

# Talking with the dead: revisiting the Victorian past and the occult in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters' *Affinity*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes the examination of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) by focusing on the theme of spiritualism and mesmerism in each of the texts and what that reveals about the role of women in Victorian society and its literary representation in neo-Victorian fiction. It will be argued that this engagement with the occult can be understood as a metaphor for the postmodern idea of resurrecting Victorian concerns in what appears to be a literary subset of the neo-Victorian novel, the spectral novel, a textual space for fictionalising what is absent from historical record and for making the dead speak in manifold ways. In this sense, Atwood and Waters, who can be considered historians in their archeological project of digging out the past, assume the role of the medium in establishing the dialogue between the past (the world of the dead) and the present (the world of the living).

**Key words:** Neo-Victorian fiction, the Victorian occult, gender issues, Margaret Atwood, Sarah Waters.

## RESUMEN

El presente artículo examina *Alias Grace* (1996), de Margaret Atwood, y *Affinity* (1999), de Sarah Waters, centrándose en las ciencias ocultas, el espiritismo y el mesmerismo en dichas novelas y en lo que este tema revela sobre el papel de la mujer en la sociedad victoriana y su representación en la narrativa neo-victoriana. Se va a argumentar que esta preocupación que esta preocupación por las ciencias ocultas puede entenderse como metáfora de la idea postmoderna de resucitar cuestiones victorianas en un sub-tipo de la novela neo-victoriana, la novela espectral, un espacio textual donde es posible imaginar lo que está ausente en el archivo histórico y en el que se puede invocar a los espíritus de formas muy diversas. En este sentido, las autoras (Atwood y Waters), historiadoras que llevan a cabo un proyecto arqueológico al excavar el pasado, asumen el papel desempeñado por una médium cuando establecen un diálogo entre el pasado (el más allá) y el presente (el mundo de los vivos).

**Palabras clave:** Narrativa neo-victoriana, ciencias ocultas victorianas, cuestiones de género, Margaret Atwood, Sarah Waters.

**SUMARIO:** 1. Introduction. 2. The occult in Victorian Canada and England. 3. *Alias Grace*: Grace Marks and mesmerism. 4. *Affinity*: Spiritualism in Victorian London. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty years, we have been witnessing the rise of historical fiction set in the Victorian period, and in which women writers have played an important role. One of the most important practitioners of the so-called neo-Victorian novel,<sup>2</sup> A. S. Byatt, affirms that her own intentions, in writing historical fiction such as *Possession* (1990) and *Angels and Insects* (1992), had to do “with rescuing the complicated Victorian thinkers from modern diminishing parodies like those of Fowles and Lytton Strachey” (2000: 79). Similarly, women writers like A. S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood and Sarah Waters, to name just a few who are now exploring Victorian issues in contemporary novels, manifest the wish to rewrite history, particularly from the point of view of women, whose voice has been hardly heard within traditional accounts of the past.

Two well-established attitudes about the fictionalisation of the Victorian past can be distinguished in studies on neo-Victorian novels. Following Georges Letissier, in post-Victorianism (the term he uses to refer to neo-Victorian novels) “two camps may be opposed” (2004: 111): on the one hand, those who follow Fredric Jameson’s attacks on postmodern historicity and consequently, “tend to view post-Victorianism as a retrogressive movement;” and, on the other, those who believe in retrieving things from the Victorian past, a project which goes beyond mere nostalgia (Letissier 2004: 112). Jameson attacked postmodern historicity for simply resurrecting things bygone without further concern with the actual events of the past and its political underpinnings, which, in his view, entailed a nostalgic vision of the past: “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (Jameson 1992: 18). In contrast, and among those who can be included in the second group defined by Letissier, is Dana Shiller’s study of A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (1987). In it Shiller takes into account Jameson’s critique of postmodernism and admits that it is only possible to know the past through its textual traces, but challenges the notion that the past is irreparable, or not worth retrieving (1997: 541). Furthermore, Shiller persuasively argues that the neo-Victorian writer, like Byatt and Ackroyd, for example, “manages to create a postmodern novel that plays on (and with) our certainties about history while simultaneously delighting in what *can* be retrieved of the past” (1997: 540; original emphasis). Therefore, the author, like the historian, establishes a dialogue with the past, conjuring it up and bringing it alive for us in her historical narrative. In other words, the author/historian engages with a fluid past which is “open to reinterpretation,” according to Shiller (1997: 540), who goes on to state: “[h]aving acknowledged that the past is textual, and that history is

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<sup>2</sup> In using the term “neo-Victorian”, I follow critics like Dana Shiller (1997), John Sutherland (2002) or Daniel Candel Bormann (2002) who have adopted it in their works to refer to contemporary historical novels which, as Candel Bormann aptly suggests, “in a variety of ways centre on the Victorian period and/or its frame of mind” (2002: 11).

always shaped by present concerns, it is still possible to recapture that past in ways that evoke its spirit and do honor to the dead and silenced” (1997: 546). That the neo-Victorian novel honours the dead and silenced remains evident, especially in the way it textualises concerns with (mis)representations of the past, often revisiting and revising the position allocated to those who have been underrepresented, marginalised or dismissed by the dominant culture.

Much has been written on the pervasiveness of the past in the present and the metaphors employed by fiction writers to demonstrate how the past perpetually influences the present. One such notion is spectrality. According to Jago Morrison, spectrality is the notion currently used by contemporary criticism to describe the ghostliness of history, and “the way the past seems continually to haunt contemporary culture, demanding exorcism” (2003: 16). The concept of haunting features prominently in contemporary criticism. Julian Wolfreys (2002), for example, has recently focused on spectrality and the haunting presence of the gothic in Victorian texts, in the light of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International* (1994). Based on a plenary lecture delivered in the conference “Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective,” held at the University of California in 1993, Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* addresses the question of the haunting presence of Marxist theory in contemporary thought and culture. Despite the efforts that, in his view, “a new world disorder is attempting to install its neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx’s ghosts” (1994: 37). Taking Derrida’s theorisation of spectrality and hauntology as starting point, Wolfreys develops notions of haunting, the spectral, the revenant and the uncanny through Victorian texts like George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil* (1859) or Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Wolfreys asserts that “[r]ecognizing the signs of haunting it must be concluded that, whether one speaks of the experience of reading or the experience of the materiality of history, one witnesses and responds to ghosts” (2002: 11). He insists upon the idea of the spectral as the “manifestation or persistence of the past in the present” (2002: 113), a matter of the return of the past (2002: 13). In this sense, a number of contemporary fiction writers are now privileging the representation of the spectral in recent novels, haunted as they are by the traces of a persistent presence of the Victorian past and the occult.

