'The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roosts Her Heart': Lesbians, Desire and the Gothic Genre

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of the Gothic genre in two 'lesbian' novels[2]: *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes (1936) and *Affinity* by Sarah Waters (1999).[3] The Gothic, I argue, is employed and manipulated in order to counter the repressive effects of 'lesbian panic', evident in much women's fiction (an idea posited by Patricia Smith in *Lesbian Panic*, 1997).

I begin by constructing a framework for my argument from the disparate yet related scholarship of several theorists, including Terry Castle, Eve Sedgwick, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gayle Rubin. My argument hinges on the claim that lesbianism threatens cultural order – based upon male homosocial relationships and the reciprocal exchange of women – in a similar way to incest. Therefore, lesbianism is subject to extreme repression, rendered shady and invisible in history and literature.

Following this theoretical introduction, I argue that the Gothic genre – that twilight realm of unconscious fantasies and forbidden desires – can be used as a tool for subverting the repressive system that keeps lesbianism in its place, bringing its silence into articulation. Through the self-conscious use of Gothic tropes in *Nightwood* and *Affinity*, Djuna Barnes and Sarah Waters write the lesbian back into tangible existence, 'repossessing' the spectre of the lesbian towards their own emancipating ends. In particular, the incest taboo and the love triangle are twisted into new shapes in these novels, so that all that Western culture designates as 'abject' becomes eerily illuminated by the Gothic's unflinching perspective.

Finally, I discuss the options available when concluding a lesbian novel and the effects of genre on narrative outcome: Is a happy ending possible in a realist lesbian novel? Could the Gothic genre hold the key to unravelling the silence of lesbian panic? My conclusion leaves discussion open to other perspectives, arguments, and, of course, to further scholarship.

Keywords: Literature; Gothic; sexuality

Introduction

Have you heard the one about Queen Victoria? When asked whether the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act outlawing homosexual acts between men should be extended to include homosexual acts between women, the Queen simply could not imagine that sex between two women was possible. However amusing such ignorance may appear to a savvy contemporary audience, the 'Queen Victoria Principle' (Castle: 66) — though relatively harmless when compared to the more violent manifestations

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[2] Though it is contentious as to whether a novel can be 'lesbian' or not, I use the term lightly here to designate novels which are the work of avowedly lesbian novelists, and which have been read widely in a lesbian context, and as part of lesbian literary heritage.

[3] The author is indebted to Sarah Waters, whose willing participation and kind words have made the whole process of writing this essay thoroughly enjoyable.

of homophobia — is one of the most powerful discourses distorting the representation of lesbianism to date:

> To judge by how frequently it is repeated, the story of Queen Victoria's pronouncement has taken on, alas, the status of cultural myth — the 'truth' of which is that lesbians don't really exist. Whenever it is retold — even seemingly jokingly, by antihomophobic historians and critics — it almost always prefigures the erasure of lesbianism from the discourse that is to follow (Castle: 249-50n).

If lesbianism has been erased from culture and history, then what about its visibility in literature? Castle laments that 'the concept of lesbian fiction . . . remains somewhat undertheorized' (Castle: 67), citing the theorist Eve Sedgwick as a perpetrator of such critical disregard. Sedgwick, she argues, has neglected to study lesbian desire with the same attention she has devoted to male homosexual desire in studies such as *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Sedgwick, for her part, defends herself from this criticism:

> [T]he diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women than men . . . an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions and valuations link lesbianism with other forms of women's attention to women: the bond of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women's friendship, 'networking', and the active struggles of feminism (697).

Though Sedgwick nods towards lesbian literary history in this passage, she underplays its important status in her discussion of homosexual panic. Her description of an idealized 'continuum' of 'women loving women', however well-intentioned, obscures the sexual dimension of lesbian desire, 'its incorrigibly *lascivious* surge towards the body of another woman' (Castle: 11).

This paper, drawing on Sedgwick's studies, will develop a hypothesis about the representation of lesbian desire. Before progressing, however, I wish to delineate my understanding of lesbian desire and how it departs from, and yet relates to, non-sexual, homosocial bonds between women. To do so, I make reference to *Lesbian Panic* by Patricia Smith (1997). Smith's study explores the intense anxiety surrounding lesbian desire in twentieth century women's writing. Her scholarship encompasses the seventy-five years between Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson, analysing several novels as 'case studies' in which intimate homosocial relationships between women engender anxiety. Smith terms such anxiety 'lesbian panic': 'the disruptive action that occurs when a character — or, conceivably, an author — is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire' (2). Smith looks at heterosexually-orientated texts in which lesbian desire repeatedly arises, only to be violently denied through narrative devices: 'This destructive reaction may be as sensational as suicide or homicide, or as subtle and vague as a generalized [sic] neurasthenic malaise' (2).

Smith follows feminist theorists Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray in understanding women as fulfilling a socio-economic role as exchange commodities in relations between men. This idea originates in the anthropological studies of Lévi-Strauss, who writes that: 'The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of

men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners' (161). In her ground-breaking essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy of Sex"' (1984), Rubin further develops the implications of this theory for feminism: 'If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage' (542-43). Therefore, women are possessions, and the real basis of power lies in the relationship between the men that exchange them.

Sedgwick uses this concept to explore the dynamics of the erotic triangle, in which two men vying for the hand of a woman serve as a metaphor for patriarchal culture, which is founded on desiring male homosocial relationships. Sedgwick's exploration of homosocial desire carefully problematizes the discontinuities of the male homosocial bonds upon which patriarchal society depends. Her ultimate aim is to 'draw the "homosocial" back into the orbit of desire [and] to hypothesize the potential unbrokeness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual' (696).

