's prologue consists of Selina's account about the dark circle at which Mrs. Brink dies:

> I was never so frightened as I am now. They have left me sitting in the dark […] They have put me in my own room, they have locked the door on me. […] Now the house is full of voices, all saying my name. [Peter Quick] was too rough, & Madeleine too nervous. […] the row brought Mrs. Brink, I heard her footsteps in the hall & then her voice, that was frightened. […] I looked once for Peter then, but he had gone. There

41 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

43 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 176.

44 Abbot, *Diary as Fiction*, pp. 44–45.

> was only the curtain, dark & shivering, & marked with a mark of silver from his hand. And after all, it is Mrs. Brink that has died, not Madeleine.[45]

In Selina's writing, Waters is more interested in creating suspense and the atmosphere of a ghost story than in actually revealing her character. It is the mystery conveyed by dark spiritualist circles that concocts the uncertainty and casts doubt about Selina's character. What we see in this passage is the combination of elements that comprise the ghost story: darkness, imprisonment, strange voices, anxiety, fear, strangely moving objects followed by death. Although we only find out later that Selina is the author of that diary, our initial encounter with her writing is based upon wariness and suspicion, given that we still do not know that Peter Quick is a spirit and that Selina is blamed for Mrs. Brink's death and for Madeleine's assault. As we can see in this passage, Selina's narration of the events follows at a quick pace, relating a series of events retrospectively without reflections about them. These events culminate in Selina's arrest.

Selina's and Margaret's diary excerpts show how Victorian domesticity was actually an upper- and middle-class social and cultural more that came to be imposed upon working-class women throughout the nineteenth century. As Beverly Skeggs explains, Victorian domesticity is ingrained in the notion of femininity, which "is a sign that was made for and only fits the middle-class woman".[46] For Skeggs, moral standards that assert the role of a woman as a wife, mother, and caregiver are impositions that serve "bourgeois domestic standards" to pressure working-class women to enter the realm of idealized respectability.[47] She argues that respectability functions as a signifier for class relations, in which working-class populations very often appear as the source of danger, filth, and obscenity. Defined as a set of practices and representations that involve "appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance", respectability is a signifier that is inherent to family values and morals that revolve around the opposing forces of domesticity and sexuality.[48] In other words, Skeggs notes how historical accounts show that class conflicts were discussed as matters of morality, instead of structural inequality, thereby sustaining the notion that the upper- and middle-classes should educate the lower-classes through familial regulation focused on the figure of the woman.

It is the moral regulation that is promoted by social workers, such as Elizabeth Fry, that Waters brings to the fore in *Affinity*. Margaret's visits to Millbank represent the work done by many philanthropists in the nineteenth century whose view aimed to 'rescue' deviant women by advising them about how to behave 'like a lady' and by teaching them activities that could place them in the right path for domestic life. By drawing the parallel between the Victorian home and prison, Waters appropriates the already established female Gothic thematic of confinement in order to stress its interconnections with gender, class, and sexuality. However, I would argue that this

45 Waters, *Affinity*, pp. 1–3.

46 Skeggs, "The Appearance of Class: challenges in gay space" in Munt (ed.) *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 133.

47 *Idem*, *Formations of Class and Gender*, p. 45.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 46–47.

parallel should not be read as if home and prison were spatial equivalents, even though the norms that shape these two spaces are based on the objective of disciplining women.

Instead, I argue that, in spite of their shared premise of control over women, home and prison confinements are produced by different disciplinary measures and circumstances that convey distinct consequences in the formation of the subject and, therefore, constitute distinct parameters for resistance: the difference in question relates first and foremost to class. Where Margaret's confinement is determined by traditional Victorian norms that impose domesticity upon women, Selina's imprisonment is sentenced by the law and is established as a crime. Although Margaret does not correspond to the model of femininity that is expected of her, something which her mother makes sure to remind her of, she has the financial and educational means to escape this condition of domestic incarceration. Yet, it is her state of depression that prevents her from leaving her mother's home, and it is her relationship with Selina that gives her strength to leave her family and the overwhelming control that her mother, sister-in-law, and brother all exert on her.

