

Revisiting the “Inhabited Space” of English Country House in Sarah Waters’s *The Little Stranger*

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Abstract

The English Country House happens to be one of the most iconic *topoi* in English literary studies. Since narratologists have long privileged time over space, narrative space remained a relatively unexplored territory until the twentieth century, which intensified the interest in the house as the thematic fulcrum of literary works. British novelist Sarah Waters’s first venture into the realm of the sub-genre of English Country House fiction, *The Little Stranger* (2009) is a befitting discourse that appropriates the poetics of manorial space. Hundreds Hall, the Warwickshire seat of the Ayreses, encapsulates many roles as the epicenter of the story and as a powerful symbol of the gradual decay of English aristocracy in the post-World War II Britain. The article will try to incorporate Gaston Bachelard’s spatial criticism elaborated in his *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and the concept of heterotopia by Foucault for the interpretation/ (s) of the narrative. The study seeks to locate Bachelard’s bourgeoisie points of view, which the author subverts by portraying the rise of the proletariat. The focus of the article is to highlight the ingenuity of Waters’s creative process, which resorts to the genre of English Country House fiction to capture the condition of British aristocrats in a time of crises.

Keywords: English Country House fiction, bourgeoisie points of view, rise of the proletariat

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Foucauldian “epoch of space”, the interest of literary and critical studies in the houses as the abodes of human beings became hugely popular. In many ways, the houses seem to be the pivotal points of the creative, artistic, and cultural domains of contemporary cultural imaginations. Space in general and interior space in particular remained relatively unexplored territories in the literary studies until the twentieth century, that witnessed an intensified interest in the house—specifically in the opulent and palatial seat of the landed gentry in an Edenic rural backdrop—as a symbol, *topos*, and motif of literary works. Quite significantly, Harry Levin in his *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1980) suggests, “The English novel, from *Waverley* to *Brideshead Revisited*, revolves around great houses” (Levin, 1980, p. 246). The sub-genre of English Country House fiction engages with the subtle nuances of the intimate spaces within the houses.

At the fag end of the first decade of the present millennium, British author Sarah Waters successfully ventured into the sub-genre of English Country House fiction with *The Little Stranger*. As is explicated in the very name of the genre, the novel offers an analysis of the manorial intimate spaces. Throughout the narrative, the house remains a constantly felt symbolic presence. It is not for nothing that the text literally begins and ends with the house of the Ayres, the Hundreds Hall. The novel opens in 1919 with a fete organized in the South lawn of the Hundreds Hall to celebrate the Empire Day. Right at the onset, in the opening scene, Dr. Faraday privileges the house over its inhabitants and herein sets the theme in perspective:

Mrs. Ayres would have been twenty-four or –five, her husband a few years older; their little girl Susan, would have been about six. They must have made a very handsome family, but my memory of them is vague. I recall most vividly the house itself, which struck me as an absolute mansion. I remember its lovely ageing details: the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings. (Waters, 2010, p. 01)

The present paper will discuss in four points how the text under consideration may get appropriated with Bachelardian topoanalysis. The concept of heterotopia by Foucault will be dealt with to map the poetics of space inside the warp and woof the narrative. The article investigates how the novelist subverts the bourgeoisie points of view of Bachelard by subsequently making space for a member of the proletariat class. The study reads Waters's narrative as an apt and timely move to capture the decaying conditions of British aristocracy in the wake of communism in the post-war Britain.

2. Bachelard and Topoanalysis:

Gaston Bachelard, the twentieth century French philosopher, widely acknowledged for his concepts of Philosophy of Sciences and Epistemological Break, in his *The Poetics of Space* (1958) engages with the concept of 'topoanalysis'. In this celebrated study, Bachelard considers the house and its intimate spaces as privileged entities for a psychological as well as phenomenological study that aims at integrating the dispersed images of memory and imagination to find out the original shell of the house. Concentrating upon the great metaphysical dimension of the inhabited spaces of the houses, Bachelard formulates:

Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is the body and soul. It is the human being's first world. Before he is cast into the world . . . man is laid in the cradle of the house (Bachelard, 2014, p.07).

