
THE ROLE OF THE UNCANNY IN SARAH WATERS' *THE LITTLE STRANGER*: A QUEER GOTHIC STUDY

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Abstract

*This paper examines the exemplification of the uncanny in *The Little Stranger*, which plays a significant role in the development of the atmosphere of the novel and its thematic development. *The Little Stranger* written by Sarah Waters (2009) is the literary work with the intriguing combination of Gothic fiction rules and conventions and queer tones of modern literature. Dwelling upon the manner in which Waters employs the idea of the uncanny both literally and figuratively, the given study takes into account the interrelations between the psychological and supernatural terror, especially concerning queerness. In the analysis, the uncanny has been located as a considerable narrative instrument applied to discuss the de-centering of identity, the suppressed history of the past, and dis-ease in the society about its discomfort with non-normative desires. This paper analyses the role of the uncanny in the interrogation of social and sexual transgression which is presented in the depiction of characters and setting of *Hundreds Hall*. The results may indicate that the uncanny, beyond the narrative strategy, is a critical element in creating the queer subtext and thus pointing to the forces of oppression in the novel. The paper is one of several recent queer accounts of Gothic criticism, and it provides new information about the overlapping area of Gothic horror and queer theory.*

Keyword: *Uncanny, Queer Gothic, Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger*, Gothic Fiction, Identity*

INTRODUCTION

The Little Stranger (2009) by Sarah Waters constitutes one of the most outstanding representatives of modern Gothic literature in that it represents a reinterpretation of classical aspects of Gothic with an emphasis on ambiguity yet incorporating a readjusted sexually queer subtext that makes a stark contrast to historical constructs of Gothic as the heterosexual norm. Set in post-World War II England, *The Little Stranger* is an ominously creepy story of Dr. Faraday, a country doctor who gets entangled in the crumbling world of *Hundreds Hall*, an old estate that reflects the decayed sociological classes of post war England. The crux of this ghostly story, though, is that it represents an inquiry into the uncanny introduced by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay, *The Uncanny*, in which he calls attention to the unsettling sensation that arises when something we are used to grows oddly unfamiliar, and in which it creates a feeling of unease and dread. Waters uses this idea to set a tone in which the supernatural overlaps with the mental and where the physical decay of the dwelling represents a metaphor in what is happening to the identities of the characters as well as the suppressed passions and fantasies of all of them.

The novel combines the theme of Gothic horror with the psychological complication, and it does not only concentrate on frightful ghosts but the destabilization of social and sexual identities. The uncanny and queerness in the context of Waters narrative is at the core of the social transgression (in terms of not only breaking class apart but also being part of the sexual non-normativity) which in turn acts as a driving force of the Gothic atmosphere of the novel. Waters brings to the reader a world that shows how repressed desires, especially those that relate to queer identity, re-emerge in a disturbing manner, especially with the state of obsession Dr. Faraday shows to the Ayres family and what is unsaid. The

uncanny in this case does not only operate as a Gothic strategy to introduce the feeling of terror on the one hand and to queer the genre on the other hand undermine the traditional distinctions of known and unknown, of normative and non-normative fantasies.

The research problem can be characterized by the underdeveloped gap between the queer theory and the Gothic genre specifically concerning *The Little Stranger* written by Waters. Although queer Gothic has already been a widely discussed topic in literary studies, with such scholars as Clare (2016) and Newman (2015) investigating the influence of queer scene in Gothic fiction, *The Little Stranger* has not been discussed in this respect widely. Much of critique on queer Gothic has rested in the earlier works of Waters, which are more directly addressing the issues of queerness like *Fingersmith* and *Tipping the Velvet*. *The Little Stranger*, on the other hand, portrays a more delicate and more nuanced approach toward queerness and involves the supernatural as a metaphor of blocked desires and repressed sexualities and as such calls to a more thorough consideration of how the uncanny coincides with queerness in this specific work. This article will provide an insight into a gap in the existing literature regarding the state of applying the uncanny and queerness in the work by Waters as the article will give further perception into how the elements of Gothic horrors and queer theory may be utilized in modern literature.

The great value of this study is that it has the potential to enlarge our knowledge about the way the use of Gothic genre, which traditionally pins down heterosexual and patriarchal norms, may be reinvented as the area of the study of the less popular sexualities. The uncanny in *The Little Stranger* plays a very essential part in the process as it enables to destabilize the supernatural and social conventions. *The Hundreds Hall* itself, the rotting wreck of a house it is, and with a ghostly history as background, has its explanation too in the psychological and sexual stresses which dominate the novel. In quering the Gothic, Waters rocks the hard-and-fast boundaries between the real and the unreal, the known and the unknown, the stable and the unstable borders that frame the genre as well as the culturally constructed notion of sexuality and sexual identity.