But what is the status of the lesbian in this patriarchal system of exchange? As we have seen, Sedgwick denies that such a thing as homosexual panic occurs between women. As exchange commodities, they are exempt from the complex rules of homosocial bonding and therefore the continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual is subject to fewer boundaries. But Patricia Smith argues that women also suffer from homosexual panic. Drawing on Sedgwick's study of male homosexual panic, she argues that female homosocial bonding is also terrorized by the threat of this bonding becoming *homosexual* — consequently obliterating a woman's market value as an 'exchange commodity' (an idea extended from Gayle Rubin's 'Traffic in Women'). Lesbian panic, she writes, arises from this fear of losing one's meaning and value in the patriarchal system:

> [W]hat is at stake for a woman under such conditions is nothing less than economic survival, as the object of exchange is inevitably dependent on the exchanger for her continued perceived worth . . . lesbianism frequently lacks a name, much less an acknowledged or acceptable identity. Accordingly, the fear of the loss of identity and value as object of exchange, often combined with the fear of responsibility for one's own sexuality, is a characteristic response; it is from precisely such fears that lesbian panic arises. (6)

Contrary to Sedgwick's view of female homosexuality as part of an acceptable, acknowledged continuum of 'women loving women', in many ways lesbianism signifies the breaking of the most fundamental rules of patriarchal culture: 'By refusing to undergo the symbolic emasculation that Western society demands of its female members — indeed depends upon — the woman who desires another woman has always set herself apart (if only by default) as outlaw and troublemaker' (Castle: 5). Prefiguring the work of Patricia Smith, Gayle Rubin acknowledges lesbian panic, in a passage that Sedgwick perhaps neglected when researching for *Between Men*: 'As long as men have rights in women which women do not have in themselves, it would be sensible to expect that homosexuality in women would be subject to more suppression than in men' (548). We can thus begin to understand that Queen Victoria's *faux pas*, rather than confirming the non-existence of lesbianism, is symbolic of a culture permeated by lesbian panic, for 'behind such silence, one can detect an anxiety too severe to allow for articulation' (Castle: 6).

This paper will develop the conversation I have set up between Smith, Sedgwick and Castle in two ways. Firstly, Smith analyses lesbian panic in the work of ostensibly heterosexual female authors. In this essay, I discuss the work of two self-proclaimed lesbian authors: the modernist Djuna Barnes and the contemporary novelist Sarah Waters. I do so in order to explore the ways in which they navigate and negotiate the problem of lesbian panic. This leads me on to the second focus of this paper: the political function of the Gothic genre. Smith's study of *Lesbian Panic* focuses primarily on realist novels in which lesbian desire is deeply repressed. I will argue that Barnes and Waters – in *Nightwood* (1936) and *Affinity* (1999) respectively – find in the Gothic an important political and creative means to challenge lesbian panic.

The Gothic genre

To consider the Gothic genre as a response to panic might appear paradoxical, though the clinical symptoms of 'lesbian panic' are eminently similar to the sensations of terror produced by Gothic literature, which include 'shortness of breath . . . dizziness, unsteady feelings, or faintness; palpitations or accelerated heart rate; trembling or shaking' (Norton, Walker, and Ross qtd. in Smith: 3). Despite these similarities, Smith's discussion of the relationship between lesbian panic and the Gothic genre is limited to a paragraph:

> Historically a means by which homosexual men and heterosexual women authors . . . could explore, express, indulge in, and subsequently, through the requisite closure in which social order is restored, reconceal their forbidden desires, the Gothic would seem an apt narrative structure through which to represent the dynamics of lesbian panic. (155)

In order to understand why it is necessary for lesbian authors to reconfigure the Gothic paradigm, it is first necessary to identify the features by which this paradigm is characterized. The Gothic genre, fixated on family structures, has unsurprisingly adopted its own father figure: Horace Walpole. Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) was famously inspired by a terrifying dream. Therefore, from its 'birth', the Gothic genre has been associated with the unconscious mind and the compulsion to articulate what is 'unspeakable' or repressed. Inspiration derived from nightmares later became a Gothic convention.[4] *The Castle of Otranto*, like Walpole's Gothic mansion Strawberry Hill, was also a trend-setting experiment in style over substance, representative of the fashionable medieval revival during this period.

However, the Walpole myth, writes Gothic critic Anne Williams 'manifestly effaces the mother . . . an ironic genealogy for a mode so fascinated with the culturally female' (11). She points instead to the seminal study of nineteenth-century women's literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1980), as an alternative way of understanding the genre. Gilbert and Gubar re-imagine the Gothic as a genre capable of articulating the psychological state of the subordinated Victorian woman. In this way, the Gothic has been theorized as a site of feminist resistance; it is no longer a dusty curiosity from a fleeting eighteenth-century fashion. Brontë's madwoman serves as a metaphor for the Gothic's disruptive power to 'transgress' boundaries: 'the

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[4] Perhaps the most famous example of this is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

madwoman, though hidden and confined . . . seems fully capable of escaping her confinement and burning the house down' (Williams: 8).