The house represents the microcosm of the macrocosm: “. . . our house is our corner of the world . . . it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (Bachelard, 2014, p.04). “The roles houses assume in literature”, argues Topolovska in her dissertation entitled, *The Country House Revisited: Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst*, “is patterned on their role in the lives of the human beings” (Topolovska, 2016, p. 13), which in Bachelardian term can be called “anthropocosmic ties” (Bachelard, 2014, p.04). Bachelardian theoretical formulations prioritize inhabited space over geometrical space, for, a house that has not been experienced is nothing but an insignificant inert box. Relevant parallelisms between Waters's narrative and Bachelardian spatial criticism have been drawn in the next four sub-points.

i. Topophilia

Topophilia, according to Bachelard, is a kind of investigation that “seeks to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love” (Bachelard, 2014, p.XXXV). For Bachelard, ‘topophilia’ is that strong feeling for space for which he himself in his study has promoted the setting of a literary work from its marginal position to give it equal status with the character and the plot. In Waters’s text, Hundreds Hall is the space that captures the mind of the narrator right in his childhood. When he steps out of the prohibited inner space of the house and steals away a little acorn off the wall, and justifies it by saying:

I didn’t do it in the spirit of vandalism. I wasn’t a spiteful or destructive boy. It was simply that, in admiring the house, I wanted to possess a piece of it—or rather, as if the admiration itself, which I suspected a more ordinary child would not have felt, entitled me to it. 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, 2010, p.03)

Faraday’s words betray him to be a trespassing outsider, intruding upon the modesty of the house itself. Here, Bachelardian immaculate version of ‘topophilia’, for which one is even capable of being “hypnotized by the gaze of the solitary house . . .” (Bachelard, 2014, p.36) turns out to be an obsessed, guilty brand of ‘topophilia’ that engulfs the entire persona of Dr. Faraday.

As the story rolls on, the narrator, Faraday is to be seen in the capacity of a physician who has been called to the house to treat an ailing maid, Betty. But, surprisingly to Faraday, in the last few decades the house has changed enough to appall him. With all the signs of “damp squibs” (Waters, 2010, p.08)—Ivy spread here and there, cracked stone steps with weeds growing on it, chaotic garden, brutally scrubbed and lifeless rooms, streaked and dusty windows, untidy rooms—the ancestral seat has lost the ceremonious tempo and flavour of its glorious days. Though Faraday was not born in this house, the house is “physically inscribed” (Bachelard, 2014, p.14) in him, for, he can rightly locate the ghastly changes that the house, from the cellar to the garret, has undergone.

It is surprising to note that this decay of the house finds a true parallel in the declining states of its dwellers: the death of the little girl Susan, Colonel Ayres’s death, Roderick’s wounds in the leg, Caroline’s manly appearances, and Mrs. Ayres’s periodic mental illnesses. The inmates become the metaphor of the house itself. The remaining living-breathing figures in the house do not realize that their gradual degenerations and ultimate catastrophes have been conflated with the doomed fate of their house. This is truly reminiscent of Bachelard’s excerpt of Jean Bourdeillette’s poem about a house that is lost and gone:

The house blends with death
In a mirror whose luster is dimming. (Bachelard, 2014, p.56)

ii. Memory Housed

In the corpus of the novel, the moment adult Faraday enters the house and locates the old deal table, he gets transported to his childhood memory of the house: “the very table, by the look of it, where I had eaten my jellies and ‘shapes’—recalled the excitement of that first visit” (Waters, 2010, p.08). Herein, it is easy to remind oneself of the theoretical formulations in the *Poetics of Space* that prioritize the house, which inhabits space as a reservoir of memories and “if the house is a bit

elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams” (Bachelard, 2014, p.08).