Some neo-Victorian novels show an interest in portraying the role played by women in the occult sciences in late-Victorian England, Canada, and the States, an issue that has been neglected for decades. If the neo-Victorian novel, in Shiller’s words, asserts “the redemptive power of history” and the past, in that it “attest[s] to the unflagging desire for knowledge of the past, a desire not extinguished by doubts as to how accesible it really is” (1997: 557), the spectral novel, defined as a literary subset of the neo-Victorian novel, feeds this desire and engages with the Victorian occult as a metaphor for the haunting presence of the past. From this perspective, contemporary historical novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* (1999), Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), A. S. Byatt’s novella “The Conjugal Angel” (1992), and Victoria Glendinning’s *Electricity*

(1995), among others, can be labelled “spectral novels” which, in general terms, aim at resurrecting and materialising the Victorian dead in manifold forms.

Taking this idea as the founding premise, this paper seeks to concentrate on the ways in which Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* explore gendered positions in Victorian Canada and England, respectively, through the lives of two transgressive women, a real-life murderess and mesmeric subject (Grace Marks) and a fictional spiritualist medium (Selina Dawes). By bringing this past alive for us, these novels honour the dead and silenced (borrowing Shiller’s words) and investigate women’s precarious status in Victorian times, as well as their ambiguous place as the other, since they lived “in a state of in-betweenness,” which is also the in-betweenness of ghosts and spirits (Dickerson 1996: 8-9). Thus, each narrative lets us hear the spectral voices of women who have been marginalised socially, biologically and sexually. However, this notion of the haunting presence of the past can be interpreted differently. My overall claim is thus twofold: that the haunting presence of the Victorian occult (namely, spiritualism and mesmerism) in the above-mentioned novels can be understood as a metaphor for the postmodern idea of resurrecting Victorian deep-seated anxieties and concerns in contemporary historical novels, and that the writer/historian/artist takes up the role of the medium since, as A. S. Byatt has stated, “the medium [is a version of] the artist or historian” (2000: 106). In doing so, both Atwood and Waters evoke a form of spectrality in their respective narratives. Before going any further, it is necessary to provide some contextualisation as to the supernatural movement that permeated the second half of the nineteenth century up and well into the twentieth in English-speaking countries.

## 2. THE OCCULT IN VICTORIAN CANADA AND ENGLAND

Margaret Atwood and Sarah Waters provide readers with a broad picture of mid-nineteenth century Canada and England, respectively, as nations where scientific discoveries coexisted with a profound interest in the occult—spiritualist activities in table-rapping dark rooms, healing therapies, seers and mesmerism or animal magnetism. Although part of the same obsession with the supernatural that swept across these nations, mesmerism has a history of its own that deserves some attention. According to Vanessa Dickerson (1996: 17), its originator was the Viennese doctor Franz Anton Mesmer, who contended in 1779 that all things in the universe are surrounded by a magnetic field or fluid. A mesmerist session involved a mesmeric operator (usually a man) and a subject, who was more often than not a woman. The mesmerist would make some passes over her and, after a period of time, the subject would sink into a state known as the mesmeric trance, whereby she would lose control over her physical senses, such as smell and touch, to supposedly gain other senses like visionary powers; after several hours under this mesmeric sleep, the subject would be awakened by the mesmerist’s passes over her (Winter 1998: 2-3). Generally speaking, Mesmer’s doctrine appealed to many people because it conflated both science and human mystery. In addition, animal magnetism or mesmerism “fascinated an age almost obsessed by the possibility of

curing all illnesses and that suffered various epidemics of its own, particularly plagues of the nervous system and the psyche” (Kaplan 1975: 8). The Victorian pseudosciences of phrenology and animal magnetism, allies in the crusade against the radical scepticism of the scientific community, formed a compound science “to be called Phreno-magnetism or Phrenomesmerism” (Kaplan 1975: 14), a designation coined by Dr. John Elliotson, Charles Dickens’ friend and physician of University College London,<sup>3</sup> and one of the two most important medical practitioners of mesmerism during the 1840s in England. Another well-known specialist was Dr. James Braid who, disappointed with the theory of animal magnetism, re-named the phenomena “hypnotism” and carried on the investigation of mesmerism introducing some changes; he sent this reformed pseudoscience “back across the channel into the clinics of Liebeault, Bernheim, Charcot” (who is mentioned in *Alias Grace*) and, above all, “Sigmund Freud” (Basham 1982: 88). As an example, one fascinating study is Ralph Harry Vincent’s *The Elements of Hypnotism: The Induction, the Phenomena, and the Physiology of Hypnosis* (1897), which traces the origins of the phenomenon of mesmerism back to Ancient Egypt. Vincent claims that the relevance of the work carried out by members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) should not be dismissed in progressively establishing hypnotism in England. By the end of the nineteenth century eminent scientists and intellectuals like Frederic Myers and Edmund Gurney took an active role in investigating pseudosciences and paranormal phenomena to such an extent that, according to Vincent, thanks to their work “[i]t may be fairly claimed that hypnotism has now gained a position in the scientific world” (1897: 64).

Mesmerism thus changed name and found its way into the respectable incipient field of psychology and mental science. In turn, spiritualism gained predominance over mesmerism as the former became more and more popular in the 1850s. Some account of nineteenth-century female spiritualism and mediumship is necessary in order to fully understand the far-reaching implications of the movement in Victorian England, and the ways in which Sarah Waters invokes ghostly presences in her spectral novel. One of the reasons that accounts for the popularity of spiritualism was that this movement reversed the gendered power-structures, unlike mesmerism, because there was now an active female in the role of the medium, “penetrating the minds of her audience” (Basham 1992: 127). As several critics have recently argued, this was “one of the few professions open to women during the Victorian age, and one which relied heavily on what were traditionally thought of as ‘feminine’ qualities of passivity, receptiveness, lack of ‘reason’” (Byatt 2000: 104). Nineteenth-century concepts of female nature and behaviour were inextricably linked to illness, passivity and lack of volition, which, according to the medical profession, made women prone to mental insanity. However, these traits were read

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<sup>3</sup> From the 1840s onwards, mesmerism was incorporated into literature, in works by Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins, for example. Special attention is at present given to the role played by mesmerism in the life and works of Harriet Martineau, who suffered from severe menstrual problems and who claimed that only mesmerism had been able to cure her illness.

in a more positive light by spiritualists and mediums since “[i]llness was interpreted as a cleansing of the temple in preparation for psychic gifts, and was thus accepted and acceptable route to powerful mediumship” (Owen 1987: 137). In this sense, critics have recently paid particular attention to the polemical controversy between the medical professionals and spiritualists over mediumship and the trance, especially in relation to the wrongful confinement of transgressive women in late-Victorian England (Walkowitz 2000/1992: 171-89). Although relying on traditionally considered ‘feminine’ characteristics, mediumship simultaneously allowed for the revision of these qualities, a fact which permitted a considerable amount of intimacy, pleasure and redefinition of gender norms in the *séances* (Owen 1989: *passim*), as Waters’ novel clearly shows.