Rather than being defined by specific 'motifs', such as haunted castles and madwomen, the Gothic mode is perhaps best understood as being intrinsically structured by a fluid 'organizing principle'. The theorist Claudio Guillén argues that all genres are a matter of a latent principle, divorced from the specifics of content, mood or form with which that are most readily associated (Guillén qtd. in Williams: 16). For Anne Williams, 'the mythos or structure informing this Gothic category . . . is the patriarchal family' (22). She argues that the Gothic is above all concerned with boundaries, from the physical limitations of the domestic space — castle walls, prisons, locked chests — to the ancestral 'line' of the aristocratic family. Such boundaries represent 'the literal and figurative processes by which society organizes itself, "draws the line" . . . the elaborate cultural system Lacan called "the Law of the Father"' (12).

Thus, the Gothic genre can be understood to operate in a similar manner to the Freudian ego. Like Freud's dream work, this genre grants the reader a safe encounter with fear, titillating them with repressed desires that are distorted through the medium of fantastic or supernatural fiction. Gothic texts blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, revelling equally in pleasure and terror. By finally casting judgement — punishing 'wicked' characters and exorcizing ghosts — this narrative equivalent of the Freudian ego regains supremacy over the unconscious mind or id — represented by the supernatural. Finally, order is restored and the repressed is once again laid to rest. The reader, unlike the fictional characters, escapes unscathed, experiencing something akin to the cathartic release associated with tragedy.

The Gothic novel, then, is organized conspicuously around the principle of patriarchal order; the Oedipal family represents, in phantasmatic form, the destruction that occurs when such boundaries and systems breakdown. It is, therefore, no coincidence that incest, the ultimate taboo, repeatedly arises in Gothic texts. In almost all canonical Gothic novels (Walpole's *Otranto*, *The Mysterious Mother* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk,* to name but a few) incest occurs, only to be violently punished. Incest, writes Lévi-Strauss, threatens cultural order in a similar way to homosexuality, by disrupting the reciprocal exchange of women upon which patriarchal society is based: 'The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others' (51).

If, as Patricia Smith posits, lesbian panic is founded primarily in women's fear of losing their identity and value as exchange commodities, the Gothic is the genre in which that fear can be exploited and lesbian desire successfully repressed. In Gothic texts, after all, '[p]assion is excited only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized. The vision is inevitably waved off' (Castle: 34). Still, what if lesbian authors were to wield the Gothic for their own ends? What if they were to re-write lesbian panic *as* lesbian panic, thereby bringing the unspeakable into articulation, the repressed into reality? *Affinity* by Sarah Waters and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes are both narratives in which buried lesbian desire is slowly and artfully brought to light, allowing the spectre of the lesbian to take on a real, and potentially disruptive, shape.

Resurrecting The Apparitional Lesbian
In *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), Terry Castle argues that lesbianism has been 'ghosted' by Western culture: 'The kiss that doesn't happen, the kiss that *can't* happen, because one of the women involved has become a ghost . . . seems to me a

crucial metaphor for the history of lesbian literary representation' (30). Transforming one (or both) of the women involved into ghostly vapour means a text can allude to lesbian desire while simultaneously denying its carnal embodiment. The ghost, imprisoned between the worlds of the living and the dead, provides an archetypal Gothic metaphor for lesbian identity as having forfeited her fundamental role as an exchange commodity, she becomes   a wanderer on the margins of patriarchal society.

The spectral metaphor therefore consistently pervades texts in which female homosocial bonds are intense, particularly those set in all-female institutions, such as girls' schools[5], or, as in *Affinity*, women's prisons. The emergence of lesbian desire becomes a greater threat when the social and economic signifiers of patriarchal culture, such as marital identities, are replaced by a hierarchy of inter-female power relations. This threat leads to lesbian panic, which is articulated and exorcized through the 'obsessional spectralizing gestures' that are associated with the Gothic genre (Castle: 34).

The spectral metaphor, however, contains a fundamental paradox: an apparition, however airy or invisible, is capable of haunting. Castle argues that 'for repressive purposes, one could hardly think of a *worse* metaphor' (63) since 'repossessed, so to speak — the very trope that evaporates can also solidify' (47). This is a sentiment with Sarah Waters also concurs:

> Lesbianism has often been rendered invisible, for one reason or another, in history and in literature. It's always been marginalised. One of the things I try to do in my books is put it at the centre of things. So in that sense, I'm fleshing out a ghost. (Waters, Personal Interview)

In all her novels to date, Waters certainly achieves her objective of putting lesbianism 'at the centre of things'. Her debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), radically exposed the queer subculture of the straight-laced Victorian era. In her second novel, *Affinity* (1999), Waters succeeds in rewriting the conventional Victorian ghost story. *Affinity*'s protagonist, Margaret Prior, is a spinster with a dark secret who has just commenced charity work as a 'lady visitor' at Millbank Prison, a sprawling, Gothic gaol looming out of the barren soil of the Thames: 'It is as if the prison had been designed by a man in the grip of a nightmare or a madness . . . I think it would certainly drive me mad, if I had to work as a warder there' (8).

In many ways, Margaret Prior exemplifies the neurasthenic Victorian woman discussed in Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985). She is the archetypal Gothic heroine; frail, pallid and nervous; prone to blushes and fainting fits. The reader soon discovers that Margaret attempted suicide following her beloved father's death. By visiting Millbank, Margaret seeks to escape her tragic history: 'I imagined them fastening my own past shut, with a strap and a buckle' (29).

