

History as Spectre: A Hauntological Reading of Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*

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Abstract

*This article examines the relationship between hauntology and psychological realism in the context of the novel *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters through the theoretical lens of Jacques Derrida's hauntology. Instead of affirming the existence of the ghost in the novel, this article will show that the haunting in the novel is actually a form of psychological and historical realism. The strange occurrences in the mansion took as symbols of the class anxiety and social decline in post-war Britain. Furthermore, this article will show that the ambiguity between madness and historical memory in the novel actually creates a space in which the past continuously invades the present. The horror and ambiguity in the novel will be revealed as the effect of the past on the present, rather than the effect of the ghost. This article will prove that the past, as history, is actually the main source of haunting in the novel, which directs the flow of the narrative and the psychological states of the characters.*

Keywords: Hauntology, Psychological Realism, Anxiety, Historical Memory, Post-war Britain.

Sarah Waters is an important British novelist. She often writes about the tradition in her fiction. This helps her to think about history and memory and how society is changing. Sarah Waters wrote *The Little Stranger* in 2009. This novel is set in England after the Second World War. *The Little Stranger* is different from Gothic stories that are too focused on history or are too sensational. Instead, Sarah Waters told a subtle story about things falling apart and people feeling uneasy and disturbed. This story is also a little unclear, which makes it more interesting. Sarah Waters explored the decline and psychological unease in *The Little Stranger*. The story was about Hundreds Hall, an old house in the country that is falling apart. It was narrated by Dr. Faraday, who's a sensible man. People often said that this book is a story about ghosts, a thrilling story that reflects the people's minds, or a book that imitates how the classes in England changed after the war. The book spoke about Hundreds Hall and the people, as Dr. Faraday said, Hundreds Hall is a part of the story. However, many such readings encountered a critical difficulty: *The Little Stranger* persistently refused to confirm the existence of a

supernatural ghost. The narrative withheld definitive explanation, leaving the source of disturbance unresolved. Rather than treating this ambiguity as a flaw or a mere narrative trick, this article argues that the novel's uncertainty is central. The absence of a visible ghost redirects attention away from the supernatural and toward the lingering presence of historical, social, and psychological forces.

This research examined *The Little Stranger* by using the theoretical framework of hauntology. Hauntology is an idea that has become increasingly prominent in the realm of philosophy and aesthetics since its inception in the 1990s. As an idea, hauntology was coined by Jacques Derrida in his book 'Spectres of Marx' published in 1993, and the concept touched on the idea of being that is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. More broadly, hauntology is concerned with the haunting or ghostly presence of lost futures alongside a crisis of imagining alternative futures, unresolved histories return as ghostly presences. In the case of the novel by Water's, hauntology reveals that the real haunting is the one that comes from the unsettled class hierarchies, decaying social structures, and the failure of post-war modernity, which completely assumed that the values of the landed gentry, rather than the paranormal. This article examined the theme of the place, death through the hauntological lens in the novel, and the temporality of the novel, revealing that the novel is haunted by the ghosts of history. It is in this regard that the novel gives an interesting view of post-war Britain as a country that is stuck between the ruins of the past and the uncertain future, where the ghost is not visible but felt. Jacques Derrida brings the concept of hauntology to his work 'Specters of Marx'. He uses the concept to undermine the notion that history happens in a linear and complete form. He states that what is declared "dead" continues to return as a spectre, occupying a space that is "neither present nor absent, neither alive nor dead" (Derrida 63). To be past is actually neither simply past nor simply present. This makes hauntology disturb binary oppositions like the past and the present, presence and absence, and, through hauntology, the unresolved pasts haunt the present.

Derrida states that, "The ghost is not the supernatural but the historical and political," (Derrida) as it stands for the unresolved conflicts of the past and the unpaid cultural debts. What haunts is the moment when "societies pretend to be beyond the relations of the past when the past continues to have effects" (Derrida). Thus, hauntology as a critical discourse reveals the impact of buried histories beneath the surface of progress. Avery Gordon further develops these points when she identifies haunting as that which happens when "repressed social violences and exclusions make themselves felt" (Gordon 8). Ghosts for Gordon, point to structural injustices, but are often displaced from their referents, held in suspense, made a subject for a story that has yet to be told Mark Fisher also identifies a connection between hauntology and the failure of the promise of modernity when he finds that "cultures are characterized as haunting lost futures" moments when promised developments have not occurred (Fisher 16).

