

Haunting Ambiguity: Gothic and Psychological Reading of Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger*

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Abstract:

Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009) is an intriguing work that unsettles readers through its atmospheric tension and obscurity. The novel is set in post-war Warwickshire, focusing on the decaying Hundreds Hall mansion and its inhabitants, the Ayres. The emotional and physical deterioration of the family is analogous to the crumbling mansion. The story is narrated from the perspective of Dr. Faraday, compelling readers to question the reliability of the haunting. Waters leaves the ending open and thus, this paper examines the supernatural and psychological interpretations of the novel. The supernatural dimension is echoed through Gothic elements like spontaneous fires, spectral presences, strange noises, and the haunting figure of the "little stranger". Waters meticulously renders the atmosphere, the architecture, and the use of classic haunted house motifs, which reinforces the sense of a genuine malevolent force and paranormal activity. The psychological interpretation focuses on the fragile mental state of the family and their anxieties rooted in class decline and grief, which can point to hysteria and psychosomatic symptoms. Faraday's obsessive attachment to the mansion introduces a psychoanalytic layer that links the haunting to repressed desires and latent hostility. His authority as a doctor becomes a mask that conceals bias and possible complicity. This paper will examine both supernatural and psychological constructs, using gothic and psychological conventions to probe deeper questions about class, desire, money, and the unstable boundary between reality and imagination.

Keywords: Gothic Fiction, Supernatural, Psychological Trauma, Unreliable Narrator.

Introduction

Sarah Waters is a contemporary British author known for her historical fiction and exploration of class, gender, and sexuality. Most of her novels are set in Victorian or Post-war Britain. Her works are noted for their psychological complexity, gothic undertones and intricate narrative structures. Her novels, such as *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Fingersmith* (2002), and *The Night Watch* (2006), all explore marginalized identities and social undercurrents. *The Little Stranger* (2009) was her first novel to diverge from explicit queer themes and delve into the world of decaying English gentry, exploring psychological trauma through gothic tropes and ambiguous narration. *The Little Stranger* combined traditional Gothic elements with psychological tension. The author refers to it as a "haunted house novel" since it leaves the reader wondering what exactly haunts the mansion. Is it supernatural, or is it just the phantasm of the anxious family members? The narrator, Dr Faraday, is at the center of this interpretation. One of the novel's strengths is that it keeps the readers guessing about the true nature of the events unfolding. This research paper attempts to examine the novel, employing both supernatural and psychological interpretations to dissect the eerie occurrences at Hundreds Hall.

Gothic fiction is rooted in 18th-century Romanticism, which presents decaying architecture, supernatural threats and characters haunted by memory, trauma, or guilt. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) pioneered these elements, which were later presented in cult classics like Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). Waters follows this tradition and presents Hundreds Hall like the Usher mansion or the Hill House. The Georgian house, which has served as the Ayres family's residence for more than 200 years, is in disrepair. Its masonry is crumbling, its gardens are overgrown with weeds, and its owners, Mrs

Ayres, daughter Caroline, and son Roderick, are finding it difficult to adapt to the changing social climate.

The Little Stranger is known for its ambiguity and the blurred lines between the supernatural and the psychological. There are numerous instances that give the idea of exactly what is going on. The house experiences strange and unpleasant incidents that make the residents and readers wonder if these are supernatural happenings or psychological effects of the characters. Dr Faraday narrates the story, and it is up to the reader to decide whether his description of the events is genuine or biased. It is challenging to distinguish between what is real and what is imagined, as the characters struggle with their own psychological problems. Hundreds Hall's physical deterioration also serves as a reflection of the Ayres Family way of life's decline, how the times have changed, and how the old aristocratic order is eroding. One of *The Little Stranger's* merits is that it can be interpreted in both supernatural and psychological ways. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether the events in the house are psychological, supernatural, or both.

The Supernatural at Hundreds Hall

Sarah Waters is known for her talent in crafting unsettling and mysterious environments in her books. She expertly employs a variety of literary devices to create a spooky atmosphere that draws readers into her works. *The Little Stranger* excels at creating an eerie and unsettling atmosphere throughout the narrative. The story is set in post-World War II England and revolves around a decaying mansion called Hundreds Hall. Waters masterfully describes Hundreds Hall, portraying it as a crumbling, decaying, and oppressive mansion. The physical deterioration of the

house mirrors the decline of the Ayres family and contributes to the atmosphere. The reader can almost feel the claustrophobia and decay seeping from the walls.

Old castles or buildings allegedly cursed by ancestors are important components in Gothic fiction because they create an ominous and threatening backdrop. This pattern was first introduced in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. *The Little Stranger* captures the essence of an ancient castle that possesses all the characteristics of a haunted house. This is why Waters referred to the book as "a haunted house novel" in an interview with Rebecca Lovell in May 2009.