Margaret's narrative has a ghostly double: 'my last journal, which had so much of my own heart's blood in it; and which certainly took as long to burn as human hearts, they say, do take' (70). The content of this burnt journal forms the simmering subtext to Margaret's present-time narrative. Margaret, we gradually discover, wishes to repress her lesbian desires, and to recover from her thwarted relationship with Helen, now her sister-in-law:

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[5] Castle uses Diderot's *La Religieuse* and Strachey's *Olivia* as examples.

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> [Helen] walked from me and stood at the bed — and I said at once, 'Don't go too near the bed! Don't you know it's haunted, by our old kisses? They'll come and frighten you!' 'Oh!' she cried then . . . and put her hands before her face. She said, would I torment her forever? (204)

Helen's reaction to Margaret's ghostly taunts recalls the compulsive 'waving-off' gesture that Castle analyses in *The Apparitional Lesbian*. The covering of the eyes, brow or entire face, she writes, is an attempt to exorcize lesbian desire, a gesture of 'blockage, as though to cede into the void the memory (or hope) of a fleshly passion' (33).

This gesture also occurs during Margaret's early visit to Selina Dawes, an imprisoned spiritualist: '"You have friends", I said, "here?" She closed her eyes, and made a theatrical kind of pass at the front of her brow. "I have friends, Miss Prior" she answered, "*here*"' (47). This self-consciously 'theatrical' gesture provides a crucial clue to Miss Dawes's true nature. With each visit to Millbank Margaret becomes increasingly attracted to this 'queer' young medium, whom she believes has been wrongly imprisoned for crimes of fraud and assault. Eventually, Selina persuades Margaret to help her escape using spiritualist rhetoric: 'You were seeking me, your own *affinity*. And if you let them keep me from you now, I think we shall die!' (275).

Through the juxtaposition of two parallel narratives — Margaret's journal account, and Selina's diary from before her imprisonment — Waters weaves a complex web of deception that dramatically unravels at the novel's denouement. For it transpires that Selina was guilty all along, working in league with her lover, Ruth Vigers, who infiltrated Margaret's house disguised as a maid. Posing as the male spirit-control 'Peter Quick' allowed Ruth to sexually assault many troubled young women, while Selina bribed heiresses out of their fortune using her apparent 'gift'. Nineteenth-century spiritualism was, Waters explains.

> [a] fantastically alternative movement, attracting people who had slightly different political, cultural takes on life. Particularly, the emphasis on the spirit over the body offered gay members a different discourse of gender and sexuality. (Waters, Interview)

In *Affinity's* startling reversal of the 'decarnalizing' spectral metaphor, Selina and Ruth initiate several young women to the delights of the female flesh by manipulating the discourses of spiritualism: 'let your spirit be *used*, your prayer must always be *May I be used* . . . You must take off your gown now & you must grasp Miss Dawes' (261).

Affinity concludes with Selina and Ruth stealing Margaret's fortune and escaping to Florence. In the novel's final pages Margaret is left devastated, alone and suicidal: 'Selina, you will be in sunlight soon. Your twisting is done — you have the last thread of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it?' (351). But while Margaret Prior, our repressed and titillated heroine, remains very much stuck inside the Gothic narrative, Selina Dawes evolves beyond the traditional Gothic plot. Although she receives a realist explanation at the novel's conclusion, Selina seems still to elude the narrative itself; the personal account of her crime remains frustratingly ambiguous.

Selina's career as a spirit medium requires her to play on the fears and desires of others in order to achieve economic independence. In this way, she is like the

author herself; wielding the Gothic genre as a tool to meet her own ends. Selina turns her status as an outsider to her advantage; by utilizing her obscure class standing and her ghostly lesbianism she is able to escape the patriarchal economic system that the middle-class Miss Prior, to her detriment, remains trapped within.

The remainder of this chapter will argue that in *Nightwood*, the ghostly lesbian lurking at the margins of patriarchal culture takes on a more tangible Gothic aspect: the vampire. In *Affinity*, Margaret, like the typical vampire's victim, becomes increasingly anaemic as Selina's influence takes hold: 'I gaze at my own flesh and see the bones show pale beneath it. They grow paler each day' (289). In line with Castle's theory, the more Margaret acknowledges her suppressed lesbian desires, the more ghostly she becomes: 'My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost!' (ibid).

Conversely, the delicate Selina eventually emerges as a formidable *femme fatale* capable of devastating several lives. In this way, she is similar to Robin Vote, the *femme fatale* of *Nightwood*. [6] T. S. Eliot praised *Nightwood* for its 'quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy' (xiv). However, the *New York Herald Tribune* argued that: 'It is a book of Gothic horror, not of Elizabethan tragedy' (qtd. in Horner: 231). Robin Vote is the centre of this horror, drifting through the lives of Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood and Jenny Petherbridge, leaving destruction and insanity in her wake. She is introduced as a picture on her first appearance in the novel: 'Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room' 31). Likewise, in *Affinity*, Selina Dawes is initially compared to 'an angel in a painting of Crivelli's' (27). However, unlike Selina's devotional posture of transcendence, Robin's first appearance exudes sensual corporeality: her flesh has the clammy 'texture of plant life' exhaling the ancient scent of 'fungi' (31).