It is only when Selina tells her to secure the money for their supposed escape that Margaret asks her brother Stephen about the conditions of her inheriting the money that their father had left her. As it turns out, Margaret's inheritance is of a high value and her father did not constrain her access to it, as we find out as Stephen authorizes her withdrawal of the amount she wishes from her trust fund.[49] Selina, however, does not choose to be incarcerated and her agency is certainly not entirely constricted by traditional Victorian mores regarding marriage and domesticity. These forms of female social regulation are only imposed on her during her time at Millbank because moral reformation seems to be the priority of the prison system that she enters. The fact that she is a working-class woman certainly plays a role in her conviction and in the daily routine of her imprisonment. In the following section, I will elucidate the differences between prison and domestic confinement, shedding light on the different mechanisms of surveillance that Margaret experiences at home and that Selina undergoes at Millbank. In doing so, I will argue that, although there are similarities in the ways in which regulation and control are enacted, the prison and the domestic sphere cannot be regarded as equivalent means of disciplining a subject, as critics such as Braid, Llewelyn, and Pohl have suggested.[50]

Narrating Prison

In her book about female prisoners, Elizabeth Fry writes about the necessity of upper- and middle-class women to be involved in charity by visiting the poor and helping to

49 Waters, *Affinity*, pp. 291–293.

50 Cf. Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels", in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Pohl, "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*.

save women prisoners "from a condition of depravity and wretchedness", so that they can be reinstated in "happiness, as a useful and respected member of the community".[51] Fry was a social and prison reformer who believed that women should exceed their domestic functions as wives, mothers, and daughters to help the poor, especially poor women, to become respectable by complying with duties that included religion, education, and virtue. It is clear from her writings that she believes that women can only achieve "habits of cleanliness, order, and regular industry"[52] if they comply with the prison's orders of discipline that entail formal education, religion, and contact with the "pious and benevolent of THEIR OWN SEX!"[53] Women prisoners should, therefore, learn the norms of domesticity and family values from the women who represent the 'true virtue' of femininity. In defending this relationship, Fry contends that women prisoners should raise their intellectual and religious standards by learning to read and write, by attending the chapel regularly, and by acquiring good ability in sewing. In other words, they should replicate the upper- and middle-class habits of female respectability.

In Waters' representation of Millbank, the female inmates must also learn these domestic activities, such as sewing and reading the Bible, as a means to improve themselves as individuals. Like Elizabeth Fry, Margaret is the lady visitor who must teach these "villainous women" proper manners. As Mr. Shillitoe, Millbank's head officer explains, "we teach them prayers, we teach them modesty".[54] Not only must the prisoners learn the qualities that make a respectable lady, but they must understand what differentiates them from a 'proper' woman. Mr. Shillitoe tells Margaret that the prisoners are "savages" and, despite the matrons' efforts to 'improve' them, it is important that lady visitors also attend them; this is undertaken in order to "let them only know that she has left her comfortable life, solely to visit them, to take an interest in their mean histories. Let them see the miserable contrast between her speech, her manners, and their own poor ways" so they can "grow meek […] grow softened and subdued".[55] Margaret reproduces what she has heard from Mr. Shillitoe in her diary without any criticism about the ways those women are treated or even questioning the reasons why society thinks those women ill. As Skeggs has pointed out, it is crucial to demarcate the prisoners' familial, religious, language, and habits as *distinct* from the 'true lady' as a means to assert and fortify the hierarchy between upper- and working-class women.

Waters renders the narration of prison through Margaret's voice, showing that the 'scientific', and therefore reasonable, account of prison life is established by a narrator who has not actually experienced life behind bars, and yet she understands it as an equivalent experience to her domestic confinement. Nevertheless, it is through Selina's voice that we get closer to the vulnerability of the inmates' social position, both within and outside of prison. This criticism is not conveyed directly through

51 Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners*, p. 4.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 20

53 *Ibid.*, p. 8. Emphasis in original.