One of the most famous spiritualists, Daniel D. Home, came from America to London in 1855, although the movement is said to have begun with the Fox sisters in 1848 in America and spread rapidly to Europe. It is often claimed that “[w]hat Spiritualism offered to [Victorian] individuals was a way of organising supernatural experiences and assumptions in relation to existing cultural realities” (Hazelgrove 2000: 23). Rather than a mere fashion, then, spiritualism in England (as in America, Canada and other countries) was a widespread practice “involving a huge investment of belief and experimentation” from the late 1840s onwards (Basham 1992: 108). One attempt to reconcile the spiritualist activities with science was made by the Society for Psychical Research, as mentioned before, which was originally established by a select group of eminent Victorians to investigate reports of supernatural phenomena.<sup>4</sup> In a few words, the key idea behind spiritualism was that it permitted communication with the other world, although it underwent an evolution in the decades that followed. As Susan Rowland has explained in her study on Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen*, “[s]pirit communication developed from table-rapping, through automatic writing where the medium held the pen and the spirit supposedly guided it, to the spirit speaking through the body of the medium” (2000: 203). By the 1870s mediums were able to materialise spirits, who “made an appearance at *séances* and walked about the room in full view of all those present. Materialisation...was undoubtedly the acme of mediumistic development” (Owen 1989: 42). The most famous female medium in the 1870s was Florence Cook, who materialised a spirit called Katie King during a *séance*. In Waters’ *Affinity* the fictional counterpart of the celebrated Florence Cook, Selina Dawes, will also prove to be a consummate medium in materialising the spirit of Peter Quick during *séances*.

All in all, Atwood’s *Alias Grace* and Waters’ *Affinity* attest to the relevance of the occult sciences in mid-Victorian Canada and England—initially marginalised from traditional accounts of Victorian culture—, thus aligning with recent studies on mesmerism and spiritualism that purport to restore them to their central position in

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<sup>4</sup> Among them were Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll and John Addington Symonds. For more information, see Janet Oppenheim (1985), in particular the section on the forerunners of the SPR (1988: 123-35).

Victorian society. In doing so, these neo-Victorian novels conjure up dead people that communicate with the living in manifold ways. In what follows I attempt to offer an analysis of both novels as examples of “spectral novels,” where the haunting spirit of the Victorian past and the occult manifests itself, and where the writer fulfils the role of a materialisation medium. As the main protagonists of these novels are women, special attention is given to the links established between gender concepts and the occult in the Victorian period, as well as how they are revisited and seen through the eyes of these contemporary women writers.

### 3. *ALIAS GRACE: GRACE MARKS AND MESMERISM*<sup>5</sup>

Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is a fictionalised account of Grace Marks, a notorious nineteenth-century Canadian woman, convicted of murder at the age of sixteen and sentenced to life imprisonment for her alleged role in the double murder of the wealthy Thomas Kinnear, her employer, and Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear’s housekeeper and supposed lover. The novel offers us a portrait of mid-nineteenth-century Canadian society in the full description of the voyage from Ireland—Grace’s homeland—to Canada, the hardships she goes through, detailed descriptions of housekeeping as well as accounts of mesmerism, and those of the nascent field of mental science. As Atwood herself points out in her “Author’s Afterword,” she has made use of previous material on the case of Grace—e.g. Susanna Moodie’s third-hand account, reports of the day and contemporary sensational newspaper accounts, details of prison and asylum life, ballads, and Atwood’s own CBC television play, titled *The Servant Girl* (1974)—to establish this dialogue between the past and the present.

Although this novel is written with no visible disruptions from the twentieth century and thus, there is a repression of self-reflexive or metafictional commentaries, *Alias Grace* shows a powerful sense of history and the (mis)representations of Grace in the historical records expressed, for example, by the juxtaposition of different viewpoints. In this sense, narrative techniques mirror this connection between the past and the present: there is alternation of past (1843) and present episodes (1859) (although the book opens in 1851 and ends in 1872), together with time-shifts that show how crucially the present is interwoven with the past and, conversely, how the past lingers on in the present. Another technique used by Atwood to examine the continuity of the past in the present is the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits, a fact which turns *Alias Grace* into an example of a spectral novel.<sup>6</sup> The question these texts pose is: How

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<sup>5</sup> The following discussion on Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is an expanded and enlarged version of a paper delivered in *The Fifth Conference of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE5)*, held at the University of Helsinki in 2000. My thanks go to Dr. Pilar Cuder for her valuable comments on my paper on *Alias Grace*.

<sup>6</sup> Borrowings, intertextual references and parodic inversions are relevant inasmuch as they provide an examination of how Atwood self-consciously recovers the past in a postmodern way. For more information, see Karen F. Stein (1999: 103-09).

do we come to know the past? And, can it be retrieved? Furthermore, it is the mingling of past and present, historical truth and fiction and the uncertainty this blurring of boundaries provokes which sustains the whole novel. What Atwood attempts to do in *Alias Grace* is to dig out Grace's story by approaching not only history, but also science, gender and historiography from a feminist perspective. In doing so, she gives voice to the dead to cast some light on these mysterious murders. However, Atwood's novel indicates that we cannot know the *truth* of the story of Grace Marks, but this fact does not mean that one true version never existed. As Shiller points out, the neo-Victorian novel wishes to reconstruct the past by emphasising events and people that have been left out of histories, and simultaneously "manage[s] to preserve and celebrate the Victorian past" (1997: 541). This is most patent in Atwood's neo-Victorian novel.