Robin first appears in 'La Somnambule' having 'invaded sleep incautious and entire' (ibid). Her character never fully surfaces from the playground of repressed, pre-Oedipal desires:

> Robin exists within a pre-socialized conception of identity and behaviour, as if she has never grown from the infant described by Freud, who begins life as inherently bisexual and polygamous, and who must renounce these perversions in order to become a socialized and gendered individual. (Parsons: 64-65)

Robin's is a position of perverse liminality; she is presented to the reader as 'a beast turning human' (33). Like Selina, she is accused of '"sensuous communion with unclean spirits"' (151). But Robin Vote has little connection with insubstantial spirits; instead, she is a creature of the flesh ruled by primal urges: 'she yet carried the quality of the "way-back" as animals do' (36). Her unfortunate husband Felix helplessly observes her receptivity to these animalistic urges: 'Always she seemed to be listening to the echo of some foray in the blood, that had no known setting' (40).

Deborah Parsons argues that Robin's 'pagan profanity links her with the stereotypical image of the vampire' (62). Avril Horner, on the other hand, claims that 'Felix Volkbein is linked explicitly with the [Gothic] figure of the Wandering Jew', while 'Robin — through her restless night-time predatory wanderings during which

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[6] All following references to *Nightwood* are in-text page citations.

she "feeds off" her café victims — is implicitly associated with the figure of the Vampire' (232).

When Felix Volkbein marries this American heiress in order to bolster his own aristocratic pretensions, Dr Matthew O'Connor warns him that '[t]he last muscle of aristocracy is madness' (36), implying that in-breeding leads to hereditary insanity and 'bad blood'. Felix's heir Guido grows up to be '[m]entally deficient, and emotionally excessive . . . at ten, barely as tall as a child of six, wearing spectacles, stumbling when he tried to run' (96). Therefore, as a vampire, Robin embodies cultural taboos surrounding homosexuality *and* incest. Nora Flood later remarks that: 'Robin is incest too, that is one of her powers' (141). By symbolically refusing to accept her role as a passive exchange commodity, the lesbian threatens to occupy a position of greater sexual and economic autonomy. This threat is made explicit through the vampire metaphor. As Bram Dijkstra observes, '[b]y 1900 the vampire had come to represent woman as the personification of everything negative that linked sex, ownership and money' (351). This Gothic fiend is far more terrifying than the apparition: vampires are tangible, powerful and, most frightening of all, capable of reproducing through blood exchange — a monstrous inversion of sexual intercourse. Once 'repossessed' by Waters and Barnes, then, the apparitional lesbian becomes a vampiric *femme fatale*, the anarchy of lesbianism frighteningly incarnated and a metaphor for women's 'blood link with the animal past' (Dijkstra: 342).

'Our Three Selves': The Haunting of the Homosocial Triangle

In personal correspondence, Sarah Waters commented that some lesbian relationships do not subscribe to the old adage 'two is company, three is a crowd':

> Lesbians have always been very keen on hanging on to old lovers, often producing triangulated relationships. You can see this in its most extreme form with Hall and Troubridge, who used a medium to contact Hall's ex-lover Batten. (Waters, 'Re: Dissertation')

Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge spent their entire relationship consulting the spirit of Mabel Batten or 'Layde', Hall's former lover. In 'Batten's words from beyond the grave Hall and Troubridge seemed to have found . . . a kind of mystical sanction for their own sexual relationship' (Castle: 49). Hall's controversial novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was dedicated to 'Our Three Selves' and uses spiritualist discourses to explain sexual 'inversion'. Although a realist novel, in the final, surreal scene, the morose heroine Stephen Gordon is surrounded by the anguished spirits of lesbians and homosexual men, who sound a plea through her lips: 'Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!' (512).

Djuna Barnes's grandmother Zadel Barnes also consulted spirits, one of whom was supposedly Lord Kitchener (Herring: 45). *Nightwood* has been described as an 'exorcism' of Barnes's unfaithful lover Thelma Wood, whose surname constitutes half of the title.

Barnes and Wood's fictional counterparts, Nora Flood and Robin Vote, are described as 'so "haunted" of each other that separation was impossible' (*Nightwood* 49). Castle identifies *Nightwood* as: 'the most "Jamesian" lesbian novel of them all', as 'an uncanny "return of Olive Chancellor"' (180-81). Olive Chancellor is the ghostly spinster who develops a close friendship with Verena Tarrant in Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886). When Olive loses Verena to a male rival, she dwindles into ethereal insubstantiality: 'she wavered and seemed uncertain; her pale

glittering eyes straining forward, as if they were looking for death' (382). Patricia Smith argues that in this typical narrative of lesbian panic, the 'threatening' presence of the lesbian functions 'as a pretext for the reassertion of the heterosexual plot' (8). However, Castle writes that Olive Chancellor's betrayal 'lingers on the lesbian literary imagination — as the subliminal pattern, even mythic archetype, of the sort of erotic misfortune to which the "inverted" woman is prone' (179).

The female-male-female triangle of *The Bostonians* is obviously a re-configuration of the homosocial triangle described by Sedgwick. Castle claims that: 'It is precisely because Sedgwick has recognized so clearly the canonical power of *male-male* desire . . . that she does not "get the point" of *female-female* desire. For to do so would mean undoing, if only imaginatively, the very structure she is elsewhere at pains to elaborate' (72). *Nightwood* radically revises the Sedgwickian homosocial triangle since Robin abandons her husband, Felix, for Nora Flood. Consequently, Felix comes to occupy the subjugated position occupied by the isolated term in the triangle. Conscious of his own ghosting, Felix laments: 'why did she marry me? It has placed me in the dark for the rest of my life' (101).