54 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 11.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Selina's writings, but rather through Margaret's accounts of what Selina says about prison and society. When they meet for the first time, Margaret asks her what she thought about Millbank and Selina turns the question around: "What *would* you make of it, do you think?" Margaret replies that she thinks Millbank is a hard place, but if she were there, then she would know that she had done something wrong and she would take the opportunity of being incarcerated to make plans to better herself.[56]

Margaret narrates this in her journal, even while remaining aware that Selina is skeptical and even hostile to her words, rendering Selina's opinion about Margaret's visits as follows: "You have come to Millbank to look on women more wretched than yourself, in the hope that it will make you well again. […] Well, you may look at me, I am wretched enough. All the world may look at me, it is part of my punishment".[57] In turning Margaret's expectations of meekness around, Selina speaks her mind about the performance of charity work as a means to 'free' herself from her own angst with the traditional norms of domesticity and femininity that Margaret must endure. Selina tries to behave herself in order to avoid problems with the matrons, and continues the conversation with Margaret by telling her that she has spirit-friends who visit her, so she does not need lady visitors to comfort her. Margaret then makes a joke saying that she should not let the matrons find out about her spirit visitors, otherwise they would not think her being there was a 'real' punishment. It is in this moment that Selina bursts into a rage and tells Margaret a little bit of what it means to be in prison:

> Not a punishment? […] To have the matron's eyes […] forever on you – closer, closer than wax! To be forever in need of water and soap. To forget words, common words, because your habits are so narrow you need only know a hundred hard phrases – *stone, soup, comb, Bible, needle, dark, prisoner, walk, stand still, look sharp, look sharp.* To lie sleepless – not as I should say *you* lie sleepless, in your bed with a fire by it, with your family and your – your servants, close about you. But to lie aching with cold – to hear a woman shrieking in a cell two floors below, because she has nightmares.[58]

Selina's descriptions of life in prison mark the differences between prison and home confinement. Forgetting common words and having them replaced by words that indicate the authoritarian orders that come from officers suggest the effects of the prison in transforming the subject into the ideal identity of a prisoner. The prisoners must learn new vocabulary to indicate that they know *how* to behave. As a spiritualist, Selina's naming the word 'bible' points to the Christian imposition upon her; the word 'comb' can be read as the obligation to learn the values of taking care of her own beauty; 'needle' is what a respectable lady uses in the proper work of sewing; 'soup' is the meager condition of food in prison, and what the prisoners should be contented with eating. The narrowing of habits means leaving behind language, gesture, and knowledge of the 'unrespectable' woman as a means to enter the realm of 'respectability'.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49. Emphasis in original.

Margaret does know that the environment of the prison is that of despair and madness and she describes it accordingly. However, instead of reflecting on the mechanisms and the purposes of this architecture and disciplinary authoritarianism, she merely associates it with her condition of confinement at home, implying that surveillance in prison is the same as the surveillance that she must endure at home. The question of respectability is not an aspect of great reflection for Margaret. She reproduces the conversations that she has with the authority of a researcher who is doing fieldwork in her diary, making notes of the routine in prison, the advice, and instructions that she has been given and making observations about Millbank's architecture. She pities the prisoners and wants to help them, but what prevails in her writings is how she feels when she visits the prison, not necessarily critical or social reflections on the mechanisms of the prison and its influence on the inmates' lives.

The Benthamite panopticon, as Foucault has prominently described it, consisted of an annular building that circumscribed the tower, at the center, which had a total view of the ring around it, given that the person in the center can watch all of the cells in the annular building, creating a mechanism that "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately", a mechanism in which "visibility is a trap".[59] In the early pages of the novel, Margaret is taken to the central tower from which she watches the inmates, who "looked small – they might have been dolls upon a clock, or beads on trailing threads".[60] In her eyes, the prisoners are just objects walking in circle; they are *her* objects of study who are later animated in her diary, for she notes that, after a while watching them, she can find a bit of 'humanity' in them; this humanity is later certified once she goes into the annular building to meet the prisoners.