Hauntology is deeply connected to space, and in *The Little Stranger*, Hundreds Hall serves as a physical record of the past that has not been settled. Faraday remembered the house as being shaky even when he was a child, and it was characterised by "worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings," making it appear "blurred and slightly uncertain—like an ice... beginning to melt in the sun" (Waters,5). The house, therefore, is presented not as a safe aristocratic monument, but as a building that is already losing its grip on historical time. When Faraday came back after the war, decay has deepened considerably: "sections of the lovely weathered edgings seemed to have fallen completely away... ivy had spread, then patchily died... the steps... were cracked, with weeds growing lushly up through the seams" (Waters,9) Haunting is more like the gradual material weakening of the house than a dramatic supernatural intrusion. As Gordon points out, haunting is where "social violence is done but not acknowledged" (Gordon,63). The house became a witness to the gradual disintegration of the class system that had been the source of its support.

Faraday's childhood theft of the plaster acorn establishes his possessive relationship to the house. He confessed, "the acorn gave at last... I put the acorn in my pocket," later discovering its "blackened nub" in the fire (Waters,8). This fragment served as a symbolic remnant of aristocratic authority, which has been taken away but still lingers unresolved. The object foreshadowed Faraday's eventual takeover of Hundreds Hall, implying that the real haunting, in fact, comes from the psyche rather than from the world of spirits, the psyche haunted by unfulfilled desire and social hatred.

Hauntology was, among other things, a genre that deeply wrestles with the idea of non-linear progress. Hundreds Hall was a case in point where the promised post-war rebuilding kept being put off; in fact, the narrative of the post-war years unfolded in a loop of decline. Whilst it is talked about in the family that they might have the modern utilities, the reality is that they had to withdraw even further into the past because, according to the county council's housing plan, their land must be sold to build new houses and thus the Hall is left without any up, to, date services. Consequently, modernisation becomes a privilege of those who will live in the renewed area, whereas the old estate is left to vanish, thus progress is equated with displacement. Faraday is a character who, despite being professionally up to date, is somehow taken back rather than forward. He confesses that "ordinary life had fractionally tilted, and that I had slipped into some other, odder, rather rarer realm" (Waters, 77). Rather than being a symbol of rational progress, he is, in fact, becoming more and more engrossed in the historical buildings that, from his standpoint, he is examining in a detached manner. Mark Fisher defines hauntology as the condition in which "the future is cancelled, and we are left with the recycling of old forms" (Fisher,16). Waters' narrative structure reflects this immobility: events repeat themselves, accounts do not add up, and every revelation, instead of clarifying, confuses further. In this way, the novel was enacting temporal stagnation, a return of the past that is felt as unresolved history making its way into the present again. Class operated as the dominant ghostly presence that haunts the entire novel. Even after the decay of its capitalist base, Hundreds Hall continued to be an icon of power. The tenants' revolt made visible to the eyes of all when Makins simply brushes off Roderick as a "so-called gentleman farmer" who disappears when labour is required (Waters, 186). The class hierarchy continued to exist in people's minds even when it was not functioning effectively in material terms. Faraday's position was very much conflicted. While he was accepted as a doctor, he still felt that he was not really among the family circle. Mrs. Ayres's reluctance before taking him to social gatherings and her worry about land sales show that there are still class boundaries that politeness cannot get rid of. Faraday's reasoned attacks on the fall of the aristocracy are combined with an overwhelming wish to be the one to represent the symbolic space of the upper class. Avery Gordon argues that haunting exposes "the lingering trouble of social hierarchies that are supposed to be finished" (Gordon 195). Faraday became a class-haunting, both a witness and an agent in this sense. In this way, the novel by Waters is an excellent reflection on the way an unrecognized past is affecting and shaking our present.

The criticism surrounding Sarah Waters' novel *The Little Stranger* is based on the Gothic elements, the psychological aspects, and the British society in the post-war period. It was noticeable that the novel is not based on the innate plot of the ghost story genre since it does not affirm the presence of a ghost as a weakness, but as a way. Through the decaying buildings of Hundreds Hall, the disruption of time, unresolved class resentment, and the limitations of modern thinking, Waters created a story troubled by what has been denied but never resolved. The novel's choice not to confirm a supernatural presence is not avoidance. It meant to, pushing the reader to see haunting as a social, historical, and psychological issue instead of just a paranormal one. Using Derrida's idea of hauntology, along with Gordon's sociological model of haunting and Fisher's view of lost

futures, this article shows that the real horror of *The Little Stranger* reveals post-war Britain as a society that cannot finish the work of mourning. The ghost that remains at Hundreds Hall is not an outside spirit but the ongoing influence of class divisions, emotional suppression, and broken promises of progress. In this way, the novel by Waters is an excellent reflection on the way an unrecognised past is affecting and shaking our present.

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