In both *Nightwood* and *Affinity*, the male characters that could potentially form Sedgwickian homosocial triangles are either dead, homosexual, or ineffectual.[7] This does not, however, mean that love triangles are absent from the plots of either novel. In fact, both novels are dominated by lesbian love triangles: in *Nightwood*, Nora and Jenny compete for Robin; in *Affinity*, Margaret and Ruth secretly vie for Selina. Waters comments that this tendency amongst lesbians to 'triangulate' is 'both a strength and a weakness':

> It means that lesbians have often been very good at challenging the traditional heterosexual romantic dyad; but it's also led to things like over-emotionalism, masochism, and a not especially positive blurring of the line between friendship and sex. (Waters, 'Re: Dissertation')

In the Sedgwickian triangular paradigm, the (male) third party of the erotic triangle eventually becomes subjugated in order for the dyadic unit of the heterosexual couple to be established, allowing for narrative closure. However, as Waters suggests, in *Affinity* and *Nightwood* the third party continues to haunt the narrative, and hence the dyadic union is problematized.

Sedgwick's homosocial triangle is informed by another triangular paradigm: Freud's Oedipal triangle, the foundation of the patriarchal family. According to Freud, in order to achieve normative heterosexuality, a male child learns to identify with his father, and to repress his desire for his mother. The female subject must also learn to renounce the mother's body and acknowledge the authority of the father if she is to take her place in the Symbolic Order. In Part Two, I argued that 'the mythos or structure informing [the] Gothic category . . . is the patriarchal family' (Williams: 22). The Gothic genre can therefore be analysed as symptomatic of fear of the mother, due to this early separation and repressed desire.

I have also shown how *Affinity* and *Nightwood* resurrect the apparitional lesbian so that she becomes — quite literally— a substantial presence within the plot. I will now argue that the repressed mother figure is also 're-possessed' in these novels, until she threatens to become yet another term in female homosocial bonding.

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[7] Consider Margaret's father in *Affinity*, Dr Matthew O'Connor, and Felix in *Nightwood* respectively.

For, as within mediumship, in calling a spirit through, one inevitably unlocks a door that allows others— in this case, the repressed body of the mother — to come through also.

In *Affinity*, Margaret opens her narrative by mourning the absence of her beloved father: 'I wish that Pa were with me now' (7). By contrast, she has a hostile relationship with her domineering mother who disapproves of her 'queer' nature: 'You are not Mrs Browning, Margaret – as much as you would like to be. You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody' (252). Selina Dawes is even more unfortunate, having lost both parents at an early age. She is adopted first by an Aunt, and later by Mrs Brink, a wealthy middle-aged woman who employs her as a medium on account of Selina's uncanny resemblance to her dead mother.

Mrs Brink wishes to re-connect with her lost mother's body through Selina. Therefore Selina, in a bizarre reversal, becomes the maternal figure for the older lady: 'when she closes her eyes I bend and kiss them – only her eyes & cheeks, never her mouth. When she has had her 30 kisses she sighs, then puts her arms about me, her head against her mother's bosom' (174). As Margaret remarks, there is something sinister about this inversion of the maternal role: 'It seems only a curious and not quite pleasant thing, that the lady . . . should ever have looked at Selina Dawes, at seventeen, and seen the shadow of her own dead mother in her, and persuaded her to visit her at night, to make that shadow grow thick' (166). The sexual implications of Selina's connection with Mrs Brink become more palpable when she and Ruth begin seducing young women during séances, carefully hiding their secret from their employer. The homosocial relationships formed at Millbank gaol between the matrons and female prisoners also take on a matrilineal structure in the absence of masculine authority. Even the prison itself is personified as female: 'She's a grim old creature, ain't she, miss? . . . some nights, Miss Prior, when there ain't a breath of wind, I have stood where you are standing now and heard her *groan* — plain as a lady' (312).

In *Nightwood*, Dr Matthew O'Connor compares the womb to a prison: 'We are all conceived in a close prison, in our mother's wombs we are close prisoners all. When we are born, we are born but to the liberty of the house' (86-87). But as this passage acknowledges, in moving from the constrictive womb to the domestic space, women merely trade one kind of confinement for another. In *The Female Malady*, Showalter writes that the Victorian 'rest cure' forced women back into a state of 'womblike dependency' (139). This 'cure', which constituted extended periods of bed rest and limited intellectual exercise (reading and writing were often banned), was formed around assumptions of feminine delicacy. For example, Margaret's mother scolds: 'She had seen this coming, she said. I had been too much from the house, I was not fit for it. It was inviting my old illness back' (223).

In *Nightwood*, the mother figure also emerges in religious discourses that are simultaneously comforting and repressive for the troubled residents of this bohemian underworld. Roman Catholicism provides Dr Matthew with a maternal figure to blame for his transvestism: '"Mother of God! I wanted to be your son — the unknown, beloved second would have done!" . . . I call her "she" because of the way she made me, it somehow balances the mistake' (135).[8] In his surreal meditation on night and day, Dr Matthew draws disturbing parallels between the womb and the grave: 'How more tidy it had been to have been born old and have aged into a child, brought finally to the brink, not of the grave but of the womb' (88).

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[8] All following references *Nightwood* are in-text page citations.