This paper hopes to explore the use of the concept of the uncanny in *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters as a means through which the author explores the theme of queer desire, social repression, and dislocated identity. Namely, it aims at considering how the uncanny works both as a plot device and as an analogy to the repressed and perverse aspects of sexuality that shatters the apparently conventional world of the novel. With an emphasis on the interrelation of the uncanny and queer identity, this article will illustrate how Waters uses the shorthand of Gothic to disrupt common ideas of sexuality, identity and authority. Moreover, the study will also be embedded in a burgeoning body of queer Gothic scholarship, by providing a critical survey of these ongoing experiments with the conventions of genre and identity as performed by the contemporary writers such as Waters. It is through this framework that what could be described merely as a psychological horror novel called *The Little Stranger* can be conceived instead as a queer Gothic tale that explores because of that post-war world, the concept of identity, repression and desire.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gothic fiction has always been a genre that gave prime importance to the examination of fear, the repressed desires, and norms of the society, which makes it a valuable instrument to treat the subject of identity, sexuality, and power. It has been studied by scholars about the way in which Gothic genre reflects varied anxieties in society including anxieties related to gender, sexuality, race, class and more. Ellen Moers (1977) in her influential book *Literary Women* says that Gothic genre has been used to express the repressed and especially in the realm of gender and sexuality creating the so-called aesthetics of monstrosity which can be understood as the monstrous feminine that disrupts and challenges the

patriarchal order. The monstrous feminine, represented by such characters as the femme fatale or the monstrous mother demonstrates fear of female sexuality and independence, which is generally trying to be subdued by Gothic narratives. The study of Moers was essential in developing a perspective of Gothic as the genre that questions the boundaries of gender and sexual identity using such aspects as repression, monstrosity and uncanniness.

Developing along the lines of Moers, Teresa A. Goddu (1997) further uses ideas of suppressed desires and anxieties by adding race and class to the American Gothic literature. In her article Goddu discusses the racial and social stressful situations of the historical background of slavery and segregation, and the forceful oppression of the marginalized groups which has influenced the forms of American Gothic novels. Such conflicts tend to leak into Gothic plots in the form of characters that represent the marginalized or othered, like the whole revenant, or ghostly, character of the story. In *The Little Stranger*, Sarah Waters has a similar task: she uses the Gothic to convey the anxieties concerning the social and sexual transgression, but she complicates this issue by combining the anxieties with the ideas of queerness. The crumbling, haunted, ghost house of Hundreds Hall is both a physical and metaphorical location wherein repressed queer desires and identities can reemerge in uncomfortable forms according to Waters. The house is not only reduced to a backdrop of supernatural activities, but it is a manifestation of the repression and trauma queerness brought with it to the post-war British society.

In his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), Sigmund Freud formulates what will be an important theoretical parameter through which to realize the Palookaville-like ambiance that oozes through *The Little Stranger*. According to Freud, uncanny is the thing that is known but unfamiliar thus resulting in a feeling of unease when something that is supposed to be familiar becomes familiar since it has become strange. With regards to Gothic literary examples, the uncanny is transformed into a metaphorical representation where the repressed aspects of the psyche reappear in deformed or terrifying versions. The uncanny as defined by Freud has also been indispensable in the studies of Gothic because it brings out a psychological and emotional effect of supernatural phenomena that in most instances bring to the picture fears about identity, repression, and norms. *The Little Stranger* works on all levels, namely psychologically, sexually, and materially as the uncanny is at work. Hundreds Hall haunted house can symbolize not only supernatural activities but the physical representation of emotions and psychological declension of the inhabitants as well, how the hidden pasts and desires mix with the polite, post-war social facade.

In addition, Waters employs the main character, Dr. Faraday, to discuss the uncanny discursively related to the queer personhood. Dr. Faraday is infatuated with the Ayres family and especially the haunted house as a substitute to his own desires, which include those of queerness and class repression. His increasing fascination with the crumbling house and lives of the Ayres family is matched by his own conflict within, regarding his wants, identity, and his societal suppression. This sexual and psychological tension plays in the role of knowing how the uncanny works through the novel- by projecting the inner torment of Faraday, Waters enables the uncanny to act in a way that it reflects the negligent sexual and emotional sub-text of the novel.