Grace Marks remains an enigmatic figure, both for Dr. Simon Jordan (an American psychologist and proto-psychoanalyst who is extremely interested in cases of amnesia and who conducts a series of interviews with her) and for us, readers. Dr. Jordan can be considered a medium/historian/archeologist insofar as he tries to unearth Grace's buried memory. A symbolic parallelism can easily be established between Grace's memory, full of gaps and absences because of her amnesia, which is Dr. Jordan's object of study, and Grace's case in official accounts of her story, also full of patches, lapses and absences, Atwood's object of scrutiny. Moreover, he occupies the same position as Atwood as medium/historian since both of them take up the role of mediators between the story of Grace and the readers. Hence, Grace is portrayed as an in-between figure, a fluid body that avoids categorising, that represents a position of both/and, rather than either/or: "I think of all the things that have been written about me—that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life...that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes...And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?" (Atwood 1997: 25). Interestingly enough, the presentation of Grace's story in ballads, newspaper cuttings and other historical documents reflects fantasies, stereotypes and myths about contemporary definitions of Victorian women. In her groundbreaking study *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982), Nina Auerbach described the four central types that captured the Victorian imagination on womanhood: the angel, the demon, the old maid, and the fallen woman. Auerbach is at pains to show that "[d]iscussing each type separately falsifies the fluid boundaries among them, for together they place woman at the junction between the social and the spiritual, the humanly perishable and the transcendently potent" (1982: 64). This is precisely the case of Grace in *Alias Grace* since her protean figure embodies the contradictions that shaped Victorian culture. Accordingly, gender and power are intertwined here inasmuch as most men in *Alias Grace*—Dr. Jordan included—resist the idea that a woman like Grace could have committed those crimes. What lies underneath is the conviction that "female violence is...worse than male violence, because it is 'unnatural'" (Mantel 1996: 8). Be that as it may, angel or female demon, Grace perfectly reflects the contradictions that pervaded the views about Victorian womanhood.

The liminal position that Grace occupies in the novel, between animal and human, between angel and demon, mirrors, then, the ambiguous position that women held in the Victorian period as well as the in-betweenness of ghosts and spirits, in Vanessa Dickerson's terms. Vanessa Dickerson has aptly argued that "Victorian women's participation in the revival of supernaturalism, whether as mesmeric subjects, as mediums, or as writers of ghost stories, constituted both expression and exploration of their own spirituality and their ambiguous status as the other" (1996: 8). In a similar vein, I would like to concentrate on how the occult and the supernatural (which, incidentally, are now receiving more critical attention in Victorian studies) provide an important site for the discussion of gender concepts and roles in this neo-Victorian novel.<sup>7</sup> Grace is always presented as a figure of indeterminacy, both as a mesmeric subject and as a medium, thus gaining a more powerful and subversive in-between status.

As far as mesmerism is concerned, *Alias Grace* offers a fascinating sample of a mesmerist session towards the end of the book when Grace is converted into a mesmeric subject as Dr. Jerome DuPont (alias Jeremiah the peddler, Grace's friend) makes an ultimate attempt to discover the truth of what happened back in 1843. However, throughout the novel Dr. Jordan, the protopsychologist, fascinated as he is with cases of amnesia as the one suffered by Grace (who has no memory of the killings), tries to solve the mystery of the murders in the various interviews he conducts. Therefore, it is possible to consider Dr. Jordan's scientific method (based on suggestion and the association of ideas), in these pre-Freudian decades, as akin to the one that Dr. Jerome DuPont, of New York, practises on Grace in the mesmerist session. At least Reverend Verringer, the leading petitioner of Grace's case, who first introduces Dr. Jordan to Dr. Jerome DuPont, treats both of them with equal respect and admiration for their "scientific" occupations. DuPont himself acknowledges that "I am what you might call a medical practitioner. Or an investigative scientist, like yourself. I am a trained Neuro-hypnotist, of the school of James Braid" (Atwood 1997: 95). This highlights the blurred line between science and the occult phenomena in mid-Victorian Canada (and England) and the struggle of such pseudosciences to be recognised and valued by traditional science.

Moreover, Dr. Jordan's activities in the novel exhibit similar features to those of Dr. DuPont as Dr. Jordan hopes to succeed in getting Grace to recovery—an achievement that would then help him set up a private asylum where he can put all

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<sup>7</sup> For example, George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859), the only work by Eliot that manifests an interest in the supernatural is a text that is being privileged in this sense. It should be noted in passing that *Alias Grace* is not the only novel in Atwood's production where séances, mesmerism and/or ghosts occupy a central position. They feature prominently in *Lady Oracle* (1976), and ghost stories pervade both her narrative and poetic works. That Atwood is fascinated by the world of the dead is patent in her recent *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), where she develops the hypothesis that "all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down,...by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (2002: 156; original emphasis).

his scientific knowledge about the diseases of the brain and mind into practice.<sup>8</sup> In other words, his work with Grace fits in with what Diana Basham posits about the narrative of mesmerism: “there is a force in nature carried by the female which, if mesmerically controlled, can revitalise man’s domination both of nature and the female” (1992: 99). Dr. Jordan’s affair with his landlady, Mrs. Humphrey, tellingly contains echoes of Grace’s story, and indicates how his repressed sexual urges towards Grace are displaced onto his landlady. In this exploitative relationship, Dr. Jordan shows his eagerness to dominate both nature and the female.

A striking study on mesmerism is Alison Winter’s *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (1998), which seeks to retrieve mesmerism “from a historiography that places it at the fringes of society, and restores it to its central place among the preoccupations of Victorian culture” (1998: 4). Winter’s book of cultural history discusses the importance of mesmerism in Victorian society and claims that “mesmerism/hypnosis can be the clue to Mid-Victorian intellectual life, exposing gender roles, colonial attitudes and the status of science” (Dinnage 1999: 15). Among many other cases, she pays particular attention to the activities of Dr. John Elliotson in relation to two notorious performers: teenage Irish maidservants called Jane and Elizabeth O’Key. The process involved a mesmeriser, Dr. Elliotson, who attempted to cure their epilepsy and hysterical fits, during which they apparently assumed alternative personalities (Dinnage 1999: 14). The controversy over the sensationalised demonstrations of Elliotson’s exploration of animal magnetism led him to resign his professorship since, “over months of demonstrations, it began to seem as though it was the doctors who were becoming hypnotised by their patients” (Dinnage 1999: 14). This is precisely what happens to Dr. Jordan as he proceeds with his interviews with Grace, coincidentally an Irish-born maidservant.