Time and again, Dr. Faraday expresses his desire to roam about all the nooks and corners of the house only to re-live the by-gone memories of the day of his childhood when his mother smuggled him inside the palace. He could rightly predict the year of its establishment and what the architects might have thought about it while building “. . . the shady corridors with the rooms opening from them, large and light” (Waters, 2010, p.25). Not only does he admire it, but out of fascination, he harbours a secret desire to possess it and starts wishing to belong to it. After his secret engagement with Caroline Ayres, when she asks him about their future abode in London, Faraday divulges his plan to stay back at the Hundreds. With unhesitating voice, he admits in front of Mrs. Ayres, “Well, in marrying Caroline, I mean not only to care for her, but for you, and the house” (Waters, 2010, p.391). In his daydream, Faraday only wants to grab his much coveted object and consequently does away with all the stumbling blocks that fall on his way to the fulfillment of his desire.

Significantly enough, Caroline gradually realizes that Faraday is much more interested in the house than in her:

A week ago you told me you were in love with me. Can you truly say you would feel the same, if Hundreds weren't my home? You've had the idea, haven't you, that you and I could live here as husband and wife. The squire and his lady. (Waters, 2010, p.448)

Faraday, with his obsessive sense of property, is more concerned about the falling apart of the concrete building than about the series of mishaps that are happening with the living souls residing inside it. Caroline abnegates the house, for, it is the place that has silently witnessed the death of her mother, the departure of her brother and the death of her pet dog, Gyp. She realizes that if she does not remove herself immediately from the house, Faraday will be the agent of her imminent death as well and so she disengages herself from him. Caroline, who once was much inclined to stay back in the house to cling onto their lost tradition and symbol of aristocracy, later on realizes, “. . . this house doesn't want me. I don't want it. I hate this house” (Waters, 2010, p.448). When all her plans to get herself away from the grip of the house after her marriage with Faraday, falls down like a pack of cards, she expresses her wish to migrate to America or Canada.

This at once invites analogy with Bachelard's oneiric house, as he suggests: “Sometimes the house of the future is better built . . . than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home” (Bachelard, 2014, p.61). But in Caroline's case, it is in her reverie that her dream haven could find a location. She could not enjoy either her childhood home or her future dream-abode. If her childhood home proves to be a “sort of lovely monster! . . . [that] needs to be fed all the time with money and hard work” (Waters, 2010, p.69), her future home could not find its niche—“I haven't decided. London, at first. But after that, perhaps America, or Canada” (Waters, 2010, p. 448).

iii. Maternal Features of the Material Paradise

The house acquires almost a maternal face, when Caroline seeks protection in it. After the dance with Dr. Faraday in the party, though for some times, Caroline indulges in romantic feelings and even exchanges a kiss with him, suddenly she becomes conscious (about her upper-class origin?) and flees away to the safe haven, for, she feels that it is the House that can provide her with “the environment in which the protective beings live” (Bachelard, 2014, p.07). The house acts as an arena

of security provided in our mother’s womb. Faraday is disappointed that she disappears inside the house, “as if stepping through a rip in the night and instantly sealing it up behind her . . .” (Waters, 2010, p.279). Though after their secret engagement, Faraday was successful to experience some romantic moments in the intimate corners of the north terrace or past the shuttered library windows, it is perhaps the maternal features of the house that saves Caroline from falling a prey to Faraday’s carnal desires.

iv. Seasons and the House

During the winter, the Hundreds Hall looks marvelous against the white snowy ground. This at once gets appropriated with Bachelardian formulation in the Chapter entitled “House and Universe”, where he explains how the quiet snowy winter adds up to the aesthetics of a house and the house with its protective walls act as an “artificial Paradise” (Bachelard, 2014, p.39) against the chilling outer world. The season, as Bachelard validates, has a great influence on the house. This brilliantly gets illustrated in Chapter 12 of Waters’s narrative: “Even the interior of the house was subtly transformed by the weather, the glass dome above the stairwell now translucent with snow, making the hall dimmer than ever, the windows letting in a chill reflected light from the whitened ground, so that shadows fell puzzlingly”(Waters, 2010, p.387).