Within the context of queer Gothic studies, other critics such as Lizzie B. Newman (2015) and Emma J. Clare (2016), have examined the crossover of queer theory and the Gothic story as it applies to some of Waters other publications, specifically *Fingersmith* (2002) and *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) which, on a more literal level, experiment with the nature of queer sexuality and desire. Newman (2015) emphasizes the use of the Gothic and its focus on the uncanny as the means to queer the conventional writings about love, family, and social order, using the contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Clare (2016) also argues that queer Gothic literature enables to deconstruct heteronormative systems, which creates an

opportunity to examine the issues of sexual desire and sexual identity without adhering to the traditional societal guidelines. Although these works have been concentrated on the earlier works of Waters, they have failed to discuss extensively *The Little Stranger*, which has a more subtextual and layered approach on engaging with queer identity. Queerness in the novel is treated indirectly and frequently without being stated explicitly, thus is an original and useful piece of writing with regards to how the uncanny and queerness overlap across the Gothic genre.

Another such gap in the existing literature is that there has not been specific examination of how *The Little Stranger* makes use of the uncanny to facilitate contact with queer identity. Although an increasing amount of queer Gothic criticism is becoming prevalent, scanty scholarly literature has been observed to study how the supernatural employed in the novel by Waters deals with riddles of queer desire, identity and repression. In that gap, this article is going to fill by paying particular attention to the uncanny and queer identity in *The Little Stranger*. This paper will attempt to add to the much larger oeuvre of studies of the queer Gothic as a genre that challenges the boundaries of identity and what it means to sublimate desire by comparing the way in which Waters deploys the Gothic to disrupt notions of both supernatural and sexual norms.

To sum up, this literature review has brought out the essential academic arguments concerning the overlap of queer theory, the Gothic, and the uncanny in the work of Sarah Waters. The analyses of the Gothic as the realm where the fears of the society over gender, sexuality, and classes are explored have been conducted to a great extent; however, there is no specific study addressing *The Little Stranger* and the exploration of the uncanny in terms of queer identity in the literature. This paper sets out to fill that gap by exploring the role of the uncanny both psychologically and sexually in the novel as part of a recent trend of queer Gothic analysis and as a new contribution to the interconnection between Gothic horror and queer theory.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The importance of this research is that it uses an approach of queer theory to the novel, *The Little Stranger*, which has been primarily interpreted as a traditional Gothic production and a historical novel up until now. Where the Gothic fiction has always been interpreted as a metaphor of the urban anxieties, queer Gothic provides an alternative domain where the social and sexual transgressions can be communicated through the supernatural. The theme of uncanny and queerness in this article not only appeals to Gothic studies but also to queer literary criticism as it provides a detailed understanding of how Waters is utilizing these concepts to explore the boundaries of identity and norms in the society.

The present study has sought to examine the phenomenon behind the uncanny, which has been regularly regarded with a tension- and horror-making tool, in the Waters novel as performed to undermine the normative perceptions of sexuality and identity. By emphasizing the relationship between queerness and uncanny, this study will continue to inform us about how Gothic fiction can be utilized as the means of delving into the areas of marginalized identities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What role does the uncanny play in the development of queer themes in *The Little Stranger*?
2. How does Sarah Waters use the Gothic genre and the uncanny to question traditional ideas of identity, especially queer identity?
3. Why does the uncanny, as both a psychological and supernatural force, serve as a metaphor for the repression and transgression of queer desires in *The Little Stranger*?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Queer theory, where the concept of gender and sexuality being performative promoted by Judith Butler (1990) played an important role in informing the theoretical arguments presented here, is one of the theoretical sources behind the present research. Butler says that gender and sexuality are not natural but they were socially constructed and governed by repetitive performances. This school of thought puts the old binaries into question and stresses the mutability and plurality of identity categories. Here, the queer theory is a lens, with the help of which it is possible to view how the heteronormative expectation is subvert in the manner of how these expectations are undermined and queered in texts in the culture.

Moreover, the notion of the uncanny, as developed by Sigmund Freud provides an additional system of thought of analyzing the opposition of the familiar and the alien in the story. According to Freud, the reason why a person has uncanny experiences is the fact that something that is familiar to a person is alienated or disturbed, producing psychological discomfort. This is a disturbing ambience that is also surrounded by unexpressed wants or fears, which is echoed in *The Little Stranger* because it has every aspect of the supernatural and of the psychological.