The mesmeric power of the medium/historian/writer to conjure up spirits and stories is turned upside down by Grace, whose cunning and alluring stories, reminiscent of Scheherazade, have the power to mesmerise her interviewer, Dr. Jordan. It is significant that one reviewer of the novel has noted that Dr. Jordan himself finds the series of interviews “mesmerizing” (LeClair 1996: 26) and Stephanie Lovelady has convincingly argued that “[t]he Eve, Pandora, and Scheherazade motifs...underscore Grace’s role as a transgressor” (1999: 50). All the men around Grace show their fascination with her case and the tales of suffering she narrates (especially Jamie Walsh who becomes her husband when she receives a pardon), as she confesses in a letter addressed to Dr. Jordan: “you were as eager as Mr. Walsh is to hear about my sufferings and my hardships in life; and not only that, but you would write them down as well” (Atwood 1997: 531). Whether or not Grace is lying is out of the question here. What has to be underlined is the current of sympathy that

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<sup>8</sup> Sally Shuttleworth has lucidly discussed the obsession with surveillance and control (typical features of the asylum) in relation to insanity. To her, Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) explores the issue of psychological instability in the context of the social and scientific discourse on psychology. Mesmerism, according to Shuttleworth (1987: 317), was under attack because it represented fear of the loss of control, of public exposure.

seems to flow between doctor and patient that eventually leads to the interchangeability of roles (Niederhoff 2000: 79). Doctor and patient exchange roles and to my mind, Grace becomes the doctor, the mesmerist who exerts control over those who listen to her stories, whilst Dr. Jordan becomes the patient, the madman who, ironically, ends up losing his memory altogether. He comes close to falling into a trance just by the sound of Grace's voice, feeling *en rapport* and having the same sensations as the mesmeric operator:

But today, listening to her low, candid voice—like the voice of a childhood nurse reciting a well-loved story—he almost goes to sleep...It's as if she's drawing his energy out of him—using his own mental forces to materialize the figures in her story, as the mediums are said to do during their trances. (Atwood 1997: 338)

Grace has now exchanged roles with Dr. Jordan and, at this moment, represents the historian/author and medium who resurrects the dead. The vampiristic image points to the displacement of power relations between Dr. Jordan and Grace: first a powerless and passive mesmeric patient, she has now turned into a powerful mediator between the living and the dead. This is even more evident in the mesmerist session that takes place at the end of the novel: under hypnotic trance operated by Jeremiah, Grace appears to be possessed by the spirit of her friend Mary Whitney.

Grace's mother (who dies on the voyage from Ireland to Canada) and Mary Whitney (Grace's sole friend who dies after an abortion under terrible conditions) constitute two 'ghosts' in Grace's life, regularly invoked in the narration. Mary is three years older than Grace, she is also an orphan and partly acts as a mother to Grace. Not only do they both share the same social status as maidservants, but also the cultural roles open to women at the time, which Lovelady categorises, "[w]ife, maid, madwoman and prostitute/criminal" (1999: 53). Grace's lapses of memory begin to occur just as Mary dies, so it can be inferred that a strong connection exists between these two women and the processes of Grace's memory. Thus, it is not surprising that Mary's death, a dream about her mother and the partial loss of memory coincide in a chapter called "Secret Drawer," since all three events reveal hidden aspects of Grace's past. This chapter culminates in the awesome death-bed scene, which assumes unexpected power: "and then I heard her voice, as clear as anything, right in my ear, saying *Let me in*. I was quite startled, and looked hard at Mary...But she gave no sign of having said anything...Then I thought with a rush of fear, But [sic] I did not open the window. And I ran across the room and opened it, because I must have heard wrong and she was saying *Let me out*" (Atwood 1997: 207; original emphasis). This scene could be read as an intertextual reference to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), but Mary's spirit's plea (*Let me in*) could also be interpreted as the beginning of a case of spiritual possession that would explain Grace's amnesia concerning the two killings. This piece of information is finally revealed in the mesmerist session where, seemingly, Mary speaks through the medium Grace:

There is a sharp clap, which appears to come from the ceiling. 'I told James to do it. I urged him to. I was there all along!'

‘There?’ says DuPont.

‘Here! With Grace, where I am now. It was so cold, lying on the floor, and I was all alone; I needed to keep warm. But Grace doesn’t know, she’s never known!’...She knew nothing! I only borrowed her clothing for a time.’

‘Her clothing?’ says Simon.

‘Her earthly shell. Her fleshly garment. She forgot to open the window, and so I couldn’t get out! (Atwood 1997: 468)

After the session it does not remain at all clear if Grace suffers from split personality, from *dédoublement*, or whether she is a genuine victim of amnesia since “‘Mary’ works as easily as a ghost as an alternate personality” (Lovelady 1999: 55-56). Be it as it may, I agree with Lovelady’s explanation: “by having Verringer raise the possibility of possession, pointing out in different contexts the same set of facts are interpreted quite differently, Atwood is keeping a supernatural explanation open” (1999: 56). Bearing this in mind, it is possible to support the view that Grace, in her role as a medium, is giving freedom to what lies submerged beneath the surface, to repressed or hidden thoughts and impulses, in the guise of spirit communication. Accordingly, the term ‘spectrality’ now acquires an added significance for the novel, in the light of the supernatural. This theme of spiritualism and talking with the dead is further explored in Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*, which shares many of its features with *Alias Grace*.

#### 4. *AFFINITY*: SPIRITUALISM IN VICTORIAN LONDON

Sarah Waters, a much lesser known writer than Atwood, has published three historical novels so far, set in Victorian London—*Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002)—. In 2000 *Affinity* won the Somerset Maugham award and was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. *Affinity* and her other two novels have been very well received by critics and the general public alike, to such an extent that she has been recently included in the *Granta* list of “Best of Young British Novelists 2003.”

*Affinity* is both a mystery story and a ghost story. Margaret Prior, an unmarried lady, recovers from a suicide attempt after the loss of her beloved father (recently deceased) and her first love, Helen (now married to Stephen, Margaret’s brother) by resuming the research she had been carrying out with her father. In late September 1874 she begins to visit Millbank prison and is deeply affected by the conditions of this panopticon-like prison, which is recorded in a journal she daily keeps. Among the prisoners is Selina Dawes, a spiritualist medium who has been convicted of “*Fraud & Assault*” (Waters 1999: 27; original emphasis). Margaret feels curiosity for Selina’s story, is progressively attracted to and fascinated with Selina and finally develops an erotic attachment to her. Her visits become more and more frequent and once their affinity is established, spurred by seemingly ghostly visits, Margaret is convinced to devise a plan to help Selina escape from Millbank. Although the final events lead us to believe that Selina is a liar, a person who has taken advantage of

both Margaret and a matron, the author places emphasis on Selina's enigmatic figure "by keeping open until the novel's final pages the question of whether Selina really does enjoy paranormal powers" (Palmer 2004: 125).

