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Spectral Dissent: “Faultlines” In Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger*

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ABSTRACT

There has been extensive criticism on how the gothic haunting in Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* enacts an ideological challenge to heteropatriarchal and class-bound norms enshrined in Hundreds Hall. These readings convincingly examine the socio-political conditions of the novel’s setting and how these are linked to the haunting process. Other readings have approached the novel as a neo-gothic ghost story. Yet to date, few studies have combined a hauntological perspective with a socio-cultural framework, leaving considerable scope to explore how spectrality reveals the ideological tensions embedded in the text’s setting. This essay addresses this gap by placing the tropes of haunting and spectrality in dialogue with Alan Sinfield’s theory of “faultlines.” Drawing on Sinfield’s methodology and the logic of the spectral – in particular, Esther Peeren’s concept of “living ghosts” and their potential “spectral agency” – I argue that combining his notion of “faultlines” with a hauntological lens offers a compelling conceptual framework for reexamining Waters’ *The Little Stranger*, a text deeply invested in ideological conflicts and contradictions. By integrating cultural materialist and spectral approaches, this essay proposes a method for reading the novel’s spectral moments as manifestations of the underlying cultural anxieties of its neo-historical setting.

Introduction

Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* is a ghost story in which the spectral operates as an expression of ideological disturbance. Published in 2009 and set in 1947, it tells the story of the Ayres family, an aristocratic dynasty that is falling apart in postwar Britain. The narrator of the story, Dr Faraday, is called out to the family mansion, Hundreds Hall, in Warwickshire to tend to a sick servant – the only servant left. Faraday, himself the son of one of the Ayres’ former servants (his mother was a nursery maid), befriends the family. What follows is a series of hauntings that, one by one, hasten the demise of the country house and the family that own it. The story of a gentrified family in decline, pitched against the emergence of a growing middle class embodied by Faraday has, unsurprisingly, inspired numerous political critical readings. Indeed, there has been extensive criticism focusing on how the haunting in the novel enacts an ideological challenge to heteropatriarchal, social norms enshrined in Hundreds Hall and embodied by the Ayres family. Claire O’Callaghan argues that the story offers us an account “of the insidious nature of heteropatriarchal domination” (O’Callaghan 128), and Emma Parker has argued that the haunting is the “consequence of envy and anger ignited by social inequality” (Parker 99). The novel has also been explored as a neo-gothic ghost story, one that offers both material and textual traces of the past.¹ Yet, to date, few studies have undertaken a reading that integrates a hauntological perspective with a socio-cultural theoretical framework, leaving significant scope for examining how spectrality can illuminate the ideological tensions embedded within the text’s setting.

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This essay seeks to address this by bringing the tropes of haunting and spectrality into dialogue with Alan Sinfield's theory of "faultlines." By combining cultural materialist and hauntological perspectives, this essay proposes a methodological framework through which the novel's spectral moments can be read as expressions of its setting's underlying ideological contradictions and cultural anxieties.

In his 1992 book, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Alan Sinfield introduces the term "faultlines" to refer to "contradictions in [...] ideology" that will always occur and work against the sense of certainty imposed by the dominant culture of a given social order (45). Texts, Sinfield argues, incorporate elements of resistance to the dominant structures they embody.² This involves reading a text in realignment with the "awkward unresolved issues, the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute" (47). For Sinfield, the social order, however seemingly impregnable, is always under pressure from the inner contradictions and tensions that it seeks to hide, and these faultlines are the fissures that lie just beneath the surface, creating "dissident potential" (41). Sinfield qualifies his reason for choosing the word "dissident" over "subversive": subversive implies some degree of success whereas, by contrast, a "dissident perspective" refers to that which allows us to hear the socially marginalized and expose the ideological machinations that are responsible for their exclusion in the first place, without this "perspective" necessarily enacting meaningful or lasting change (49). It follows that faultlines are exposed when a "dissident perspective" – the Other – is able to obtain a decisive purchase on a way of life, even if this cannot last.

Given Sinfield's emphasis on the unresolved, the unruly and the potentially transformative potential of "faultlines," it can be argued that the cultural materialist and the spectral reader share an affinity, particularly when considering the evolution of spectral scholarship over the past decades. In their collected anthology, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren credit Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* with initiating "the spectral turn" (2).³ They present a substantial body of criticism that has advanced discussions of spectrality, comprehensively tracing the expansion of this turn, including seminal publications that precipitated the growth in this field.⁴ While each critic's conceptualization of the specter is distinct, the anthology demonstrates how spectrality – ghosts, haunting, specters – functions not just in supernatural fiction, but as analytical and methodological tools in contemporary theory. Importantly, scholarship has emphasized the socio-cultural dimensions of the specter. In her seminal work *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (a chapter of which is featured in *The Spectralities Reader*), Avery Gordon foregrounds the "social figuration" (20) of the ghost as a figure through which what has been excluded or silenced by dominant narratives makes itself felt. Gordon's call for an epistemology attuned to the complex and often contradictory dynamics of subjectivity finds a clear parallel in Sinfield's notion of "faultlines," which similarly identifies the sites where ideology betrays its own incoherences and repressed elements resurface.

Esther Peeren broadens the social lens through which ghosts are examined in her 2014 book, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, offering an approach that resonates strongly with Sinfield's emphasis on cultural anxiety. Peeren finds limitations with Derrida's generalized ghost, advocating instead for a more contextually grounded and specific approach to spectrality (11). Through detailed analyses of films, TV series and literature, Peeren illustrates how cultural texts represent and negotiate the presence of "living ghosts" (5) – marginalized peoples such as migrants and servants – reflecting societal anxieties and contradictions regarding visibility and recognition. Yet for Peeren, like Sinfield, the surface coherence of social norms is constantly threatened by what has been excluded or marginalized, creating the very points of instability that faultlines theorize. While arguing for a "broad notion of spectrality" (9), Peeren calls for a "re-focalization of the ghost" as "cultural product[s]" (8), observing that the Derridean ghost "tends to the general, even the universal" (11). In this way, Peeren, like Sinfield, calls attention to the precise ideological mechanizations that are a play at any given time. For her, the spectral trace must be particularized so that the "ghost's figurative specificity" (102) can be examined and understood. Focusing particularly (although not exclusively) on the ghost as "cultural product[s]" and part of historically embedded social formations, I argue that,

in *The Little Stranger*, the ghost functions as a figure of alterity that materializes the ideological disjunctions inherent in Waters' setting – precisely the faultlines identified by Sinfield. Specifically, I will utilize Esther Peeren's notion of the "living ghost" and its potential for "spectral agency," alongside Sinfield's concept of "faultlines," to explore how this is enacted.

Indeed, the little stranger's successive attacks on Hundreds Hall reflect ideological ruptures rooted in the novel's historical setting. As a neo-historical novel, Waters text revives the specter of the past by setting the story in postwar Britain. It is the conflicting ideological discourses of the novel's 1940s setting that are shown to simultaneously enable and restrict the paths of the central characters. As Avery Gordon observes, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is particularly effective at interrogating the retrieval of excluded subjects, replacing realist depictions of life under slavery with a narrative that is "no longer located in the vice of the morality of verisimilitude" (164). While Waters' novel may not provoke the same morally charged implications as Morrison's work, I would argue that its historical distancing and spectral framework similarly allow her to illuminate postwar Britain with a comparable retrospective specificity. Waters highlights the competing narratives of the postwar era: a period in which the gentry sought to maintain social authority even as their influence waned; in which deference and nostalgia coexisted with the transformative effects of nationalization and the creation of the NHS and Welfare State; and in which education offered avenues for social mobility, even as entrenched class prejudice endured. I argue that synthesizing a figurative, spectral logic with a theoretical cultural approach to *The Little Stranger* can deepen our understanding of the unstable power dynamics Waters presents. By doubling the analytical lens, we can better apprehend the neo-historical setting and its influence on the characters' trajectories, thereby revealing how individual subjectivity is inextricably entwined with the socio-cultural contradictions and intersections that define the broader ideological landscape. This essay explores how the novel's spectral energy responds to ideological incoherence: the haunting can be read as an expression of ghostly dissidence arising from postwar Britain's socio-cultural contradictions, which converge in the central protagonist's professional position as doctor. Drawing on Sinfield's methodology and the logic of the spectral, I argue that his theory of faultlines and the trope of the ghost together provide a compelling conceptual framework through which Waters' *The Little Stranger* – a text deeply engaged with ideological conflicts and contradictions – can be reexamined.