The paper at hand will examine the role that *The Little Stranger* takes in discussing the themes of sexual and social uneasiness, through the application of a queer theory and reference to the concept of uncanny as presented by Freud. Through this, it shall bring out how the novel queers identity categories as well as has applied the uncanny to destabilize normative expectations by focusing on how discomfort and disorientation threatens to alter how the characters perceive themselves in society.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study will entail mainly close reading of the text of Sarah Waters *The Little Stranger* with a close watch to parts of the text where uncanny is most called upon. This study will enable me to scrutinize in depth the interconnection of the supernatural features in the novel and the psychological, social and sexual aspects of queerness. Close reading is an analytical method and it involves a sentence-by-sentence scrutiny of the text with a certain focus on words, phraseology, imagery, and plot structures that may help to establish the uncanny. Through an in-depth examination of the most significant passages, especially the ones in which the uncanny manifests in the phenomena of the supernatural as well as the personalities of the characters, the paper will seek to identify why Waters combines Gothic conventions with the idea of being queer.

A large part of the Gothic environment of the novel is due to the environment of Hundreds Hall, a rundown property where the repressed desires of the characters are explored. Even the house can be interpreted as a symbolic embodiment of emotional and sexual repression that dominates the entire characters, especially Dr. Faraday. Through the journey of the analysis of the physical world and its uncanny changes, the study will investigate the role of the house in the articulation of the inner disquiet of the characters as well as its role in being a representation of the known and unknown as the central element of the uncanny. The unfortunate fate of the decaying building becomes a metaphor for the destruction of Dr. Faraday, especially his suppressed needs and his queerness that he does not express out loud and therefore provides a plethora of exploration.

Besides the setting, the character development of Dr. Faraday will be explored by closer attention to his thoughts, actions and interactions with other characters of the plot. Such approach will enable one to discuss the way Waters employs his character to convey the theme of repression, desire and what the society demands of others. The complicated relationship between Faraday and the Ayres family and the

fact that his obsession over the house is growing will be examined to reveal how the psychological aspects used in the novel work as metaphors to reveal the repressed and transgressive desires that form the background of the novel.

The given method suits the research questions in specific since one will be able to have a deeper understanding of the impulses of the text. Through a close reading, not only will it be possible to get insights about the psychological and emotional world and character of the people in the story but it will also be possible to see how Waters, through the Gothic genre and the uncanny, explores themes of queerness, repression and disruption of the normative identities. Also, close reading as a method is quite compatible with queer theory because it will enable the focusing on the significance of subtexts, coded and concealed meanings, and marginal identities that would be either suppressed or ignored with reference to normative readings. Analyzing these elements of the text, the research will help in developing a new appreciation of the queer Gothic and how Waters manipulates the uncanny in order to subvert the normative frontiers of sexuality, identity, and societal order.

Such an approach will offer a critical and interpretative approach which is both sensitive to the literary qualities of the text and to the wider cultural implications, which makes it the right approach to the intersection between the uncanny and queer identity in *The Little Stranger*.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In *The Little Stranger*, Sarah Waters uses the uncanny as a narrative device with a very detailed methodology, by relying upon it, she goes far beyond the psychological implications of queerness, and tends to the social. The crumbling of the Hundreds Hall develops as a point of focus in becoming the uncanny since the destination appears accustomed and yet unfamiliar. Being a decline of an estate, it symbolizes the downfall of class sediments in post-World War II England, as well as symbolizes a downfall of the characters individually, especially emotional and sexual decline. The home is also treated as a metaphor to repressed desires and preconcerted traumas of the characters, and the rot found in the physical space can be reflected in the psychological life of the people that live there. The uncanny, in this respect, discloses the re-emergence of the past (both personal and historical) in its uncomfortable and disturbing form and leading to a destabilization of the apparent stability of everyday life.

The fact that the supernatural is present in the house also contributes to the uncanny feel and especially the unexplainable phenomenon that Dr. Faraday experiences. These interferences with the supernatural violate these very boundaries between that which is and that which is imagined, which constitutes the essential element of the concept of uncanny as given by Freud in 1919 (Freud 1919). The fact that the thing that haunts the Hundreds Hall cannot be easily described indicates that all these supernatural phenomena have a connection with hidden memory and desires. In this manner, the uncanny demonstrates the disunity between the externally conditioned identity of the characters and their inner side of shadowy, unconverted aspects of mind. And obsession of the house and the Ayres family by Faraday can be said to be a symbolic representation of the inhibition of queerness in the novel. The manner in which his own repressed desires, especially those involving his queerness start to manifest in disturbing ways is through his obsessive focus on the rotting estate. The further Faraday gets into the family the more the haunting nature of the house comes to the fore, a symbol of the eventual recurrence of the suppressed, both socially and sexually.