Foucault argues that the Benthamite panoptic schema permeates society as a whole as a mechanism of surveillance and of disciplinary power, in which individuals are constantly watched, controlled, and classified by each other, by authorities, and by institutions.[61] Acting upon utilitarian principles of efficiency, the Panopticon aims to "strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality".[62] For Foucault, the disciplinary forces in society are omnipresent in various apparatuses and institutions, such as in schools, hospitals, family structures, and state authorities (e.g., police and military). In the novel, discipline is imposed on Margaret at home, as her mother pressures her into abandoning her activities as a researcher. In Selina's character, discipline is enforced by state authority in prison, as she must learn the proper manners of upper- and middle-class femininity to prove that she can live in society again.

Discipline, therefore, becomes a subtle mechanism of control, a kind of power that "arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways".[63] Foucault

59 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 200.

60 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 13.

61 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 206–207.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

contends that it is the disciplinary forces that are ingrained in society (the classification of individuals, the marking of normal and abnormal, and the principle of visibility) that enable the emergence of the prison as the legitimate form of penal punishment, having the destitution of liberty as its core principle.[64] It was in the nineteenth century that prisons acquired the function of depriving the individual of their liberty and also of transforming them through work, isolation, and education: "the prison must be the microcosm of a perfect society in which individuals are isolated in their moral existence".[65]

The panoptic Millbank Penitentiary in *Affinity* depicts this attempt to recreate society within prison walls. In fact, when Mr. Shillitoe shows Margaret the prison on her very first day, he explains: "you see, we are quite a little city here! Quite self-sustaining. We should do very well, I always think, under a siege".[66] The prison functions as a way to create the ideal of femininity, construed by the norms of domesticity and sexual repression. It is no coincidence that Margaret recognizes herself in the prohibitions and norms that the prison imposes, as she notes in her diary that she is scared that someone will mistake her for a convict.[67] The prison affects Margaret in a contradictory way through its function to produce the ideal subject, whose guilt and punishment will make them follow the law. On the one hand, she recognizes herself as guilty for not complying herself to the norms that the prison imposes on the prisoners, given that she is not the ideal Victorian woman, for she is both an intellectual and someone who nurtures same-sex desire first with Helen and then with Selina; on the other hand, her condition as a well-educated, upper-class woman is what grants her the privilege of intellectual and moral authority and the appearance of respectability, which creates the delusion of agency, since she is the one who can walk in and out of prison whenever she wants and can occupy the central position of watching over the prisoners from the tower.

Margaret's descriptions of London are limited to short trips to the British Museum and to Bloomsbury or to descriptions of her window view of the River Thames and the trees in Battersea. Her routine consists of spending time with her family, of eventual trips around the city, and of her visits to Millbank. After her first day as a lady visitor, Margaret writes that "it was impossible not to feel my own liberty and be grateful for it".[68] However, after a few months visiting the prison, she compares the prisoners' incarceration and constant surveillance to her own confinement. For instance, as she talks to Susan Pilling, who is in prison for thieving, she writes that both the prisoner and the matrons are watching her while she speaks. The feeling of having so many gazes upon her reminds Margaret of her mother "scolding me […] saying I must talk more […] ask the ladies after the health of their children; […] or the work they had painted or sewn".[69] Margaret's confinement is more related to the moral demands of

64 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
65 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
66 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 9.
67 *Ibid.*
68 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
69 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

middle- and upper-class femininity than to spatial confinement and the surveillance of the prison. Even though she cannot enact all Victorian norms of femininity, she nevertheless functions as an authority of surveillance from whom the prisoners must learn these norms. This becomes clear once she reports her activities as a visitor to Mr. Shillitoe and, in so doing, she argues that she has been giving Selina privileges because she considers herself to be a guide to her moral improvement.[70]