The story of Hundreds Hall, a Georgian mansion located in Warwickshire, is narrated by a middle-aged doctor named Dr Faraday. He begins by describing a childhood afternoon in July 1919, when he first saw the interior of the house while accompanying his mother, a nursery maid, and fell in love with it. "I remember its lovely ageing details: the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings" (Waters 1). Nearly 30 years later, he returns to Hundreds Hall for treating Betty, a new maid who is frightened by the old house. The 14-year-old servant and the family dog, Gyp, are the first to notice and be impacted by the menacing presence, just like in a traditional ghost story. "It ain't like a proper house at all. I think I shall die of fright sometimes" (Waters 13).

Dr Faraday observes and develops a friendship with the Ayres family. He starts coming to the house frequently to take care of Roderick's nerve issues, which developed while he served in the RAF during World War II. The electric therapy is described by Roderick as "something of Dr. Frankenstein's" (Waters 60). The main focus of the narrative is Mrs Ayres's daughter, Susan, who died at the age of 8 due to diphtheria. The book suggests on numerous occasions that it is

indeed the ghost of the deceased girl that haunts the mansion. The uncanny incidents start when the family invites friends to supper one day in an effort to find Caroline a good spouse. The black Labrador, Gyp, who is usually calm, bites a girl on the face during the party, leaving her permanently disfigured.

Faraday has to put the dog down, and Caroline shows no remorse for the girl, Gillian, and even accuses her of killing the dog, which causes Faraday to detest Caroline for the first time. Roderick was having his own paranormal experience in his room at the same time. His collar was initially nowhere to be found, and then suddenly appeared in the sink. His cufflinks disappeared next, and the shaving glass finally began to move on its own. Faraday dismisses everything as PTSD from the war and claims that Roderick has been experiencing "war shock." Caroline believes in the supernatural as well, but Faraday shrugs it off as a delusion. One of the most dramatic supernatural events in the novel is the fire that destroys Hundreds Hall. The fire is particularly mysterious because it appears to have started spontaneously, making it seem as though it was more than a simple accident. Roderick blames the malicious presence for it. He is admitted to a mental hospital the next day. Caroline does not want to stay at the house since she always feels a malevolent presence there. Mrs Ayres worries about being abandoned as the bond between Faraday and Caroline deepens. They discover strange 'S' signs throughout the house. Mrs Ayres thinks it is her deceased daughter, Susan, who is the spirit in the house. Caroline also shows Faraday two books, "Phantasms of the Living" and "The Night Side of Nature", underscoring the family's belief in the supernatural.

Faraday and Caroline vacillate between a confusing platonic friendship and romantic interest. Caroline, Mrs Ayres, and their two servants are alarmed by additional sounds in the home. In the areas where these events have taken place, they discover odd, juvenile writing on

the walls. The phone rings in the middle of the night with no one on the other end, and the bells of the maids ring without anyone calling them. “But the house, it seemed, would not be so easily subdued, and before another week had passed, a new trouble had emerged” (Waters 331). The maids are startled by the sound of a 19th-century tube communication system that connects the kitchen to the abandoned nursery. When Mrs Ayres decides to investigate it, she finds herself locked in the nursery where Susan, her beloved first daughter, passed away at the age of eight from diphtheria. Mrs Ayres slams the windows open, cutting her arms as she tries to get away from the shadows and inaudible fluttering. She starts to believe and find comfort in the idea that Susan is always close by and is eager to be with her, despite the fact that she occasionally hurts her. Caroline calls the hall a “madhouse”. Soon after, Caroline and the maid discover Mrs Ayres’s lifeless body.

Faraday and Caroline made preparations to get married in six weeks on the day of Mrs Ayres funeral. However, Caroline is apathetic and uninterested in the wedding. As a result, she calls off the ceremony and begins making plans to sell Hundreds Hall. Faraday is sceptical and makes numerous unsuccessful attempts to convince Caroline to change her mind. Faraday had a call that prevented him from being present on the evening of their intended wedding. When he returns home at last, he finds out that Caroline killed herself by throwing herself off the second floor onto a marble landing. At the inquest, the maid testifies that she was awakened by Caroline going upstairs to look into a noise she had heard in the hallway. She just said "You!" before collapsing to her death.