Post-War Upheaval: Ideological Contradictions

The novel recounts the story of Dr Faraday who, in the summer of 1947, is called to Hundreds Hall, once one of Warwickshire's finest estates. As a country doctor he occupies a position that was well-established in English villages in the early part of the twentieth century. Valerie Porter observes that, by the 1930s, the majority of large villages already had a resident doctor who "was a respected and hard-working professional" (Porter 5) and it is this role, postwar, that Faraday occupies when he first visits the Ayres when the family send for him. Despite the changes that have affected the Hall, the opening interactions between Faraday and the Ayres show that the traditional hierarchical structures that underpinned village life before the war still persist. Emma Parker points out that, even though the Ayres "claim oppression" (Parker 102), there are plenty of references that signify their privilege: the so-called "little parlour," for instance, is actually about "thirty-feet deep and twenty wide" (Waters 18). The Ayres also employ a young maid servant, Betty, replete with "an awful old dress and cap" (12) and talk quickly turns to their former domestic staff employed in the household, one of whom Roderick refers to as a "moron" (27) and another of whom Caroline describes as having fingers "like sausages straight from the meat-safe" (26). This is all done jocularly; the reminiscences are lighthearted as they refer to a time when Hundreds Hall and the family were still wealthy and comfortable. As such, their former monetary condition is conveyed via sharing jokes about their staff as they reflect nostalgically about the past. This nostalgia combined with comic anecdotes highlight the Othering of domestic employees, prompting Faraday to feel the "faintest stirring of dark dislike" (27) for the family. Such signifiers of class divisions are made all the more explicit when Faraday mentions his mother and Mrs Ayres recalls that she "was a nursery maid here once" (28). Mrs Ayres finds a photo that she "*think[s]*"

(28 Waters' italics) is her, "but can't be sure" (28). The indefinability of Faraday's mother is reinforced by the fact that her "features were blurred" and there was "another servant, also fair-haired, in an identical gown and cap" (29). Consequently, Faraday's familial legacy reflects the Othering process; his mother is identified as part of a homogenous "staff of servants" (29), afforded no distinct identity of her own. In her chapter, "Spectral Servants and Haunted Hospitalities: *Upstairs Downstairs, Gosford Park and Babel*," Esther Peeren employs a hauntological framework to analyze these titular texts, arguing that the servants function as "living ghosts" (5) – figures rendered invisible by their subservient positions and seldom recognized within the dominant social order. While Faraday is not a domestic servant to the Ayres, his first meeting with them in a quasi-employee role, coupled with the photograph recalling his mother's history of servitude, situates him as a potential "living ghost" (Peeren 5), a role he gradually comes to inhabit and leverage as the narrative unfolds. Before the haunting proper begins, the photograph signifies what spectral logic would characterize as that which seems distant or over in history – a spectral figuration of what Derrida argues constitutes the "politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (xviii). Faraday is gifted the photo, and it serves as a ghostly reminder of his family's past status as employees of the gentry. The extension of such entrenched class divisions, specifically Faraday's position outside of the Ayres' social stratosphere, is marked by Waters in a number of other ways during their first encounter: when Roderick first meets the doctor, he looks as if "he were bored by the sight of me [Faraday] already" (6) and the finest two cups with "riveted handles" from the "handsome old bone china" set is not given to Faraday but kept "back for the family" (22) when they have tea. Traditionally, the country doctor's role was relational to those he treated: "High up the social scale the doctor might be treated as a rather superior type of servant" (Rivett), and it is this dynamic that first characterizes the social relationship between Faraday and the Ayres. The ghost of pre-war feudalism remains as Faraday's memories of his mother's stories about how "she had to stand each morning with her hands held out while the housekeeper examined her fingernails" (30) serve as spectral echoes of his own relational position to the family as an employee of sorts. Therefore, as the novel continues and the little stranger wreaks havoc on the Hall and its inhabitants, it becomes plausible that, as Parker argues, the haunting is "motivated by Faraday's envy and anger" (Parker 107) at a once-dominant yet still surviving class system that continues to marginalize and alienate him.⁵

However, Waters makes it abundantly clear that Britain's socio-cultural landscape had markedly changed by 1947 and was continuing to do so. When he arrives at the Hall, the decay and neglect strike Faraday immediately: the ivy growing up the wall "hung like tangled rat's-tail hair" and the "steps leading up to the broad front door were cracked" (Waters 5). This vision of postwar degeneration is juxtaposed with the opening of the novel: a memory of Faraday's of an Empire Fete Day in 1919 when, as a boy, he accompanied his mother to the Hall in which she was employed as a nursery maid. As a child, Faraday is struck by Hundreds' grandeur, awed by the "lovely aging details" of the "absolute mansion" (1). The decaying state of the Hall nearly thirty years on is employed to contextualize the ghost story as a narrative of postwar anxiety, and Hundreds as an objective correlative for the disintegration of a gentrified class no longer able to sustain itself in a society splintered by yet another world war. As such, despite the unwavering persistence of traditional class divisions depicted in Faraday's first meeting with the Ayres, the shift in power dynamics between the characters is established immediately when Faraday is called to the Ayres' home and finds that their problems, as well as those of the house itself, are vast and painfully clear. The power the family held pre-war is visibly diminishing: Roderick has a "noticeable limp" (6), Caroline's hands are "spoiled" (16) from kitchen work and, as she prepares and brings in tea, she jokes that she'll be "soon obliged to earn [her] living at a corner house" (22). By the end of the 1940s, after two world wars, the structure in rural communities and the country house's place within this bucolic hierarchy had become destabilized and this is represented by the Ayres' deterioration, inscribed on the bodies of the characters as well as the house itself, rendering Faraday's position as subordinate outsider equally unstable. In *Faultlines*, Sinfield points specifically to the fact that the dominant culture is never more than one player in the cultural field and that it exists co-currently with "residual" or "emergent" (Sinfield 9) cultures. In this

way, “the dominant and the subordinate are structurally linked” (Sinfield 42) and it is the instability of this power relationship between the Ayres (the once-dominant culture) and Faraday (the emerging culture) to which Waters draws attention early on. The discreet inversions of power are made all the clearer when Faraday reveals that “I didn’t want to take his [Roderick’s] money at first” (Waters 32), later describing to friends the condition in which he found Hundreds as “heart-breaking” (33). Such an encounter reminds the reader that “Power relations are always two-way; that is to say, however subordinate an actor may be in a social relationship, the very fact of involvement in that relationship gives him or her a certain amount of power over the other” (Giddens 6).⁶ The broken state in which Faraday discovers the family and the house allows the reader to perceive the Ayres and, by extension, the elite class they represent, as fragile and insecure. In turn, Faraday’s relationship with the Ayres is no longer fixed: the social conditions have shifted, meaning that the power dynamic between the two can evolve. Indeed, the novel is littered with references to postwar austerity, ostensible reminders that Britain was in the grip of vast economic and social change. Faraday describes the unhealthy living conditions of his patients: one laborer who suffers from pleurisy lives in a “cramped terrace cottage with a damp brick floor” (Waters 108) and even the economically comfortable characters that attend the Ayres’ dinner party “all come together, squashed in the Desmonds’ car to save fuel” (85).

The vast majority of references detailing postwar economic pressures are reserved for the Ayres. Early in their friendship, Faraday meets Caroline foraging for blackberries and is offered some, but Faraday rations himself, concerned to not “eat up all her crop” (45). Not long after this, Faraday himself begins providing the family with “groceries and coal; sometimes pretending that the gifts came from the patients” (235). The Ayres’ financial ruin is presented as inevitable when, among a myriad of other complaints about money, Roderick admits to Faraday that they have “*nothing* - no money” (61 Waters’ italics). Moreover, we are reminded that the Ayres’ financial burdens are indicative of the experience of families like them across the country: “All the fellows I used to know at school,” Roderick tells Faraday, are “telling the same story. Most of them have run through their settlements already” (152). At this point in history, families like the Ayres who not so long ago represented the socially privileged and central discourses of their age, no longer hold this same power. A once-dominant ideology is now being superseded by an emerging dissident perspective, represented by Faraday who becomes the provider (supplying them with goods) and healer (attending to their health) of the family. This obfuscation of power dynamics reflects a hauntological logic in which the boundaries between socially sanctioned and transgressive subject positions become blurred. While the little stranger is yet to emerge, Waters fashions an environment charged with the potential for its haunting presence to materialize, one in which “the boundaries between normative and non-normative subject positions [...] are not necessarily immediately perceptible, producing a pervasive anxiety that things may not be as they seem” (Peeren 7). It is precisely by combining this hauntological lens with Sinfield’s conceptualization of competing power discourses that we can clearly apprehend the ideological tensions at play and the moments where authority begins to falter. Within this context, the Ayres are undergoing what Sinfield would term relegation to the “residual” (151), even as they continue to “play gaily at gentry life” (Waters 27), creating the conditions for spectral disruption and the unsettling of social and ideological hierarchies. Waters shows this not just by detailing the decline of the family, but by describing the wider structural transformations that are occurring in the village. The family can no longer get reliable servants because they can find better working conditions in the larger industrial towns: as Betty explains to Faraday, “Me cousins’ve all got factory jobs” (13) and Caroline bemoans that “it’s almost impossible to get girls in the past few years” (16). Likewise, Caroline laments the changing habits of traditionally stock village roles: “The postmen are so careless nowadays. Before the war Wills the postman would come right to the door, twice a day. The man who has the round now complains about the extra distance. We’re lucky if he doesn’t leave our post at the end of the drive” (69).