In contrast to Margaret's limited circulation throughout the city, Selina relates a life prior to her incarceration, in which she moves from one place to the next in London; she must visit clients in different neighborhoods, such as Farringdon, Islington, and King's Cross. We learn that she grew up in Bethnal Green with her aunt and that, after her aunt's death, she moved to Mr. and Mrs. Vincy's hotel in Holborn, and later to Mrs. Brink's in Sydenham. However, we should not confuse her mobility with freedom, as social surveillance outside of prison is imposed by unequal class relations: in Selina's accounts, we encounter the experiences of labor exploitation and of dysfunctional (and violent) homes. With Mrs. Brink, for instance, it does seem like the lady is taking care of her and this is, indeed, the impression that we have when reading Selina's accounts, as she emphasizes the comfort she is given at home. Yet, like the relationship between Diana Lethaby and Nancy Astley, Mrs. Brink treats her like a private toy of the Ouija board,[71] especially after the apparition of the spirit Peter Quick, given that she invites friends over to see what Selina can do. Once she secures work at Mrs. Brink's, Selina's working hours are extensive and, although she has certain privileges compared to Ruth, she is also kept as a servant who serves her mistress with spiritualist sessions, and she receives a home to live in and expensive gifts in exchange.

In the following part of this chapter, I will argue that Selina's rupture with the norms that are imposed on her are enabled by the emancipation of herself from middle- and upper-class femininity by considering Selina's background before going to prison, and Margaret's account of Millbank; this is performed by using the queerness and exoticism of spiritualist discourses. Although we do know that her plan to escape prison is only possible because Ruth Vigers gives her information about Margaret, Selina's use of her knowledge about spiritualism is also crucial to achieving her freedom. As a ghost story, the novel discusses spiritualism and the supernatural as means to transcend gender power relations and to move beyond the boundaries of social norms. This is, in fact, Selina's explanation to Margaret about the possibility of dissipating social norms, including gender norms, created on earth, once one passes on to the spiritual sphere. Selina's knowledge about spiritualism, regardless of its veracity or intentions, suggests possibilities of resistance to those norms and even the possibility of emancipation from labor exploitation and from middle- and upper-class femininity.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

71 The Ouija board was an instrument used by spiritualists to talk to spirits. It consisted of a board with numbers zero to nine and the alphabet, on which the spirit would guide the medium's hand to form sentences.

Spiritualism and the Transgression of Class and Gender Norms

In one of her visits to Millbank, Margaret tells Selina that her mother has demanded more attention from her since her sister married. She claims that Priscilla has "*evolved*, like one of your spirits", while she has been left behind "more *un*evolved than ever".[72] Margaret writes in her diary that she is envious of Priscilla, who goes to Italy on her honeymoon, a place Margaret was supposed to have gone with Helen and her father. Selina tells her visitor that she has been brave in confronting the situation, but Margaret is aware of her limitations: "Brave! I said. Brave, to bear my own complaining self! When I would rather lose that self – but cannot, could not, was forbidden even that".[73] The notions of evolving and "losing the self" in Margaret's speech indicates how her identity and the norms that are imposed upon her entrap her 'true' self and thwart the possibility of working against the norms that oppress her. Margaret is rendered as a fallen woman, a mad woman whose reason is constantly undermined by medical diagnoses of mental illness through her inability to reproduce those norms and to present a stable and coherent identity that corresponds to the social expectations around her. It is her domestic and familial environments that constitute a prison that impose the duties of a respectable Victorian woman. She is too weak to 'evolve' beyond those norms, but she cannot present the ideal behavior of the respectable woman either. Selina's reply conveys the idea of 'spiritual evolving' as the possibility to transgress these norms:

> What do you have to envy, really? What has she done, that is so marvellous? 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 –'
>
> She said then that, it was doing the same thing always that kept us 'bound to the earth'; that we 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.[74]

While Selina's arguments point to an insistence on change, and the necessity of evolving as a means to free the self from the regulations that confine it, Margaret's thoughts infer that a woman achieves nothing but social scandal through her inability to successfully reproduce the correct behavior. To "throw the system out" suggests going against specific norms as a means to produce transformations. In this system, she can only be perceived as mad or unfit for her social environment, not as a possible agent of resistance. Selina employs her knowledge of subversion through the supernatural to free herself from the class, gender, and sexuality sanctions that are enforced upon her, even though this subversion is enacted *for and against* the same class power

72 *Ibid.*, p. 208. Emphasis in original.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

74 *Ibid.*

relations that constitute the norms. This becomes clear when her plan with Ruth Vigers succeeds and they flee to Italy, which is exactly what Margaret had planned to do with Helen and later with Selina. Going to Italy represents the very possibility to take up the role of the upper-class woman, but without the limitations of Victorian domesticity.