The conflict between ordinary and extraordinary in *The Little Stranger* is a bright illustration of the whole issue of identity, sex, and power. Colonel Philip Ayres and his family, Dr. Faraday also gets to show their internal struggles as this occurs through his worsening affection of the Ayres family and the paranormal

incidents of the same family through the supernatural occurrences. The uncanny is then used to explore the difficulty of identity and sexuality, the fact that it is ever-changing as shaped both by social conformity as well as by personal uncertainty of the characters themselves. The repressed queerness of Faraday or the repression of society are the main points of the story and Waters employs the uncanny to reveal that these are not just psychological but also social cases since characters are seen to be struggling with the restrictions of the post-war British society.

These are the results that correspond to the theoretical framework presented above, according to which the uncanny is used as a metaphor of the repression and transgression of being queer. The corresponding influence of Freud and his idea of the uncanny (1919) on how Waters builds a world in which the familiar is disturbed by the incursion of the repressed, both by powers supernatural and sexual identity, is direct. Moreover, it is possible to see the influence of the uncanny through the queer theory as introduced by such scholars as Clare (2016) and Newman (2015), which can be used to explain the repressed desires of Faraday and how those desires become more prominently manifested with the help of the uncanny. The novel can therefore be seen as a queer Gothic piece of work, where the uncanny is used not only to create fear but also to question societal attitudes toward sex and selves.

This study is also limited to a certain extent. Although the performance in question is analyzed through the lens of the possibility of interaction between the uncanny and queer identity, the discussion on other societal identities, including class and gender, is poorly-defined. The present study could be extended to future studies to investigate the role played by these multilateral identities towards the Gothic atmosphere, along with repression and transgression themes. Also, without looking into the greater context of Waters utilizing the uncanny in her other works, there is one more way to perform a deeper analysis of how the writer implements the given piece of literature in connection to the notion of queerness and social anxiety.

FINDINGS

The paper comes to the conclusion that the employment of the uncanny in the work of Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger*, is key to how she explores the idea of queer identity, social constraint, and how identity is subverted in the novel. The crumbling ruins of the Hundreds Hall, and the uncanny, unexplainable phenomena that are experienced in the said house represent such uncanny type of repressed desires and unspoken traumas as a strong metaphor. As an example, Dr. Faraday feels both comfort and terror in his very house, which can be taken to reflect the nature of his mixed feelings of belonging and alienation. Based on the analysis, Freud (1919) observes in the uncanny, the *unheimlich* (uncanny), is the type that returns to that which is well-known and long familiar. In *The Little Stranger*, the setting, the house, or in other words, though familiar to Faraday and the family of Ayres, is transforming into something unfamiliar, frightening, revealing unfamiliar and frightening desires and backgrounds of the characters.

Moreover, the growing obsession of Dr. Faraday towards the family of Ayres actually shows how the repression can be seen both in psychological and physical form in the story. His obsession with the Ayres property shows his personal desires that he does not face directly, and when they are thrown into conflict with reality, they become uncanny. The uncanny, therefore, is the storytelling element that underscores the contrast of notions of the subjectivity of personal strife of the characters versus the societal social or institutional pressures it places over non-conforming sexuality and behavior, which is queerness.

By doing so, Waters turns uncanny into a tool to criticize the established norms in society and formulate a queer re-appropriation of the Gothic genre. She transforms and changes the context of the old Gothic tropes, concentrating on declaring them through the lens of queer, questioning social and sexual otherness further.

CONCLUSION

The Little Stranger blinks at the definite role of the uncanny to discuss queer identity on a high level of innovation and description going beyond the classic frames of a Gothic novel. Waters marry psychological terror to the supernatural to produce a story that induces fear not only, but also challenges us in questioning the complications of sexuality, identity, and the repressive nature of society. A means through which the novel brings out its concerns with the horrors of anxiety over queerness in both individual and societal contexts, the crumbling, run-down house of the Hundreds Hall, itself a metaphorical symbol of repressed desires and societal corruption, are positioned as a central point around which the dread of queer questions of anxiety spreads disgustingly and unnaturally.

The paper aids in advancing the emerging area of queer Gothic studies, which starts to show how uncanny subverts not only individualities but also social norms, and unveils the repression and transgression of queer desires. Through the investigation of the way Waters creatively employs Gothic tropes, this study highlights the subversiveness of the uncanny in gender-bending and queering the genre, and as such, it is a vital resource in the understanding of other marginal sexualities. By questioning queerness and repression, and demonstrating the uncanny, The Little Stranger rises to become one of the most prominent Gothic texts of the current era that reconstitutes the possibilities of breathing life into the genre to the extent of discussing questions of identity, fear and social normativity.

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