

# The representation of power and control between females in affinity essay



Sarah Waters' *Affinity* is a gothic novel that represents the power and control between females. In order to understand how 'power' and 'control' is represented, we need to define these terms. 'Power' and 'Control' between females could suggest how particular females within the novel influence each other<sup>1</sup>, and also how women wield authority over women. <sup>2</sup> Waters represents the 'power' and 'control' between females when she portrays the structure of Milbank prison by exploring Jeremy Bentham's panopticism, with regards to both the prison and society.

The prison's structure in the form of pentagons could suggest how the female prisoners are institutionalised. Margaret describes the prison on first entering it as a 'Lady Visitor' as it has been designed by a man in the grip of nightmare or madness – or it had been made expressly to drive its inmates mad. I think it would certainly drive me mad, if I had to work as a warder there. <sup>3</sup> Margaret's vision of this prison as an institution built to "drive its inmates mad" <sup>4</sup> emphasises the panopticon prison's influence over the prisoners.

The prison's surveillance also illustrates the power and control between women, as the matrons monitor the prisoners through the door flaps and this creates a sense of unease and lack of privacy amongst the prisoners. The coding system that co-ordinates the prisoners within the prison system also illustrates how the matrons exercise authority over the prisoners. Selina, in the novel, is referred to like a servant by the matrons, as she suggests that "They call me Dawes here, like a servant." <sup>5</sup> Selina's position as a criminal deprives her of identity and her status in society descends.

The authority of females over other females in Milbank prison mirrors that of Margaret's household, as this is particularly seen by Mrs Prior's treatment of Margaret. Since the death of Margaret's father, Mrs Prior establishes herself as a matriarch who influences Margaret's day-to-day routines, lifestyle and decisions, and therefore wields authority over the household. Since her suicide attempt, Margaret's position in society has deteriorated from an upper-middle class woman to a spinster, whom is domesticated: "' Your place is here! ' ' She answered, -not at the prison.

And it is time you showed that you know it. Now Priscilla is married, you must take up your proper duties in the house. Your place is here, your place is here'".<sup>6</sup> This illustrates Margaret's incarceration within the home by her mother, and also shows that in order to elevate her status from spinsterhood by partaking in household duties, she needs to marry and exchange her vows. The critic Jenni Milbank supports this as she argues that: Margaret's status as ' spinster' renders her vulnerable to pressure from her family and sexual suspicion from the prison matrons.

As a sexual and social subject, Margaret is belittled, surveilled and deprived of liberty<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the coding system within Milbank prison is similar to Margaret's position in society. Selina's servant-like status mirrors Margaret's transition from the upper-middle class to spinsterhood because Mrs Prior, mid-way, through the novel suggests that " You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody. You are only Miss Prior. " <sup>8</sup> Likewise with Selina, Margaret's position in society has descended.

Waters' *Affinity* is typical of the gothic genre because, as part of the Female Gothic it, explores incarceration and the Victorian social taboos. <sup>9</sup> However, on the other hand, Margaret is not only identified by her mother and the society. We see that Margaret reveals herself to Selina as "Aurora" <sup>10</sup>. This is ambiguous because we see although Margaret uses this identity as a vehicle to perhaps transcend her mother's view and society's view, Margaret has only adopted the identity of 'Aurora'<sup>11</sup> because her ex-lover Helen had identified her as this.

This to some extent also represents the authority that women have over other women. Power and Control between females could also be represented by the structure of the novel because we see that in *Affinity*, there is intertextuality portrayed by Margaret's diary entries based on her visits to Milbank prison. Her mother takes a dislike to this as we see that mid-way through the novel; Mrs Prior suggests "' You are not Mrs Browning, Margaret - as much as you would like to be' " <sup>12</sup> and this is significant because it appears that Margaret's own emotions, thoughts and feelings are oppressed.

However, this observation of Margaret's diary entries can be seen in context because we understand that when Waters' 'lesbian' novel 'Tipping the Velvet' was first produced in 1998, due to the control and censorship of written work in the 1990's, it could not be categorised as such under a particular genre<sup>13</sup>. The critic Mark Llewellyn has argued that: There is an inescapable desire to categorise the novel Waters' wants to write. Perhaps the greatest affinity of all therefore lies not between Margaret and Selina, but Margaret Prior and Sarah Waters herself. <sup>14</sup>

This is agreeable as Margaret's diaries parallel Waters' own fiction and is significant in illustrating how both Waters and Margaret want to express themselves. Waters also portrays how female characters are controlled by other female characters by the presence of the spiritualism theme in the novel. We see that in Selina's diary entries, as a spiritualist-medium employed by Mrs Brink, Selina draws people to her 'dark circles', particularly Madeline Silvester. Power and Control between females is represented also when we discover the identity of the character known as 'Ruth'.

This character's identity is ambiguous throughout the novel as although there is a 'lesbian' relationship between Margaret and Selina in the novel, Ruth is established in the background as a go-between. Margaret's diary entries identify Ruth as 'Vigers', whereas, in Selina's diaries, she is identified as 'Ruth'. Although Ruth is working-class and Margaret appears to control her within her diary entries, Waters portrays Ruth's possession of Selina, in Selina's entries.

Ruth's possession of Selina is illustrated at the end of the novel when Selina suggests "Remember, Ruth is saying, whose girl you are" 15. This is ambiguous in illustrating how power and control between females is represented because not only does Ruth seem mysterious and spectral, however, she appears to exercise more authority and influence than Margaret and Selina do. Furthermore, when the matron Mrs Jelf tells Margaret of Selina's disappearance and elopement with Ruth, Margaret is confused and comments "Vigers.

I said then. My servant, I said. Vigers, my servant, Selina's maid. " 16 The structure of Margaret's comment here not only suggests her confusion, however, Margaret realises that, as a woman from a family of a higher social status, she has been deprived of her wealth and power by Ruth, a lower-class woman. However, although, Waters explores how power and control between females is represented, Waters also illustrates transgression, where women are able to escape from the dominance and influence of other women.

Water's theme of spiritualism particularly illustrates this because mid-way through the novel, although Selina indicates that " they call me Dawes, here like a servant" 17, both Margaret and Selina create identities; Margaret refers to " Dawes" 18 as " Selina" 19 and Margaret reveals herself as " Aurora" 20. This is ambiguous because not only does this transcend the coding system that the prison adopts, on the other hand, the identities allow Selina and Margaret to envisage their own humanness.

Furthermore, this overturning of power and control between females in Waters' novel is explored by the end through Margaret's deprivation of wealth and power as Selina and Ruth travel together and steal Margaret's money, tickets and passports, as she suggests " I have been robbed, I thought, by my own servant! " 21 The critic Sheryl Stevenson has argued that " Waters similarly banks on her readers' tendency to disregard Margaret's servant, re-enforcing the betrayal of sisterhood when class difference easily trumps gender solidarity. " 22

This is agreeable because Selina and Ruth's escape illustrate how women in the novel can escape the influence and dominance of other women, as Selina is able to escape the prison, and Ruth is able to escape from Margaret's control. In *Affinity*, Power and control between women is represented by the panopticism of Margaret's position in Victorian Society and Selina's position in the prison. However, Waters' themes of spiritualism and lesbianism act as vehicles where women can transgress the dominance and influence of other women in society.