Throughout the novel, Waters presents a series of unexplainable events that defy rational interpretation. These events include mysterious accidents, inexplicable fires, and strange occurrences beyond the realm of scientific explanation. Dr Faraday, the novel's narrator, attempts

to provide rational explanations, but the supernatural angle lingers, leaving the reader to question the true nature of these occurrences. One of the most prominent supernatural elements in the novel is the appearance of apparitions. Several characters claim to have seen or sensed a ghostly figure, often described as a "little stranger." These apparitions manifest as a haunting presence adding to the pervasive sense of unease. Whether it is Mrs Ayres's sightings or the eerie nursery scenes, Waters maintains a delicate balance between the supernatural and the psychological, leaving the existence of these apparitions open to interpretation. The enigmatic character of the "little stranger" is central to the supernatural interpretation of the novel.

The novel's conclusion offers multiple interpretations of the little stranger's identity, ranging from a malevolent spirit to a manifestation of collective guilt and psychological trauma. Waters masterfully blurs the lines between the supernatural and the psychological, leaving readers to question whether the eerie events are the result of paranormal phenomena or manifestations of the characters' inner turmoil. Waters maintains the supernatural interpretation through the creepy atmosphere, unusual happenings, apparitions, and the enigmatic presence of the little stranger. *The Little Stranger* is a testament to Waters' talent for weaving a story that defies simple classification and encourages readers to consider the line between the normal and the supernatural.

Trauma, Psychological Uncertainty and Unreliable Narration

From a psychological perspective, *The Little Stranger* explores themes related to the human mind, trauma, and the effects of class and social change on individuals' mental states. The sensible and logical figure in the book is Dr Faraday, who believes that every phantom or supernatural occurrence is the result of the Ayres family's mind playing tricks. He dismisses

every sign of haunting with rationality and it is this scepticism which makes him an unreliable narrator (Braid 139). The Ayres family members exhibit symptoms of hysteria and psychosomatic illness. These symptoms may be linked to their anxieties and the decline of their social status. Caroline Ayres, one of the central characters, experiences a range of physical and emotional symptoms that are often associated with hysteria. These symptoms include fainting spells, nervousness, anxiety, and physical weakness. Hysteria, historically considered a psychological disorder, was often diagnosed in women who exhibited a variety of unexplained physical and emotional distress. Even Dr Seeley seemed to think all the events were “a pretty plain case of psychoneurosis” (Waters 377). The stressors in Caroline's life, such as the downfall of Hundreds Hall and her family's social standing, as well as her deteriorating mental state, seem to emerge as psychosomatic symptoms in her situation.

Dr Seeley rejects the notion that Hundreds Hall is haunted, even asserting that the only anomalous elements in the mansion are the ladies. He observes, “It’s generally women, you know, at the root of this sort of thing” (Waters 380). Caroline, being unmarried and caring for her mother and brother, is seen as a sign of ugliness, strangeness and cold-heartedness. As Simone de Beauvoir said, “one is not born, but becomes a woman.” She being a woman is expected to take care of the unwell family which in turn takes a heavy toll on her. Being intelligent and childless is treated as a social crime for a woman within patriarchal society. Caroline was deemed mentally unstable in court posthumously and her eccentricities were brought up in an attempt to solve the mystery surrounding her sudden death. The meaning of Caroline's symptoms is left unclear on purpose throughout the book. The narrative leaves open the potential of supernatural influences on her health, even though they can be interpreted as

signs of psychological distress and hysteria. This ambiguity heightens the story's discomfort and mystique.

Seeley asserts that there may be some energy involved in the haunting “motivated by all the nasty impulses and hungers the conscious mind had hoped to keep hidden away” (Waters 380). The majority of the characters have feelings and frustrations that they have suppressed in their subconscious, which may have been the cause of the poltergeist. Roderick is obviously physically and mentally disabled by the war. He regressed to a sour, cynical version of his former self. He does not say much and is constantly agitated. As the home's owner, he tries vainly to maintain it but fails terribly. His haunting, which culminates in a fire in his bedroom, reflects this sense of responsibility, and in order to get away from the apparition, he consents to being committed to a mental institution. The ghost he sees might just be a hallucination of his overworked and stressed-out mind.

After Roderick is committed, Mrs Ayres is plagued by what she believes to be the spirit of her deceased eldest daughter, Susan. Then came the monstrous noises, enigmatic letter "S" markings, and the appellation "Sucky." The speaking tube in Susan's old nursery was generating weird noises while Mrs Ayres was locked there. She claims to have seen and heard her dead daughter's ghost, who prods her mother to join her by killing herself. It is possible that the grief over losing her daughter, Roderick's disability, and Caroline's deteriorating health, all might have contributed to the ghost's appearance.

The haunting has little effect on Caroline. She is merely an observer who hears and sees unusual noises and sights. She is unconcerned and less affected by everything. She does not even feel sorry for Gillian, who was bitten by the dog, Gyp. Between all of this, she even has an

awkward and delicate relationship with Faraday, which she subsequently ends and decides to sell the property. It quickly becomes apparent that she is also a victim of whatever inhabits Hundreds Hall and not a culprit. After what appears to be an encounter with "the little stranger" in the middle of the night, she falls off the stairs.