Just as the post-man’s traditional role – his habits and duties – are changing, so too the margins of Faraday’s role as country doctor are beginning to shift. After he has ingratiated himself with the family by assisting Roderick with his leg injuries, Caroline offers Faraday access to their private land: “Would

it help you to use the park more often? As a short-cut between patients, I mean?” (70). Symbolically, Faraday is no longer segregated by his station, by the “rope or a ribbon” (1) that demarcated such clear class distinctions back in 1919. Significantly, Caroline’s modifying of her offer – “As a short-cut between patients, I mean” – is a reminder that the shifting dynamic between Faraday and the Ayres is the consequence of both the latter’s economic and social decline and Faraday’s own rising position as a doctor. The novelty of this strikes him early in the narrative when, driving in the car with Caroline, he remembers his uncles, employees of the estate, working on the “hundreds harvest” and how he is now “thirty years on, a qualified doctor, with the squire’s daughter at my side” (47). Faraday may have always been what Sinfield terms a “subordinate [...] actor” (47) in his relationship with the Ayres, but this relationship of aristocratic patient to village doctor is shown to be evolving.

Professional Plausibility: The Rise of the Subordinate

These power relations are not simply inverted. Waters employs Faraday’s position as a doctor to show that his growing power in his relationship with the Ayres is the product of ideological incongruity. Undoubtedly, Faraday’s position as a doctor locates him as the Ayres’ social inferior: “But I’ll still call you Doctor, if I may,” Caroline remarks early in the narrative; “One never quite likes to breach those professional distances, somehow” (52). Such implicit reminders of class divisions are repeated throughout the novel; however, it is this very position of inferiority, marked out for him by his profession, that also grants Faraday an ideological license to reconfigure these boundaries in a way that mirrors the social change in Britain that was occurring at the time. Emma Parker contends that the novel’s hauntings, when situated within the broader context of national transformation, function as a “metaphor for class unrest” (Parker 105). While this reading is highly persuasive, it is also important to consider how this historical context specifically implicates the medical profession and how Waters mobilizes Faraday’s role as a doctor to interrogate it. His position as a community doctor to the Ayres foregrounds the shift in the socio-economic landscape that saw the decline of a hierarchical Britain and a rise in nationalization enshrined in the newly established NHS and Welfare state. Heralding the former’s arrival, Aneurin Bevan’s message to the medical profession in 1948 highlighted the “national effort” and “sharing the cost,” affirming that “There is nothing of the social group or class in this” (Bevan). Such major reforms had a profound impact on rural communities such as the one depicted by Waters in *The Little Stranger* and had great consequences for Britain’s class system as a whole. Valerie Porter observes that “the welfare state [...] finally supplanted the squire-and parson role towards villagers” and similarly, other traditional, archetypal characteristics of village life changed, entailing the demise of the “county family” (Porter 76) and the power they held. Waters demonstrates how times are changing, depicting Roderick’s panic and disillusionment with this position: “they [Warwickshire people] can see which way the wind is blowing. I wouldn’t blame them if they decided to chop off our heads!” (Waters 190). The Ayres are arguably on the cusp of becoming part of a “residual gentry ideology” (Sinfield 151) whose past dominance, although still perceptibly present at the start of the narrative, is struggling in the postwar world.

Faraday then, in many ways, is symbolically part of a rising middle class that inevitably threatened the traditional nucleus of social power in Britain – the aristocracy. However, such change was in its infancy in 1947 and Faraday is working in a world just beginning to grapple with these changes. The intricate dynamics of these competing ideological power structures demand close and careful analysis. Avery Gordon argues that, when exploring ghostly matters, “the obvious task of the critic or analyst is to designate the precise contours of experience and causality in particular instances” (Gordon 19). It is the complexities of social life for Gordon that necessitate a need to explore hauntings, as “the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never [...] transparently clear” (Gordon 3). It is Faraday’s “particular” experience as a doctor in 1947 in rural Warwickshire, shaped by intersecting power discourses, that will give rise to the spectral presence at Hundreds Hall. Reading through a hauntological lens, then, allows us to see faultlines not as abstract inconsistencies but as materialized effects of social and historical contradictions: Faraday, despite the Ayres’ growing

dependence on him is still subject to the same socio-economic prejudices and limitations men of his position faced before the war – his house “is a very plain sort of place” and he has never had the “time or money to brighten it” (Waters 37). Furthermore, ironically, he fears that such political commitment to social equality, headed by the newly elected Labor government and the establishment of the NHS, may affect his livelihood, resulting in some of his “poorer patients” having the option of “leaving my list and attaching themselves to another man” (36). Yet despite these misgivings, his role in society is distinctly removed from that of his parents, his mother, a nursery-maid, and his father, a “grocer’s boy” (28). In this way, Faraday’s life reflects the social change that was occurring on a macro level in Britain, signified by the “letter [...] recommending me for a scholarship to Leamington College” which sits in a box next to postcards written by his parents with “badly spelled messages” (38), reminders of his educational achievements and how these mobilized a shift in his social class, distancing him from his parents’ blue collar professions. He admits that he had “only recently begun to make a profit” and while his income still compares poorly to his colleague Graham’s who entered the profession with “money and standing behind him” (35), he is the recipient of a grammar school education, an educated professional operating in a political world committed to promoting equality over the conservation of inherited seats and traditional structures of power: in short, Faraday is the product of social mobility, a symbol of the permeable boundaries of class division in the mid-twentieth century. And yet this ideological shift – the rise of a middle class and the depletion of gentrified power – is not yet complete. Sinfield argues that it is the “project of ideology” to present itself as “coherent and harmonious” (Sinfield 9). This is how power is maintained. By foregrounding the struggles of both the Ayres *and* Faraday to maintain or secure social power, Waters presents an ideological landscape that is fractured, not harmonious, unable to resolve its own contradictions. Despite Faraday’s negotiation of his own power and the rapid, drastic decline in the Ayres’ fortunes, he concludes that he is “not grand enough for the gentry” (Waters 36) and thus remains still marginal and inferior. Thus, as a professional doctor, Faraday sits in the liminal gap between an emergent culture, still defined by subordination – but also one that poses a potential threat to traditional power structures in a new postwar Britain. Such a context positions Faraday as having potential agency, one that will soon be born out in the form of spectral disturbance. Esther Peeren conceives of “spectral agency” as the potential to be disruptive or challenging, despite the subject’s seemingly limited capabilities (Peeren 9). Crucially, she emphasizes that it is “not a property one simply has, but a conditional capability whose strength and (im)possibility are determined, to a large extent, by contextual factors’ (Peeren 182). From this interpretive standpoint, we can see how Waters positions Faraday within an economically precarious society, highlighting how his professional authority both intersects with and is circumscribed by broader social and economic instabilities, thereby endowing him with a contingent, potentially disruptive agency. He remains an employee of the gentry, and yet he is in a decidedly more secure position than the Ayres – those whose economic and social status, however once well established, is waning. It is this faultline – the contradictory nature of his position – that allows Faraday to reform and revise an identity that has, heretofore, been shaped by the dominant cultural paradigms that placed him below the Ayres.

He does this via his professionalism: when Caroline protests that the family cannot afford treatment for Roderick’s war injury, Faraday convinces her that Roderick would “be doing me a kind of favour” and that he will be “seen taking the initiative with this kind of trial” (49). By having Faraday perform a case study on Roderick, the socio-economic conditions that brought about a need for such studies highlights the decaying body of a gentrified class, in Roderick’s case literally. This was hastened by the catastrophic repercussions of war and precipitated by the emergence of a subordinate sub-culture, in this case, the rise of a medical profession whose burgeoning national role has been legitimized by the war and its lingering consequences. It is significant that the very circumstances that allow Faraday to become a plausible presence in the Ayres’ lives as Roderick’s doctor emerge as a direct consequence of the war: “I spent a good deal of time on the wards of a military hospital . . . I did a little muscle therapy, as it happens. Electrical work and so on” (21). This progress in Faraday’s professional experience and capabilities that the war years enabled is directly contrasted with the consequences of these events on

Roderick whose leg has a “yellowish, bloodless look” and is “puffy and inflamed” (55), rendering him limp. Thus, Faraday’s necessity in the Ayres’ lives is derived from the very circumstances that expedited the downfall of a gentrified class, and this serves to sanction his own emerging authority in the power play that ensues.