The novel unfolds through alternating selections from the diaries of the two women:<sup>9</sup> intertwined with the present story (1874), are flashbacks to 1872 and 1873, the period of Selina's spiritualist activities before she was imprisoned, offering a first-hand account of her daily existence. The entries in Margaret's diary give us a more detailed description of her life during her prison visits, from September 1874 to January 1875, and trace the development of her obsession with and passion for Selina, the convicted medium. Margaret's role is that of the researcher/historian, who seeks to unearth Selina's story in order to know the truth. That Margaret is aware of her role as a historian is made clear in the opening lines of her first entry into the journal: "Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended" (Waters 1999: 7). The blurred line between history and literature, as contemporary historical novels seem to postulate, turns out to be one of the most important themes in this novel. Waters also suppresses any metafictional or self-reflexive commentaries and gives an air of verisimilitude to the novel, even though the story of Margaret and Selina (unlike that of Grace Marks) is not based on historical facts. However, there are many similarities between these two novels: first and foremost, both are prison narratives since Grace is confined in Kingston Penitentiary and Selina in Millbank prison, where control, surveillance and the constant gaze linked to punishment occupy a central position (Macpherson 2004: 205-21). Waters has utilised Henry Mayhew's *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* (1862) in her depiction of Millbank prison life, as one critic has noted (Llewellyn 2004: 204). In fact, *Affinity* contains a specific reference to this author when Margaret goes to the reading room at the British Museum and consults "Mayhew's book on the prisons of London" (Waters 1999: 57). Mayhew describes Millbank as one of the criminal prisons of London in the second half of the nineteenth century, and places it in the category of prisons "for offenders after conviction" (1862: 82). In Mayhew's words, "Millbank Prison is a modification of Jeremy Bentham's 'Panoptikon, or Inspection House'" (1862: 235), an architectural design and scheme, developed in a series of *Letters* written from Russia at the end of the eighteenth century and later elaborated upon in some *Postscripts* (Božovič 1995: 1-2). Bentham's panopticon writings gained more critical attention since the publication of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1991/1975), where he read the panopticon as a place to contain, observe and punish the criminal through a complex system of visual control and discipline, as many critics have extensively discussed (Božovič 1995). As far as *Affinity* is concerned, gaze and observation exert a coercive influence upon the two protagonists of

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<sup>9</sup> For further information about the role of the two diaries and the discrepancy between Margaret's and Selina's public voices with their "private improper voices," only suitable for twentieth-century readers, see Christian Gutleben (2001: 36-37).

*Affinity*: Selina is under constant surveillance by matrons at Millbank prison, and Margaret is subject to the control of her mother's disciplinary gaze.<sup>10</sup>

As regards the similarities between *Alias Grace* and *Affinity*, it can be affirmed that, like Grace, Selina remains a shadowy figure, an enigmatic character, who is unknowable and retrievable only through textual traces. In the interviews and visits that Margaret pays to the prison, she takes up the role of the historian (and medium) who feels curiosity for the object of her study, which parallels the relationship between Dr. Jordan and Grace. Moreover, these historians (Dr. Jordan/Margaret) are respectively outwitted by Grace and Selina. Both novels address the same issues: consciousness and unconsciousness; Victorian ideas of criminality, mental illness, female confinement, gender and class. Lastly, it must be underlined, once again, that mesmerism, so important in *Alias Grace*, broke the ground leading to the advent of spiritualism (its heyday was the central decade of the 1870s), in turn accurately portrayed in *Affinity*. Given the striking similarities between the two novels, it could therefore be argued that Atwood's novel somehow paved the way for *Affinity* or, at least exerted an influence on Waters' novel. Most conspicuously, both Atwood and Waters act as mediums in their capacity to conjure up the past and communicate with the dead as the spiritualist medium conjures up spirits. Consequently, they can be said to 'ghostwrite' the Victorian period (with the multiple possible meanings of the word 'ghost'), thus producing two 'spectral' novels.<sup>11</sup>

In *Affinity* Waters is giving fictional voice to the women marginalised in official records of the cultural history of the Victorian age. It is precisely this same preoccupation that lies behind Alex Owen's well-known study of mediumship and female spiritualism in Victorian England, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989). Without making judgement as to the actual existence of spirits, Owen deals with the possible "meaning and significance of spiritualism as a social movement with a specific world view" (1989: xviii) and its further implications with "The Woman Question" because of its potential to subvert dominant norms and social conventions, specifically in the séance room. Basham has also insisted upon this connection and has argued that spiritualism "offered, within the controlled, other-wordly theatre of the séance, a mirrored enactment of the first stirrings of the Victorian Women's Movement and their new claims for legal and political status" (1992: 135). What Owen and Basham attempt to do is to consider the ways in which the occult participated in the Victorian Women's Movement from the 1840s onwards. Basham affirms that literary productions and a

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<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to explore *Alias Grace* and *Affinity* "as texts which utilize and subvert the power of the panopticon, inserting instead a feminine gaze that allows for illusion, performance, and subversive control" (Macpherson 2004: 206).

<sup>11</sup> The term 'ghostwriting' has been defined by Hilary M. Schor in her study on A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects* as "a concern with writing that [Byatt] is identifying as peculiarly Victorian...a contemporary version of realism that can reanimate the complicated literary genres of the past" (2000: 237). Although Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Waters' *Affinity*, to varying degrees, illustrate this concern with resurrecting literary genres—for example, detective fiction and the ghost story, among others—, this goes beyond the scope of this paper.

number of events explored the connections between the two movements, e.g. the arrival of Mrs. Hayden (a spiritualist medium) along with Harriet Beecher Stowe from America in 1852 (1992: 122-23). Neither of these writers would like to suggest that the supernatural movement encroached on the nineteenth-century Women's Movement, nor would they dismiss the work and fight for equal human rights of the forerunners of the Women's Movement at the turn of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Owen, for example, focuses on the emergence of the spiritualist societies and the establishment of dark circles "contemporaneously with the consideration of women's proper role and sphere which became known as 'the woman question'" (1989: 1). In this sense, there is a recent upsurge of interest in the similar status that Victorian ghosts and Victorian women (for women, read mediums) had at the time, since both lived in a state of indeterminacy and motivated suspicion as they fought to gain recognition (Basham 1992: 152). These voices of the socially or sexually underprivileged characters, who stepped outside the Victorian conventions of womanhood (Selina Dawes and Margaret Prior), are brought alive for us as revenants in this spectral narrative.