Walkowitz's comments about spiritualism in the nineteenth century endorse the idea that spiritualist practices were more common among women than men, as "the séance reversed the usual sexual hierarchy of knowledge and power" by placing the female medium as a figure highly capable of judgment and awareness.[75] Many of the séances and women who attended spiritualist sessions found a means to obtain refuge from, and support to confront, familial and marital problems in this practice. As Waters accurately portrays in *Affinity*, private séance sessions were highly charged with sexual behavior, since "trance conditions legitimized a wide range of 'bad behavior' on the part of women […] allowing them to engage in a subtle subversion […] of the 'separate sphere' construction of 'true womanhood'".[76] It is this subversion that attracts so many of Mrs. Brink's friends to the dark circles in her home, especially after the apparition of Peter Quick, the spirit who plays with the women in the circles.

The spirit is depicted both as a source of subversion and as a perpetrator of abuse. On the one hand, it is through Peter Quick that women act out their sexual desire; on the other hand, though, he completely crosses the line with the sexual behavior he enacts. As Selina's 'spirit guide', Peter Quick is playful with the gentlemen, taking their hats and telling them jokes, and he gets too close to women by kissing and touching them and paying them compliments by saying how beautiful they look. Selina writes in her diary that the ladies "like that & they laugh & answer 'o, you naughty thing!' They think kisses from Peter Quick don't count".[77]

However, as time goes by, Peter Quick's apparitions and behavior become increasingly violent and abusive; he mistreats the women and even Selina herself. As a ghost, Peter Quick comes to haunt the dark circles as a ubiquitous form of patriarchal power, a power which Selina cannot control. Selina relates that, during a session, Peter Quick ties her wrists and legs to a chair and makes a lady check if the knots are well tied. The lady tells Peter that Selina is trembling and to this he replies that "[i]t is for her sake I do this" and whispers in Selina's ear: "It is for you I do this […] I am all your power".[78] Indeed, he gains all of the power necessary to control all women, leaving some of them in a state of constant fear, as is the case for Miss Isherwood, who comes back to Mrs. Brink's home because she claims that Peter Quick has been haunting her.

Selina says Peter wants to use Miss Isherwood as a medium and convinces her to talk to him again so that she can develop her own powers as a séance. Peter Quick's first lesson is that the medium must act like a servant, as a "plastic instrument for

75 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 176.

76 *Ibid*.

77 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 218.

78 *Ibid*., p. 232.

the spirits' own hands".[79] Like Selina, Miss Isherwood must let him use her for his own purposes and she makes Selina take off her gown, as she follows his instructions. Peter Quick claims that Miss Isherwood's flesh is not hot enough for the development to happen, so he advises her to take her own gown off and get closer to Selina to embrace her.[80] This passage clearly shows that Peter Quick functions as the male gaze and power in society, dominating and controlling for he does not allow women to carry out their own sexual wills: he uses their sexual desire for his own pleasure.

Conversely, Peter Quick also functions as Selina's way of seeking financial independence, given that it is with his sudden appearance that her fame as a séance leader thrives in London's spiritualist milieu. Moreover, he is also part of her initial plan with Ruth, as Selina writes in her last entry before the dark circle in which Mrs. Brink dies. In this passage, Selina and Ruth Vigers are sitting in bed discussing the development of another girl named Miss Silvester and Selina reports that Ruth "is thinking of Little Silvester's money, & what we might do with a share of money like that" and "thinking how handsome [Selina] will look, say in France and in Italy".[81] Whether or not Peter Quick is a fraud plotted by Selina and Ruth remains ambiguous, but we do find out in this last passage that Ruth plays a crucial role in manipulating and concocting actions in their plans, since she is the one who apparently controls the ways in which Selina uses Peter Quick in her spiritualist sessions.