Indeed, the potential of his own status being raised comes as a direct consequence of Roderick’s dwindling position: “I don’t think it’ll do my standing at the district hospital any harm” (49). His position as Roderick’s doctor – hired help – and, incongruously, authoritative practitioner, confirms how “dissidence operates, necessarily, with reference to dominant structures” (Sinfield 47). For Sinfield, marginalized and emergent cultures must work within the ideological framework they inhabit in order to renegotiate their position. A parallel argument is advanced by Esther Peeren where she argues that servants, as “living ghosts” (5), are rendered invisible by their subservient roles. Yet, just as Sinfield highlights the potential for dissidence within such marginalization, Peeren suggests that this very “invisibility” can be strategically mobilized: “servants may derive an ambiguous form of agency from either taking their assigned roles to the extreme [...] or by stepping outside the service scenario and asserting themselves in a different capacity” (Peeren 78, 79). In line with Peeren’s logic, Faraday, inheriting a family legacy of servitude – a dynamic somewhat echoed in his role as doctor – must similarly navigate and reconfigure the ideological margins of his position. In part, he does so by invoking his traditional position as subordinate, acting as employee. Paradoxically, this grants Faraday a certain authority, one that allows him to levy influence over Roderick. This is exemplified in the scene where Faraday treats Roderick’s damaged leg. Claire O’Callaghan has read this moment as one “that highlights the eroticism of homosociality and the doctor/patient relationship,” arguing that the detailed account of Roderick’s leg is indicative of male genitalia (O’Callaghan 181). Certainly, Waters’ detailed account of the tactile, intimate moment can be interpreted as a thinly veiled erotic encounter, one in which Faraday is able to view Roderick as the “queer masculine” (O’Callaghan 180) subject and gain the upper hand as he asserts his gendered, masculine power in the relationship. Alongside the anatomical descriptions of Roderick’s leg, however, it is worth paying attention to the esoteric descriptions of the medical machine and how this affects Roderick during the therapy. When first treating his leg, the mechanics of the machine are described clearly to the reader: “soaking squares of lint with salt solution, fixing these to the electrode plates; putting the plates on his leg with elastic bindings” (56). At first, Roderick resists the treatment. However, it is the technical process that intrigues him and eventually persuades him to capitulate: “That’s the condenser is it? Yes, I see.” (Waters 56). Here, it is worth considering the theorizations of John Clarke and Stuart Hall, who, in a related context to Sinfield, point specifically to the fact that subordinate cultures may express their influence even when on the periphery of a more dominant culture.⁷ When Faraday treats Roderick’s leg, he occupies a peripheral position relative to the Ayres family, yet nevertheless manages to assert a degree of agency and influence. Waters presents a contact zone, one in which the subordinate (Faraday) may not “stand at the apex of power” but “nevertheless may find ways of expressing and realising in [his] culture [his] subordinate position and experiences” (Clarke, Hall 5). Such a moment enables Faraday to obtain a decisive purchase on a way of life that has historically occluded him: “Then he [Roderick] met my gaze – met it properly [...] perhaps for the first time ever; finally ‘seeing’ me – and he smiled” (56). Sinfield argues that when a dominant culture is under pressure – in this case one whose dominance is close to collapse – “deviance returns from abjection by deploying just those terms that relegated it there in the first place” (Sinfield 48). Sinfield’s claim can be applied to this situation: Faraday invokes the ideological structures that have heretofore contained both men by way of a shared interest in technological modernity. Crucially, this has been enabled by Roderick’s health problems and Faraday’s role as doctor. By engaging in a discourse that would by its utterance traditionally marginalize him – that of country doctor and aristocratic patient – Faraday is able to put pressure on these wavering dominant ideological formations so strong in the past, revising his role as social inferior, by means of their shared interest in technology.

Waters presents what Peeren calls a site of “dynamic interaction” (182) where Faraday as the revenant servant has “strategized” his lowly position “and, in the process, re-oriented” it (184). While

Faraday has not yet “stepped outside the service scenario,” he is certainly “taking his assigned role to the extreme” (78–79) by offering personalized medical intervention, moving beyond the ad hoc practice of a typical country doctor. Peeren asserts that the “master-servant relationship is most severely tested when servants reappear in the Bellamy house [in *Upstairs Downstairs*] as guests” (98). She argues that, when the framework of hospitality is invoked in this way, roles are subverted, enabling the “living ghost” to be discursively reconstituted. I would argue that the same logic applies to Faraday but that, rather than relying on the framework of hospitality, he relies on that of medicine. By depicting Faraday attending to Roderick’s leg, Waters establishes a strikingly different context from the novel’s opening, when the young Faraday was forced to sneak into Hundreds Hall. At the beginning, as an uninvited guest – an intruder – Faraday is expelled. However, in his new capacity, his lingering invisibility becomes a source of empowerment. Here, Roderick becomes a patient and the dependent on his social subordinate, and Faraday ascertains a position of powerful “plausibility” (Sinfield 26), gaining trust and credibility. Peeren observes that it is “precisely because their masters see them as uninteresting nobodies that they [servants] may use their unsuspected intellect to advance their own agendas” (91). In a parallel dynamic, Faraday’s medical knowledge and skills force Roderick to recognize him, allowing Faraday to establish a more secure and influential role within the social hierarchy of Hundreds Hall, much as Peeren’s “living ghosts” assert agency through the very invisibility that initially marginalizes them. In fact, Faraday and Roderick’s shared interest in the machine means that Roderick relaxes in Faraday’s presence, confiding in him about his concerns for Hundreds: “He has started talking almost unwillingly, but it was as if he had some sort of spring inside him, and his own words wound it” (Waters 58). It is not as clear cut as mere role reversal: Faraday is the son of a past servant and Roderick still “looked very much the young country squire” (149) and is the Ayres’ only male, and thus in the position of the patriarch, but the legacy of Roderick’s hegemonic authority and Faraday’s legacy of subordination conflict in a postwar culture of ideological incoherence.

It is exactly by invoking his professional credibility that Faraday is able to reposition himself in the Ayres’ affairs. This at once exposes his subaltern position as well as his increasing influence: “I learned later that they’d missed me there. I suppose they had come to rely on me” (292). Crucially, the Ayres begin to believe in a narrative that casts Faraday as necessary in their lives. For Sinfield, it is the very “conditions of plausibility” that are so “crucial” as they “determine which stories will be believed” (Sinfield 30). In short, Faraday inserts himself into a position of *needed* plausibility as someone the Ayres come to rely on, thus moving beyond the exclusively Other position he would have occupied before the war. This is neatly encapsulated by Caroline and Faraday when Caroline insists to Faraday that the family’s most recent troubles are not his concern. In response, Faraday replies that they are, “since I’ve more or less become Rod’s doctor” (Waters 148). In turn, Caroline reminds Faraday that this invocation of such a relationship is not strictly accurate: “but you haven’t really, have you? [. . .] You can dress it up how you like, I know you’re treating him now more or less as a favor” (148). As a doctor, Faraday is the Ayres’ employee, but by treating Roderick as a favor, he also becomes their friend. Faraday re-writes a historical narrative and, by doing so, produces a new, plausible story that enables him to begin to construct an emergent subjectivity, no longer exclusively circumscribed by the vestiges of his class inferiority. He is part of an emergent ideological discourse of power, still inchoate, yet functioning as a precursor to alternative modes of seeing and doing that prefigure future hegemonic formations. This social configuration creates the conditions for what Sinfield terms “dissidence” (Sinfield 47) and what Peeren frames as the spectral potential for an “alternative distribution of power” (Peeren 97).

Spectral Dissent: Ghostly Negotiations of Power

However, this is not easily achieved and Faraday, despite his increasing involvement in the family’s lives, faces the haunting, interminable legacy of class prejudice. Waters makes it clear that, in 1947, families like the Ayres still levied considerable influence and standing in their communities. The “local

feudal spirit” was “resilient” (Waters 424), and the Ayres are painfully aware of their reputation, doing their best to maintain appearances even as their lives implode. Roderick’s departure to a mental institution is not made public: the family make it known that he has gone “to stay with friends” (230) and then “abroad” (423). Later in the novel, Mrs Ayres’ suicide “shocked and stunned the whole district” with even a “couple of nationals” reporting on her death (420). Ironically, these events that document the Ayres’ demise also foreground the persistent significance of such gentrified families postwar, arguably made more acute by a sense of loss the war engendered in the national psyche. Mrs Ayres is described as “part of a different, more gracious age” (425) and this resonates with the sense of cultural nostalgia that emerged in response to a broken Britain. Nimrod Ben-Cnaan argues that “In post-war Britain, through the distorting nostalgic reflection [...] the past was made to speak meaningfully to its post-war beholders” (Ben-Cnaan 147) and this is demonstrated through the lingering significance the Ayres still hold in the district. As such, despite his best attempts, Faraday’s role in the Ayres’ lives is not negotiated easily. He has to work within the margins of his class and professional position in order to revise these class boundaries, meeting significant resistance.