The first-person narrator, Dr. Faraday, is the only other character who could be capable of using his subliminal abilities to accomplish his objectives. Although he initially escapes our judgment, it is entirely possible that the ghost was nothing more than Faraday's game. He was motivated to get rid of the Ayres's and stood to gain greatly by doing so. Since he was a young boy, Faraday has been in awe of the home. He had always been drawn to the mansion since his first meeting when he took a plaster acorn from Hundreds' walls, "I was like a man, I suppose, wanting a lock of hair from the head of a girl he had suddenly and blindingly become enamoured of" (Waters 3). This can be interpreted as an act of possession and a repressed desire to take over the house, which signifies the higher classes and established social order. Faraday's reliability as a narrator, along with his growing obsession, is essential to understanding the novel's exploration of perception, subjectivity, and the blurred lines between the supernatural and the psychological.

The first-person narration of Dr Faraday only gives a glimpse of his perspective on the events of the house. As a medical doctor, he has an institutional authority, but this also biases his interpretation of the events. He tries to explain everything rationally, and his reliability can be questioned. He is overly attached to the family, which may be a strategy to assess their vulnerabilities. His relationship with Caroline can also be just to get married into the family. He disparages Mrs Ayres suffering as obsessive nostalgia and thus makes her descend into madness (Madsen 116). Roderick becomes aware of this hostile stance for the first time. "Why the hell are you here? How did you manage to get such a footing in this house? You're not a part of this

family. You're no one." (Waters 197). It might not be a coincidence that the same night, Roderick's room is caught on fire.

As his attachment to the family and the house deepens, he becomes more emotionally invested in their lives. This emotional involvement can lead him to project his own desires and fears onto the Ayres family and their experiences, potentially distorting his narration. Faraday's narration is unreliable since it consistently presents his point of view. Readers can only believe what is revealed by the narrator. First-person narration tells the story from the viewpoint of a particular character. The story is perceived by the audience exclusively through the narrator's viewpoint. By definition, a first-person narrator is a limited and potentially flawed witness. Dr Faraday's obsession with Hundreds Hall not only affects his reliability as a narrator but also strains his relationships, particularly his interactions with Caroline Ayres. His desire for the house and his growing fascination with Caroline shapes his actions and decisions. In the end all characters depart and every time it was from an accident manipulated by Faraday (Dubey and Chowdhury) .

Faraday conveniently leaves the house whenever something happens or is about to happen. The final night, he is on his way to see Caroline when he falls asleep in his automobile not far from the entrance to the hall. In the end, the Hundreds Hall is not sold, and Faraday continues to frequent the location using his old key. Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory, explores the language of the unconscious mind. He delves into the unconscious mind, repressed desires, and how past experiences shape an individual's behaviour. His point was that desire does not express itself easily because culture does not allow or facilitate it, and we need to pay attention to language and other forms of symbolic expression – gestures, sounds, facial expression and

writing to discover it. Faraday's obsession with the family and the house can also be analysed in terms of unconscious desires, particularly those related to class and his past.

Conclusion

The presence of strange sounds, apparitions, and unexplained illnesses in Hundreds Hall invites a supernatural interpretation, which is further reinforced by other inexplicable phenomena. The Hundreds Hall mansion itself is seen as a potentially evil and haunted place that has traditional Gothic characteristics. The psychological tension and anxiety felt by characters are heightened by supernatural components, which add to their mounting agony.

The supernatural explanation causes readers to reflect on issues of faith and scepticism in relation to the story as well as their own perspectives. The unreliability of Dr Faraday as a storyteller is the main topic of a psychological analysis. He defends himself against his increasing preoccupation and discomfort by offering logical explanations for paranormal occurrences. An alternative explanation for the events is provided by psychological interpretation, which focuses on the Ayres family's mental and emotional issues as a result of prior trauma. The distinction between reality and imagination gets increasingly hazy as Faraday's logic deteriorates, highlighting the vulnerability of the human mind. The audience views everything through Faraday's perspective, not realizing how much the narrator can be manipulating them. Sarah Waters's strategy of reverse psychology deliberately crafts Dr Faraday as an unreliable narrator to create ambiguity and tension within the story.

The Little Stranger is a rich and multifaceted text that thwarts a clear, singular interpretation. The novel's haunting can be read as a literal ghost story and also as a psychological allegory. Waters uses gothic concepts not merely to frighten but also to unsettle

readers' assumptions about class and gender. The ambiguity here is not a flaw but a deliberate strategy to make the novel a compelling exploration of the human psyche.

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