In *Affinity* the fictional counterpart of a celebrated female medium, like the aforementioned Florence Cook, is Selina Dawes who, despite her youth, is presented as a consummate medium with extraordinary powers. As reflected in her diary, she was seemingly able to produce a fully formed materialised spirit, called Peter Quick, a spirit guide, who flirted with the female sitters but was aggressive and bad-tempered with gentlemen at the séances. Owen posits that "[m]aterialisation was considered difficult and dangerous to perform" (1989: 42). It is precisely one of the private séances Selina offers to young ladies (who, in possession of a "fatal gift," need developing in order to become mediums) that provides us with some clues as to the understanding of the hidden passions and impulses that lie beneath the surface:

I looked at Peter then, & saw him smile. He said 'My medium's nature is very special...You must let your spirit be *used*, your prayer must be always *May I be used*...Then Peter said 'Now you see my medium unclothed. That is how the spirit appears when the body has been taken from it. Put your hand upon her, Miss Isherwood. Is she hot?' Miss Isherwood said I was very hot. Peter said 'That is because her spirit is very near the surface of her flesh. You must also become hot.' (Waters 1999: 261-62; original emphasis)

It seems clear that Selina and her 'spirit guide' are making use of the mediumistic trance to explore forbidden territory, releasing feelings, desires and a libidinal energy

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<sup>12</sup> For a thorough discussion of the history of the Women's Movement in Britain, see Ray Strachey (1988/1978) and Oliver Banks (1986). Although these studies do not make any actual reference to spiritualism, they offer an informative historical account of the Women's Movement. Banks makes a passing comment on Annie Besant's conversion to Theosophy, and its influence upon her feminist involvement (1986: 14), but she does not investigate the further connections between Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky's doctrine which combined spiritualism and Eastern religious ideas, and the Women's Movement. On the other hand, Basham devotes a section of her book to the examination of the links between Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant, socialist campaigner in the last decades of the nineteenth century (1992: 195-204).

that opposed Victorian conventions of womanhood, as Owen argues (1989: *passim*). The dialogues between spirits and mediums were subversive, “questioning the right of man’s authority over woman and courting resistance to the established order... they facilitated the expression of the inexpressible, and constituted a space within which silence could be broken” (Owen 1987: 144). As mentioned before, Victorian women’s participation as mediums expresses and explores their ambiguous status as figures of indeterminacy, as the “other,” who live in a liminal position of in-betweenness (Dickerson 1996: 8-9). One of Selina’s entries in her journal makes her liminal status clear by stating that “[t]he spirit-medium’s proper home is neither this world nor the next, but that vague & debatable land which lies between them” (Waters 1999: 73). In addition, Selina and Margaret share the same cultural position: one is a spiritualist medium who is imprisoned in a cell, and the other is a spinster who feels confined within the limits of Victorian gender norms and trapped in the plight of an unmarried woman (on the verge of becoming an old maid by Victorian standards) whose destiny is to remain at home, taking care of her mother. That Victorian women, ghosts and spiritualist mediums equally shared the same cultural status, involved as they were in questions of visibility and invisibility, is recognised by Margaret: “I have turned, in two years, from a girl into a spinster. There were many spinsters there to-day, I think—more, certainly, than I remember. Perhaps, however, it is the same with spinsters as with ghosts; and one has to be of their ranks in order to see them at all” (Waters 1999: 58).

Taking this idea further, I would like to develop a possible link between Margaret and Selina, and discuss the intimacy and attraction that the former feels for the latter on the basis of the doctrine of ‘affinity,’ which was accepted and acknowledged by those Victorians involved in spiritualism. According to Alex Owen, in the 1870s and in the 1880s, spiritualists were the target of considerable hostility and one of the accusations against them was that of immorality due to, among many other things, the undercurrents of sexual desire and the doctrine of ‘affinityship’ (1989: 218). More often than not, people attending séances were convinced that the medium or the spirit guide was their “long-sought-after spiritual affinity” (Owen 1989: 219); in other words, Owen defines “affinityship” as “the idea that a particular medium was the physical embodiment of a unique soul-mate [and this] gave earthly passion an extra dimension” (1989: 219). All the cases Owen mentions in her book are heterosexual, but Waters in *Affinity* gives this doctrine a lesbian slant. Nancy Willard’s review of the novel in *The New York Times Book Review* focuses on the special connection between Margaret and Selina, and highlights the way Selina plays with this idea of ‘affinityship’ to exert control over Margaret’s life: “the seduction succeeds because Selina raises their personal *affinity* to a higher level, suggesting a connection in which Margaret, isolated by her loneliness, longs to believe” (2000: 25; emphasis added). As the novel progresses, Margaret wants to believe in the spiritual world and the actual presence of ghosts and spirits, and this longing is spurred by ghostly visits and presents supposedly proffered by Selina’s spirits. Margaret’s transformation and change into a real believer of the supernatural take place in the conversation

where the concept of affinity is at last explained. This is when Margaret finally realises that she feels an erotic attachment to Selina:

‘And if you don’t take me,’ she said...Will you go on being a prisoner, in your own dark cell, forever?...I was only seeking you out, as you were seeking me. You were seeking me, your own *affinity*.

*My own affinity*. Have I known it? ....

We are the same, you and I. We have been cut, two halves, from the same piece of shining matter...*You are like me*. (Waters 1999: 274-75; original emphasis)

A recent article by Mark Llewellyn is worth considering since the author carries out an in-depth analysis of the novel as “a critique not only of the 1870s modes of dealing with social and sexual transgression, but also the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries’ responses to similarly perceived deviance” (2004: 213). This critic argues that both Margaret and Selina transgress societal codes and gender norms, and that both are “‘queer’ in society’s eyes because of their unnameable desire” (2004: 211). The haunting presence of puns on the word ‘queer’ in moments like this: “There was something devilish *queer* about this flight of Dawes’s, after my attentions to her—something very devilish *queer*, indeed!” (Waters 1999: 327; emphasis added) helps uncover the use of spiritualism as “a metaphor of lesbian sexuality” (Llewellyn 2004: 210). Despite the fact that the concept of affinity can be explained in spiritualist terms, the above-mentioned passage suggests “not only shared spirituality but a shared sexuality” (Llewellyn 2004: 210). What is at stake here is the connection between lesbian desire and spectrality, which has been fully developed by Terry Castle in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), as Llewellyn himself acknowledges.<sup>13</sup> Castle sustains that since the eighteenth century there has been an association between ghosts and lesbians for “[t]he spectral figure is a perfect vehicle for...objectifying—and ultimately embracing—that which otherwise could not be acknowledged” (1993: 60). To substantiate her thesis, Castle applies the Freudian idea that through negation repressed thoughts are affirmed on a different plane to “the process by which lesbianism itself has entered into the imaginative life of the West over the past two centuries” (1993: 60, 64). Seen in this light, spectrality gains an added significance in *Affinity* since it is now linked to lesbian sexuality, expressed in Margaret’s visits and intimate conversations with Selina in her cell, which turns into “an outlet for her lesbian desire” (Llewellyn 2004: 210), as well as in the dark circle of the séance where Selina and her ‘materialised’ spirit give release to their ‘spectral’ desire.