Significantly, Waters foregrounds this by depicting a context in which Faraday should feel welcomed. Some weeks into his newly established relationship with the Ayres, they host a dinner party and invite him. Derrida points out that, for the ghost to manifest properly and be interacted with, the conditions of “absolute hospitality” (Derrida 211) must be in place. In other words, an attitude of unconditional welcoming is needed to enable the ghost’s presence. If we read Faraday as a once “living ghost” (Peeren 5) bound by the indefinability and invisibility that marked his mother’s position as a servant, this invitation suggests that he has, to some degree, become more perceptible to the Ayres. Yet Waters demonstrates that his strategizing remains incomplete; his agency as a liminal figure is constrained. He is only invited because of his involvement with the Ayres that has been established by the doctor–patient relationship and at this point early in the narrative, this relationship points to the legacy of a hierarchy: when invited by Mrs Ayres, he observes that “She said it warmly enough, but with the briefest of hesitations” (Waters 77). He reflects that at this stage he “was a regular at the house” but “not a family friend” (77). By the other characters, he is deemed little more than a servant: Miss Danbey has an “old-fashioned quality,” and consequently, “a rather high-handed way with GPs” (85), and Mrs Rossiter elicits his help with serving: “Dr Faraday, would you be a perfect lamb and fetch me a little more sherry?” (88). Such moments persuade Faraday to see himself as a “balding grocer” (89), relegated to the blue-collar roles of his parents. Here, the pervasiveness of a hierarchical British culture concerned with wealth and material acquisition, so dominant in the centuries preceding the war, asserts itself once more. Faraday, as a “living ghost” and revenant of class subordination, is rendered invisible by the Ayres and their guests, directly contravening Derrida’s injunction for openness and hospitality. This is reinforced by the presence of the Baker-Hydes, a newly wealthy family. Even though the Baker-Hydes share similar origins to Faraday, their newly-monied status that has enabled them to purchase a neighboring estate means that they are treated with reverence: their wealth has turned them into the “new” gentry, and they are recognized as such by the “old” gentry, the Ayres and Rossiters. It is also noteworthy that Waters highlights the significance of Faraday’s professional position in the power play: “None of the newcomers knew me, in my evening clothes” (85). The plausibility of his medical role at Hundreds that has served him well up until now does not hold at this point; in fact, it hinders him. Defined by his profession and dismissed because of it, Faraday’s identity is, to the others, inextricably bound to his role as a doctor and reinforces his position amid the wealthier elite as limited to professional service.

This raises the question, as Peeren does, of whether the marginalized can leverage their spectral or liminal status to renegotiate these constraining roles: she asks, “what opportunities [...] do they themselves have within the spectral scenario to enforce a different relationship?” Is it possible, she queries, for the “living ghost” to “activate the disruptive powers *Specters of Marx* assigns to the ghost?” (Peeren 90). Certainly, as a “living ghost,” Faraday’s capacity to renegotiate his position is depicted as suddenly and markedly restricted. The point is made more starkly as his recounting of the party is juxtaposed with memories of his own decidedly less privileged experiences of medical school, where he

recalls being “permanently hungry, and living in a Dickensian garret with a hole in its roof” (86). Thus far, his medical position has enabled him to begin renegotiating his role in the Ayres’ lives with some success. Here, this negotiation fails, and his medical profession – with its own legacy of poverty and subordination – revives an obsolete power dynamic. At this point, Waters suggests that a dissident perspective cannot be articulated meaningfully in the face of an enduring dominant ideology, however diminished.

Under threat from this resilient dominant culture, Faraday must reassert his own emerging authority. Sinfield states that when any culture strives to substantiate its claim to superiority, it will inevitably experience “disturbances” (Sinfield 41) that threaten it. As the Ayres and their guests exclude Faraday at the dinner party, substantiating their dominance, the “disturbances” that threaten the status quo here emerge as the “tearing yelp” (Waters 97) from Gyp when he bites Gillian and throws the party into complete disarray. Faraday’s agency as a marginalized subject – a “living ghost” – falls short, signaling the narrative’s turn toward a materially supernatural force capable of fully unsettling the social and ideological order of Hundreds. Crucially, this moment of spectral horror engenders a need for Faraday, a need based precisely on his medical skills. He takes Gillian down to the kitchen where she is stitched “quite extensively” and once again acts in a scene that affirms his relevance: “Let the doctor do it, Peter [...] for God’s sake!” (99). For Faraday, a moment of exclusion at the party is replaced with a moment of credibility and need. In *Resistance Through Rituals*, Stuart Hall and his colleagues remind us that the “subordinate cultures will not always be in open conflict with it [dominant culture]. They may, for long periods, coexist with it, negotiate the spaces and gaps in it, make inroads into it” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, Roberts 6). Ironically, by moving to the kitchen, the very room in which Faraday first spent time in the house, he returns to a place of subordination but, by doing so, makes “inroads” into new spaces. Faraday’s invisibility is reconfigured. Unlike Peeren’s example of a “living ghost” in *Upstairs Downstairs*, where the servant’s transition to guest serves as an effective strategy to be seen and become a haunting figure, “throwing into doubt established categories and raising the possibility of a new ethics of intersubjectivity based on respect rather than disavowal” (101), Faraday’s position as guest offers no such straightforward agency. Paradoxically, he must defer to his subordinate role as doctor to secure the family’s reliance on him, a dependence through which his power and influence slowly emerge. In Sinfieldian terms, this marks a faultline within the hierarchical structure of Hundreds Hall, revealing the instability and tensions at the heart of the ostensibly coherent social order that governs the dynamics of the dinner party.

Significantly, another spectral incident just slightly preceding Gillian’s accident also exposes Hundred’s unstable social terrain on the same evening. Reported to Faraday several days after, Roderick reveals that he too experienced a terrifying ghostly ordeal when inanimate objects – his cuffs, collar and shaving mirror – were possessed with spectral agency, resulting in the mirror “lanch[ing] itself at his head” (162). The ghostly trickery prevented from Roderick joining the dinner party and fulfilling his role as squire. Roderick himself implicitly observes how the uncanny objects signify the role he is expected to fulfil: “I was – the host, supposedly; the master of Hundreds! – keeping everyone waiting [...] because I only owned one decent stand-up collar!” (158). During the dinner party, the ghost of entrenched class hierarchies that sought to marginalize Faraday downstairs was counterbalanced by the spectral energy upstairs, which asserted the tenuous power of those attempting to occlude him. The seemingly stable social order of the little parlor was destabilized by the ghostly events in Roderick’s room, revealing his waning grasp on a historically privileged position. In this way, a contradictory ideology operates: Faraday’s Othering from the Hall by the socially superior Ayres is offset by the implicit reminder that this superiority is no longer secure. The haunting Waters depicts, when read through the lens of spectrality and faultlines, reveal the unresolved tensions fracturing postwar society. We are reminded that the ghost resurges not in spite of these contradictions, but precisely because of them, and it is Faraday’s liminal position as doctor that enables him to exercise this spectral agency. In fact, it is once again by invoking his medical role that Faraday persuades Roderick to confide in him about the haunting, convincing him that “family doctors are like priests” whom people tell their “secrets” to (154), convincing a desperate Roderick to trust Faraday: “A

priest keeps his secrets, doesn't he? You promise me!" (156). Faraday's medical expertise propels him forward in his desire to possess the Hall. Indeed, Gillian's accident triggers a chain of events that positions Faraday as a necessary presence in the Ayres' lives: he is called upon again in the coming days to euthanize Gyp, once again invoking his role as doctor to negotiate his place in the social milieu of Hundreds.⁸ As the story continues, more medical emergencies necessitate his return to the Hall, enabling him to simultaneously develop his friendship with the family.