But by far the most disturbing aspect of *Nightwood* is the implication of incest that underlies its treatment of the maternal figure. On glimpsing Dr Matthew sitting up in bed, dressed in a nightgown 'with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders' (71), Nora Flood thinks: 'God, children know something they can't tell, they like Red Riding Hood and the Wolf in bed!' (ibid). Parsons describes this as 'an acknowledgement of childhood incestuous desire that surfaces earlier in Nora's dream of her grandmother' (77):

> Nora dreamed that she was standing at the top of a house . . . saying, 'Come up, this is Grandmother's room,' yet knowing it was impossible because the room was taboo . . . With this figure of her grandmother who was not entirely her recalled grandmother, went one from her childhood, when she had ran into her at the corner of the house — the grandmother who, for some unknown reason, was dressed as a man, wearing a billycock and a corked moustache, ridiculous and plump in tight trousers and a red waistcoat, her arms spread, saying with a leer of love, 'My little sweetheart!' (56-57)

This sinister, cross-dressing grandmother has been identified as Zadel Barnes, Djuna's real-life grandmother. Some critics, such as Mary Ann Broe, argue that Djuna and Zadel engaged in an incestuous relationship during Djuna's adolescence (Herring: 58). Barnes herself commented that she chose Thelma Wood as a lover due to her resemblance to Zadel (Herring: 59), recalling Nora's description of Robin as being: 'like a relative found in another generation' (141).

Despite these biographical resonances, the incestuous elements of *Nightwood* might be just as readily construed as further evidence of Barnes's interaction with the Gothic genre, in which incest is remarkably prevalent. Through her portrayal of incestuous desire, then,

> Barnes is not simply writing a 'confessional' novel . . . Rather, she is also engaging with a European tradition, intellectually iconoclastic and quasi-Gothic in temperament, which seeks to deconstruct the morality of Western civilisation. (Horner: 239)

Rubin writes that 'the incest taboo and the results of its application constitute the origin of culture' (543) — therefore, through her portrayal of an incestuous relationship that is also lesbian and cross-generational, Barnes drastically disturbs the very foundations of Western civilization.

In *Nightwood* and *Affinity*, the reintroduction of the mother figure operates as a means of the destabilizing the heterosexual dyad upon which patriarchal culture relies. For what is ultimately so terrifying about the mother is the way in which she threatens to displace the father — the central figure of Lacan's Symbolic Order. The mother figure represents the pre-Oedipal, infantile state which Lacan terms the 'Imaginary', in which there is no differentiation between self and other, between subject and object, inside and outside. For Julia Kristeva, the mother's body is a symbol of 'abjection' — an 'object of primal repression' (12):

> The abject confronts us . . . within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking

away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as secure as it is stifling. (13)

The abject is 'what disturbs identity, systems, order . . . borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (4). Since the horror of the Gothic lies in its systematic violation of boundaries, it is a genre capable of expressing the subject's struggle for liberation from 'the natural mansion' of the mother's womb (13). However, by resurrecting the mother's body, *Affinity* and *Nightwood* gradually release us from the horror of abjection, dissolving the boundaries that alienate us from our original nature.

Happy Endings? How to conclude a lesbian novel.

As I demonstrated in Part One, lesbian panic is repeatedly 'resolved' through the traditional 'romance' plot of canonical fiction: 'those narratives that do not end with marriage . . . end with the female protagonist's death, thus indicating the limited options available to women under this "sex-gender system"' (Smith: 7). But if this is the case, then how does one conclude a lesbian novel? It is no surprise that even self-proclaimed lesbian authors face difficulty in imagining endings for lesbian characters. Finding a conclusion that does not depict living in the world as an 'outsider' as the inescapably negative fate of all lesbians is perhaps harder than it seems when one considers the pervasive effects of lesbian panic.

Patricia Smith cites a range of instances from heterosexual novelists in which lesbian panic manifests itself as a violent 'disruptive action' (2). However, it is fair to state that the conventional endings of lesbian novels have not always been especially optimistic either. Depression, suffering and madness— not to mention premature death — emerge as repeated themes. One need only consider Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* — regarded as a core text of the lesbian 'canon' — which delivers about as much joy as one might expect from its title: 'Nothing overly sexy goes on in *The Well of Loneliness*. "She kissed her full on the lips like a lover" is the subversive depth of the book' (Souhami: 160).

Despite this, *The Well of Loneliness* provoked a court scandal, with the Director of Public Prosecutions declaring: 'I would [rather] give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel' (qtd. in Souhami: 178). However, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) not only eluded the same censors who condemned *The Well of Loneliness*, but also manages to imagine an original and positive ending for its gender-swapping protagonist. *Orlando*'s victory perhaps lies in its 'oscillation between realistic and fabulous modes' (Castle: 90) — a stark contrast to the plodding realism of *The Well of Loneliness* . Such oscillation can also be seen in Djuna Barnes's outlandish combination of European café culture with nihilistic Gothic surrealism. Unlike Hall, who employs the realist mode in order to apologize for sexual inversion, Barnes uses the Gothic genre to interrogate sexuality itself. Indeed, *Nightwood* presents all forms of sexuality with such grotesque and relentless negativity that one reviewer pronounced: 'had I daughter whose passions for mistresses and older girls were beginning to cause scandal and alarm, I should certainly insist that she read *Nightwood*' (qtd. in Parsons: 82).

The Gothic genre, to reiterate, is traditionally the means by which 'homosexual men and heterosexual women . . . could explore, express, indulge in, and subsequently, through the requisite closure in which social order is restored, reconceal their forbidden desires' (Smith: 155). I have discussed the ways in which Waters and Barnes 'explore, express, and indulge in' lesbian desire. However, I shall now argue

that in the conclusions to these wonderfully subversive novels 'requisite closure' is deliberately avoided. In fact, *Nightwood* and *Affinity*'s mysteriously inconclusive endings provide the key to
finally unlocking the repressive closet of lesbian panic — freeing the lesbian novel from the constraints of the foregone conclusion.