Although Margaret makes all preparations to start a new life with Selina in Italy, once she is set free from her imprisonment by the ‘spirits,’ as she herself asks Margaret to believe, the novel bears some similarities with *Alias Grace* in that the object of study here, Selina, outwits Margaret, who ends up alone and robbed of her possessions in her Chelsea house. Very little did Margaret suspect the real plans of Selina when she was told by the convicted spiritualist: “you are my medium” (Waters 1999: 298). In fact, Margaret has become her medium, her vehicle, ready for use in a number of ways. Although the mystery is at last solved and the most

eerie phenomena—as, for example, the *rapport* and the appearance of items such as flowers in Margaret’s room—find reasonable and logical explanations, Waters wants to leave us in doubt as to Selina’s spiritualist powers, which accounts for the reader’s ambivalent response to her shadowy character (Palmer 2004: 125). Nancy Willard wonders whether Selina’s powers are genuine or fake (2000: 25). There is no definite answer to this matter; rather, the author strives to make us think: what if? All in all, Waters, a historical researcher (as Margaret), has taken up the role of the medium in this spectral novel, conjuring spirits, materialising the dead and resurrecting the Victorian occult in order to meditate on the marginalised position that women such as Selina and Margaret had in late Victorian England.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To both Waters and Atwood, history consists of the recording of the individual memories of the past that allows for the incorporation of the female voice and that addresses issues of gendered positions. They explore the nature of history’s buried memory and question the position allocated by history to women like Grace Marks, Selina Dawes and Margaret Prior. As Shiller suggests, it is, then, possible for the “postmodern present to be utterly enfolded by the past, and immeasurably enriched by it” (1997: 558). By bringing the Victorian past alive, they investigate women’s status as the ‘other,’ living in a liminal position as ghosts and spirits who partook of two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. In addition, the in-between position that these women possess in *Alias Grace* and *Affinity*, respectively, allows the authors to meditate on questions of the past and the intrinsic relationship between history and fiction. Therefore, the haunting presence of the occult in *Alias Grace* and *Affinity* has been discussed as a metaphor for the postmodern idea of resurrecting Victorian deep-seated anxieties and concerns in recent fiction. In this sense, Atwood and Waters, who are also historians in their archeological project of digging out the past, assume the role of the medium in conjuring up spirits and stories, and in establishing the dialogue between the past and the present. Furthermore, *Alias Grace* and *Affinity* offer a similar pattern, since Dr. Jordan and Margaret can also be considered historians/researchers/artists through their undertaking the study of the cases of Grace and Selina. All of them (Atwood/Dr. Jordan and Waters/Margaret) aspire to reveal what lies submerged beneath the surface. If Dr. Jordan seeks to unveil the mystery of Grace’s loss of memory concerning the killings, Margaret also feels the need of unearthing Selina’s story as a spiritualist medium. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, *Alias Grace* examines Grace’s transgression of gender norms. However, *Affinity* approaches the transgressive behaviour of two women, Selina and Margaret, by making a further connection between spiritualism and lesbian desire, whereby spectrality functions as a metaphor of lesbianism, both Victorian and contemporary (Llewellyn 2004: 210-13). Margaret gradually reveals her passion for Selina in her ‘journals of the heart’ (Waters 1999: 241), the name she gives to the recording of

her visits to the convicted medium; undercurrents of sexual desire are, in turn, released in the dark room of the spiritualist circle, controlled by Selina, the medium, and 'Peter Quick,' her materialised spirit-guide.

Lastly, as Victorians were caught between the world of the living and the world of the dead, neo-Victorian women writers also wander between two worlds, the past and the present. A. S. Byatt has affirmed in relation to one of her characters, a medium in her novella "The Conjugal Angel," that she "represents one reason for involvement in spiritualism—narrative curiosity" (2000: 106). Perhaps this is what motivates the authors' involvement with things historical with a special interest in the occult, because they seem to be driven by the same force and energy: narrative curiosity to know what happened and then conjure up the past. It could therefore be argued that, by resurrecting the Victorian occult and materialising ghostly forms, Atwood and Waters are contributing to the contemporary historical novel with a special type of narrative: the spectral novel, a textual space for imagining what is absent, or spectralised from historical record, for exploring the far-reaching implications of the fringed Victorian pseudosciences, and for making the dead speak, which fits into the notion of spectrality as defined by Jago Morrison (2003) and Julian Wolfreys (2002), following the work of Derrida (1994).

Let me borrow Vernon Lee's final words from the Preface to her *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1906), which deal with the haunting continuity of the past in the present in works of fiction. The following passage nicely captures the idea that lies behind contemporary historical narratives in which the Victorian past, and particularly the Victorian occult, is brought alive for twenty-first century readers as a means of exploring the position women occupied in the Victorian period, a position of in-betweenness and indeterminacy, like that of ghosts and spirits:

That is the thing—the Past, the more or less remote Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance—that is the place to get our ghosts from. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past, in houses looking down on its troubadours' orchards and Greek folks' pillared courtyards; and a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present. (1904: x-xi)

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This paper undertakes the examination of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) by focusing on the theme of spiritualism and mesmerism in each of the texts and what that reveals about the role of women in Victorian society and its literary representation in neo-Victorian fiction. It will be argued that this engagement with the occult can be understood as a metaphor for the postmodern idea of resurrecting Victorian concerns in what appears to be a literary subset of the neo-Victorian novel, the spectral novel, a textual space for fictionalising what is absent. This paper undertakes the examination of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) by focusing on the theme of spiritualism and mesmerism in each of the texts and what that reveals about the role of women in Victorian society and its literary representation in neo-Victorian fiction. It will be argued that this engagement with the occult can be understood as a metaphor for the postmodern idea of resurrecting Victorian concerns in what appears to be a literary subset of the neo-Victorian novel, the spectral novel, a textual space for fictionalising what is absent.