The next moment of uncanny violence takes place, once again, when Faraday meets substantial resistance in his attempts to infiltrate the family on new terms. Where Caroline enables Faraday to enter their lives by encouraging him to treat Roderick's leg, Roderick himself eventually opposes the plan, reminding Faraday of his immutable Otherness: "You're from pirate stock aren't you? You don't think you'd have been invited along tonight, otherwise? Mother's too embarrassed to let any of our real friends see us as we are now. Hadn't you figured that out yet?" (Waters 190). Despite his dwindling grasp on authority, Roderick is still master of the estate, executing his patriarchal role traditionally, even to the extent of excluding the women in his family from the financial burdens he manages so that Caroline admits she doesn't know "how bad" things are because "Rod does all the book-keeping himself" (46). Though at first he was persuaded to allow Faraday some role in their affairs, the initial indeterminacy of their relationship that enabled Faraday to treat Roderick's leg no longer stands. So too, the trust Roderick put in Faraday by disclosing his concerns about the Hall is broken when Faraday reveals these concerns to Caroline. Feeling betrayed, Roderick is not willing to permit Faraday a higher stake in the family's lives, one in which the latter's role as doctor is repurposed: "How did you manage to get such a footing in this house? You're not part of this family! You're no one!" (197). Roderick does his best to marginalize Faraday once more, but Roderick's authority is not absolute and is in fact under threat; Faraday's influence in the Ayres' affairs is already well underway. In his theorization of the competing ideological disjunctions that form culture, Sinfield asserts that the more the dominant social order engages with the elements it aims to occlude, "the more it becomes susceptible to incorporating them within itself" (Sinfield 116). In other words, "to silence dissent, one must first give it a voice" (Sinfield 117). Faraday has already been gifted this voice when Roderick agreed to treatment. Roderick now hopes to dispel Faraday and silence him, but Faraday has already been "incorporated" into the family (Sinfield 116). The treatment Faraday gives Roderick in fact does nothing to help him – Faraday notes that the limp was "quite as bad as it had been six months before" (Waters 229) – but what it does do is enable him to penetrate the Ayres' elitist world. When expelled as doctor/friend by the patriarch, Faraday must find other means of ensuring that he is not defeated on the ideological battleground of class wars. After Roderick's dismissal of him, the second major haunting occurs, this time directed at Roderick. Diagnosed as suffering from a breakdown and "beyond ordinary medical help" (227), he is placed in a psychiatric hospital, on Faraday's recommendation. Peeren describes spectral agency as "the ability to act on one's own initiative and to have this acting taken seriously by others as something meaningful that merits a response" (Peeren 15). Like Sinfield's theory of "dissidence," Peeren conceives of agency as necessarily operating within dominant discourses: in other words, from both a spectral and cultural materialist viewpoint, ideological systems are haunted by what they attempt to exclude, and in *The Little Stranger*, it is Faraday's decisiveness and his invocation of his traditionally inferior role that creates "meaningful" change. As he enacts this change, organizing for Roderick's removal, Faraday is at pains to foreground his medical expertise and the authority that this brings: "but as GP, you're definitely willing to put him into my care?" (228). Once, again, his role as a doctor – its weight and credibility – is used to articulate a "dissident perspective" (Sinfield 47). Sinfield argues that "faultlines are by definition resistant to the fantasies that would erase them" (Sinfield 41) and here, Faraday proves that, rather than "no one" (Waters 197), he is, in fact, someone, someone with the emerging power to challenge the lingering remnants of a gentrified dominant culture and reconstruct his own role within the multiplicity of postwar discourses. It is not Faraday but Roderick that is "erase[d]" (Sinfield 41) from Hundreds.

It can thus be seen that it is at points when Faraday's plausibility is disputed that the hauntings emerge. While "revenge" and "anger" are certainly unconscious motivations on Faraday's part (Parker

109, 99), the spectral phenomena also function as a protest against the emergent dynamics of power that Faraday seeks to control. The specter is the manifestation of the faultline, a challenge to a once-dominant power that aims to silence dissidence – a counter insurgency. Faraday's growing power occurs in tandem with the hauntings: as the Ayres' power is undermined, Faraday's is slowly strengthened. When the little stranger attacks Hundreds and its inhabitants, Faraday proceeds to make his position as doctor in the Ayres' life invincible. He re-writes this role so that he becomes confidant, friend, dependent, and potentially patriarch, with Caroline confessing, "I don't know how we'd have managed without you in the past few months" (Waters 237). Peeren points out that, spectrally, when the positions of servant and guest converge, their assumed "mutual exclusivity" (Peeren 99, 100) is brought into question. A similar dynamic unfolds in Faraday's case, as his role as the subordinate doctor intersects with his tentative emergence as a social equal and friend, unsettling the boundaries that have traditionally defined his relationship with the Ayres. For him, the faultline opens "an effective strategy to enforce being seen and to become a haunting specter that throws into doubt established categories and raises the possibility of a new ethics of intersubjectivity based on respect rather than disavowal" (Peeren 101). In the course of Roderick's demise, Mrs Ayres seeks Faraday's opinion as "our friend, as well as our doctor" (221). After Mrs Ayres' encounter with the spectral and her subsequent strange behavior, Faraday is inevitably called out again for his "opinion" (311) on her mental state. When he senses Caroline's hesitancy as their romantic relationship progresses, he solicits her need for him by reminding her of her mother's medical needs, a need which locates him as a fundamental part of their given circumstances: "She's going to need all our help" (354). Faraday is repeatedly called out in his capacity as doctor, "ready to drop in [...] in response to a telephone call" (292), replicating the pattern established at the beginning of the story when treating Roderick. Thus, the spectral hauntings do not simply chronicle the Ayres' slipping grasp on their legacy of wealth and power and Faraday's rise as a middle-class professional. His rising power in the relationship is by no means secure and relies on the medical support he can offer. Instead, arguably the hauntings are ignited by the family's decline and its clash with Faraday's increasing authority in a medical capacity, a position incongruously inflected by his contemporary authority and historical inferiority. There is then a "co-currence" of oppositional and cultural forces at play in the novel where different ideological structures exist together in "varying relations of incorporation, negotiation and resistance" (Sinfield 9).⁹ It is this faultline that kindles dissident potential and gives rise to the spectral violence that haunts the house. Such moments may effectuate meaningful change, resulting in "perspectival hierarchies" being "radically reordered" (Peeren 182). It is at times when this dissent is met with opposition, whenever the family "close ranks" (Waters 112), that the "little stranger" acts decisively and ruthlessly. It is the ghostly insurrections that propel Faraday forward, symptomatic of the emergence of a new postwar culture, destroying Hundreds and killing off the family.

Doomed Projects and the Fall of the Gentry

Of course, the irony is that the emerging power that Faraday invokes is not one he wishes to be part of. While he is successful in employing his medical status in a postwar world shaped by competing ideological discourses, even becoming engaged to the squire's daughter, it is the fading dominant culture of the gentrified class he seeks to not only infiltrate but preserve. Waters shows that such a project is doomed. This is achieved by stressing the changing context of Faraday's medical profession in contrast to the rapid decline of the Hall. His resistance to embrace the opportunities afforded to a man in his profession at the dawn of the NHS are hinted at early in the narrative when he admits his reasons for wanting to produce a paper based on Roderick's condition: "had I been really honest [...] I also had hopes of impressing the local gentry" (49). The same purpose is served when he is invited to give a paper at a London conference and it is well received. Although there is talk of him "joining them down there" and he is invited by a doctor who prefers working with other practitioners who have, as one doctor puts it, "come in from outside the system" (310), he declines: it is this system – one of

inherited wealth and power – that Faraday craves to be part of. He rejects the offer, concerned only with what he would be “giving up” (319).

Ironically, it is Caroline who understands that Hundreds and the way of life it once represented is already beyond repair. When she hears that moving to London and away from Warwickshire is a possibility if she marries Faraday, “her gaze changed, seemed to quicken” (319). In fact, her distaste for the prospect of staying at Hundreds is palpable: “We wouldn’t – we wouldn’t be *here*, would we?” (329 Waters’ italics). It becomes clear that Caroline’s incentive for marrying Faraday is escape from Hundreds and her old way of life, but it is this very way of life that has seduced Faraday. Caroline sees the NHS’ birth as hope for change – “you told me there might be a post for you there” (329) – but Faraday employs it as a reason to stay put, warning that everything will change “in July, when the Health Service comes in” (329). Faraday suggests to Caroline that, professionally, it might make more sense to stay in Warwickshire and live at Hundreds, rather than embrace opportunities the NHS creates. Here, his medical authority is used to promote and preserve the lingering cultural power of the once-dominant gentry. Where up until this point he has used his medical position to contest this culture, this is no longer necessary as he is on the verge of getting what he wants – Hundreds Hall. Where Caroline recognizes the quickening obsolescence of her family and the Hall, Faraday clings to a culture that, whilst decaying, is finally at his grasp. Ironically, his role as doctor, the very role that enabled him to become a meaningful participant in the Ayres’ lives in the first place, is the one that he now wishes to sideline, superseded, he hopes, by his role as squire.