In Margaret Prior's final diary entry, Selina and Ruth are (rather aptly) 'spirited away': 'I lifted the lid of the trunk, and wept to see what lay inside it. A mud-brown gown, from Millbank, and a maid's black frock, with its apron of white. They lay tangled together, like sleeping lovers' (341).[9] Selina and Ruth triumphantly escape the Gothic narrative by passing into the new and brighter world of Italy, while Margaret remains trapped in the drab, insubstantial realm of the apparitional lesbian: 'There is no breath of wind, no drop of rain, upon the street . . . There is no longing in me, now . . . she has taken all that and left me nothing' (348). Thus, in a startling reversal of Gothic convention, Selina and Ruth emerge victorious by boldly acknowledging their desires, while Margaret is symbolically punished for remaining confined by lesbian panic: 'I know myself untouched, unlooked-for, and alone' (349).

In this way, Waters subverts narrative convention by granting the lesbian couple a happy ending. However, Selina and Ruth's fate ultimately remains out of sight, since *Affinity* ends with their escape. Waters perhaps only takes their narrative this far due to her concern with maintaining the illusion of historical authenticity: 'I feel it's more meaningful to call me a historical novelist than to call me a lesbian novelist. The lesbianism is incidental in the books because its incidental in my life, but the past is what motivates me as a writer' (Waters, Interview). However, through her historical research and remarkable affinity to Victorian fiction Waters effectively re-writes the Victorian era itself. In the celebrated follow-up to *Affinity* — *Fingersmith* (2003) — she borrows from novelists such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens to weave yet another tale of mystery, intrigue and lesbian love. In this way, Sarah Waters continues to confirm that — contrary to the Queen's pronouncement — passion between women did indeed exist in the Victorian era.

If *Affinity* subverts the conventions of the Victorian novel, *Nightwood* explodes them altogether.[10] The novel was received as a masterpiece of the modernist project, recommended as a 'companion piece for *The Waste Land*' (qtd. in Parsons: 60-61). One review commented that 'for bitterness and crazy violence [it] leaves the darkest chapters of *Ulysses* far behind' (ibid). Barnes, like Joyce, tests the boundaries of narrative convention through her 'stylistic modernist abstraction' (Parsons: 81) and her nightmarish vision of the modern city. For the inhabitants of *Nightwood*, everything is inverted — the night is the 'truer' day and the urban space becomes the night-wood of the title, a 'primitive city of withdrawn memories and fantasies . . . a repository for those whom society designates as abject and obscene' (Parsons: 72). *Nightwood*'s final chapter 'The Possessed' takes place in a wood, where Robin pursues Nora to her dilapidated 'salon' complete with 'its own burial ground, and a decaying chapel' (45). In the final, bizarre scene, Nora enters the chapel and witnesses a surreal encounter between Robin and her dog: 'Sliding she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out and the dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting' (152).

Barnes was distressed to discover that many of her readers (including Thelma Wood herself) interpreted Robin's encounter with the dog sexually: 'The dog is not

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[9] All following references to *Affinity* are in-text page citations.
[10] All following references to *Nightwood* are in-text page citations.

being romantic towards Robin! It is furious at the mystery of her drunkenness, a kind of exorcism of what it does not understand' (Barnes qtd. in Herring: 168). Barnes implies that Robin's encounter with the dog is a symbolic 'exorcism' of the civilized side of her nature. In this scene, she is purged in a way that brings her closer to the savage, pre-Oedipal vestiges of human nature represented by the dog, for 'the abject confronts us . . . with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*' (Kristeva: 12).

Robin is continually presented to the reader as 'a blank slate, a body that mediates between the cultured and the primitive' trapped in a state of 'pure abjection and liminality' (Parsons: 66; 62). Thus, in the final pages of *Nightwood*, this 'wild thing caught in a woman's skin' (131) forms one of her most intimate connections in the novel with an animal: 'she began to bark also, crawling after him — barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching' (153). We could, therefore, read Robin's encounter with the dog as a liberating moment of *jouissance*, 'where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other' (Kristeva: 9).

This encounter also constitutes yet another re-orientation of the homosocial triangle — in an absurd, outrageous twist, Nora's dog becomes the third term in Robin and Nora's relationship. This final triangle forces the reader to question the patriarchal system of exchange that our culture is founded upon. Throughout *Nightwood*, Barnes rewrites the Gothic, stretching its conventions to breaking point. She also creates a narrative that not only reorientates the homosocial triangle, but deconstructs it altogether.

I would like to conclude as I began, with some inspiring words from Castle:

> It is time, I maintain, to focus on presence instead of absence, plenitude instead of scarcity . . . In seeking out the lesbian who is everywhere, one often finds a part of oneself. Like a ghost come back to life . . . the lesbian offers us new and vital information about what it is to be human. (19)

I have, of course, only just begun exploring the relationship between lesbians, desire and the Gothic in this paper. In the Gothic's long tradition of 'writing the repressed', we may begin to discover a lost heritage of lesbian literature. The lesbian 'canon' perhaps exhibits a slight bias towards realism and didacticism. However, Djuna Barnes and Sarah Waters make important contributions to this canon through their fascinating interaction with the Gothic genre. Like Brontë's notorious madwoman, their novels push, stretch and manipulate convention — until the walls we have become accustomed to collapse entirely**.**

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