3. Foucauldian Crisis Heterotopia

Besides Bachelard, the novel, to some extent, adheres to the spatial formulations of Michel Foucault. For the Ayreses, the house is the marker of their identities in the society. Though the house is now in a dilapidated condition, they never dare to leave the house, “for the fear of being harpooned . . .” (Waters, 2010, p.25) in the outer world that was witnessing the rise of communism. The family could construe that it is a difficult time for the rural landowners “so long as the present government [Labour Government] was in power” (Waters, 2010, p. 242). It is significant to note that Hundreds Hall proves to be “a crisis heterotopia”, which Michel Foucault in his essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” defines:

There is a certain form of heterotopia that I could call Crisis heterotopias, i. e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live in a state of crisis. . . . In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found. (Foucault, 1986, p.23)

For the Ayreses, the house is the only tool with the aid of which they can hold fast to their lost aristocratic heritage in a declining post-war country house reality and Caroline’s outright confession, “The truth is . . . we know how lucky we are to have lived there at all” (Waters, 2010, p.48), provides enough approval to this observation. Foucault argues that these crisis heterotopias are continuously disappearing from the society to give way to the “heterotopias of deviation” (Foucault, 1986, p.23). For Foucault, hospitals, asylums, prisons, cemeteries are the heterotopias of deviation.

In Waters’s narrative, Dr. Faraday sends Roderick Ayres from the crisis heterotopia of his ancestral house to a mental asylum and the Ayres mother and daughter to the cemetery, the ultimate heterotopia of deviation. The Ayreses’ commitment to their ancestral seat has been juxtaposed by the Randalls family who sold out their Elizabethan ‘big House’, Standish to start over

a new life in South Africa. The fates of the other country houses were almost the same—Mrs. Ayres’s maternal house has been converted to a Roman Catholic boarding school, the nearby Warwick Priory has been sold out to a *nouveau riche* American, Charlecote and Coughton are made public, Woodcote and Meriden Hall have been abandoned (Waters, 2010, p.71). Whereas, almost all the other aristocratic families throw away the burden of their palatial houses in order to keep pace with the changing time, the Ayreses still take pride on the lost grandeur of the fallen empire and take refuge in it. And it is their decision to stick to the Hundreds Hall that brings about their decline.

As a most befitting paradigm case of Country House fiction, Waters’s narrative conforms to the main characteristics of the genre, which A. K. Weatherhead has prescribed in his *Upstairs: Writers and Residences* (2000):

. . . the detailed description of the house and its inventory; next, the arrival at the house of a guest, invited or not, who is alien to the traditions and the culture of the household (a feature, of course, of many various novels); and third, as a result of this arrival, the departure of a major character who may or may not return. (Weatherhead, 2000, p.58)

The text opens with an elaborate description of the Hundreds Hall—its dustless white walls, decorative plaster border, polish on the floor, patina on wooden chairs and cabinets, the magnificent green baize curtains etc. Second, the arrival of the unwanted guest is marked by the appointment of Dr. Faraday as the family physician of the Ayres. Though he himself seeks admission into the upper class stratum of the society by virtue of his profession, he cannot deny his working class background, as his mother was a nurse-maid of that very family. In spite of all his endeavors, he remains alien to the rich heritage of the aristocratic family. Third, it is certain that only for his maltreatments, Roderick had to go to the mental asylum. Though Faraday justifies it with the excuse of Roderick’s intermittent nervous breakdowns, Caroline, at last, realizes his real motive:

My mother’s death was what made me begin to see things clearly. To think about what I wanted, and didn’t want. To think about what you want too . . . sometimes I think you want to keep me tired, that you like me to be tired. (Waters, 2010, p.446).