Can Peter Quick be the ghostly form of Ruth Vigers' domination? If he is, then it is possible to say that Vigers not only takes advantage of her invisibility as a servant, but also that she appropriates dominant masculinity to achieve freedom from the class exploitation that haunts her as a servant. In this constellation, Selina's role is not merely that of a victim, but also as an agent in those plots; we can perceive this in the ways in which she manipulates and seduces Margaret. In prison, Selina's spiritualist knowledge also functions as a means to persuade women to comply with her needs. Apart from Margaret, she also entices Mrs. Jelf, a matron at Millbank, by supposedly sending her messages from her dead son. Mrs. Jelf takes part in Selina's plan by giving her a matron's cloak and by walking out with her from the prison so that she can be free.

Most criticism regarding *Affinity* tends to overly emphasize Victorian domesticity as a space of confinement and the prison as a queer space that functions as a means for Margaret to enact her lesbian desire and free herself from Victorian domesticity; this is because Margaret's voice is so dominating in the novel.[82] In doing so, these texts end up overlooking the role that class plays in the plot's development. Braid argues that the panoptic gaze in the novel is turned into "a lesbian gaze of desire",[83] claiming

79 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 352.

82 Cf. Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels" in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Pohl, "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*.

83 Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels", p. 79.

that the prisoners at Millbank represent women's captivity in Victorian society, and suggesting that the role of an upper-class woman, such as Margaret, is the same as a working-class woman like Selina and so many other prisoners.

Llewellyn considers Margaret's character to be transgressive and criminal for not representing the traditional Victorian woman, since she does not have children, she is unmarried, and she is intellectualized. He reads her activities as a lady-visitor as "an outlet for lesbian sexuality", arguing that Margaret's upper-class position places her in the advantage of the voyeuristic gaze and this is a feature that enables her acting out her desire with Selina. In Llewellyn's reading of *Affinity*, spiritualism is the key to enter the world of same-sex desire among women, as he regards spiritualism as "a metaphorical cover for the underworld of lesbian sexuality".[84] It is in this sense that he suggests that Margaret is able to release her sexuality as she comes into contact with Selina.

Neither Llewellyn's nor Braid's readings consider the incongruent power ingrained in the novel's class relations; they consider class only as an identity category that composes Margaret's and Selina's characters and that does not necessarily interfere with the effects of confinement and incarceration in the characters' development. King is the only critic who addresses matters concerning class in *Affinity* in her work about Victorian women in contemporary literature, emphasizing the subversive function of spiritualism in Victorian gender relations and discussing the distinctions between upper- and lower-class female sexualities.

King argues that Margaret's visits to the prison work as a kind of therapy that, as Braid and Llewellyn have suggested previously, enables Margaret to act out her same-sex desire. However, she reflects on the role played by class in the characters' relationship, pointing out that it is the working-class prisoner who incites transformations within the upper-class visitor, not the other way around, as might be expected. Instead of Selina learning the manners of middle- and upper-class femininity that Margaret supposedly teaches her, it is Margaret who believes in Selina's spiritualist power and learns the values of transgressing norms from her. In fact, King sees potential for transgression in Selina's writings, arguing that the character's diary "subverts the convention that diaries provide insight into a character's truest and most secret thoughts and feelings".[85] For King, Selina is highly aware of the potential of transgression in her thoughts and, hence, she does not put them down on paper.

It is true that Waters' depiction of the prison cannot be limited to the institution itself but must, in the Foucauldian sense, be extended as a means of criticism of Victorian gender and sexual ideology writ large. Yet, even if we do consider the prison to be a metaphorical confinement, as a set of disciplinary norms that enact upon the soul and form subjects, the consequences of each kind of imprisonment cannot be read on equal grounds, even though there are certainly similarities between them. Outside of prison, Selina's life is restricted by her position as a servant and by frequent episodes of abuse, domestic violence, and exploitation. In contrast, Margaret's social position as a spinster and as a woman who has had same-sex relationships makes her

84 Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity*", p. 210.

85 King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Literature*, p. 90.

vulnerable to medical violence that insists on placing her as a mad and dysfunctional person. They are both confined in the social norms that limit their roles as women, but it is important to emphasize that the class position that each of them occupies entails significant differences, particularly in terms of their possibilities of escape.