Indeed, he comes tantalizingly close to securing what he wants. However, while it is ostensibly clear that Faraday has sustained himself in the face of hostile forces, by erasing these forces – the Ayres – he destroys the very order in which he hopes to rule. When Caroline protests that they cannot marry until her mother’s health improves, the little stranger acts again by killing Mrs Ayres, removing what Faraday perceives as the last threat standing between him and becoming master of Hundreds. When Caroline agrees to marry him, it seems that Faraday has achieved what Peeren might call, “full visible materiality and social significance” (Peeren 7), succeeding in his insistence to be fully seen by the family. However, with his role as doctor now redundant, his hopes of becoming the squire are finally thwarted by Caroline, who chooses to leave. When Caroline rejects him and with it his desires of becoming the gentrified, heteropatriarchal master, the disturbances he has reaped on the Hall in order to infiltrate it finally obliterate the prospect of this transformation. In spectral terms, the agency Faraday has exercised has not led to “sovereign control” over his “actions and their consequences” (Peeren 15). Having lost Caroline, the family is dead and with this Faraday’s prospects of owning the Hall and standing proxy for the aristocratic elite are quashed.

It is worth considering here how Sinfieldian and spectral logic might be applied to Caroline’s fate. In the position as the sole Ayres left with a decaying house, her options are inevitably inflected by 1940s gender discourses. O’Callaghan insightfully highlights the role of Faraday’s “clinical gaze” (O’Callaghan 169) in mediating how the novel’s gender and sexual politics unfold, reminding us that Foucault and Butler conceptualize gender and sexuality as discursively produced via socio-political and cultural institutions, such as medicine. From this perspective, the hauntings can be read as expressions of Faraday’s unstable masculinity, the ghostly attacks a means of asserting himself as a normative masculine “prototype” (O’Callaghan 170); Caroline is a casualty of this heteropatriarchal assertion. I would argue that Caroline’s fate also speaks to the conflicting attitudes toward gender roles present in postwar Britain. She tells Faraday that “England doesn’t want me anymore” (448). Caroline recognizes her declining influence: she becomes a potential “living ghost,” in danger of extinction in postwar Britain but, despite this, she recognizes that with the fading relevance of her role as the squire’s daughter comes the potential of a new role – that of an economically independent woman in the 1940s. Yet, she finds herself poised to undertake the traditional role of squire’s wife, preparing to stay at Hundreds, in danger of simulating the gender patterns that have characterized her predecessors’ lives. Waters thus stages another Sinfieldian Faultline: Caroline is bound by the intersecting expectations of a declining gentry and the gendered role it imposes, yet she simultaneously encounters an alternative made possible by wartime shifts in women’s labor and status. Her divided

position endows her with a form of agency comparable to the spectral agency Peeren attributes to marginal figures – those who navigate and exploit the contradictions of their roles. Reading Caroline's fate through both Sinfield's cultural materialist framework and Peeren's spectral metaphor thus invites, as Peeren advocates, a "greater degree of specificity" (15) in our attention to how ideological tensions shape subjectivity.¹⁰ Sinfield's method likewise urges us to recognize these faultlines – moments when ideology's coherence fractures – and to consider how such contradictions condition and constrain the lives of individuals within a given cultural formation. For Caroline, ironically – and revealingly – it is her gentrified inheritance that offers her the potential means of escape, exposing the paradox through which a residual class privilege could facilitate a break from normative femininity: "I shall be putting the estate up for sale [...] I shall need the money" (Waters 449).

However, unlike Faraday, Caroline cannot translate contradiction into agency. Her fate demonstrates that multiple faultlines – here those of gender and class – may coexist but do not align harmoniously. Waters shows how the 1940s volatile class politics are exploited by Faraday through his medical authority, and that these override the gendered possibilities available to Caroline: when Faraday is unable to accept her choice – "How *can* you? How *dare* you?" (Waters' italics, 465) – she becomes the final victim, falling to her death. While the postwar cultural contradictions that converge in Faraday spectrally mobilize his ascent, Caroline, as a figure of emergent postwar femininity, is sacrificed. The novel suggests that the faultline structuring her position is too deeply embedded in traditional gender norms to permit real transformation. While Sinfield recognizes that dissidence can emerge through such faultlines, he also recognizes that such ruptures are no guarantee of actualized change. For Caroline, the faultline does not yield liberation but containment, where the possibility of social reorganization is neutralized by the reassertion of heteropatriarchal power.

Other marginal characters do emerge from Hundreds' decline with greater degrees of power or having gained something material, demonstrating the inversion of postwar class relations: Betty now works in a "bicycle factory," her "evenings and weekends" now her own (496). She confides to Faraday when she meets him three years after the Ayres' deaths that she still dreams of Mrs Ayres trying to give her "jewels and brooches" and that she "never wants to take them" (496). Significantly, Betty does not clarify whether she takes them or not in these dreams and we are reminded of her trying on Mrs Ayres' "gold leather slippers" (316) earlier in the novel. As Monica Germanà argues, such possessions "disclose the subversion of linear genealogy by which the maid replaces Susan, the dead heiress, and becomes the potential usurper of the Ayres' inheritance" (Germanà 121). Indeed, Betty's social ascent has been analyzed from a cultural and intertextual perspective, leading to scholarly speculation that she may well be the agent behind the hauntings.¹¹ While Betty never quite becomes the "guest" in the Pereenian spectral sense, she does reconfigure her position as a servant in the Hall, significantly moving upstairs to sleep on the same floor as Mrs Ayres, symbolically and literally transgressing her lowly position. Interestingly, while Betty's transformation signals a degree of class mobility, Waters does not attribute to it the same subversive gender potential that characterizes Caroline's before her death. Faraday observes that Betty's "hair had been lightened and permed, and her cheeks were red with rouge" (Waters 496) – a transformation that, while symbolic of her class elevation, remains firmly within the bounds of normative femininity. Unlike Caroline, whose dissident potential arises from the intersection of gender and class decline, Betty does not inhabit a faultline charged with the same ideological tension. By contrast, Caroline's fate underscores the limits of cultural transformation when residual hegemonies – specifically, heteropatriarchy – remain structurally intact.

Nonetheless, Betty's shift from domestic service to factory worker, and the broader social freedoms it affords, reminds the reader that, in many ways, the cultural landscape has shifted postwar. This is further reinforced by Faraday's references to Hundreds' reconfigured land, now the site of newly built council houses which have "been a great success" with "more planned" (Waters 495). The materiality of the Hall is repurposed and new spaces – literal and ideological – are fashioned. In comparison, despite the fact Faraday's role has expanded and he is now considered "popular" (494), in the final pages of the novel, he is located where he was at the start, at Hundreds, now trying to fix leaky roofs and board up windows (497). Waters situates Faraday in a compressed space in contrast to the

expanding postwar society described in the same chapter. We are reminded that, paradoxically, Faraday's assimilation into what Sinfield would recognize as a once "dominant culture" (Sinfield 116) has expedited the dismantling of it, leaving him isolated, adrift in a new emerging world. The faultline that enabled him to contest dominant pre-war discourses that once marginalized him has now shifted. The irony is that Faraday himself has accelerated this change by destroying the very culture – emblemized by the Hall – that he wanted to be part of. Hauntology demonstrates that spectral agency "*potentially* enables one to renegotiate one's social position and identity" (Peeren 15 my italics), yet its realization is contingent on context and opportunity. In parallel, Sinfield underscores that dissidence alone does not guarantee subversion; the capacity to challenge dominant ideology is always mediated by the social and cultural structures within which individuals are situated. Together, these perspectives highlight the fragility and partiality of attempts to navigate or unsettle established hierarchies. In the novel, Faraday hastens the Ayres' decline, destabilizes traditional power structures and, in doing so, moves from employee, to friend and – almost – squire. His ultimate failure is the result of his attempts to reconfigure the fading boundaries of a once powerful social authority and insert himself within it: in doing so, he defeats all that he hopes to be part of.