As the ending of the novel suggests, all the major characters depart one by one, not only from their home-space, but to a world from where they can never return and in every case, their good-byes are caused by accidents manipulated by Faraday and accentuated by his evil designs. Dr. Faraday, who appeared as a *deus-ex-machina* throughout the first few chapters of the novel, finally turns out to be completely antithetical to it. Faraday’s reliability as the first person narrator may be interrogated. Though Faraday justifies his reiterated dismissals of the residents’ experiences of the presence of little Susan’s apparition in the house citing his affiliation to science, Caroline suspects him:

You can talk about delusions and fantasies and things like that. But you don’t know this family . . . We were different, a year ago. Things have changed—gone wrong—so badly, so quickly. There has to be *something*, don’t you see? (Waters, 2010, p. 353)

To be the master of the house is his sole concern and that will be the culmination of his upward social mobilization for which he has been striving and dreaming, right since his childhood. After his willful ousting of Roderick, the rightful owner of the house, he sees the vision of a happy life of lordship over the Hundreds Hall with the destitute Ayres mother and daughter at his service. But things did not follow the way he paved for. Mrs. Ayres unexpectedly meets her fatal end after she aired her initial disapproval of the match between her daughter and Faraday, the son of a former nurse-maid of the house. Similarly, Caroline, after she breaks up her engagement with Faraday, dies in unexplained circumstances. Though as per the observation of Dr. Seeley, “Ayres, unable to

advance with the times, simply opted for retreat—for suicide, and madness” (Waters, 2010, p.498), there is a tacit suggestion at the ending of the novel that Faraday might be implicated at the incidents. His part in the foul play gets ascertained when he heaves a sigh of relief at the ultimate disappearance of the rightful owners from the house:

. . . Despite all this, the house retains its beauty, in some ways it is handsomer than ever, for without the carpets and the furniture and the clutter of occupation, one appreciates the lines and Georgian symmetries . . . there is no trace of the Ayreses at all. It is as if the house has thrown the family off, like springing turf throwing off a footprint. (Waters, 2010, p. 498)

4. Beyond Theoretical Paradigms

Suffice it to say, Waters’s novel meets halfway through the tenets of Bachelardian spatial poetics and it will be unfair to underrate the creative genius of Waters, as she has never conformed absolutely to the epistemology of any one thinker, philosopher or theorist. Bachelard is optimistic about the fact that the house will face “the bestial hostility of the storm and hurricane” of the outer world and will turn out to be “an instrument with which to confront the cosmos” (Bachelard, 2014, p.46). The Ayreses also pinned their hope on their ancestral house until the accidental death of Mrs. Ayres breaks Caroline’s faith on the mother-like protective powers of the material building. They thought that the age-old mansion will preserve them from the inevitable jeopardy that awaits them in the utterly altered scenario of rising communism in the outer world. The case of the Ayreses does not follow suit of Bachelard’s concept of the house as a “bird’s nest” (Bachelard, 2014, p.92) or “snail’s shell” (Bachelard, 2014, p.118), explicated in the chapter entitled ‘Nests’. Whereas, Bachelard considers the houses as “life-giving . . . since it continues to shelter the bird that has come out of the egg” (Bachelard, 2014, p.93), in the fictional world of Waters, the house itself acted like the foul factotum of death for the inhabitants.

Time and again, Waters hints at the changed scenario of Britain. Roderick in the very first chapter communicates his realization to Faraday that neglecting any member of the servant community is a “capital offence” (Waters, 2010, p.06) in the contemporary society. In chapter 8, Mrs. Ayres accuses the election of the Labour Party for the “breaking up of the old estates” (Waters, 2010, p.242). She apprehends that “there would be nothing but penalties and restrictions for rural landowners so long as the present government was in power” (Waters, 2010, p.242). She pins her hope on the restoration of the Conservative party in the next few years. Caroline too, after the sudden death of her mother, realizes, “England’s no good any more for someone like me. It doesn’t want me” (Waters, 2010, p. 448).

In his topoanalysis, Bachelard, with his bourgeois point of view ignores everyone except the owners of the property. What Bachelard relegates to the margin, Jeremy Musson highlights in *Up and Down Stairs: The History of the Country-house Servant*. Rightly does Musson argue:

. . . the servant should be regarded as an indivisible part of the story . . . They (the Country-houses) were built not only for the occupation of a landowning family but also had to accommodate a large body of servants to run it. (Musson, 2010, p.01)

Waters’s narrative not only shows how “after the second World War, the world of the country house changed out of all recognitions, and the enclosed, stratified and hierarchical communities of domestic servants evaporated” (Musson, 2010, p.07), but goes a step further and focuses on the rise of the proletariat, the narrator Faraday in the text.