Being in possession of a fortune, as Margaret is, she could easily walk away from the home confinement and surveillance to which she has been submitted by pursuing her activities as an intellectual. Although Margaret mentions that she would like to write a book that is *not* a 'journal of the heart', she cannot achieve this because her writings, despite often criticizing the role played by women in Victorian society, do not function as a means to free herself; instead, they cause her to sink herself further into the depression of domesticity. Selina, however, has no possessions and strives to transform her life and to overcome obstacles through the use of spiritualism. The question of agency is crucial here as we notice that Selina's financial independence with her work as a medium provides the means for emancipation, whereas Margaret, with her wealth and education, cannot use her activities as a researcher to achieve a similar purpose. The book about the prison is never written and her fieldnotes become secondary in her diaries when compared to her constant complaints about being under surveillance at home. If prison offers the possibility to achieve emancipation for Margaret, she certainly does not take advantage of it. The prison cannot, by any stretch, be experienced as a possibility for improvement, reflection, or freedom for Selina and all of the other incarcerated inmates in Millbank. This is only available for women in Margaret's class position, particularly women who can walk in and out of the prison and return to a comfortable home.

The diary form that Waters chooses in her novel conveys the apparent truth and documentation of life behind bars in a Victorian panoptic prison, a documentation form that is endorsed by the social texts about prisons written by Elizabeth Fry and Henry Mayhew. Nevertheless, this documentary fiction is narrated by a character who walks in and out of prison whenever she wishes, instead of someone who actually must endure the daily count of prison time, the authoritarian impositions of the officers, and the social marginality directed towards convicts. It is, in fact, Margaret's privilege in the prison system that Waters represents, given that the character occupies the position of a watcher, an observer, who has the voyeuristic privilege of looking into but walking out of Millbank.

The matrons show Margaret the different wards during her first visit and she gets to peak into the cells through what the inmates call 'the eye', an iron flap that covers a small hole on the cell's door, which can only be opened from the outside. As she walks by Selina's cell, Margaret opens the inspection hole and sees Selina for the first time, a moment that is later described in her diary: "I was sure that I had seen her likeness, in a saint or an angel in a painting of Crivelli's".[86] As she scrutinizes Selina through the spying hole, she sees the Victorian "angel in the house", she sees fragility and virtuousness, she sees the ideal of the upper-class Victorian woman, the role that she is supposed to play at home, and which she cannot fulfill. Margaret's visits to Millbank can be read in parallel with the popular activity of slumming, as an

86 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 27.

entertaining adventure taken up by a bored and depressed spinster, by someone who can revive her humor by looking at women who seem more miserable than herself.

Margaret's writings suggest that there is a will to be sympathetic to the prisoners' lives and that there is a will to help (a will of charity), and she does see the prison as an unfair method of punishment. Nevertheless, she is unable to be critical of her own class position and truly believes that she and the inmates share the same social position in terms of confinement (i.e., the position of a 'Victorian woman'). In another diary entry, Margaret feels sorry for those "fifteen hundred men and women, all shut up and obliged to be silent and meek", and she wonders "how many of them lie in their cold cells, dreaming of china cups, and books and verses".[87] The assumption that those prisoners are thinking of books and of china cups displays her own incapability to understand the political, social, and economic forces that construct the prison as the ultimate space of punishment and control, and also the social disadvantages that has taken those women to prison: all of them are poor women who are convicted for abortions, for murdering their babies, for theft, for assault, and for aggressively responding to sexual abuse and harassment.

It is in this sense that I contend that the appropriation of the prison, or the queering of the prison, occurs as a way to disrupt dominant class relations between upper- and working-class women. Unlike other Sarah Waters novels, queering space in *Affinity* is not a way to resist heteronormative gazes and enact lesbian identity. Rather, it is a way to break free from suffocating and oppressive class domination *through* the use and enactment of spiritualism and same-sex desire. For Selina, being a lesbian is not perceived as a challenge, as something forbidden; it is rather natural, it is love, and it is what she calls *affinity*. For Margaret, conversely, this is described as one more prohibition, one more failure that she must confront, first with Helen and later with Selina.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 32.