Conclusion

In her epistemology of haunting, Peeren insists that hauntological analysis must "explore the highly specific way in which the spectral operates in each case" (5). Similarly, Sinfield calls for a comparable attention to specificity, though in a culturally analytic rather than figurative sense. Together, their approaches offer a robust framework for examining the interplay of ideology, subjectivity, and spectrality. Applied to *The Little Stranger*, this lens reveals how Waters presents a world in which the social order is not unified – far from it. When Faraday enters Hundreds Hall nearly thirty years after seeing it for the first time, he remains marginalized, still a subordinate to the aristocratic Ayres. Yet, as the family's need for him grows, their own power dwindles. However, Waters does not simply invert the power play: there is no straightforward ideological transition. Rather, Faraday must invoke his Other status to infiltrate a class that has traditionally occluded him. He does this by asserting his authority as doctor, a liminal role that speaks to his subordination and, simultaneously, his powerful role as a plausible presence in the Ayres' lives at a time when the medical profession was being redefined. As a marginal character at the start of the novel – a "living ghost" – Faraday is able to use his role as a doctor to "act with a sense of purpose," ensuring that he is "seen to be of consequence" (Peeren 15). His liminal position works to unsettle normative boundaries and spectrally materialize the ideological contradictions that underpin Waters' neo-historical setting. Peeren's concept of "living ghosts" then can be read as a figurative embodiment of Sinfield's faultlines, where faultlines provide an analytical framework for understanding the structural tensions in Waters' setting that the little stranger signifies. Conversely, Sinfield's faultlines give conceptual precision to the otherwise metaphorical spectrality, allowing us to map how specific class, gender, and historical tensions operate in the novel's setting. Together, the two concepts illuminate how cultural and social structures are both haunted and unstable, revealing the contradictions that shape the postwar landscape – in this specific context, a late 1940s Britain, rife with tension and change. Indeed, Waters takes care to highlight the competing narratives of the postwar period: it was a time when the gentry still held on to social authority, and yet their grasp was slipping; a time when deference and nostalgia infused Britain, but also a time of burgeoning nationalization enshrined in the newly established NHS and Welfare state; a time when education could enable individuals to be socially mobile, and yet class snobbery remained insidious. It is because of these conflicting discourses that the specter emerges, and Faraday is able to reconfigure his role in relation to Hundreds Hall. The demise of the Ayres and Faraday's relational position to them speaks to the vulnerability of the social order symbolized by the Ayres and the elements of resistance it inevitably prompts. His trajectory demonstrates how moments of ideological incongruity can create openings for change and destabilization, even when that destabilization is violent and coercive. However, these competing narratives, while opening up opportunities for Faraday, do not yield a straightforward path to power. His failure to attain what he covets – Hundreds – reminds us that the

effects of ideological contradictions are always mediated through the individual's engagement with, and response to, these competing discourses. In the same way that Sinfield highlights the intricate interplay of often hidden paradigms to understand a subject's social positioning, Peeren cautions against "universaliz[ing] the condition of spectralization" (15). By following this reasoning, we can discern the complex and contradictory cultural forces that shape Faraday's course. Similarly, we can read Caroline's story in this way. Peeren emphasizes that the potency of ghosts – "how powerful ghosts are" (3) – is contingent upon "contextual factors" (Peeren 3) and each subject's particular relation to them. Caroline's fate reveals the complex interplay between intersecting faultlines. Her decision to leave Hundreds marks what Sinfield identifies as the moment when ideological contradictions become visible. Caroline knows she risks becoming what Peeren terms a "living ghost" (5), and she attempts to harness this, attempting to mobilize her dissident potential within the shifting material conditions of postwar Britain – marked by social restructuring, the erosion of class privilege, and evolving gender roles. However, this potential remains unrealized. Thus, Caroline's death exposes the limits of cultural change under conditions where dominant ideologies, particularly heteropatriarchy, remain structurally entrenched and capable of containing and suppressing dissent. Betty's trajectory reinforces this dynamic, as she is able to achieve social mobility after leaving Hundreds – arguably because, unlike Caroline, she does not directly challenge the enduring and oppressive heteropatriarchal structures. Waters thus demonstrates how one form of cultural rupture can create openings for dissident emergence while simultaneously foreclosing other possibilities, highlighting the uneven and contingent nature of social and ideological change.

Thus, the novel underscores not only the transformative possibilities inherent in cultural change but also the limits of this: Waters shows how characters' positions are negotiated along Sinfieldian faultlines and animated through the spectral dynamics that expose the instabilities of the broader ideological order. Faraday, whose effort to reconfigure his marginal position within postwar Britain almost effectuates change, ultimately fails to secure the role he so desires. Just as Peeren's spectral logic emphasizes that the ghost may not exercise full sovereignty and instead "manifest as a figure of compromised agency" (3), Sinfield likewise acknowledges the limits of subversive potential, observing that dissidence "may not even be actualized [...] becoming disruptive only at certain conjunctures" (Sinfield 46). When Faraday's "project of ideology" (Sinfield 9) looks set to fail, the little stranger acts as a disruptive force, revealing the cracks of the postwar ideological façade the Ayres work so hard to maintain in the first part of the story. It is at moments when Faraday's refashioning risks failing, when the Ayres "close ranks" (Waters 112) in "spurious unity" (Sinfield 116) as a dominant ideological force, disputing Faraday's plausible presence at Hundreds, that the little stranger strikes. Arguably the spectral, then, is a manifestation of the dissident and fractious energies that emerge when ruptures appear in the social fabric. Faraday's relationship with the Ayres thus becomes a conduit through which the novel explores the contested authority of professional and cultural identity within a society undergoing ideological realignment.

Yet, by aiming to become the squire, Faraday is complicit – indeed has always been complicit – with an ideological perspective in which he is the subordinate. Rather than expedite social change, the spectral violence he engenders seeks to reestablish the pre-war hierarchical order, but one in which he is now the authority. Waters shows that this is impossible. By subverting his marginal position, Faraday must destroy the Hall and with it, the authoritative role of squire he so desires. As Sinfield's theory posits: "if we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?" (Sinfield 35). In other words, how can resistance take place when it is the product of a "complicit ideological base" (Sinfield 35)? By subverting his marginal position, Faraday must destroy the Hall and with it, the authoritative role of squire he so desires. Despite the irony, the demise of the Ayres reminds us that "dominant cultures," despite their seeming invulnerability, are always "under pressure" (Sinfield 41), even from those who do not present as hostile. Just as for Peeren, the specter's lack of "sovereign control" does not "diminish the importance of being able to act [...] and of being seen to be of consequence" (15), we are reminded that, for Faraday, "regardless of the ending, the challenge really was unsettling" (Sinfield 49): he may not achieve the squire status he craves, but he does contribute

to the destabilization of the historically dominant aristocratic order, even as he unwittingly precludes himself from joining this class by destroying it.

Notes

1. Existing criticism of the novel has approached *The Little Stranger* from a range of perspectives: Katharina Boehm analyses the House's materiality as a key site for exploring class relations; Ann Heilmann frames the novel within Victorian (as well as 1940s) literature and culture, and explores how the intertextual structure of the novel inflects the theme of class; Barbara Braid interrogates the intersections between the gothic mode and class; Emma Parker situates her analysis of class politics in the novel in the context of the country house narrative; Monica Germanà analyses the haunting in relation to wider discourses of fashion and class; Claire O'Callaghan argues that the novel constitutes a study in masculinity, partly shaped by class dynamics.
2. Sinfield first came to prominence in 1985 with the publication of *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* in which he and his coauthor Jonathon Dollimore applied cultural materialist theory to early modern texts, challenging the canonization of Shakespeare (and some of his contemporaries) as universal and timeless.
3. While Blanco and Peeren identify the influential publication of *Specters of Marx*, they recognize that the spectral turn can be traced back to the 1970s at least, foregrounding the significance of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's psychoanalytic theorizations in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*.
4. Criticism includes that of scholars well established in the field of hauntology and spectrality including Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Julian Wolfreys and Roger Luckhurst.
5. Several scholars have read the hauntings as a manifestation of Faraday's desire to possess Hundreds (see Heilmann, Parker, O'Callaghan, Germanà, Braid, Boehm).
6. Sinfield alludes to Anthony Giddens' work in *Central Problems in Social Theory* in which Giddens theorizes about the problems of the social sciences.
7. Sinfield makes brief reference to Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggard who founded the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1964.
8. Each moment of spectral violence manifests differently in the novel: in this instance, the affable dog unaccountably turns on the child, as if disturbed by some evil force. Waters draws on nineteenth-century theories of parapsychology to imply that the ghostly presence behaves in ways akin to a poltergeist. For a detailed discussion of these literary allusions, see Heilmann.
9. Sinfield refers here to Raymond Williams' argument for viewing culture as an intersection of dominant and subordinate ideologies.
10. In a similar context, Avery Gordon engages with the work of Gayatri Spivak to warn of potential blind spots when approaching a singular theoretical lens, warning that doing so may lead to the foreclosing of the multiple and often competing social discourses that inform experience. Prefiguring Peeren, Gordon's epistemology of haunting calls for an approach that attends to the contradictory complexities of social life.
11. Ann Heilmann explores both Victorian and 1940s contemporary fiction and nonfiction intertexts of the novel that point convincingly to the possibility that Betty may also be responsible for the spectral occurrences; Monica Germanà argues that Betty's social transformation – specifically her refashioning – similarly implies her complicity with the hauntings.

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