Being a descendant of the working class community, Faraday is equally sympathetic towards the underprivileged within Hundreds Hall and without it, as well. The Ayreses' jibe at the servant community irks him:

Perhaps it was the peasant blood in me, rising. But Hundreds Hall had been made and maintained, I thought, by the very people they were laughing at now. After two hundred years, those people had begun to withdraw their labor, their belief in the house; and the house was collapsing, like a pyramid of card. (Waters, 2010, p.27).

When Mrs. Ayres enthusiastically asks Dr. Faraday about the condition of the maids during the heyday of the country house, Dr. Faraday, the son of the Nurse-maid of the Hundred's Hall recalls only one incident of his mother's experience:

She had to stand each morning with her hands held out while the housekeeper examined her fingernails; how Mrs. Beatrice Ayres would, every so often, come unannounced to the maid's bedrooms and turn their boxes, going through their possessions piece by piece. (Waters, 2010, p. 30)

Faraday's recalling of his mother's daily experience at the Hall provides enough proof with which any perceptive reader can construe the real condition of the house maids in the household of the English country houses. Although the Ayreses forgot, Faraday fails to erase his consciousness of his working class background. When Mrs. Ayres brings in the anecdote about her great-aunt calling the maids of the house as "specks of grit", Faraday unconsciously classifies himself as one among the servant community of the great house: "For if the house, like an oyster, was at work on Betty, fining and disguising her with layer after minuscule layer of its own particular charm, then I suppose it had already begun a similar process with me" (Waters, 2010, p.73). His is a complex state of duality of reaction towards the aristocratic family. If in the one hand, he is resentful towards the family with his heart filled up with the grudges of a working class, on the other hand, he takes pity on their decaying mansion and poses as a rescuer of the family in plight.

Though the novel carries tacit suggestions that Faraday is the agent who causes the disintegration of the family, he never hurts Betty, another member of the servant community. It is not to be ignored that adult Faraday arrives in the house to treat Betty's physical ailment and throughout, he remains compassionate towards her mental health as well. His symbolic dining with Betty is a marker of his disapproval of the class-based inequality so rampant in the Hundreds Hall. His life-long struggle to fight the prevailing patrician order in the Ayreses household, is crowned with success as Caroline, the last vestige of aristocracy, dies mysteriously. The house, the seat of the Ayreses, betrays the bona fide proprietors to favour Dr. Faraday, who once as a little boy vandalized it. The human cost of the fiasco that the estate was subjected to, atones for itself with the rise of a member of the proletariat, who have so long sacrificed their lives in maintaining the property in a proper manner. Suffice it to say, Bachelard can be censured for his upper-class outlook that fails to notice the roles of the servants, whom Jeremy Musson in his *Up and Down Stairs: The History of Country House Servant* considers as "the largest contingent of the *dramatis personae* of the country house" (Musson, 2010, p. 06).

5. Conclusion

The English country houses have been regarded as "disciplinary projects of imperialism and imperial destabilizations and re-formations of English identity" (Baucom, 1999, p.4). The locales of English country houses have always served as emblems of nationalistic pride. The material places of the Country houses have always been associated with the idea of Englishness, for, critics like

Baucom feels that “Englishness has consistently been defined through appeals to the identity-endowing properties of place . . . [for instance] a Gothic cathedral, the Victoria Terminus . . . a ruined country house. . .” (Baucom, 1999, p.4). If the Country houses in Jane Austen’s fictional world were testimonies to the imperial rule of England, in the Thatcherite regime the houses may be perceived as the sites of nostalgia boomlet. In the contemporary post-Brexit British scenario, the revisit to the English country houses suggests, what Arjun Appadurai would term “nostalgia without memory”. The ultimate analysis reveals how Waters’s narrative forebodes a post-crash Britain; the house being the synecdoche of the nostalgic backward looking in the post-Brexit Britain. Rightly does the novelist portend the Hundreds Hall as “a decaying place with a big wall around it, with an inflated idea of itself, endlessly trying to keep alive a mythical kind of world” (Allardice, 2018). The narrative tries to capture the decaying conditions of the aristocratic family as the “spectre of communism” was haunting Europe (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1972, p.335). As one of the minor characters, Dr. Seeley detects that the Ayreses’ problem is that they could not adapt to the changing scenario of Britain:

. . . as if something slowly sucking the life out of the whole family. . . It is called a Labour Government. . . But what’s left for an old family like that in England nowadays? Class-wise, they’ve had their chips. Nerve-wise, perhaps they’ve run their course. (Waters, 2010, p.378)

The novelist hails from a lower middle-class family from the 70s Pembrokeshire. If in maximum cases, her novels talk about queer sexuality, it is her class struggle that came into play in *The Little Stranger*, “the most atypical of” her books. She herself admits in an interview that her readers may “hate” her for discarding “lesbian element” in her 2010 text. Ripe with class strife, Waters’s Hundreds Hall subverts what Noel Coward says: “The stately homes of England,/ How beautiful they stand, To prove the upper classes/ Have still the upper hand” (Coward, 2002, p.188). Waters in her narrative exemplifies how Faraday, in spite of being a member of the proletariat class, endeavours to possess the symbol of aristocracy and ultimately wins over the property by hook or by crook. Emma Parker in her 2013 article, “The Country House Revisited: Sarah Waters’s *The Little Stranger*”, accuses the narrator as the destructive agent in the aristocratic world of the Ayreses. In the book-length study, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers: The English Country House in the Contemporary Novel* (2015), Urszula-Terentowicz Fotyga finds an analogy between the collapse of the big house and Faraday’s elevation in the status-quo.

To lend a dramatic twist, the story closes on a gothic note that hints at the presence of a supernatural being—“some ravenous shadow-creature” (Waters, 2010, p.498) in the house who may have maneuvered all the fateful events. The text too supports this view to a certain extent. Reiteratively, Mrs. Ayres talks about the presence of the poltergeist of her long deceased daughter, Susan. The mysterious sounds, the chiming bells of the kitchen parlour, the childish scribbling of “SSSSSS S SUS” (Waters, 2010, p. 303) arise suspicion in the minds of the Ayreses, and Betty. Though ostensibly it seems to be done by the ghost of little Susan, Faraday never acknowledges the ghostly existence. During the trial of Caroline’s death, Betty, the chief witness, confirmed the presence of “a spiteful ghost [that] wanted the house all for its own” (Waters, 2010, p.485). Noted critic Gina Wisker too reads the novel as a contemporary instance of feminist gothic story.

In a subtle way, the novelist even hints at the fine psychological workings of a troubled unconscious mind associated with the house. Though Waters does not furnish any strict authorial stance, the final words of the novel, uttered by Faraday, are quite revealing:

If Hundreds Hall is haunted, however, its ghost doesn’t show itself to me . . . what I am looking at is only a cracked window-pane, and that the face gazing distortedly from it, baffled and longing, is my own. (Waters, 2010, p.499)

The novelist shrouds the character of Faraday with mystery. It may be true that when Caroline surprisingly yelled, “You?” just before her fatal fall, she might have seen Faraday, for, Faraday himself admits that he had spent that fateful night outside his house. As a postmodernist text, the story is left open-ended. The novelist is perhaps aware of her role as a champion favoring the rise of the proletariat, who enters, to borrow Bachelardian terms, the “good warm home” (Bachelard, 2014, p.93), through the most vulnerable boundary lines that divide the inner space from the outer and leaves the door wide open to all the risks and crises. Needless to say, Waters’s Country House is much more than the Bachelardian “inhabited space” or a Foucauldian “crisis heterotopia”. In Waters’s narrative, the Hundreds Hall assumes the role of a full-fledged character. It has been deliberately left open to the imaginations of the interpretive community of readers to decode the text in their distinct and unique ways. And this is the hallmark of a creative artist, par excellence.

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